Theodore Dreiser

(1871-1945)

"In his muddled way, held back by the manacles of his race and time, and his steps made uncertain by a guiding theory which too often eludes his own comprehension, he yet manages to produce works of art of unquestionable beauty and authority, and to interpret life in a manner that is poignant and illuminating. There is vastly more intuition in him than intellectualism; his talent is essentially feminine, as Conrad's is masculine; his ideas always seem to be deduced from his feelings…He gets his effects, one might almost say, not by designing them, but by living them. But whatever the process, the power of the image evoked is not to be gainsaid. It is not only brilliant on the surface, but mysterious and appealing in its depths. One swiftly forgets his intolerable writing, his mirthless, sedulous, repellant manner, in the face of the Athenian tragedy he instills in his seduced and soul-sick servant girls, his barbaric pirates of finance, his conquered and hamstrung supermen, his wives who sit and wait."

H. L. Mencken
A Book o f Prefaces
(Knopf 1917) 95-96

"The lagging triumph of naturalism in the United States belongs as much to the history of public taste as to the history of the art of fiction. Crane and Norris died too young to carry the movement far. Garland turned to romance, London and Sinclair inclined to melodrama, Herrick lacked flexibility and fire. The burden fell chiefly on Theodore Dreiser, and more controversy than ever on any other American novelist. The charges usually brought against him were that he wrote crudely about disagreeable persons. The truth was that he offended by bringing to the American novel a body of material and an attitude almost wholly strange to the native tradition….Dreiser was the first important American writer who rose from the immigrants of the nineteenth century…

The muddle of elements so often obvious in Dreiser's work comes from the conflict within him of large, expansive moods and a conscience working hard to be accurate in its representation of the most honest facts of manners and character….Men can partially escape from the general meaninglessness of life by being or studying individuals who are genuine, and who are therefore the origins and centers of some kind of reality….And temperamentally he had the characteristics of what for want of a better term may be named the peasant type of mind…he carried with him wherever he went a true peasant simplicity of outlook, spoke with a peasant's bald frankness, and suffered a peasant's confusion in the face of complexity….Dreiser's plain-speaking on a variety of topics euphemized by earlier American realists had a conscious intention and was sustained by his literary principles, but his candor came from his nature: he thought in blunt terms before he spoke in them. He spoke bluntly upon the subtle and intricate themes—power and wealth, love and art—which interested him above all others….

He had been the wheel-horse if not the spearhead of American naturalism, and had taught his countrymen a new tolerance toward what might be shown in fiction. After him came followers who were more decisive and more artful than he. But he remains the chief of his school. The awkwardness of his style, his occasional verbosity, his frequent irrelevancies of argument cannot obscure his best effect: that of a large spirit brooding over a world which he deeply, somberly loves. He may miss some of the finer shades of character, particularly in cultivated society. His conscience about telling the plain truth may suffer at times from his systematic refusal to draw lines between good and evil or between beautiful and ugly or between wise and foolish. But he gains as much as he loses by the magnitude of his cosmic philosophizing. These puny souls over whom he broods, with so little dignity in themselves, take on a dignity from his contemplation of them. Small as they are…Something spacious, something now lurid now luminous, surrounds them….Though it may be difficult for a thinker of the widest views to contract himself to the dimensions needed for naturalistic art, and though he may often fail when he attempts it, when he does succeed he has the opportunity, which neater worldlings lack, of ennobling his art with some of the great light of great poets."

Carl Van Doren
The American Novel 1789-1939, 23rd edition
(Macmillan 1921-68) 245, 249-51, 259

"Theodore Dreiser is one of those who are utterly incapable of swallowing the world as a young cuckoo swallows the grub that its wagtail mother has brought to it. He must look under every leaf, turn over every stone. His great, lumbering imagination, full of a divine curiosity, goes roaring through the prairie-lands of the Cosmos with the restless heavy-shouldered force of an old bull *wildebeest*. Whenever I am with him and can watch his cumbersome intellect at work upon any one of the manifold subjects like 'the trickiness of women,' the breeding of pigeons, the reasoning power of a spider he studied once in his bed-chamber, or the electronic basis of the Universe, I never fail to feel awe at the struggles of this ungainly giant, whose limbs are still half-buried in clay."

Llewelyn Powys
The Verdict of Bridlegoose
(Harcourt 1926) 64

"It must not be supposed, of course, as has now and then been done, that the writings of a man of his stature can be without artistic virtue. Far from it. He possesses the central artistic virtues, though he lacks the peripheral ones….Dreiser has the root of the matter in him, which is detachment and transcendence during the creative process. He can keep his eye on the object, only and solely and entirely on the object…. He can take the clay and mold men; he can create the relations between them….What counts against him is…the heavy, amorphous verbiage, which will seem duller as time goes on, the unrestrained meticulousness in the delineation of the trivial, the increasing grittiness of his texture."

Ludwig Lewisohn
Expression in America
(Harper 1932) 481-2

"One of the strongest of influences leading to the break-up of the well-made novel, at least in America, has been the movement toward extreme realism. This movement dates back into the nineteenth century, at least as early as Stephen Crane's *Maggie, a Girl of the Street* [1893] and *The Red Badge of Courage* [1895]. Its main exponent in the present century is Theodore Dreiser, whose career as a novelist is exactly contemporary with Edith Wharton's….Mr. Dreiser does not give the impression of being an author greatly concerned with questions of form as such; and if his novels constitute a reaction against the conventional pattern of the well-made novel, this is incidental. They are fundamentally a reaction against conventional ways of regarding human nature. They are one continuous protest against the prime assumptions of the genteel novel. For essentially that is what the well-made novel for the most part is, a survey of humanity from the standpoint of genteel good taste. It is mainly confined to the limits of good society…This was about the state of things in the American novel when Mr. Dreiser arrived to view life in the larger perspective of Balzac and the French naturalists….

If time allowed, it would be worth while to distinguish between the somewhat crass scientism of Dreiser and the decidedly more humanistic philosophy of Balzac, of Flaubert and Zola….What is important…is not to point out the relative crudeness and exaggeration of Dreiser's realistic philosophy, but to emphasize what he has in common with the great French novelists—his fearlessness, his honesty, his determination to have done with conventional posturings and evasions. It was extremely important that we should have some one bold enough to set down in the English language just as he saw it the unvarnished truth about American business life, American social life in its major reaches, and the sex-psychology of American men and women. And every serious writer of the present day is deeply under obligation to the brave pioneering of Theodore Dreiser. It is he, more than any other writer, who has borne the brunt and odium of this ungrateful task....

If he has given adequate expression to his thought, he has met at least the minimum requirements of shaping art. And then it must be added that he has made no specific original contributions to novelistic technique, and is not among the most skilful of novelists when it comes to nice points of craftsmanship. His books are solidly built around a central idea. They are documented in a manner worthy of his admired

Balzac and even suggestive of the more colossal structures of Zola. No novelist could have gone into the operations of business and politics more thoroughly and still maintained our unflagging interest. He manages to make us appreciate the excitement of the stock-exchange and follow intently the organization of gas companies and street-railways, of advertising agencies and magazine mergers, and the interrelations of politics and business. And at the same time he makes clear how all these matters bear upon the intimate emotional life and cultural status of individuals….

All things considered, *An American Tragedy* is doubtless the most neatly constructed of all Dreiser's novels, as well as the best written….The solid documentation, which suggests Balzac, suggests a defect in technique which is even greater in Dreiser than it is in the French writer. He relies too much on formal exposition. He imagines that if he has described a character to us we can see him; that if he spends three or four thousand words telling us all about a character, then we know all about him; that what an author has explained becomes *ipso facto* the possession of the reader. Accordingly he overloads the text with details, important enough and interesting enough if only they might somehow be assimilated to the imaginative fabric of the story. Again, he does not know how to get from one moment in his story to a later moment without giving an extensive summary of what was going on in the interval….

Mr. Dreiser, in short, is singularly defective in the faculty for conceiving his story in scenes. He has taken seriously his philosophic obligation to tell the truth, but has thought very little of his artistic obligation to 'make us see.' He is entirely innocent of any intention concerning point of view. He keeps himself, on the whole, pretty well out of the story. But he seldom considers from page to page whose story it now is. Whatever needs explaining must be explained at the moment it comes into his head, without regard to whether or not it will spoil an intimate effect for the imagination or the feeling. That is, his approach to his art is almost exclusively intellectual. He has so much matter to deliver from his mind to the reader's mind. For the reader's imagination he has no care. In keeping with his indifference to the scenical, he has no conception of what a chapter may mean in the way of imaginative composition of subject-matter. His chapters are chronological rag-bags rather than the imaginative units which Zola's chapters, for example, are.

His handling of dialogue is typical of his want of concern for the niceties of writing. Dialogue is one way of enlivening exposition, and he uses it with the average frequency of serious writers. Of course there are moments of dramatic confrontation and struggle in which it would be practically impossible to avoid the spoken word. There is nothing remarkable about his dialogue. He is a plain realist, and does not attempt to signalize it as commonplace or vulgar. It is commonplace, but without intention. It is not slangy, racy, colloquial. It is ordinary speech, but without any special notation of the rhythms of ordinary speech. There is no hint of the deliberate marking of the accents such as we have it in Hemingway's dialogue. Dreiser is not thinking of the way talk sounds; he is thinking simply and solely of the subject matter, of what is conveyed. But the best things, the subtlest and most poignant things are not conveyed by words that *mean* so-and-so; they are conveyed by words that *sound* so-and-so.

Much fault has been found by critics with Mr. Dreiser's style…His style is all of a piece with his general want of concern for imaginative writing as such. As wholes, his books are of extreme interest because of the large spirit, the passionate intelligence which informs them. His writing does not bear too close inspection in detail, because he has not approached it with an esthetic intention. His people are true like historical personages. Intellectually we believe in them. We are certainly interested in them. We want to know how their stories come out.…There are in his books no *belles pages*, no enchanting moments, no passages that thrill us with minute precision of rightness, such as abound in Hardy, Gorki, Maupassant, Hudson, Thomas Mann. For all that, he is one of the strongest forces tending to antiquate the well-made novel…and that *because of what he has to say*.

Dreiser is very unlike the new men, the modernists. He shows no interest in technical experiments and inventions. He makes no attempt to add a fourth dimension to the three dimensions of plain realism. He tells a simple story, straight forward. He is scarcely more interested in psychology as such than is Hardy….he is a literal, matter-of-fact, extravert, moving in a world of 'substantial things.' The lives of his people are made up of what they do and what happens to them. In his books there is no psychopathic

divorce between thought and action, between motive and behavior. Compared with the new men, the generation of Joyce, he is a classical figure."

Joseph Warren Beach
The Twentieth-Century Novel: Studies in Technique
(Appleton-Century-Crofts 1932) 321-22, 325-31

"I admired the things which he could do in writing which nobody else could do—the simple and poignant truths of life; and I thought his philosophic notions bosh and his historical truths mere uneducated ignorance. I found that he did not agree with those critics who praised him for the immense amount of bricks and mortar that were visible in his towering structure of fiction—the multiplicity of details which such critics called 'realism.' He was not especially interested in the details, but was using them, and perhaps over-using them, earnestly in trying to achieve beauty. He once told me with honest tears in his eyes that a novel had no excuse for existence unless it was beautiful. And by beautiful I knew that he meant true to the deep emotions of the human heart, not to the mere visible surface aspects of life."

Floyd Dell
Homecoming
(Farrar & Rinehart 1933) 268

"He early developed a yearning for wealth, society, and the kind of life which he later gave to his hero Cowperwood, an unscrupulous magnate of big business who is the subject of an exhaustive character study in *The Financier* (1912), *The Titan* (1914), and *The Stoic* (1947)….Dreiser sets forth his naturalistic concept of American society. This view, developed in the four previous books, concludes that, since the chaotic nature of life precludes spiritual satisfactions, it is normal and right to take the most one can from the economic grab bag. Dreiser has been acclaimed for this sincere and profound consciousness of the tragedy of life as he saw it in America, despite the ugliness of his heavy style, and his structural incompetence, chaotic verbosity, and sometimes confused character drawing. Often bogged down by clumsy writing, his books nevertheless are endowed with power by sheer force and an honest massing of details. In *Dreiser Looks at Russia* (1928), *Tragic America* (1931), and *America Is Worth Saving* (1941), he expressed hopeful belief in socialism, as opposed to his former confused naturalism, while *The Bulwark* (1946) emphasized the place of spiritual values in the life of the modern individual."

James D. Hart
The Oxford Companion to American Literature, 5th edition
(Oxford 1941-83)

"It is because he has spoken for Americans with an emotion equivalent to their own emotion, in a speech as broken and blindingly searching as common speech, that we have responded to him with the dawning realization that he is stronger than all the others of his time, and at the same time more poignant; greater than the world he has described, but as significant as the people in it. To have accepted America as he has accepted it, to immerse oneself in something one can neither escape nor relinquish, to yield to what has been true and to yearn over what has seemed inexorable, has been Dreiser's fate and the secret of his victory."

Alfred Kazin
On Native Grounds
(Reynal 1942) 89-90

"Because he refused to compromise his materials or his purposes, he became the one novelist of what Mencken called 'the literary movement of the nineties' who was fully prepared to take part in and to help shape the literary renaissance of the 1910's and 1920's….Certainly it was not because of confidence in himself or his art, for he paints his own portrait as a blind and stumbling seeker….Of all American novelists, Dreiser limited himself most sternly to what he knew of life through his own experience, mainly in his youth…. Dreiser as a boy absorbed this dream of social power and easy money as if by osmosis, at the same time that he saw poverty, failure, ignorance, and defeat all about him, even in his own family….

There has been much debate among the critics as to whether Dreiser was a 'naturalist' after the manner of Zola. If by this is meant merely a franker acceptance of the ugly in life or a more faithful recording of

personal experience, it can be accepted as a description of his art. If further it means a turning to the current findings of science for a philosophy with which to ask the fundamental questions about man in himself and in society, it can still be accepted. Only when it serves to confine creative genius within a formula must it be rejected, for Dreiser belonged to no school, studied no sources with intent to obey, knew little of literary movements at home or abroad.

He was an objective realist who gathered his facts impersonally, but he was more. He lived in his dreams, his hopes, his broodings. For this reason, he absorbed both the realistic method and the new conceptions of the universe from science into his thought and his writing. His views are loose in formulation, and inconsistent. For example, his theory of the relativity of morals is as inconsistent as it is challenging… He was an artist, not a philosopher….Perhaps the best way of describing Dreiser's total literary work is to state that he too was engaged on a lifelong search for a theory of existence. Like many another major American writer, he read to assimilate what were considered to be the best ideas of his time, to verify his own observations and brooding reflections….

Dreiser began his literary career when Social Darwinism was a main current of American thought… Its central concept—which generally served as a means for justification of the practices of capitalism—was the equation of nature with society. It conceived the natural and the social worlds as continuous, subsumable to the same laws; in consequence, it attempted to give the status of social generalization to the conclusions of biological evolution. Dreiser, accepting this concept, developed from it an attitude of both personal and social determinism. One of the major emphases in his work is therefore biological. Man is for him a creature with imperious biological needs. The 'instincts' drive him to actions whose motivations he does not understand. Frequently, as in *The Financier* and *The Titan*, he characterizes these impulses as 'chemisms,' which in man are also expressions of some unapprehended force, or energy, purpose, or 'God' in the universe. The universe, including the social world of man, is all of one piece, a product of unknown force, creative by nature, and resident in human organisms. Thus does man act in accordance with natural impulse. Sex, beauty, and a will to power or to dominancy are interrelated. Man seeks to satisfy himself. He seeks his mate or mates; he seeks beauty; he seeks power. The stronger personalities are best equipped to satisfy themselves; they crush the weaker, and themselves survive.

In Carrie and Jennie, Dreiser had studied the operation of these 'instincts' in young women of almost no place in the social scheme. Their method of attaining a fuller life was the feminine one of exploiting the male animal to satisfy their deepest needs. In…*The 'Genius'*.…*The Financier*.…*The Titan*…and…*The Stoic*, he turned to the masculine version of the problem, already indirectly presented in Hurstwood and Kane…The dictates of conventional society tend to force man to repress his nature; the need to express and to satisfy his nature pushes him toward violating social codes and conventions. Life is a search for beauty, a quest for power, an effort to express creativity, becomes a struggle, on the plane of society, for money and position, and for sexual satisfaction. In this quest and rivalry, the strongest win out; the weak are crushed. Thus to biological is added social determinism….Only those individuals who are strong enough to gain control over the levers of power have a good chance of resisting social pressure. In capitalistic society the struggle for power, for gratification, is expressed in the struggle for money. Woman, as the illustration of beauty, is bought….

Dreiser portrays the social-biological struggle with a certain evenness or balance, an unflagging objectivity in which he is restrained from didactic condemnation…. Equipped with a 'theory of existence,' however unsystematic, Dreiser was in a position to ask questions about American life more searching and profound than those of earlier realists like Howells, Garland, or even James. He dramatized in fiction the American success story; his world is one of growing cities where new careers, new fortunes, are made day after day….Dreiser not only reveals the meaning of American social ideals in his own lifetime and during the period immediately preceding his birth; his works also mirror the changes in those ideals, and the change in the social structure of American life….The tragedy in Dreiser's novels is social tragedy. His characters do not merely represent themselves; they speak for their classes and their occupations….The Social Darwinism of Dreiser's basic attitudes toward human nature is distilled into a social philosophy of determinism and change. Again, without formulation of a system (ironically, he became a communist only just before he died), he supplies the means by which basic questions about twentieth-century American society may be asked.

Forgetful of the integrity and power of Dreiser's whole work, many critics have been distracted into a condemnation of his style. He was, like Twain and Whitman, an organic artist; he wrote what he knew—what he was. His many colloquialisms were part of the coinage of his time, and his sentimental and romantic passages were written in the language of the educational system and the popular literature of his formative years. In his style, as in his material, he was a child of his time, of his class. Self-educated, a type or model of the artist of plebian origin in America, his language, like his subject matter, is not marked by internal inconsistencies. As a style, in the formal sense, it never developed at all, and he frequently permitted his novels to be revised by others before publication.

Dreiser has also been upbraided because of his auctorial comments. The newness of his material and method seemed to him to need explanation, and the censorship and rejection of certain of his novels did little to convince him that such explanation was not necessary. He had no model upon which to shape his attack on the formal middle-class conventions of the times. He needed to be extensive in his realism, rather than concentrated and intensive like Flaubert or Balzac or Zola, who wrote from a richer and deeper literary tradition, and for a more sophisticated and culturally sensitive public than America could supply.

There are many passages in these novels that rise to high levels of passionate writing. In Dreiser the subject matter is always more important than the expression. Because he reveals the very nerves of American society he has exerted a more profound, a more lasting influence than any other novelist on twentieth-century realistic fiction in America. Several generations of writers are already his debtors. His influence is discoverable in a seriousness of approach to the material of American life, in a greater freedom of theme, in the parallelism of ideas and phenomena. Dreiser described the broad patterns of modern American experience; his successors have been more intensive in their treatment. Because he was faithful to his art and made no compromises with the censors and the prudes, his work gives a sense of totality and finality."

Robert E. Spiller
Literary History of the United States, 3rd edition
(Macmillan 1946-63) 1198, 1200-07

"For American fiction, the nineteen-twenties inaugurated a more flourishing period than any Dreiser had previously known….His most devoted followers, especially Sherwood Anderson, were growing up around him. Among the many new talents which made this decade one of the richest in our literary history, both realists like Sinclair Lewis and naturalists like Dos Passos were conscious of how much Dreiser had helped to prepare their way. It is more surprising to find Scott Fitzgerald saying, at the dawn of his own career: 'I consider H. L. Mencken and Theodore Dreiser the greatest men living in the country today….'

An American Tragedy was his first immediate popular success, with a sale of twenty-five thousand in its initial six months, which still left it far below the ranks of a best seller. It was banned only in Boston. Mencken, who no longer needed to be Dreiser's champion, summed up the consensus of favorable opinion when he said: 'Dreiser can feel, and, feeling, he can move. The others are very skillful with words.' Wells agreed with Bennett that here was 'one of the greatest novels of this century. It is far more than life-size rendering of a poor little representative corner of American existence, lighted up by a flash of miserable tragedy….It gets the large, harsh superficial truth that it has to tell with a force that no grammatical precision and no correctitude could attain.' The word 'superficial' is important to note, particularly coming from a European. The shallowness of a Clyde prevents his history from ever reaching the transfiguration that Dostoyevsky dwells upon in the closing pages of *Crime and Punishment*.

But the thoroughness of Dreiser's treatment, the realization we have at the end that his mind has moved inexhaustibly, relentlessly over every relevant detail raise the book to the stature that made Joseph Wood Krutch speak of it as 'the great American novel of our generation.' There were still many dissenting voices. Clyde's whole experience was too undifferentiated, too unilluminated to compel the attention of some readers already habituated to the masterpieces of the modern psychological novel. But for young men growing up in the twenties and thirties here was a basic account of the world to which they were exposed."

F. O. Matthiessen
Theodore Dreiser

(1950; Dell/Delta 1951) 187, 210

"Theodore Dreiser is an ideal test case in the history of naturalist fiction….Dreiser was led to a simple equation: desire was fundamentally and primarily for material things; degree of desire (or 'social stratification') applied simply to the growing need of finer things, more highly gratifying and more expensive experiences: silks and satins instead of gingham. A further assumption, certainly abundantly documented by Dreiser's newspaper experience, was that there was no discernible or measurable balance between 'good' and 'success'; not the good but the strong succeeded….From newspaper offices and from his own experience in having to attend to them, he acquired a wholesome respect for facts. The art of telling a story seemed to him to require a marshalling of facts in an order most obvious and most easily followed. His novels thus acquired the rough form that facts naturally achieve when they recur often enough to indicate simple patterns of chronology and repetition."

Frederick J. Hoffman
The Modern Novel in America
(Regnery/Gateway 1951-63) 44-46

"Dreiser is generally regarded as the novelist above all others who fought the battle for naturalism in American fiction, and his monolithic novels are set up as its monuments….Balzac was a far more important influence upon Dreiser's work than Zola—Dreiser himself went so far as to tell Mencken that he had 'never read a line of Zola'…It would be difficult to exaggerate the influence upon his thinking of Spencer, Tyndall, and Huxley, and later of Jacques Loeb's *The Mechanistic Conception of Life*….Dreiser interpreted his reading in terms of his environment. His poverty-stricken background was culturally barren; he was flung, or he flung himself, into the world of robber barons in the last golden age of ruthless individualism, which lives in his novels as nowhere else in our literature…. Clumsy, ignorant, brooding, greedy, sensitive, passionate, pitiful, rebellious, and loving-hearted, Dreiser was himself an American tragedy; or, if he was not, then, precisely to the extent that he rose above his conditioning, did his life indicate the inadequacy of the 'views' that he held....

Consideration of Dreiser's philosophy of life is complicated at the outset by his own insistence that he didn't have any. As late as 1928 he declared that he was unable to make up his mind about anything or to catch any meaning from all that he had seen, and that he felt himself destined to pass on, quite as he came, confused and dismayed….man was a mechanism, and a poor one at that, with all his ideals, joys, and sorrows mere 'chemic compulsions.'…Temperamentally, Dreiser was more mystic than materialist…. He loved goodness, despite all his immoralism… He did not believe that nature was 'a blind, stumbling force'; she only seemed so to us because of our limited knowledge. It is true that the creator of this world is not necessarily 'the ultimate power or guiding force' of the universe. But the physical structure of life itself is 'shot through with some vast subtlety that loves order…'And he could not believe that the atoms were 'toiling for exactly nothing…' Evolution is still going on…

Persons who know only that Dreiser joined the Communist Party not long before his death may wonder at this simultaneous development in the direction of a religious attitude toward life and may ask themselves how the two affirmations can be reconciled. The answer is, of course, that they cannot, and that Dreiser's communism was a home-grown variety. He had always been a 'sucker' for causes; in the course of his life, he had signed almost everything…. It was Thoreau and John Woolman that he was reading during his later years, not Karl Marx, and he expressed great admiration for the Quaker philosopher, Rufus M. Jones. He joined the Communists with much hesitation and many reservations, insisting that he had in no sense abridged his complete freedom of thought and action. He did not live long enough afterward to be disillusioned….

One may sneer at his philosophy but not at the groping honesty with which it has been developed. One may deplore, also, his lack of selectivity, his failure to conceive a novel as a work of art. When Carrie approaches a department store, we must pause for a dissertation upon the nature of the department store and the role it plays in American life…Dreiser's style—the fruit of 'a miscegenation of the gutter and the psychological laboratory'—and every charge that has been made can be sustained. Yet, in essential matters, like all writers of genius, Dreiser has found his way home, and nobody really believes that *The Titan* would

be a better book if it were rewritten in the manner of Meredith or Henry James….Dreiser the creator broods over his world with a vast cosmic pity…"

Edward Wagenknecht
Cavalcade of the American Novel
(Holt 1952) 281-85, 292-93

"Theodore Dreiser was our first full-fledged naturalist in fiction. Although Frederic, Crane, and Norris had pioneered in the naturalistic direction, a fully developed naturalism did not appear in the American novel until Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* (1900): for the first time in American fiction, the actions of the characters were determined entirely by 'natural' causes….For more than twenty years, Dreiser was the center of a great controversy. His books were condemned as 'immoral.' *Sister Carrie*, though printed in 1900, was not released for sale in America until 1906. His second novel, *Jennie Gerhardt* (1911), like *Sister Carrie*, was objected to because it told a story of unconventional sex relationships. Dreiser did not hold up Carrie or Jennie as examples for other girls to follow, nor did he treat sex salaciously; but conventional moralists found objectionable his sympathetic attitude toward his characters and his failure to mete out the usual rewards and punishments.

The Financier (1912) and *The Titan* (1914), which describe the unscrupulous career of Frank Cowperwood, were attacked with especial violence…*The "Genius"* (1915), an inferior and innocuous work, was suppressed for eight years. Dreiser's champions, chief among whom was H. L. Mencken, editor of *The Smart Set*, defended him ably; but the attack continued until 1925, the year of *An American Tragedy*. Although *An American Tragedy* was not radically different from its predecessors, it was an instantaneous success. No more striking evidence can be cited of the change in the intellectual and moral atmosphere of postwar America….

It is easy to point out weaknesses in Dreiser's novels: he lacks a sense of humor; his prose is pedestrian; the piling up of detail often makes for dull reading. But his work is important, both historically and intrinsically. No other American novelist has documented his stories quite so carefully or has written a social record of American life so convincingly authentic. No other American novelist has treated his subjects so sympathetically. Human actions, to Dreiser, are largely the result of social forces from without, and of chemical forces from within. Men and women, therefore, are not too much to blame for what they are and do. There is no satire or cynicism or smartness in Dreiser, no prurient exploitation of sex, no manipulation of plot or trick of style. He recorded life as he saw it—with naturalness, candor, and compassion. Sherwood Anderson wrote in 1921: 'Theodore Dreiser is a man who, with the passage of time, is bound to loom larger and larger in the awakening aesthetic consciousness of America.' The prophecy was fulfilled. With Dreiser no longer a subject of controversy, as he was in the 1910's and 1920's, his work could be studied dispassionately."

Walter Blair
The Literature of the United States II, 3rd edition
(Scott, Foresman 1953-66) 767-68

"Theodore Dreiser…suggested to me some large creature of the prime wandering on the marshy plains of a human foreworld. A prognathous man with an eye askew and a paleolithic face, he put me in mind of Polyphemus…a Rodinesque figure only half out from the block; and yet a remark that someone made caused him to blush even up to the roots of his thin grey hair. Dreiser was hyper sensitive, strangely as one might have thought, --he was a living paradox in more than one way; but a lonelier man there never was."

Van Wyck Brooks
Days of the Phoenix
(Dutton 1957) 20

"Dreiser's true form has revealed itself with time, and has nothing to do with our relative sympathy for the characters or any conventional suavity of construction, but a great deal to do with the intensity of the process and the 'representation' resulting from it….In the kind of organic plotting for which Dreiser… deserve(s) to be famous, intuition and intelligence work together to supercede the type of novel in which action flows more directly from character and character is more opaque and compact….Dreiser uses such

conventional devices as the trial, often quite ineptly, for terminal suspense; but the common refusal to grant him tragic status comes from a failure to see the *emotional* unity of his plot….Dreiser's success made him *the* great American novelist of his time and place (no competition with James implied), the one in whom we feel the most sustaining and exhilarating press of life."

R. W. Flint
Nation
(27 April 1957) 372

"There is little question that Theodore Dreiser is the most distinguished member of the whole group of modern American novelists…. He was a realist…. Yes, he, partly through his own innocence, perhaps, and early origins, told the truth about life when he could discover it. Probably no one else in our literature has had such a direct and intimate feeling for the common forms of experience, pleasant or disgraceful. But he was also, like Balzac, who is the closest European counterpart, one of the high romantics of literature. What gave his work its remarkable texture, its glamour, really, was his simple sense of the variety and mystery of life on all its levels."

Maxwell Geismar
American Moderns
(Hill & Wang 1958) 50

"He was not, by and large, an attractive figure, and the letters present his unattractive qualities more relentlessly than the books that have been written about him have done. One notes, for instance, his dependence on other persons, particularly women, and his offhand acceptance of their services to him. One notes his arrogance and his greed. But at the same time one feels in the letters, as in the novels, that this was a man who was utterly faithful to his own vision of life. As he wrote Mencken, he was born with a bias in favor of men and women as victims—of the economic system, of their own impulses, of life itself. This bias led him into ridiculous contradictions, but it also gave him insights that have made his novels, with all their many faults, a permanent part of our literature."

Granville Hicks
Saturday Review
(4 April 1959) 16

"Dreiser was willing to risk being wrong; and he had great wrong-looking juts to his character. He was a stiff-armer, an elbower who never gave ground outside his novels or in them. And though outside the books he could be so obtuse and unjust, inside them his passion for justice rang true. At the height of his success, when he had settled old scores and could easily have become the smiling public man, he chose instead to rip the whole fabric of American civilization straight down the middle, from its economy to its morality. It was the country that had to give ground."

Nelson Algren
Nation
(16 May 1959) 459

"The novels of Theodore Dreiser have survived sixty years of complaint against Dreiser. They have survived most of the novels published by the realists of Dreiser's own generation, and they have survived …almost all concern with Dreiser himself. They have even survived the epoch of rugged individualism and sexual squeamishness out of which they arose—both of which once seemed so inseparable from his novels that there are still many people who mistakenly believe that Dreiser's novels have lasted only as records of a vanished period….Dreiser is one of the few American novelists who have survived into the second half of the twentieth century….

Dreiser was able to wheel into motion that enormous apparatus for suggestion and illusion that makes us lose ourselves in his books as if each were a profound and tragic experience of our own….Dreiser was an artist who operated with the *facts* of a new era because he saw them as instruments of human destiny. He saw man, man naked as he essentially is, playing with skyscrapers, trains, stocks and bonds, the costumes that man wears in our time. Only an imagination which can see the circumstances of life as significant accidents, which can portray the vulnerability of the human person under the pressure of social fact, can really portray the limited but unmistakable area of determinism within which we operate….

…we recognize that disproportion between man and his world…is one of the themes with which Dreiser is often able to create the sense of actuality. Only a writer who conceives of historical events in terms of personal sensation and emotion, who can describe the peculiar mercilessness of industrial society as an articulated experience in the human heart, can create for us a sense of the 'times.'…For Dreiser the emotion of the provincial Carrie in the big city has become a powerful ingathering symbol of the interest and fascination of a society that, by reducing everyone in it to a feeling of complicity and powerlessness, makes *everyone* feel provincial….

It is precisely the imagination that sees modern society as a gigantic accident, as a paradigm of the infinite and indifferent universe, which creates, in the burning and vivid metaphors of Dreiser, Zola, Hardy, the feeling of truth about society. Without this necessary perspective, without some sense of wonder, or opposition, or fancy on the part of the realistic novelist, society gets so much taken for granted that it can no longer be fairly *seen;* and indeed this is exactly what has happened in many contemporary novels, where the concern with purely personal or sexual themes betrays a lack of all perspective, of serious intention on the part of the novelist.

Dreiser's love of documentation, his naïve passion for 'facts,' recalls the poetic intent behind Whitman's 'inventories' of modern city scenes. Dreiser attempts to create a sense of the material structure of modern life in much the same way that Whitman, in 'Song of Myself,' itemizes in quick detail… Dreiser still writes in the spirit of the nineteenth-century discovery of evolution; nothing moves him so much as the realization that man has always been a part of nature…. Dreiser was wholly under the influence of nineteenth-century biology and social philosophy. For him man is indissolubly part of the natural world itself; the order of nature reflects man's personal emotions in the same way that his fellow human beings…reflect his longings and his weaknesses. Dreiser was able to portray modern society as an organism precisely because he recognized that although it did not always satisfy human aspirations, society itself was a natural growth: it expressed sexuality, greed, social ambition, in forms that are natural to man… The sense of modern society as itself biological and evolutionary attains in Dreiser's novels a glow of romantic exaltation, a suggestion that everything in the universe is alive and seeking new shape….

The bias of Dreiser's fellow 'naturalists,' as we can see in Stephen Crane's masterpiece, 'The Open Boat,' and in Frank Norris's best book, *McTeague*…life must be portrayed in such strong terms as to seem positively hostile to man. Dreiser, who shares their philosophy, nevertheless identified the world with his own ambition and his compassion, and this is why one recognizes a maturity of involvement in Dreiser's work that is very different from the self-conscious stylization in Crane and the essentially patronizing and abstract manner of Norris. The truth is that for many writers, the philosophy of naturalism was a way of rationalizing their own indifference and apathy, their typically modern sense of alienation. For Dreiser, on the other hand, this 'scientific' philosophy actually played the role that evolution had for romantic pantheists like Emerson and Whitman; naturalism provided a way of binding himself more firmly to the world.

Dreiser sees the modern scene precisely as did the tender realists of the 'ash-can' school of painters who discovered the beauty of the big city; he is not one of the pseudo-Nietzschean naturalists, like Jack London or Frank Norris, who mixed their toughness with romance; nor is he in the least a crusader, like Upton Sinclair and many proletarian novelists of the 1930s, for whom a novel was a description of things to be eradicated….Dreiser…writes as a contemplative, one who finds the significance of the external scene through his personal attachment to it. The nearest analogy to Dreiser's 'personal' realism is to be found in the painter Edward Hopper, who shares Dreiser's passion for transcendental writers…One feels in the awkwardness, the dreaming *stillness* of Hopper's figures the same struggle to express the ultimate confrontation of men and things, that one does in Dreiser's reverent description of saloons, street-cars, trains, hotel, offices. The beauty of such realism…is inevitably allied to a certain pathos. Just as in *An American Tragedy* one feels about Clyde Griffiths's exultant discovery of hotel luxury the pitiful distance between the boy and the social world of tawdry prizes that he is trying to win, so in Hopper's street scenes and lonely offices one can visualize the actual unrelatedness between men and the objects they use every day. It is one of the paradoxes of modern art that the more 'external' and ordinary the object portrayed—a city street in Hopper, the complex record of a stock deal in Dreiser—the more personal is the emotion

conveyed. The emotion consists in exactly this surprise of attachment to the world that so often dwarfs us….

Despite the personal vulgarity and tinsel showiness in Dreiser's style, his fundamental vision of things is always the artist's….Dreiser's greatest strength is as a dramatist of human relations. Although his narrative technique, especially in chronicle novels like *The Financier* and *The Titan*, often becomes mechanical…In Dreiser the writer was always wiser than the man. When his instinctive transformative powers fail him, when he imposes on the reader great blobs of incoherent personal emotion, one recognizes how silly the man Theodore Dreiser could be….What made Dreiser powerful in *Sister Carrie* and *Jennie Gerhardt*, where he used the stories of his own sisters, was his ability to see his own family in historic and histrionic roles, exactly as if he had visualized them in dreams….

Dreiser is always concerned with eroticism….Dreiser is one of the most cogent novelists of sex we have had—so long as he sticks to the inescapable involvement of women, money and power, or can reveal a compassion for women that shows us such very different victims in Carrie, Jennie Gerhardt, and the utterly innocent Roberta Alden. In Dreiser compassion is as strong as lust…

The real objection that must be considered against Dreiser's work refers to more than his occasional vulgarity of style or to the naivete with which he often furnishes a room. The force of the objection lies in the contrast between unassimilated actuality—the purely personal-historical portrait that Dreiser so often achieved—and what Henry James, who insisted on the novel as a wholly realized art form, called a 'situation.'…Henry James would not, in theory, have objected to Dreiser's material, or even to the style of a writer he might conceivably have accepted as 'our American Balzac'…James's objection would have been that all of Dreiser's work, to use the titles of two books of Dreiser's stories, is either a gallery of men or a gallery of women. We feel the 'case,' the individual within the drama of history…but we do not find the well-made novel that was James's ideal…Dreiser does not meet these specifications. When we read him, we are aware not only of the unevenness of style and intelligence that we get even in so strong a book as *Sister Carrie*, but we also discover that Dreiser's interest is in the individual within the immense struggle and pathos of historical circumstances…. Undeniably, it is not the 'situation' of art but the 'case' of history itself, as it afflicts the individual, that is the ruling image in Dreiser….

May it be that in Dreiser we see the human soul, though almost crushed by circumstances, nevertheless irreconcilably free of them, its own freedom made clear in the light of inarticulate longing? The truth is that Dreiser's books belong to a period of literature in which the individual is still large, epochal, heroic—not crushed….Dreiser's individuals are *large* because they still have an enormous capacity for suffering—and for realizing their suffering. In their defenselessness they recapture the reality of the human person. They are so alone that we watch with awe what is happening to them….We watch with admiration because we know that despite Dreiser's philosophy, Dreiser's novels prove that history does not simply ride over man but is in some sense an expression of him."

Alfred Kazin
General Introduction
An American Tragedy by Theodore Dreiser
(Dell/Laurel 1959) 7-18

"In 1912 came *The Financier*, the first of his 'Trilogy of Desire' concerning the life of Frank Cowperwood; the second in the trilogy was *The Titan* (1914). Cowperwood, a superman, struggled and clawed his way upward from poverty to a position of wealth and power, experiencing many erotic adventures on the way. The stories, based on the career of Charles T. Yerkes, traction magnate of Philadelphia and Chicago, were thoroughly documented by Dreiser in the best tradition of Naturalism. In the light of Dreiser's later belief in socialism, it is a temptation to read the Cowperwood novels as satires, but this was almost certainly not Dreiser's intention at the time. Cowperwood is presented as the hero, a Nietzchean figure whose struggle for success somehow promotes the evolutionary aspirations of all mankind.

The "Genius" (1915) concerns another superman, this time an artist, Eugene Witla, who was modeled on the painter Everett Shinn, who fascinated Dreiser, a young art editor of the Butterick Publications who

committed suicide, and on Dreiser himself. It is by far the most personal of Dreiser's novels, and Witla's complex and turbulent love life was close to Dreiser's own; the author had been divorced from his first wife, was not living with the actress Helen Patges, whom he later married, and at the same time was engaged in several other affairs….

The Stoic, last of the Cowperwood trilogy, was published posthumously in 1947, although Dreiser had written most of it many years before. It is not a good novel; by the time he came to write it he had outgrown the attitudes which prevailed in the earlier Cowperwood stories. Nevertheless, it is interesting to the student for its discussion of Hinduism, to which the book's heroine turns in her final despair. Rather surprisingly, Dreiser apparently also turned to Oriental mysticism; at least he studied it seriously, and he seems to have found in the leap to pure Spirit a usable antidote to his purposeless wandering in the materialistic flux….

The Bulwark (1946) was begun as early as 1910, an awkward story that seemed quite unsatisfactory when it was published. Dreiser's great contribution to naturalism had been completed in his small group of major novels. Indeed, he often expressed his naturalistic theories and his philosophy of life more directly in his autobiographical works, *A Traveler at Forty* (1913), *A Hoosier Holiday* (1916), *A Book About Myself* (1922)…and particularly *Hey-Rub-a-Dub-Dub: A Book of the Mystery and Terror and Wonder of Life* (1919). By the time he died the tide of naturalism had turned and a new conservatism was on the way. The crusading novelists were dead or silent, with perhaps the exception of James T. Farrell, to whom Dreiser in his old age turned for criticism and encouragement.

The most formidable obstacle to an appreciation of Dreiser's work has been his style—so frequently described as 'elephantine' as to have won a certain proprietary right to the adjective. While there are many passages of forceful and passionate writing in his novels, his style is often dull, awkward, and banal. Nevertheless, with all his faults, Dreiser created an image of American life which has had a wide and enduring relevance. He indicated the tragic possibilities inherent in the conflict between the individual driven by a desire for self-realization and a society characterized by repression and narrow moral and social conventions, on the one hand, and the glorification of material success, on the other. There is in his work an integrity, a compassion, a dedication to the task of finally making moral and metaphysical sense out of his vast apparatus of realistic detail, which places it among the best of modern American fiction."

Max J. Herzberg & staff
The Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature
(Crowell 1962)

"The rather grim and fatalistic view of life that critics later called Naturalism in his fiction sprang organically from Dreiser's own life as well as his personality. It came first from his family—varied, disordered, poor, and ruled by hidden forces, yet full of human sympathy. What he saw later of mankind, as a reporter and writer, editor and traveler, reinforced this early grounding in life's grim aspects….Poverty bred in him and his sisters a desperate need for the appearance of wealth. His interest in money both as a reality and as a symbol of man's desires, displayed so vividly in *Sister Carrie* (1900) and the 'Trilogy of Desire,' came largely from this youthful insecurity. Money not only meant success; it meant color and light in life….

He at least understood that popular fiction bore little relation to the world he knew, and that masses of people were absorbing a false view of life. By the late 1890s he sensed that he was ready for literary productivity of some kind, and that America was poised for a change in institutions and values that might make his new viewpoint acceptable or even fashionable. He knew now that his basic theme would have to be faithful reporting of what he had seen. He did not underestimate his opposition; he knew how shallow and wrong public taste and standards could be…. 'You couldn't write about life as it was,' he recalled, 'you had to write about it as somebody else thought it was, the ministers and farmers and dullards of the home…'

In *The Financier* (1912), the trilogy's first volume, Dreiser traced his magnate's rise to fame, and ultimate bankruptcy, leaving him on the threshold of greater things in a new city, Chicago. Cowperwood's

vision and daring let him dominate lesser men, breeding a contempt for weakness and caution that momentarily halted his upward progress when he was jailed for technically misusing public funds in a stock scheme. Powerful political enemies imprisoned him, fearing that his vision and ruthlessness might dominate their affairs.

Dreiser wove into his narrative the emerging outlines of Cowperwood's complex personality. Apparently happily married, the financier nonetheless found other women attractive and had an affair with the daughter of a powerful rival. Possessing a fatal magnetism toward women, and being above conventional morality, Cowperwood accepted sex as a major part of his personality. He convinced himself that he was 'chronically promiscuous, intellectually uncertain, and philosophically anarchistic.' To add force to the story's total impact, Dreiser excepted Cowperwood from the normal workings of social law. Since he had so much to give, and was so extraordinarily talented, why should rules made for lesser men bind him? 'There seemed to be certain general principles—or people assumed there were—but apparently there were exceptions.'…Cowperwood illustrated Dreiser's belief in the dominant individual asserting his will in the face of natural indifference…. Dreiser did not make Cowperwood's life a study in mere money-making or business building, but tried to make him symbolize life's trials to those who do not fit social law. A strong streak of mysticism redeemed Cowperwood's ruthlessness, for like life he seemed to be working for a larger purpose than smaller minds could see…

The contrasts of style and approach in the financial novels of Frank Norris and Dreiser illustrate the varieties of literary Naturalism. With his sharp eye for color and talent for creating the captivating event, Norris made his narratives bright and compelling. Nothing Dreiser wrote could match the sweep of *The Octopus*. If Norris's story was often thin, the reader seemed not to notice, and his handling of details could be as real as Dreiser's. But Dreiser could not follow Norris's example. Never given to colorful presentation, with little apparent eye for the illuminating moment that offered volumes in symbols, he lumbered through his novels of finance like an elephant through a rain forest, leaving a trail of details that built up a powerful superstructure. The process of events, the steady construction of a story, fascinated him more than they did Norris or Stephen Crane. If Norris lacked texture and boasted flair, Dreiser lacked flair and boasted texture….

In a single page, Dreiser often committed every heresy known to the English language, and whole sections of books like *The 'Genius'* and *The Stoic* are labored and unreadable. He brought to his task almost no formal training and often wrote badly because he did not know good writing. He worked into his style the colloquialisms of the speech he heard, which irritated many purists. He depended on an almost oceanic rhythm in his longer novels to produce stylistic and emotional effect. He wrote steadily and grimly, almost as if it were a duty, and he had little sense of selection. Like the self-made man he was, and like so many naturalistic writers, he absorbed masses of detail and had too little judgment in choosing the significant. Mencken often saw him sit stolidly at his desk or table, writing almost without interruption for hours, as if the words came out of him by their own volition.

His faults were obvious. He tended to overwrite endlessly, especially when discussing philosophy, adding to his confusion. He overused favorite and exotic words like 'osseous,' 'oleaginous,' 'sapient,' 'trig,' and 'eleemosynary.' The passive voice, indefinite verbs, dangling participles, dependent clauses, all decorated his pages. But as with many naturalists and realists, Dreiser depended for impact upon total effect and logical development of his characters and situations. He cannot be read hurriedly; one must accept his ponderous gait and develop an ear and a tolerance for his style. The quality of the situations and characters fascinate the reader more than what they are or do. Dreiser seldom carried a reader through a story to show him events, as a guide shows monuments to a tourist. His books do not depend upon great moments, though they are filled with fine scenes. The process of reaching an event fascinated Dreiser far more than the event itself.

Frank Norris tempered his Naturalism with romance and the color of emotional excitement. His works are ideally suited for the Technicolor screen. Dreiser lacked both this talent and desire, and preferred the specific details that composed a total picture. His novels do not lack tension and drama, but they unfold slowly, like a vast portfolio of still photographs, each carefully posed to emphasize the background…. Like Norris's, Dreiser's Naturalism fitted into no neat categories. Whatever philosophy he developed grew

organically from his own background and his struggles for recognition. His own observations rather than reading underlay his determinism. He began writing with little knowledge of literature in general and Naturalism in particular. Among foreign authors, he liked Balzac, Zola, de Maupassant, and the Russians. Among Americans, he admired but never deeply studied many contemporary realists and naturalists like Garland, Crane, and Howells….

Dreiser's philosophy of Naturalism and determinism developed with his writing and experience, but his belief in man's essential helplessness was present in all his work. Like the aged Mark Twain, he divided his thinking into two phases, the general and the specific. He argued that an individual's struggles against chance or fate might be meaningful to the individual, but in the largest context no man meant much in nature's scheme of life. His development was a steady adoption of broader perspective, moving from the specifics of people and events to the generalities of cosmic order….Life was essentially a process of change, composed of millions of different organisms, including man. Rigid laws and social rules that did not allow for this variety or face the realistic view of man in the total universe penalized the sensitive and creative. This was especially true, Dreiser thought, in America, which fed on optimism and illusions. His country valued the common denominator too highly….Valuing individual expression despite his deterministic view, he thought…efforts to prevent original thought hindered the total race's' development....

The search for causes occupied him until the end of his life. In his middle and later years he decided that the human organism was chemically composed. Balance or imbalance in this composition, an act of sheer chance, determined a man's personality….'man appears to be in the grip of a blind force or process which cannot help itself and from which man can derive no power to help himself save by accident or peradventure.'… Dreiser quarreled with men like Sherwood Anderson who feared science. He felt that all facts at man's disposal helped determine his true state. Exact knowledge, not moralistic theorizing, might give meaning and direction to existence….He tempered his mechanistic thinking with a sense of mystery toward life and a sympathy toward human beings….

In the 1920s, Dreiser was often the bad boy of American letters; and 'humanistic' critics, like Paul Elmer More and Stuart Sherman, condemned his theory of animalistic and deterministic behavior. They attacked his apparent interest in life's sordid side, decried his grim insistence on fate's operations, and thought the whole naturalistic trend unwholesome and sterile….In all of this, nothing seemed more surprising than Theodore Dreiser the reformer, a role he accepted with increasing relish as he grew older. He saw no conflict between his determinism and social reform….

Dreiser was anti-capitalistic, anti-English, anti-Semitic, pro-socialist, pro-German in many attitudes, and pro-communist in varying degrees throughout his life. To his credit, he slowly and painfully worked out of anti-Semitism, though he never quite abandoned other bigotries. Of all these, capitalism irritated him most, for he thought it a great repressive engine. It had produced the false standards of money and status to which his fictional characters were so often fatally drawn. Though he was not a social reformer in his youth—preferring in his confusion to wonder over primal causes—as he grew older he turned more and more to social action….The same hatred of injustice that made him sympathize with the weak before a brute nature made him resent the artificial injustices of rampant wealth and social inequality. He thought that capitalism aided nature's blind selectivity. It gave rewards at random…He feared most the leveling tendencies of reform in America, for he disliked the common denominators that did not allow for the unusual individual. He was not an egalitarian, especially when it came to moral and intellectual conduct….

His dislike of capitalism drew him to Soviet Russia. For three months in 1927, he toured the country as a guest of the Soviet government…He came away with mixed impressions, reflected in his book *Dreiser Looks at Russia* (1928). While he admired much of the communist program, he knew that it would not work in America, where different attitudes and institutions prevailed. His report pleased no one. The book alienated the Russians and American communists who thought he was bourgeois to criticize their dogma and program. It displeased most Americans who read it because he accepted part of communism and condemned capitalism. Dreiser himself disliked the dogmatizing that surrounded communism more than the program…it attempted to dictate what he could think and write. He scoffed openly at the communist notion that familiarity with Marxism would make him a better writer, and remained unconvinced that communism would bring its long vaunted utopia….On the eve of his death he formally joined the

Communist Party, remarking that if the communists did not like what he said they could expel him…. Upon joining the Communist Party Dreiser remarked that the true religion was in Matthew. Though some thought he had returned to religion, he offered this thought in the text of human love rather than a dogmatic Christianity….

Dreiser's life almost uniquely illustrated the pain and time which the sensitive mind consumes in seeking meaning in existence. For that arduous task he will always be vivid in American letters….As with Frank Norris, any quarrel with Dreiser's style seems petty when contrasted to the questions he asked and the world he created."

H. Wayne Morgan
American Writers in Rebellion: From Mark Twain to Dreiser
(Hill & Wang 1965) 146-47, 150, 155-56, 167-71, 179-89

"Dreiser is the first of our writers to reflect, as the principle of his fiction, this transformation in the American urban mind. In many senses his much discussed naturalism—obviously different from Zola's or Norris's in lacking a real base in scientific experimentation—is in reality the reflection of the state of his own psychic involvement with the life of the city….Dreiser's novels are shaped like his mind….his awareness of commercial considerations and the conventions of periodical literature were on a surface level of his consciousness. At a deeper, separate level lay his intuitive, personal sense—what Ernst Junger well terms the 'second, colder consciousness'—of the profoundly inexplicable tragedy and romance of the human condition. Between these two psychic levels there was no influence. Existing on a level wholly apart from his surface editorial concerns, this colder consciousness provided the context and conventions for his fiction. As a novelist he projected stories and novels which as an editor he would have immediately dismissed. With a mind divided in this way, he wrote out of a consciousness uniquely free from genteel convention, but vigorously informed by metropolitan actuality….When he turned to fiction, he described the terrible parade of failure, or failure-in-success, in *Sister Carrie* and the Cowperwood trilogy….

Ordering, even twisting and contriving his speech, Dreiser…was willing to chance artificiality to achieve art. His bumbling clichés embody everyday experience. On one level of his mental experience he was so close to the archetypes of the early twentieth-century mind that the very force of the experience bursts through the artificiality of the language. In one sense, we are forced by Dreiser to an awareness of the intensity of his experience by seeing how life breaks through language. His symbols arise out of the life of the novel itself, as the accumulation of his response to reality.

Not in themselves, but in the recurring of his characters' feelings about clothes, rooms, warmth, and so on, these things come cumulatively to represent the nature of their lives…. Dreiser's triumph as a novelist is his ability to convince the reader that his experience is so strong it cannot be conveyed by his words. By using the flowers of rhetoric and the paste gems of genteel speech he creates a verbal situation in which the powerful life of his narrative must overrun the false life of his speech. Thus he impresses us all the more with the power of his experience, as it apparently shatters the bonds of literary convention. The facts and details which engage his narrative come not from the cliches of language, but from the commonplaces of life….Dreiser brings the genteel cliché back into contact with the basic needs of physical life, and so refreshes both that language and the sense of life it conveys.

His style has force and power—not, surely, in its rough ungainliness, but in Dreiser's adept and unashamed insistence on the repetitive character of ordinary circumstance. Man's primary needs and emotions—love, death, hope, wonder, helplessness, self-assertion—fill the narrative and are as fully conveyed as if Dreiser were confronting these for the first time. Dreiser observes and describes the common real as if it were the rare. His style glitters with the wonder of details, and as a result he was the first man to accept and reveal, in all its massive incomprehensibility, the modern city. The surface of life is thus rendered incandescent. Dreiser endures, then—as the muckrakers and progressives and novelists of the city like Phillips and Upton Sinclair have not endured—because he filled his books with the clutter and imperatives of ordinary human circumstance….

The massive force of his details shattered stereotypes….Whereas in the literature that followed Dugdale's study of *The Jukes* (1877) the poor had been portrayed stereotypically as degraded by their

heredity and environment, Dreiser presented Carrie, Jennie, and Clyde supported and sustained by the desire to rise. In a period when Americans seemed either to be gloriously optimistic or…sensationally disenchanted, Dreiser created characters whose hope and despair were mingled and equally justified. He returned our world to us in all its vast, irregular complexity….

Dreiser shared the plight and passion of the outsider….[he] projected into his books the depression and frustration that sent him to a mental sanitarium in 1903, midway through the slough of despond between *Sister Carrie* and *Jennie Gerhardt*….Up to the end of his life, when he simultaneously embraced Christianity and Communism, Dresier sought to find meaning in life with a desperation that eventually spoiled his last books."

Jay Martin
Harvests of Change: American Literature 1865-1914
(Prentice-Hall 1967) 258-59, 262-63

"Theodore Dreiser's life and art have been closely assessed in several book-length studies. Shorter critical pieces, undertaking parallel inquiries, have multiplied into the hundreds. Dreiser has been called 'the Mount Everest of American fiction,' 'the Hindenburg of the novel,' 'a many-sided monolith,' 'the wheelhorse of American naturalism,' 'bellweather of modern fiction,' 'high romantic,' 'the peasant of our literature,' 'a Flemish artist,' 'and 'a belated Victorian.' He has been acclaimed 'chief spokesman for the realistic novel,' 'one of the great folk writers,' and even 'one of the great moral leaders of mankind.' His merits have been compared favorably with those of Dr. Johnson, Michelangelo, Balzac, Goethe, Wagner, Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, and with those of a thoroughbred horse. He has been deplored as 'the Caliban of American fiction,' 'one of the last berserkers,' 'a Man of Ice,' and 'the worst writer of his eminence in the entire history of literature,' not excepting Richardson. Although many of the commentaries on Dreiser contain forceful insights both into his personal history and into his achievements as a writer, taken in aggregate they are disappointing. Like the swords of an illusionist, which penetrate a cabinet only at fixed points, they adhere to a pattern which leaves vital zones untouched.

The present study…fixed the character of Dreiser's thought by a chronological reading of his complete works. This hitherto untried approach surprisingly affirms Dreiser's consistency and, to a large extent, takes him out of the arena of controversy….It traces the connection between plot, image, and idea in his novels and reveals how his interests and experience relate to, and even explain, his form, his style, and his art. It offers definitive assessment of his extensive use of symbols, and explains how certain symbols—notably, his abundant motion symbols—are tied, in their recurrence and interaction, to a functional purpose. The moving world of Theodore Dreiser did not rest on an effervescent compassion, but on a dynamic theory of flux. Finally, the study gives account of Dreiser's architectonic genius and of those lurking currents of transcendentalism which, throughout his works, are a sustaining force.

Theodore Dreiser believed that the American Dream, and the precepts that safeguarded it, put before Americans false gods which estranged them from Nature and left them unfulfilled; the passion with which he wrote from that conviction dominated all his work….He was said to be a willful despoiler of public and private morality, a tawdry thinker, and an egregiously bad stylist. The first charge, though it plagued Dreiser through much of his lifetime, rarely is heard today. Ironically, modern writers have exercised with such liberality the freedom Dreiser procured for them that his transgressions now seem puny. As to the second criticism, Dreiser's thinking was much less tawdry than has been supposed, even by his admirers. A systematic inquiry into the growth of his thought shows that he seemed inconsistent merely because his quest for philosophic ultimates was constant and he never hesitated to abandon a position when he found it untenable. Throughout his life Dreiser experienced steady intellectual growth….

His earliest detractors were alienated by his brutal frontal assault on the Protestant ethic, and by the realization that a Teuton-Slav had challenged Anglo-Saxon dominion over American letters. Later critics were stirred by his adoption of a chemico-mechanistic theory of life. After 1930, his open advocacy of communist causes inspired attempts to diminish his stature as an artist in order to lessen the consequences of his political affirmations…. Dreiser's assumption that communism would give Americans the paradise the American Dream could not provide, rested more on a fond hope than on sober understanding of political realities. He himself owned that his hope was not deep rooted. But his belief that the idealism of

the American Dream had been betrayed, that the values from which it had taken its substance had lost relevance, merits respectful consideration.

In young manhood Dreiser concluded change was the basic law of Nature and then, appropriately, committed himself to a pattern of life physically, philosophically, and spiritually nomadic. Hence his repugnance for the anchoring stabilities that religion, society, and the state, proffer man. Dreiser's quest for ultimate realities often made him ridiculous in the eyes of his fellow men: it brought him under censure and even sharp attack….A villager by upbringing…Dreiser turned to the city because he found in it the raw materials he needed to know life. More than once he was found by friends convulsively sobbing on street corners as he observed poor, struggling humanity en masse….Throughout his works, the orphanhood of every major character is, at some point, dwelt upon with tender solicitude.

Dreiser's works have been scrutinized with less critical acuity than the works of any other major American writer. Seldom has he been evaluated dispassionately. In survey accounts he is passed over hastily because no one quite knows how to supply him relevance. His achievements tend to be redistributed among writers who went to him for apprenticeship—Anderson, Lewis, Faulkner, Masters, Fitzgerald, Farrell, Dos Passos. Who sees that the revolt of the village began with Dreiser?… Dreiser was the first novelist to recognize that Emersonian self-reliance had been perverted by predators into an astonishing complacency and indifference to the moving course of history. He should stop being pilloried for his political, social, and moral views."

John J. McAleer
Theodore Dreiser: An Introduction and Interpretation
(Holt 1968) vii-viii, 1-3

"Theodore Dreiser (1871-1945) is one of the most controversial figures in American literary history. His life, as told by W. A. Swanberg in his *Dreiser* (1965), is a case study in how to disenchant friends and alienate almost everyone else….Dreiser's novels shared with the man a capacity to affront. From *Sister Carrie* (1900) to *An American Tragedy* (1925) they grew longer and seemingly more shapeless. The efforts of friends and editors had little effect on Dreiser's awkward, frequently cliched verbiage. But despite these stylistic inadequacies, his best novels express a brooding insistence on the essential tragedy of life that has absorbed readers and critics for over a century….discussion of Dreiser and his work was deeply colored by his symbolic role in the American cultural scene as he was either attacked as a prime example of 'barbaric naturalism' or celebrated as a champion of artistic freedom. In addition, his radical social and political views often encouraged a polemical response to his work, especially during the last two decades of his life."

Donald Pizer, ed.
Preface to the Third Edition
Sister Carrie by Theodore Dreiser
(Norton Critical Edition 1970-2006) ix-x

Michael Hollister (2015)