

INTRODUCTION



Theodore Dreiser

(1871-1945)

Theodore Dreiser is the foremost Naturalist in American literature, yet he turned into a mystic. His first novel *Sister Carrie* (1900) has been the primary example of Naturalism taught in schools, in preference to *McTeague* (1899) by Frank Norris, which is more entertaining to some readers. His major contemporaries died off and left Dreiser standing almost alone against genteel convention and the timid Realism of Howells. With blunt honesty and dogged persistence he opened the way for Sherwood Anderson and the Modernists as well as for social realists of the 1920s and 30s like Sinclair Lewis and John Dos Passos. His narratives have a universality and power, deriving from simplicity, emotional depth, the accumulation of realistic details and sympathetic characterization of common people the reader cares about. By consensus his masterpiece is *An American Tragedy* (1925), an extensively detailed account based on an actual murder case--a prototype of the "nonfiction novel."

Of all major American writers, Dreiser has the clumsiest prose style—and other faults. Incongruously, his second novel *Jennie Gerhardt* (1911) was dramatized at the Bolshoi Theater in Moscow in 1961. He is the only major American writer to die a member of the Communist Party--while simultaneously embracing Christianity! He became the most widely published American writer in the Soviet Union, yet he never wrote a proletarian novel, he did not adhere to the Marxist dictate that a work of art should be a weapon in the class war, he believed in free speech and his art transcends ideology.

CHARACTER

Called "the most unreasonable man in the world," Dreiser had such a scandalous character that in 1932 when he first applied for membership in the Communist Party, he was refused. He was under indictment for adultery at the time. His life was a search for Meaning and for an ideal mistress-mother—a series of multiple intrigues in pursuit of women, money, fame and power. He tried hashish, heroin and utopianism. He was a mass of contradictions: a moralistic libertine, a sentimental rebel against genteel sentimentalism, a callous editor who wrote love letters in baby talk, a domineering self-made man who denied the existence of free will, a pessimistic determinist who advocated social reform.

His first two novels attempt to redeem two of his sisters from the moral disapproval of conventional society and express the compassionate love of a brother, dramatizing how they were exploited by men. Yet throughout his life Dreiser exploited women himself, conducting multiple affairs with college girls, office

workers, actresses and other women, using them as secretaries, editors, nurses and servants. He enjoyed shocking women, exposing himself nude at parties and conducting conversations while seated on the toilet. He was a crude braggart, a liar, and a bully. Once, in a quarrel over money, he threw hot coffee into his publisher's face.

He got jealous over losing out in the competition for the Nobel Prize to Sinclair "Red" Lewis, a fellow leftist. Lewis was married to the journalist Dorothy Thompson. In 1928 Thompson and Dreiser visited Russia at the same time and each published a book about the trip, his only two months after hers. Lewis praised Dreiser in his Nobel acceptance speech in 1930, but at a dinner party in 1931 Lewis publicly denounced Dreiser as "the man who plagiarized 3,000 words from my wife's book." Dreiser slapped Lewis in the face twice and challenged him to a duel. Before World War II and Stalin's pact with Hitler in 1939, Dreiser backed the Communists and the Nazis at the same time.

BIOGRAPHY

Dreiser was born poor to German immigrants in the steel mill town of Terra Haute, Indiana--the son of a crippled steel worker, a fanatical Catholic, and a doting mother of pagan temperament—"A strange, sweet dreamy woman," he called her, "who did not know how life was organized." Once he was sent home from his Catholic school because he had no shoes. He was raised in poverty and humiliation, instilling in him both a deep sense of determinism in life and a powerful will to succeed nevertheless. Among his 4 brothers and 5 sisters was Paul, who grew up to become a famous Tin Pan Alley composer of popular songs, creating himself anew by adopting the name Paul Dresser. Paul and Theodore together wrote the Indiana state song, "On the Banks of the Wabash," and Paul went on to write the barber shop quartet favorite, "My Gal Sal"—"a wild little devil, but dead on the level..." Few knew that Sal was the madam of a brothel in Evansville, Indiana.

As a teenager the eager young Dreiser went to Chicago with all the longings of Sister Carrie: "I was like a guest at a feast, eating and drinking in a delirium of ecstasy." Then his former high school teacher, Mildred Fielding, financed a year for him at the University of Indiana. There he suffered from social frustration and sexual torment. At 21 he became a newspaperman, pursuing the American dream, first in Chicago again, where like Carrie he lived in Ogden Place overlooking Union Park. Then he moved on to St. Louis, where he was seduced by his landlady and where he met and formed a passionate attachment to Sallie White, his future wife. Thereafter he worked as a journalist in Pittsburgh, Toledo, Cleveland, Buffalo, and New York City. While in Pittsburgh, at age 23 he discovered Balzac and collided with the Naturalistic philosophies of Herbert Spencer and Thomas Huxley, who popularized Darwin's theory of evolution: "Spencer nearly killed me, took every shred of belief away from me; showed me that I was a chemical atom in a whirl of unknown forces; the realization clouded my mind."

He sank into despair, hating the church for swindling him, as he saw it. Spencer became his oracle. Man was simply a stage in evolution, a creature responding helplessly to chemical activity over which he had no control--merely a tiny particle of energy, bereft of free will. Man the mechanism was only one of countless agencies by which an Unknown Cause worked through evolution to produce a state of equilibrium in Nature. Dreiser took some comfort in Spencer's acknowledgment of an Unknown Cause, which Dreiser came to regard as an "intelligent creative force"—what most people called God.

In 1895 he wangled a job at the *New York World*, then considered the best newspaper in the country. He studied popular fiction in magazines, then launched his own magazine and published stories by Stephen Crane and Brett Harte. Meanwhile he envied the great success of his brother Paul, he actively supported the Democratic presidential candidate William Jennings Bryan, and he grew increasingly frustrated that Sallie White refused to become his mistress after he declined to marry her. He was opposed to all aspects of marriage except its comforts. He kept one of her slippers and one of her gloves in his room as love fetishes. His pet name for her was Jug.

By age 27 he was a successful hack writer for magazines, giving no evidence that he was equipped to be a novelist. Finally he succumbed and married Jug. He soon regretted it. She was a moralistic Methodist and proved to be too possessive and conventional for Dreiser, like expecting him to be faithful. He never

lived with her much. One day a friend encouraged him to write a novel: “Finally I took out a piece of yellow paper and to please him wrote down a title at random—*Sister Carrie*. My mind was a blank except for the name. I had no idea who or what she was to be. I have often thought there was something mystic about it, as if I were being used, like a medium.”

Sister Carrie (1900)

The plot is based on the true story of Dreiser’s sister Emma, who had fallen in love with a suave, fortyish cashier of a fashionable bar in downtown Chicago—a man named Hopkins--then discovered he was already married. She eloped with him anyway to Montreal, where he admitted that while drunk he had stolen \$3,500 from the safe of his employer. The police were on his trail. Hopkins returned all but \$800 of the stolen money in a letter, begging his employers not to prosecute; and they did not, but the scandal made headlines in the Chicago newspapers. He and Emma then went on to New York, where they supported themselves by renting rooms to prostitutes.

The manuscript of *Sister Carrie* was discovered by novelist Frank Norris, an editorial assistant reading for Doubleday. At the very same time, Dreiser was reading Norris’s *McTeague*: “I talked of nothing else for months.” Norris recommended *Sister Carrie* highly and did all he could to promote the book after it was published, but the wife of the publisher read it, was shocked by its offense to conventional morality and persuaded her husband not to promote it, resulting in virtual censorship. As a consequence, Dreiser sank into a depression comparable to Hurstwood’s. He ended up starving on skid road in Brooklyn, having hallucinations and almost going insane. He was about to throw himself off a wharf into the East River when he was distracted by a cheery drunk with a Scots accent who flipped his coat-tails and danced a jig, to encourage him, “Ah, we’re feelin’ verra low today, but we’ll feel better by and by.”

SUCCESS

Dreiser’s brother Paul paid for his recovery at a rehab center. Back to work as an editor and hack writer, Dreiser gave this hardboiled advice: “Success is what counts in the world, and it is little matter how the success is won...No matter how fine our conceptions of art or ethics, we can never see the world as it actually is, until we look this fact in the face.” In 1907 *Sister Carrie* was reissued and almost became a bestseller. As a consequence, Dreiser was catapulted to the peak of his financial success when he was hired by Butterick Publications, one of the largest publishing companies in the country, as Editor of all three of their popular magazines. Incongruously, Dreiser became the top editor for a publisher of dress patterns and prim magazines purchased by millions of ladies. As put by his biographer, W. A. Swanberg, “It was the literary joke of the century—Dreiser the apostate, the libertine, the enemy of prudery, the fighter for realism, the author of *Sister Carrie*, becoming the high arbiter of dainty stories for dainty women, the iconoclast turned hymn singer. He was now one of the nation’s greatest whoremasters of letters...In despair a few months earlier, Dreiser now was as happy as a misanthrope could be, cynically playing the commercial world for all it was worth, reveling in his important editorship...” After only 3 years he was fired for waging a campaign of seduction against the 17-year-old daughter of an assistant editor.

OTHER NOVELS

In 1911 he published his second novel, *Jennie Gerhardt*, based on the life of another one of his sisters. Jennie is a poor girl seduced by a U.S. Senator who intends to marry her but suddenly dies, leaving her an unwed mother. To hide her shame she flees from Columbus to Cleveland, Ohio. There she meets a rich man and becomes his mistress, concealing her child from him. In the first draft the story had a happy ending, with the rich man becoming reconciled to the child and marrying Jennie. Dreiser revised it to end with Jennie losing both the man and her daughter. He followed the two novels about his sisters with a trilogy based on the career of Charles T. Yerkes, a prominent transportation magnate in Chicago and Philadelphia, but essentially about himself imagined as a ruthless business tycoon, Frank Cowperwood, the titan who falls in the end: *The Financier* (1912), *The Titan* (1914) and *The Stoic* (1947). Contrary to his later Communism, Dreiser made Cowperwood a capitalist hero, a Nietzschean superman whose struggle for success furthers the evolution of the human race.

The "Genius" (1915) is about another superman like himself, Eugene Witla, an artist modeled on the painter Everett Shinn, a young art editor at Butterick Publications who committed suicide. It is Dreiser's most personal novel. The turbulent sex life of the artist is close to his own. He had divorced Jug and was living with an actress he later married, while engaged at the same time in other affairs. He once told one of his mistresses that he liked to carry on two or more affairs simultaneously because it stimulated him in his writing to feel the tension between women competing for his attention. *The "Genius"* became controversial when it got censored by the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice, headed by John Sumner, who had replaced the infamous Anthony Comstock upon his death: "Through the story there are very vivid descriptions of the activities of certain female delinquents who do not, apparently, suffer any ill consequences from their misconduct but, in the language of the day, 'get away with it.' It is wholly conceivable that the reading of such a book by a young woman would be very harmful..." Over 500 writers signed a petition to the contrary, supporting free speech, but nevertheless, the publisher withdrew the novel from distribution and it was not republished for 16 years.

Dreiser again felt alienated and frustrated. He ran out of money and was being shunned by other editors. In 1918 he received 76 rejections of submitted material. On the other hand he met the second great love of his life in 1919, Helen Richardson, his second cousin, and went into hiding with her in Los Angeles. In 1921 he urged his friend H. L. Mencken to nominate him for the Nobel Prize for literature, offering him a bribe and misspelling Nobel, calling it the "Noble Prize": "Start the ball," he coaxed, "and if I snake the forty thousand...you get five."

An American Tragedy (1925)

Dreiser made his comeback with his Naturalist masterpiece *An American Tragedy* (1925), the longest, most extensively documented true crime novel ever published up to that time, more a work of imagination yet still a prototype of the "nonfiction novel" that Norman Mailer and Truman Capote claimed to invent later in the century. In 1906 Chester Gillette, a poor relation working in his wealthy uncle's skirt factory in Cortland, New York, seduced a pretty millhand, Grace Brown. Then he became enamored of the daughter of a wealthy Cortland citizen who encouraged his courtship and his dream of rising through marriage into the town's upper set. When poor Grace got pregnant and became an obstacle, Chester escorted her to Big Moose Lake in the Adirondacks pretending that he would marry her. Instead he took her out boating, stunned her with a tennis racket, overturned the boat and swam to shore while she drowned. Having been seduced by the false values of the capitalist American Dream--like Dreiser himself--Chester was tried and executed. As is Clyde in the novel. The most complex part of the novel is his trial, which explores the moral ambiguity of the situation, the deterministic forces operating on Clyde and his weak character. "My purpose was not to moralize—God forbid—but to give, if possible, a background and a psychology of reality which would somehow explain, if not condone, how such murders happen."

POLITICAL ACTIVISM

In 1927 Dreiser toured the Soviet Union at the invitation of the Communist government, in 1931 he led a reform group on a tour of worker conditions in the coal fields of Kentucky, and in 1932 he was refused membership in the Communist Party, presumably due to his scandalous public image. By then, according to his biographer Swanberg, Dreiser's emotional ideology was dominated by a burning hatred of the rich—of capitalists; a tender sympathy for the poor masses in the abstract; a simultaneous suspicion of the masses in actuality; a Nietzschean belief in the superman, complicated by the conviction that he was one; a fear that his supermanship was unrecognized; a dread that he was instead sinking into failure and obscurity.

As a result, during World War II he felt compelled to leap before the public in articles, lectures and statements often bellicose and uninformed. In 1944 alone his royalties from the Soviet Union amounted to \$34,000. He befriended and corresponded with John Howard Lawson who headed the Communist Party in Hollywood during the period of the infamous hearings by the U.S. House Committee on Un-American Activities in the 1930s-40s. Dreiser had the same attitude as many in Hollywood who became Communists or supported the Party. He did not believe in equality. Much to the contrary, he considered himself superior to the masses, one of those hard leftists he presumed would be among the elite in a Communist society. Furthermore, as a deterministic ideology, Marxism is perfectly consistent with Naturalism. The people have no free will. The totalitarianism of a Communist state expressed Dreiser's own nature.

LAST YEARS

In his later years his compulsion toward social criticism combined with an increasing attraction to mystic philosophy, to such an extent that he nearly abandoned fiction writing. The apparent conflict between his politics and his religion may be resolved if it is understood that Dreiser's politics were sentimental and defiantly idealistic. His hero Cowperwood resembles Stalin. Naturalism and Communism both allowed Dreiser to take a cosmic view of history in which the suffering of individuals is an inevitable part of evolution dominated by the strongest in a deterministic universe. Christianity compensated for these facts with compassion and charity. Quakerism in particular appealed to the mystical dimension present in Dreiser all his life, the soul underlying his deterministic philosophy, as expressed in his last novel *The Bulwark*, published after his death. In 1944, after 25 years of living together, Dreiser finally married Helen Richardson—in secret. At her urgings he attended a few Christian Science meetings.

DEATH

He was finally admitted to the Communist Party in 1945, seeing it as the best hope of humanity. He no longer had to worry about getting censored by the Party, for he died of a heart attack soon after submitting to its authority, at the age of 74. By then he was almost forgotten. His funeral was an American travesty reflecting the preposterous contradictions of his life: Services were held in a Congregationalist church, the eulogy was delivered by a Communist, Dreiser was interred with capitalistic splendor at Forest Lawn in Hollywood, in the plot next to the cowboy movie star Tom Mix. He willed everything to Helen, requesting that she in turn leave half of his estate to a Negro orphanage of her selection, which she did when she died in 1951. A bronze plaque was erected in his hometown of Terra Haute, Indiana, honoring Paul Dresser the songwriter, but there was no recognition of Dreiser, who wrote the lyrics of the state song and two major novels but was considered immoral and un-American.

Michael Hollister (2015)

DREISER ANSWERS CRITICS

“Have you been satisfied with the reception of *Sister Carrie*?”

“Well, the critics have not really understood what I was trying to do. Here is a book that is close to life. It is intended not as a piece of literary craftsmanship, but as a picture of conditions done as simply and effectively as the English language will permit. To sit up and criticize me for saying “vest,” instead of waistcoat, to talk about my splitting the infinitive and using vulgar commonplaces here and there, when the tragedy of a man's life is being displayed, is silly. More, it is ridiculous. It makes me feel that American criticism is the joke which English literary authorities maintain it to be. But the circulation is beginning to boom. When it gets to the people they will understand, because it is a story of real life, of their lives’.”

Otis Notman

“Talks with Four Novelists”

New York Times Sunday Review of Books

(15 June 1907) 393

PORTRAITS OF DREISER

“He was a tremendously physical person, without conventional morals, almost ugly, and yet he had a kindliness and warmth that were magnetic.”

Ann Watkins, a friend

“Like a child, he was intellectually [naïve]—discovering that fire burns, and that pain is not pleasant. Like a child, he is furiously busy piling up evidence of the physical world: such as the facts that women are sexually attractive, that monogamy is not a natural state, that business men love power, that wine intoxicates, that all the ladies who go to church are not saints.”

Waldo Frank, literary critic

“Now to me, as to many other American writers, Dreiser, more than any other man, is marching alone. Usually unappreciated, often hounded, he has cleared the trail from Victorian, Howellsian timidity and gentility in American fiction to honesty, boldness and passion of life. Without his pioneering I doubt if any of us could, unless we liked to be sent to jail, express life, beauty and terror.”

Sinclair Lewis
Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech
Stockholm (1930)

“On the occasion of my first meeting with the author of *The Titan* we had for a period of three or four hours talked of nothing but words and styles and Mr. Dreiser had been so completely in agreement with me that I had taken him to be a larger and gentler Conrad...Indeed, Mr. Dreiser, even on the surface, seemed to know quite as much of the technique of writing as I did...and I gave him mental credit for knowing a little more.”

Ford Madox Ford

“He said he could go into the laboratory and prove there was no free will, that we were really controlled by glands, chemism, hormones, and compulsions.”

Robert Elias, journalist

“One half of the man’s brain, so to speak, wars with the other half. He is intelligent, he is thoughtful, he is a sound artist—but there come moments when a dead hand falls upon him, and he is once more the Indiana peasant, snuffling absurdly over imbecile sentimentalities, giving a grave ear to quackeries, snorting and eye-rolling with the best of them....”

While Dreiser lived all the literary snobs and popinjays of the country, including your present abject servant, devoted themselves to reminding themselves of his defects. He had, to be sure, a number of them. For one thing...he had an insatiable appetite for the obviously not true. But the fact remains that he was a great artist, and that no other American of his generation left so wide and handsome a mark upon the national letters. American writing, before and after his time, differed almost as much as biology before and after Darwin. He was a man of large originality, of profound feeling, and of unshakeable courage. All of us who write are better off because he lived, worked and hoped.”

H. L. Mencken

“The dichotomous Dreiser—on the one plane a selfish, bullying, unreasonable, capricious, deceitful, evil old man—was in his other incarnation more than ever the awe-stricken contemplator of the creative force that made him what he helplessly was, a part of all nature in its infinite glory and sorrow....He would stoop to pick up a pin for luck, then discourse on science. He was secretive about trivialities...but could make astonishingly intimate revelations of his own frailties. For a determinist who professed a disbelief in moral causes, he became inconsistently involved in causes of his own.

Nor could anyone assess Dreiser the liar who demanded truth in the world; the hater who called for love; the money-grubber who denounced capital; the glorifier of the proletariat who held the mass in contempt; the relentless promoter of sexual intrigues, the love cheat who asked for a high moral order and more ‘spiritual character’; the ego so vast that it exempted only himself from his own standards; the boy who never really reached maturity and yet who exuded at times a charm and sympathy that is warmly remembered to this day.”

W. A. Swanberg, his biographer

PHILOSOPHY OF DREISER

“From first to last he was driven to try to understand man’s place in Nature, to a far more profound degree than any of his American contemporaries in fiction; indeed, for a parallel we should have to go back to Melville’s grapplings. This is what gives Dreiser’s books their peculiar breadth: they are universal, not in their range of human experience, but in the sense that an only partly known universe presses upon and dominates his searching consciousness of what happens to all his characters...”

One of the strongest scientific influences upon him, which had begun, indeed, when he was working on *The Financier* [1911] was Jacques Loeb's *The Mechanistic Conception of Life*. Loeb's explanation of human instincts and behavior in physiochemical terms seemed to Dreiser the next natural step after Spencer and Darwin and Haeckel, and his own descriptions of love in terms of 'chemisms' derive from this source. Yet Dreiser was never a consistent mechanist. Paul Elmer More, reviewing *Hey-rub-a-dub-dub* with the cool distaste of the new humanist, declared the distinguishing feature of these essays to be an 'oscillation between a theory of evolution which sees no progress save the survival of the rapaciously strong and a humanitarian feeling of solidarity with the masses who are exploited in the process.'...Dreiser advanced from his earlier feeling of pity for the helpless poor to his militant belief that their condition could be changed by mass action....

The sense of life that we feel in Dreiser's novels is larger and deeper than are any of the patterns of thought that they advance....Mechanism holds that life has no transcendent meaning that we can discover; but Dreiser, though he thought he accepted this, could not accept it with any equanimity....He keeps searching for a transcendent meaning. He never really adhered to the pitiless implications of the Darwinian universe....As he kept groping to find more significance in their lives than any his mind could discover, he dwelt on the mystery of the inexplicable as no rigorous mechanist would have done....He always became impatient with scientists who would not grant that 'mystery' was part of 'reality.' The main drive of his interest was to pass beyond phenomena to their cosmic significance....

In 'The Myth of Individuality' (1934) he developed the proposition that 'It is not the man that is living, but the race or races and their creative chemisms. Man is not living, but is being lived by something which needs not only him but billions like him in order to express itself.' What distinguishes this proposition from his earlier recurrent thought that man does not use life, but is used by it, is its new grounding. For he now said explicitly that he was against all 'mechanism,' and began in subsequent essays to talk in terms of the 'totality,' which 'we variously refer to as the Universe, God, or the Vital Force.' If Nature was still a 'oneness' from which man had no separate will, this 'oneness' was now a 'universal mind.' To illustrate his new reverence before this conception of nature, he quoted Emerson's 'Brahma.'...

Whitman, no less than Dreiser, was occupied with the new discoveries of science while equally determined to pass beyond the limitations of science. And as he dwelt upon cosmic wholeness, he also dwelt more and more upon the need of solidarity in society, and his political thought—again like Dreiser's—moved from individualism towards socialism....We are confronted by the paradox that at the very time when he was denying the concept of the separable individual, in either the cosmos or the state, he was also drawn, as he had not previously been, to our earlier American transcendental thinkers. He immersed himself in Thoreau...Of all the philosophers he had read in recent years, 'from Democritus to Einstein,' he had found Thoreau 'most illuminative of the implications of scientific result' because of his staunch unwillingness to stop short with mechanical processes, because of his belief in 'a universal and apparently beneficent control...however dark and savage its results or expressions may seem to us at times.'...He had arrived at the conviction that man cannot find fulfillment except through society. But he had not lost the individual in the mass; he still held to the conviction that it is the function of a good society to give release to every member's creative potentialities....

[In] 'My Creator' (1943)...he dwelt on the 'design' that he now saw everywhere, in the avocado tree in his garden or in the farthest courses of the stars. He declared that he was 'moved not only to awe but reverence' for the inevitable Creator of such divine and yet harmonious patterns...He could still denounce the Catholic Church for promoting 'mass stupidity'; but as early as 1927 he had spoken of the teaching of Elias Hicks as 'the most reasonable of all religions.' [Quakerism] The choice of Hicks—who, incidentally, was the strongest influence upon Whitman—was significant in that his emphasis, even beyond that of other Quakers, was upon the inner light and against the need of the outward marks of authority. It is equally significant that as Dreiser began to think in terms of the development of a more organic society, he said to Dos Passos in 1938 that the kind of community he wanted in America would have something like the Quaker conception of 'spiritual relationship.'...

He has found his way back to the core of the teachings of John Woolman, firmest of American Quaker radicals. As Dreiser weaves crucial passages from Woolman's *Journal* into his text, it is evident how much

he had also meditated upon these. Woolman has not insisted that everybody else must join the Quaker sect; he did insist on human brotherhood in its simplest and most revolutionary form, on the freeing of the slaves, on economic equality....The central truth that he wanted to affirm...was that living authority lies not in the harsh judging mind but in the purified and renewed affections of the heart....

Like Melville in the forty years from *Moby-Dick* and *Pierre* to *Billy Budd*, he had progressed from a bitter questioning of the universe to a more serene acceptance—and yet his deepest burden was still compassion over all that remained inscrutable. The months during which Dreiser was writing *The Bulwark* seem to have been one of the happiest periods of his life, one in which he felt a harmony between his inner and his outer worlds. His openness now to religious experience led him on several occasions to different churches, and on Good Friday, 1945, just as he was finishing *The Bulwark*, he partook of the Congregational communion service....In the same month that he made his symbolic act of joining the Communist Party he declared: ‘The true religion is in Matthew’....

In the feverish period leading up to the war he often seemed only to be echoing the Communist position without adequate investigation of his own, often seemed very close to one of the worst danger points of our time—an unqualified acceptance of mass force for the good it can theoretically do. He moved away from this danger point as his meditations on the nature of equality deepened, as he realized that equality meant the equality of individuals co-operating to create the only effective freedom. He would no longer say that he was for either the individual or the mass. His belief continued to grow that a society which would do justice to both could be built through socialism....

He was deeply stirred also by the way in which European writers and artists—Picasso and Sean O’Casey among them—were affirming their adherence to international solidarity by the symbolic act of joining the Communist Party....He was more religious than he had ever been before, and he may therefore have considered it necessary to assure his associates on the left that this did not involve any defection from them. The fact that Foster, for whom Dreiser had warm admiration, had again become head of the American Communist Party doubtless helped crystallize his decision. In any case he believed that the claims of both the self and the unself were justified by this act. He insisted that he would continue to speak his mind as he saw fit; that if the party did not approve it could expel him.

In judging his act we must remember the temper of the period in which it was made. His major concern was the prevention of further wars, which he was convinced would destroy civilization. He had slowly learned the lesson that there could be no humane life in the United States until the inequities should be removed that had thwarted or destroyed so many of the characters in his fiction. He now believed that the next step was to do everything he could to break down the destructive barriers of nationalism, and to work for equity among all the peoples of the world.”

F. O. Matthiessen
Theodore Dreiser
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Michael Hollister (2015)

