

62 QUOTATIONS



Theodore Dreiser

(1871-1945)

Theodore Dreiser is the primary Naturalist in the literary history of the United States, whose first novel *Sister Carrie* (1900) was initially censored by his publisher's wife, then got rejected by Hollywood as immoral, but eventually became the novel most often taught to exemplify Naturalism. His most ambitious novel is *An American Tragedy* (1925). Dreiser grew up dirt poor, an awkward ugly person with the mind of a peasant who lusted after salvation—and women—through worldly success in the Big City. He lived the most scandalous life of any major American writer and is the only one to die a Communist—despite also having become a mystical Christian! He transcended his many faults as a human being in his novels, expressing a deep sympathy for women based on experiences of his sisters, compassion for workers, and a primal humanity. He dramatizes basic human nature through sympathetic characters in common situations, an intuitive and sociological novelist with dramatic power and eternal appeal.

Narrating in the omniscient Godlike voice of the Victorians, he becomes, ironically, an old-fashioned character in his novels. His style is the clumsiest and most naïve in American literature, but he tells compelling stories and writes from the heart. And he is not without art. His novels are relatively simple, but also full of convincing rounded characters, thematic motifs and ideas. They have dramatic form and are symbolic, even allegorical. Throughout his life Dreiser groped clumsily after the Truth, clutching one ideology after another, often making a fool of himself. Fortunately his desire to be truthful as an artist was stronger than his politics and conflicting opinions.

ORDER OF TOPICS: home, father, Puritan upbringing, the conventional mind, his own moralizing, myth of agrarian pastoralism, glamour of the Big City, sex, poverty, human suffering, idealistic Realism, Naturalism, motif of fluidity in *Sister Carrie*, allegory, style, chemistry of being, myth of individuality, mystery, uncertainty, human nature, Socialism, Communist activities, futility of reform, evolution, God:

HOME

There was a time not long ago when Americans [Victorians] felt that the beginning and end of all things was the home...a comfortable home in which to grow and vegetate. Everything had to be sacrificed to it... We have seen several generations go by since they were built.... I myself have witnessed a great revolt against all the binding perfection which these lovely homes represented.

A lovely home atmosphere is one of the flowers of the world, than which there is nothing more tender, nothing more delicate, nothing more calculated to make strong and just the natures cradled and nourished within it. Those who have never experienced such a beneficent influence will not understand wherefore the

tear springs glistening to the eyelids at some strange breath in lovely music. The mystic chords which bind and thrill the heart of the nation, they will never know. [Victorianism in *Sister Carrie*]

HIS FATHER

My dogmatic father...was a Catholic and a bigot. I never knew a narrower, more hidebound religionist, nor one more tender and loving in his narrow way. He was a crank, a tenth rate...Francis of Assissi, and yet a charming person if it had been possible to get his mind off the subject of religion for more than three seconds at a time. He worked, ate, played, slept, and dreamed religion...he was constantly attempting to drive a decidedly recalcitrant family into a similar point of view.

PURITAN UPBRINGING

We were taught persistently to shun most human experience as either dangerous or degrading or destructive. The less you knew about life the better; the more you knew about the fictional heaven and hell ditto. People walked about in a kind of sanctified daze...hypnotized or self-hypnotized by an erratic and impossible theory of human conduct which had grown up heaven knows where or how, and had finally cast its amethystine spell over all America, if not over all the world.

THE CONVENTIONAL MIND

The conventional mind is at best a petty piece of machinery.... It has its little siphon of thought-processes forced up or down into the mighty ocean of fact and circumstance; but it uses so little, pumps so faintly, that the immediate contiguity of the vast mass is not disturbed. Nothing of the subtlety of life is perceived.

HIS OWN MORALIZING

When a girl leaves her home at eighteen, she does one of two things, either she falls into saving hands and becomes better, or she rapidly assumes the cosmopolitan standard of virtue and becomes worse.

That such a scene might stir the less expensively dressed to emulate the more expensively dressed could scarcely be laid at the door of anything save the false ambition of the minds so affected.

Not evil, but longing for that which is better more often directs the steps of the erring. Not evil, but goodness more often allures the feeling mind unused to reason.

MYTH OF AGRARIAN PASTORALISM

To me it seemed that all the spirit of rural America, its idealism, its dreams, the passion of a Brown; the courage and patience and sadness of a Lincoln—the dreams and courage of a Lee or a Jackson, were all here. The very soil smacked of idealism and faith, a fixedness in sentimental and purely imaginative American tradition, in which I, alas! could not share. I was enraptured. Out of its charms and sentiment I might have composed an elegy or an epic, but I could not believe that it was more than a frail flower of romance. I had seen Pittsburgh. I had seen Lithuanians and Hungarians in their ‘courts’ and hovels. I had seen the girls of the city—walking the streets at night. The profound faith in God, in goodness, in virtue and duty that I saw here in no wise squared with the craft, the cruelty, the brutality and the envy that I saw everywhere else.

GLAMOUR OF THE BIG CITY

To the child, the genius with imagination, or the wholly untraveled the approach to a great city for the first time is a wonderful thing. Particularly if it be evening—that mystic period between the glare and gloom of the world when life is changing from one sphere or condition to another. Ah, the promise of the night. What does it not hold for the weary! What old illusion of hope is not here forever repeated!

She hummed and hummed as the moments went by, sitting in the shadow by the window, and was therein as happy, though she did not perceive it, as she ever would be. [Carrie before her success on the stage]

Amid the tinsel and shine of her state walked Carrie, unhappy.

SEX

“You do?” he said, pressing his lips to her own.
For answer, her lips replied.

POVERTY

It is difficult to indicate to those who have never come out of poverty into luxury, or out of comparative uncouthness into refinement, the veil or spell which the latter comes eventually to cast over the inexperienced mind, coloring the world anew. Life is apparently striving, constantly, to perfect its illusions and to create spells.... And to those who have come out of poverty, luxury is a dream of delight.

HUMAN SUFFERING

The infinite suffering and deprivation of great masses of men and women upon whom existence has been thrust unasked appalls me. My greatest desire is to devote every hour of my conscious existence to depicting phases of life as I see and understand them.

IDEALISTIC REALISM

We like realism, but it must be tinged with sufficient idealism to make it all of a truly uplifting character. Our field...is limited by the same limitations which govern the well-regulated home. We cannot admit stories which deal with false or immoral relations.... The fine side of things—the idealistic—is the answer for us, and we find really splendid material within these limitations. [as Editor]

NATURALISM

For all the liberal analysis of Spencer and our modern naturalistic philosophers, we have but an infantile perception of morals.

It was only an average little conscience, a thing which represented the world, her past environment, habit, convention, in a confused way. With it, the voice of the people was truly the voice of God.

As I see him the utterly infinitesimal individual weaves among the mysteries a floss-like and wholly meaningless course—if course it be. In short I catch no meaning from all I have seen, and pass quite as I came, confused and dismayed.

[Drouet] was a merry, unthinking moth of the lamp.

Carrie was unwise, and, therefore, like the sheep in its unwisdom.

She was merely pretty, good-natured, and lucky.

MOTIF OF FLUIDITY IN *Sister Carrie* (1900)

She could not realize that she was drifting...

...rushing into a great sea of life...
...a lone figure in a tossing, thoughtless sea.

She felt the flow of the tide of effort and interest—felt her own helplessness without quite realizing the wisp on the tide that she was.

Carrie saw the drift...

The deeper she sank into the entanglement...
...the slightest tide of success...

The constant drag to something better was not to be denied.

Several times their eyes accidentally met, and then there poured into hers such a flood of feeling as she had never before experienced.

He took Carrie's little hand, and a current of feeling swept from one to the other.

Some old tunes crept to her lips, and, as she sang them, her heart sank.

It was always a matter of feeling with her, strong and deep.

...the great surging feelings and desires...

The little shop girl was getting into deep water.

She was letting her few supports float away from her.

He was simply letting things drift...

Some days he found that he was all at sea...

She had just recently donned a sailor hat...

Her resistance half dissolved in the flood of his strong feeling.

He would be but an inconspicuous drop in an ocean like New York.

Carrie drifted out of his life...

ALLEGORY

Sometimes nature does it in a face—it makes the face [Carrie] representative of all desire.... At least, she got the idea that her look was something which represented the world's longing.

STYLE

This was really a gorgeous saloon from a Chicago standpoint.

It was a truly swell saloon.

Hurstwood glowed with his own intensity, and the heat of his passion was already melting the wax of his companion's scruples.

CHEMISTRY OF BEING

It is a question whether the human will, of itself alone, ever has cured or ever can cure any human weakness. Tendencies are subtle things. They involve the chemistry of one's being...

Now, it has been shown experimentally that a constantly subdued frame of mind produces certain poisons in the blood, called katastates, just as virtuous feelings of pleasure and delight produce helpful chemicals called anastates. [science fiction]

MYTH OF INDIVIDUALITY

Individuality is a myth.... All things to me are emanations and evolutions of cosmic forces and cosmic law. Buddha and Mary Baker Eddy affirmed an *over* or *one* universal soul, itself *being* and so *containing*

all wisdom and all creative power. Modern science sees no other answer than this, but is not willing to affirm it.... As for the human soul—my scientific, as well as my philosophical studies, compel me to feel that there can be but one primary creative force or soul.... I am inspired by the conception of a primary source of all life or over-soul...[echo of Emerson] More, I am thrilled by life's endless grandeur and genius as it presents itself in time and space. Again I am profoundly grateful for any manifestation of itself that may be looked upon as *me*. I have no desire to flout such of its laws as are truly known—only to understand them. To know that I have been, and possibly may continue (in any form) as a part of it, is sufficient not only for my present well-being but my continuing peace of mind.

MYSTERY

I once believed that nature was a blind, stumbling force or combination of forces which knew not what or whither.... Of later years I have inclined to think just the reverse, i.e. that nature is merely dark to us because of her tremendous subtlety and our own very limited powers of comprehension.

UNCERTAINTY

For myself, I accept now no creeds. I do not know what truth is, what beauty is, what love is, what hope is. I do not believe anyone absolutely and I do not doubt anyone absolutely. I think people are both evil and well-intentioned.

While the money was in his hand the lock clicked. It had sprung! Did he do it?

HUMAN NATURE

And dealing with man is a practical thing—not a theoretical one. Nothing can alter his emotions, his primitive and animal reactions to life. Greed, selfishness, vanity, hate, passion, lust, are all inherent in the least of us, and until such are eradicated, there can be no Utopia.

SOCIALISM

This fall, if I vote, I vote for Debs.... I don't care a damn about the masses. It is the individual that concerns me.... I was ready to accept socialism if by that I could get what I wanted, while not ready to admit that all people were as deserving as I by any means.

COMMUNIST ACTIVITIES

I have been called upon by the militant communists of this country to perform every known service from writing and speaking to entering dangerous areas in order to bring about favorable results for mistreated and injured American workers, and always at my own expense. I am constantly being called upon by Russian newspapers and various organizations to submit opinions, articles, and whatnot to their publications and causes without any return to me whatsoever. Accordingly now I feel that if further material of mine is to be used, it should be paid for in order that I might recapture at least a fraction of the money that I have expended on Russia's behalf here and in Russia.

FUTILITY OF REFORM

I can only say that I have no theories about life, or the solution of economic and political problems. Life as I see it, is an organized process about which we can do nothing in the final analysis. Of course, science, art, commercial progress, all go to alleviate and improve and ease the material existence of humanity, and that for the great mass is something. But there is no plan, as I believe, from Christianity down, that can be more than a theory.

EVOLUTION

Men are still led by instinct before they are regulated by knowledge.

Our civilization is still in a middle stage, scarcely beast, in that it is no longer wholly guided by instinct; scarcely human, in that it is not yet wholly guided by reason.

We see man far removed from the lairs of the jungles, his innate instincts dulled by too near an approach to free will, his free will not sufficiently developed to replace his instincts and afford him perfect guidance. He is becoming too wise to hearken always to instincts and desires; he is still too weak to always prevail against them...

We have the consolation of knowing that evolution is ever in action, that the ideal is a light that cannot fail.

Ames [higher aims] had pointed out a farther step, but on and on beyond that, if accomplished, would lie others for her. It was forever to be the pursuit of that radiance of delight which tints the distant hilltops of the world.

GOD

Surely there must be a Creative Divinity, and so a purpose, behind all this variety and beauty and tragedy of life. For see how tragedy had descended upon him, and still he had faith, and would have. [Solon the Quaker in *The Bulwark*]

