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Dreiser and theTradition of the American Working Girl Novel

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In 1900, the year that *Sister Carrie* was published, the majority of the more than five million American women who worked did so in the kind of sweatshop, factory, domestic service, or department store jobs that Carrie expected to fill until or in the absence of marriage. Her migration from town to city was undertaken by one out of every three urban working women, many of whom, like Dreiser's heroine, dreamed that a "better thing would eventuate and [they] would be rewarded for coming and toiling in the city" (15). In her quest for satisfying employment and a more eventful life, Carrie embodied an emergent social and literary type. By 1911, when *Jennie Gerhardt* appeared, the number of female wage earners had grown so that even hard-pressed married women, real-life counterparts of Jennie's mother, constituted a tenth of the female work force, again largely in metropolitan centers. Young single women like her daughter Jennie, however, still supplied the bulk of feminine labor.[1]

Although his novels about working-class womanhood stirred controversy by violating the genteel literary stricture that any woman who erred sexually, particularly one from the morally suspect lower classes, should be punished, to the post-Victorian mind Dreiser provides classic defenses of the urban working

woman under economic pressure. Faced with defeat or destitution, alienated from the industrial workplace or expecting an illegitimate child, his labor heroines find adaptive alternatives to the drudgery of representative "women's jobs" like Carrie's unskilled shoe factory and Jennie's laundry work. Even as a young journalist in the 1890's, Dreiser's investigations of the urban poor in general and sweated labor in particular anticipated his dramatic descriptions of Carrie Meeber's prisonlike work conditions and the impoverished Gerhardt women's desperate acceptance of cleaning and laundering work. Dreiser's observations of the lengthy and difficult working lives of his many older sisters, together with his early experiences as a laundryman and bill collector in working-class Chicago, also furnished him with the labor material on which his two novels draw so skillfully.

Given Dreiser's celebrated compassion for the female downtrodden and his refusal to judge, much less kill off, his "fallen" protagonists, what has seemed beyond dispute is his rejection of the era's stereotyped fiction about women at work. Cathy and Arnold Davidson remind us that by satirizing the working girl romance and allied forms for mass audiences, Dreiser "controverts . . . the basic messages preached in the popular fiction of the time" (407). The Laura Jean Libbey romance, for instance, marketed the formula of the morally spotless working girl, purity and altruism incarnate, who emerges untainted from a host of trials ranging from kidnapping to attempts on her life. Libbey invariably extols this improbable sweatshop Cinderella, draws her work life sketchily at best, and quickly elevates her by marriage to a wealthy young man. In a time of literary reluctance to acknowledge that women challenged the Victorian ideology of "separate spheres" by supporting themselves, however meagerly, Dreiser dramatizes the lives of wage-earning women. Rather than employ period formula, most notably the *deus ex machina* of the aristocratic marriage, Dreiser, argue modern critics, not only documents the trying conditions of the feminine workplace but illustrates the moral compromises his overworked and underpaid heroines must make to survive.

Dreiser's relation to his era and its working girl fiction, however, is more complex than modern commentators have realized, for, like less controversial writers who depicted the working-class heroine, his true subject is her emotional, not

her work life. Furthermore, to fully understand his attitude toward working women, it is necessary to place him in the context of fiction which middlebrow readers took far more seriously than the dime novels of a Laura Jean Libbey or a Bertha M. Clay. Ripe for Dreiserian reversal, their subliterary books were popular with lower-class women rather than the bourgeois audience Dreiser was trying to reach. His novels have a greater affinity with more literate popular forms, *Sister Carrie* with the New York tenement tale of the 1890's, and, in a more complex way, *Jennie Gerhardt* with its successor, the cross-class labor romance of the 1900's.[2]

Significantly, Dreiser employs some of the chief narrative strategies of these forms, devices which undercut his celebrated verisimilitude about working women. Like J.W. Sullivan in *Tenement Tales of New York* (1896) and Marie Van Vorst in *Amanda of the Mill* (1903), Dreiser distances himself from what the new labor historians term "woman's work culture," her response both to her female peers and her employer's rules and strictures (Cooper 2). Divided between compassion for and condescension toward the typical working woman, between locating his heroines in the feminine workplace and rescuing them from its coarsening influence, Dreiser's novels illustrate his ambivalence about wage-earning women. Of course, he has a more profound vision of the economic, social, and psychological forces shaping them. But, like the sentimental slum tales and romantic labor novels which "explained" working women to middle-class America, Dreiser's fiction draws back from exploring the feminine work experience. If to a certain extent he transcends such fiction, he also shares the prejudices which characterize it.

As a New York reviewer well-versed in the books of the day, Dreiser was acquainted with tenement fiction, sentimental or naturalistic stories which chronicled the urban poor where they lived and worked. Invariably cast as the vulnerable innocent, destined for marital rescue from sweated work or the certain doom of the streets, the working girl was a prominent character in such works. Dreiser was certainly familiar with Crane's *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (1893), the period's most notable slum tale of how the feminine "other half" lived and often died. As a contributor to *Ev'ry Month*, the young Dreiser

reviewed Edward W. Townsend's aptly titled 1895 novel *A Daughter of the Tenements*. In it a Lower East Side Italian girl who sells fruit from a pushcart and is headed for a sweatshop life providentially achieves a Carrie-like success on the variety stage. Dreiser biographer Richard Lingeman speculates that he may well have known of celebrated photo-journalist Jacob Riis's *How the Other Half Lives* (1890), a work Lingeman views as a study of a male-dominated Bowery landscape (158). But "The Working Girls of New York" is one of a number of chapters study a female subject, which Riis followed up with fictive vignettes of garment center and factory women in *Out of Mulberry Street*, two years before *Sister Carrie*.

Whether he had read *Mulberry Street* or not, like the works of Crane, Townsend and then-popular writers J.W. Sullivan and Julian Ralph, encapsulates a period attitude toward the feminine workplace which, in depicting the women whom Carrie encounters in the factory, Dreiser himself shared. Despite a surface sympathy for the monotony, drudgery, and poor wages which are the lot of their protagonists, Riis and his contemporaries seem more alarmed at women's conduct in the workplace than their victimization by it. Tenement writers invariably cast the woman who remains a wage earner, rather than embraces the vocation of marriage, as an anti-heroine, a roughened, wayward type. She is always a danger to the real heroine of the piece, who, in any case, is too refined to work for long in a shop or factory.

In their impulse to rescue the working girl from rather than study her in the workplace, tenement writers reflect the pervasive period fear, common to social scientific surveys, investigative journalism, and reform fiction alike, that the industrial workplace was, as a representative commentator phrased it, "moral poison" for women (Ames 56). The 1890's, the heyday of the tenement tale, was also a time when government statisticians began keeping detailed records on women workers. Although surveys presented information about the working girl's wages, hours, and family situation, the overriding concern was her moral state. A widely held belief was that the workplace encouraged "unwomanly" behavior. Whether prone to coarse or flighty conduct, to the immorality of paid or casual prostitution to supplement or replace her wages, or to subversive ideas about rejecting marriage and motherhood, the working girl was con-

sidered in constant spiritual danger. Indeed her very ability to survive in the workplace branded her as hardened.[3]

Interestingly, when Riis and his contemporaries dramatize these beliefs, they take such morally tainted working women to task more than the lascivious foreman or seductive male co-worker who contributed to making them so. In a prototypical Riis story, the celebrated defender of the male underclass criticizes the "hoydenish" cloakmaker Rosie Baruch, inspired by fantasies of escape from her fatiguing work to adopt "harum scarum ways" (122) and keep late hours, presumably with the unsavory company she has encountered at work. In another Riis tale, a wayward pie factory girl prefers a workers' picnic to remorse over the beau she is jilting. Julian Ralph's china shop clerk "Dutch" Kitty rejects marriage for eleven hours a day in the store and refuses to give up the friendship of a workmate who inveigles her to a dance hall frequented by prostitutes. When, just in time, she comes to her senses, she echoes her creator in blaming work for giving her such dangerous ideas. Finally, in "Minnie Kelsey's Wedding," J.W. Sullivan's title character is also saved at the last moment from the morally perilous influence of her own factory companions. Her hardened co-workers, veterans of the dance hall, lure her to a rough party. Already dispirited by the long hours of her dull machine work and ill-equipped to comprehend the urban toughness these women personify, Minnie is ripe for their corrupting influence. In a reversal of the nineteenth century's seduction scenario, Sullivan provides a male rescuer, a local gambler determined to reform by marrying the virginal Minnie. Sullivan's message is clear: only when the "prettiest girl in the factory" (59) is removed from both work and the unsavory women she meets there is she safe. The fate of those she leaves behind does not concern him.

Indeed, whether the heroine is Sullivan's ingenuously pretty Minnie Kelsey, E.W. Townsend's lovely, virginal Carminella, or even rebellious naturalist Stephen Crane's "slum flower" Maggie Johnson, their creators single them out because the young women are superior in beauty and chastity to the vulgar co-workers who surround them. Of course, the slum Cinderella was also a staple of the Laura Jean Libbey school, but, unlike Libbey and most other nineteenth-century imaginers of the working girl, the tenement writers locate her in a social

landscape. The would-be suitors of a Minnie Kelsey or a Maggie Johnson are no fairy tale princes, but recognizable Lower East Side figures. Stephen Crane even describes Maggie Johnson's drunken, brutal parents and her childhood as their battered daughter. Yet, like less talented practitioners of the slum story, he clings to a formulaic insistence on her transcendent innocence. And, largely to distinguish her from the alcoholic, complaining or prematurely aged women who people it, he provides a brief description of the collar and cuff factory where she toils. If her final misfortune is to be seduced and cast on the streets by the unsavory Pete, an early one is to "be gradually shrivelling in the hot, stuffy room" (64) among such repellent workmates.

Carrie Meeber's experiences among female sewing machine operators in a Chicago shoe factory mirror those of her predecessors in tenement fiction. From the moment she enters that sex-segregated workplace--the skilled male workers are spatially separated from the unskilled females--Dreiser focuses on her revulsion at the "common" women (53) whom she meets there. To her eyes, they are too familiar with the men who joke and even touch them playfully. Indeed these implicitly promiscuous women realize the period's worst fears about the workplace, for they are "free with the fellows and exchange . . . banter in rude phrases which at first shocked her" (53). Certainly their manners and language are worlds away from her own, as Dreiser is at pains to emphasize. He deplores the fact that the workmate at her right speaks to Carrie "without any form of introduction" (37). Because of the bad grammar of the girl at her left, also unnamed, he suggests that she too is vulgar and uncouth. The implication is that these girls are members of an army of women, not worth dignifying by name, who inhabit a verbal world characterized by questions like "Say...what jeh think he said?" (38). Sexual innuendo and the rowdy giggling which greets it further brand Carrie's work peers as part of a community of women she does not wish to join. Dreiser summarizes Carrie's response with sympathy: she "felt it was bad to have to listen to the girl next to her, who was slangy and rather hardened by experience" (53).

As in the tenement tale, the hazards from such women are as real as those from the lustful shop employer or the seductive men in the streets and dance halls outside. Had Carrie met these

women's overtures of friendliness with anything more thar aloofness, they might well have included her in the jaunts tc dance halls and saloons of which they gossiped, and which thei real-life counterparts certainly frequented (Peiss 89-93). Insisting on her separateness from the brazen workplace womer who personify something "hard and low" (40), he casts her as a princess among the serfs. For if Carrie is appalled by the dirty, odorous atmosphere, the endless work day, and the disrespectful conduct of the male operators, she is just as revolted by the "gir at her left."

Unlike a Riis or a Ralph, Dreiser is too much the realist tc deny that these women's behavior is an adaptation to the gruel-ing conditions of the workplace. Acknowledging that "[n]ot the slightest provis-ion had been made for the comfort of the employees" (39), Dreiser suggests that the women, routinely ad-dressed by the foreman as "you," must endlessly repea mechanical movements in a stifling atmosphere at a pace directed by the owner. Dreiser's observation that the work speec turned men and women alike into "clattering automatons" (36) is borne out in autobiographies by garment center women such as Elisabeth Hasanovitz and Rose Cohen.

As in many factories of the period, the women, used routine-ly to train apprentices such as Carrie, which takes unpaid time from their own work, are also denied access to skilled "men's jobs" and treated rudely by bosses and male workers. They are even forbidden to talk on the job because it was believed tc lower feminine productivity. Given this dehumanizing taboc about conversing, like their real-life counterparts, they banc together to circumvent both ruling and punishment by talking animatedly about their recreational activities and warning one another when the foreman is in listening range. Their work cul-ture, described by one modern historian of women's work in this fashion, "organize[s] workroom social life around the interests and experiences shared by most young women" (Tentler 69). Although part of him scorned the low intellectual level on which these women functioned, Dreiser knew that such gossip reflected the interests of young working women. When in a reminiscence he recalled his own sisters, who worked in low-paying jobs in Chicago in the 1880's, he said they talked constantly of "[c]lothes and men" (*Dawn* 69).

Furthermore, if--much like the rather wayward Dreiser girls

themselves--the shoe factory women are attuned to the sexuality of male co-workers' familiarities, then they also exemplify a consideration for one another, including newcomers like Carrie. Historian Leslie Tentler finds in the turn-of-the-century feminine workplace countless instances of a "supportive work group . . . embodying an oblique protest" (66) against the demands of incessant productivity. So too among the women Carrie encounters. The very girl whom Dreiser brands as unmannerly for not introducing herself gives Carrie tips on conserving her energy for the afternoon's sewing. All try to slow up their work so that the inexperienced new girl can better learn her machine. And they try to initiate her into workplace mores. "Don't you mind. . . . He's too fresh" (40), one says to comfort her, when a young man prods a mortified Carrie in the ribs.

Despite the semi-documentary approach to such women, Dreiser still buries the issue of their hard, unremunerative work in another device of the tenement story. Like tenement writers, he uses the providential male rescue to separate his atypical shop girl from the toughened types who try to befriend her. Carrie, it is true, is not able to marry the freewheeling Drouet, and Hurstwood's union with her, though she cultivates ignorance about it, is a bigamous one. But unlike the average lower-class woman of the time, who could expect to work seven years before marriage, Carrie enters a series of semi-marital relationships which provide her with much the same reward as a tenement heroine. J.W. Sullivan's Minnie Kelsey, for instance, is promised by her marriage-minded suitor: "I'll share my money with you[,] . . . dress you well and give you a nice place to live" (65). Nor in tenement fiction did a woman need to be more virtuous than Carrie to be worthy of a marriage offer. Crane's Maggie, it is true, gives up her virtue in the mistaken belief that her seducer will provide marital rescue from a sweatshop life, only to fall to despair, streetwalking, and a river death. But her namesake in an 1898 Brander Matthews story, "Before the Break of Day," flees the paper-box factory, and foolishly takes up with a bad type who forces her into dance hall prostitution. A neighborhood bartender kinder than Crane's Pete marries her and helps her undo her past. While few corrupted working girls were that fortunate, even a former opium addict, a secondary character in *A Daughter of the Tenements*, starts life anew in rural retreat with an idealized father figure whom she might one

day wed. The point was that men extracted the working girl from the workplace, whether as husbands, protectors, or failed protectors who propelled her to prostitution.

Carrie's escape from wage-earning work and its negative associations for Dreiser is more complex than in slum fiction. True, like Sullivan's Minnie or Matthews's Maggie, Carrie spends only a few months in a factory. The male protector, however, is not the resolution of her problems. First one man, then another, supports her financially. But, by encouraging her early attempts at acting and not meeting her needs or insuring her security, both plant in her the seeds of interest in a career. Furthermore, her fairly rapid rise to theater fame and financial independence defies the paternalistic message of the tenement story; even Townsend's tenement success Carminella ends up marrying a protective professional artist. What does recall the Townsend scenario of the shopgirl turned stage success, though, is the disassociation of work on the stage from real work. Townsend, for example, takes care to distinguish Carminella from the dancers of the chorus, who truly view the stage in an Algerian fashion and, though without his heroine's talent, long to escape the sweatshop. But Carminella must achieve stardom more effortlessly, for Townsend, restrained by the negative association of the workplace and the "unwomanly" woman, simply refers to her meteoric rise without much attempt to explain it. Similarly, Dreiser describes Carrie's theater ambitions as if she were longing for effortless fame rather than interested in a profession: "Ah! to be rid of idleness and the drag of loneliness--to be doing and rising--to be admired, petted, raised to a state where all was applause" (177).

No arduous climb involving learning her craft or engaging in endless chorus line work, Carrie's overnight success is that lucky accident, largely independent of her own efforts, for which she had wished. For, having left Hurstwood and returned to the ranks of wage earners, Carrie does not really re-enter the work force. Just as when she left the vulgar drudges of the shoe factory, Dreiser undercuts her identity as a working girl. Indeed, given his prejudice against unchaste working women, his refusal to include Carrie, "fallen" or not, in that morally suspect group is a way of defending her innate purity. Sheldon Grebstein, analyzing Carrie's sexual relationships, argues convincingly that Dreiser sanitizes her by playing on associations

with "innocence, purity and helplessness" (545). Thus Dreiser depicts a Carrie, ever demure and wistful, who "sins chastely" (551), quite unlike the brazen women of the city workplace.

A decade later, he again quickly removed a labor heroine from the worker's life. To do so, *Jennie Gerhardt* chronicles a cross-class love affair in which a toiling protagonist, remarkable for beauty and family self-sacrifice, escapes waged work through rescue by a romantic capitalist. In many ways, Dreiser offers the same fairy tale as do the more conservative female labor novels of the 1900's, which replaced the tenement story as the favored working girl fiction of middlebrow audiences. Unlike these writers, Dreiser criticizes the snobbery which prevents Jennie from marrying Lester Kane. Yet if the plutocratic Lester is unwilling to marry a working woman, Dreiser, ever protective of his heroines, demonstrates his own kind of condescension toward laboring women. For he is reluctant to permit his heroine even a transient identification with a working-class consciousness of her class situation, and thus with workers' militancy. Not for his laundress protagonist the union activity, or even class solidarity, so briefly characterizing the actions of Marie Van Vorst's mill worker or Mary Wilkins Freeman's shoe factory operative. Before analyzing how Dreiser does imagine a twentieth-century labor heroine, it would be well to understand how his contemporaries undertook the same task.

The years roughly between the publication of *Sister Carrie* and *Jennie Gerhardt* saw a period in American labor history in which more women engaged in or spearheaded strikes than at any earlier time. Although at most three percent of working women actually belonged to unions, this was in part due to discouragement from male trade unionists fearful of female competition for jobs. Certainly those women who were active were visibly so. In 1903, 35,000 women marched in the Labor Day parade in Chicago, where the task of organizing women was taken up more successfully than in any other American city, and where large portions of the Dreiser novels, which ignored events of this nature, were set. The same year, the Women's Trade Union League, the first national body dedicated to organizing women workers, began its operations in Chicago and New York. Between 1905 and 1915, 100,000 women in the clothing factories of those cities joined workers in Philadelphia,

Rochester, and Cleveland and walked off their jobs. Massachusetts textile workers, San Francisco tobacco strippers, Boston telephone operators, Troy, New York, collar starchers all agitated for improved working conditions in the face of, at best, lukewarm American Federation of Labor support and a public perception of them as the most unfeminine of women.[4]

Although before the Shirtwaist Strike of 1909, involving 20,000 New York garment center women, strike fiction was slow to focus on the female militant, in the early 1900's, novelists, particularly women, awoke to the idea that the working woman was not always the unsavory pleasure-seeker or virgin craving marital rescue pictured in tenement fiction. To depict a woman who voiced dissatisfaction with conditions and even for a time challenged her employer, Marie Van Vorst posed as a worker and gathered data on the privations of female mill and cannery workers. The same year as her novel *Amanda of the Mill,* she published *The Woman Who Toils*, an expose based on her experiences. Mary Wilkins Freeman was known to her wide American audience as a regionalist whose stories centered on self-sufficient rural women, but in 1901 she departed from her standard subject matter to produce *The Portion of Labor*, in which a young shoe factory operative leads striking men and women when the employer cuts their wages.

When Van Vorst, Freeman, and their contemporaries created such fiction, however, they saw the female proletariat from a middle-class perspective. Retaining the prejudices of the tenement tale, they present women, striking or otherwise, as brutalized and defeminized by wage-earning work. Thus while these writers provide descriptions of strike meetings, they deem it necessary to separate their refined heroines from the uncouth, wayward types who constitute the feminine workforce. Despite a sympathy with women who, with Van Vorst's title character Amanda, swelter in Southern mills for fourteen hours a day from childhood on, the dominant thrust of this fiction is to extract her from the milieu which damns the others. Thus in *Amanda of the Mills* the owner's wife, the first of her capitalist protectors, removes her in childhood from her brief working life. When, years later, Amanda tries to help striking mill women, even attending meetings and giving anonymous donations to the cause, Van Vorst emphasizes that she is, rightly, a Lady Bountiful. She is in distinct contrast to her "barbarian"

(250) older sister Lily Bud, who after years of work has degenerated into a promiscuous drunkard. It is only proper that Amanda marries the man who inherits the mill, although Van Vorst does add that he will run it along enlightened lines. Similarly, although in the *The Portion of Labor* Ellen Brewster toils at making shoes and even organizes workers for a walkout, a strike action she later recants, she is too refined to socialize with her crude, man-obsessed female co-workers. She is the only working woman her patrician employer considers his peer--and soon makes his wife.

While there are references to her participation in labor activity, for however brief a time, the labor romance heroine is no Emma Goldman or Elizabeth Gurley Flynn. Instead her creators raise the militancy issue only to undo it, shifting to her qualities as a Victorian heroine who is willing to sacrifice herself to help her family or others in need. Like Jennie Gerhardt, Ellen Brewster finds work to support the family when her father no longer can. Factory worker Amber Garland, the improbably named heroine of Van Vorst's *Philip Longstreth* (1902), rescues a pregnant co-worker from destitution, makes provisions for her baby, and even engineers the girl's marriage to her repentant seducer. (Although the novel ends *in medias res*, Amber herself may well marry the philanthropic Longstreth.) Remote as her story seems from a Dreiser novel, it is her employer--Van Vorst's version of Drouet and Lester Kane--who "lends" Amber the money which enables her to help the unwed girl. An equally generous working woman is the shop girl in another work with labor romance elements, Isaac Kahn Friedman's *Poor People* (1900). She marries a businessman and moves her family to their splendid suburban house--prefiguring Jennie's hospitality to her father when she becomes "Mrs. Kane." For Jennie, as for the Amandas and the Ellens, prosperity is presented as a just reward for a noble nature--and a pretty face.

When, early in *Jennie Gerhardt*, Dreiser comments that his title character is too beautiful to have to work with her hands, he both reflects the curiously anti-labor bias of the labor romance and demonstrates the impulse to protect his working heroine which characterized *Sister Carrie*. Like Carrie, Jennie enters the world of work as if she had just come to the city. Both are vulnerable--unused to the splendor of urban places patronized by the affluent, given to blushing when interested men stare, and

easily manipulated by ostentatiously successful men who act kindly and press money into their hands. But in his later novel Dreiser seems even less interested in locating his heroine in a work milieu.

Though the Gerhardt women are city dwellers at least seasoned enough to take on cleaning work outside the home at an opulent Columbus hotel, Jennie soon settles for piecework at home, a throwback to women's tasks in the domestic economy of a pre-industrial age. She apparently does not think to seek permanent wage-earning work as a hotel laundress. Women routinely held such full-time jobs in large urban centers, as Dreiser, a laundry wagon driver attracted by the women he worked with in 1890's Chicago, well knew (Lingeman 86). But his very awareness of the public perception of these women may have prompted him to keep Jennie apart from them.

In her study of laundresses in nineteenth-century French culture Eunice Lipton argues that middle-class culture insisted on seeing such women "in exclusively sexual...terms" (302). The fantasy, which bore some relation to reality, was that women who worked in intense heat in semi-clothed conditions, who reinforced each other's need for alcohol to cope with their work, and who delivered men's garments to them in their rooms, were among the most immoral of the female working class. In 1904, Dorothy Richardson, who worked for a time in a New York laundry, gave a less racy description of American laundresses, but one which emphasized their slovenliness, love of drink, and, to her unsympathetic eyes, a work culture characterized by slang, shouting, and complaints (229-248).

Although he uses Jennie's laundry work as a symbol of the fate of unskilled, impoverished women like her mother and herself, Dreiser censors Jennie's involvement in it. There are not even the few pages of description allotted to Carrie's shoe factory labors. Rather than dignifying Jennie's work, her creator almost calls up the fantasy of the sexually available laundress. To soften the harsh truth that, to make any money, Jennie has only herself to sell, Dreiser emphasizes that she is "barren of the art of the coquette" (35). She does not "fully understand [Senator Brander's] meaning" (37) when he proposes a liaison, and, though she accepts his proposal, "enjoy[s] it all innocently" (43)--the second of Dreiser's chaste Chicago sinners.

As early as 1906, laundresses in another big city, San

Francisco, rebelling against their notoriously ill-paid work, successfully struck for overtime and reduction of the work week (Foner 309). Although their striking counterparts in cities like New York were less successful, the image of the militant laundress had established itself to a certain extent. Dreiser's vision of the female worker, though, is one of complete self-containment. He emphasizes Jennie's gratitude for her work and keeps her from contact with women in the trade, dissatisfied or otherwise. In fact, to demonstrate her probity, which will bolster his defense of her later dealings with Senator Brander and Lester Kane, Dreiser focuses on Jennie's gratitude for the work. Historian Meredith Tax observes that immigrant and first-generation women often expressed appreciation for the most wretched sweatshop work, comparing it with the poverty of their European lives (28-29). But, in distinct contrast to the unreflective Jennie, these women at least had a work consciousness, a sense of what Tax calls "their money-earning capacity" (29). Furthermore, by the second decade of the twentieth century, these were the women who would transform passive gratitude into solidarity and even revolt.

Like the labor romancer, Dreiser extricates Jennie from the workplace fairly early in her working life through an encounter with a scion of the ruling class. He transcends that form by illustrating how, as Carol Schwartz remarks, "Jennie's fate is bound up with caste" (21). For Jennie's life after she leaves the servant work in which Lester Kane finds her reveals that the privileged have no room for working-class women. Viewing women like Jennie as symbolic of the unregulated sexuality the era associated with women of the servant class, they dehumanize her and exert ultimately successful pressure on her lover to abandon her. Rejecting the nineteenth-century stereotype of the poor girl abandoned by her rich lover to destitution and death, Dreiser creates a woman whose strength of character and loving nature enables her to survive her rejection and become a maternal figure. The "care of flowers," notes Dreiser, "the nature of children, the ordering of a home were...in her province" (406). Jennie thus undergoes two transformations, from working woman to affluent mistress, and from mistress to foster mother. What Dreiser is doing is radical enough, for he does not mete out the harsh fate dealt female sinners by genteel American writers. His predecessors in British fiction, writers like Wilkie

Collins and the then-popular Mrs. Houstoun, also redeemed their sexually unorthodox heroines (Hapke 19, 21), but to Americans Jennie's nunlike dedication to caring for children was probably not atonement enough. Certainly a mainstream form like the labor romance would never have granted a woman who had born one man an illegitimate child from one love affair, and lived in a false marriage with another, the relative affluence which Dreiser permits her.

But if, putting aside the fact of her "fallen" status, Jennie is viewed as a woman who engineers her escape from the drudgery of work, she also separates herself from her past more than her counterparts in the labor romance. When Van Vorst's Amanda marries, she becomes involved in plans for the regeneration of the mill town and the improvement of women's work conditions. While they have no such ambitious plans for their former co-workers, Freeman's shoe factory heroine and Friedman's shop girls do not forget the lives they escaped. If such writers are hardly providing portraits of women whose belief in class solidarity leads them to reject marital alliances with the employer class, the fact that their heroines retain some connection with or memory of their working days is significant. Dreiser's impulse is quite different. Just as from adolescence onward he wished to ascend to a class "to which I properly belonged" (qtd. Lingeman 84), he liberated his heroines from the working-class background which fueled his art but of which he was so ashamed.

To conclude Dreiser's reluctance to explore the identity of the wage-earning woman, much less empower her, suggests his own ambivalence about the type. He does offer a critique of the capitalist workplace by emphasizing that underpaid manual work, not the life of the fairly affluent mistress, strips a woman of her youth and dignity. But, like the culture he criticizes, he too perceives the working woman as one who has only herself to sell. By focusing, as did the tenement tale and the labor romance, on an atypical heroine rescued by a providential male, even if, like Drouet, Hurstwood, and Lester Kane, this male protector proves less than a savior, Dreiser mirrors his era's prejudices. He joins the period's mainstream writers in his conviction that work is a moral threat to women and his inability to respect any female workplace community, much less a militant

one. Clearly, the successful kept womanhood of the former shoe worker Carrie Meeber and the one-time hotel laundress Jennie Gerhardt is a reversal of the formulas employed by Sullivan, Van Vorst, and their contemporaries. Nevertheless, incisive as is his understanding of the feminine desperation caused by poverty, like so many American authors who imagine the working woman, Dreiser's real subject is her morality, not her work.

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[1]I am indebted to Weiner, Chapter 1, and McKelvey 134 for the above information. Other excellent women's histories with chapters on the period in question abound. See, for example, Kessler-Harris, and, for a still-useful statistical survey, Hill.

[2]Studies of the tenement tales thus far have focused on the male proletariat. See, for instance, Giamo. There is no study of the labor romance as a genre, although most of the works to be cited appear in Blake. The term labor romance is an apt designation, but I have only encountered a reference to an allied form, the socialist cross-class romance, in Conn 520.

[3]Veiled or outright attacks on the immorality of working women appear in Wright and Finck, respectively.

[4]I am indebted to Foner, Chapter 17, and Tax, Chapter 1, for the above information.

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Dreiser Meets Fitzgerald ... Maybe

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During the winter of 1922-23, Dreiser hosted a party for a select group of his friends (about a dozen) in his two-room Greenwich Village apartment at 16 St. Luke's Place. The guest list included H.L. Mencken, Sherwood Anderson, Carl Van Vechten, Llewelyn Powys, Ernest Boyd and Burton Rascoe. Eventually they were joined by the newly celebrated and somewhat intoxicated F. Scott Fitzgerald, who had never met Dreiser but considered him and Mencken "the greatest men living in the country today" (Wilson 33). The stage seemed to be set for a momentous occasion in American literary history--the first meeting of two men destined to become giants surrounded by a supporting cast of characters renowned for their intellectual acumen and ready wit. But the moment was never realized. By all accounts, the party was a dismal failure.

This broad outline is agreed upon by all who have recounted the incident. The details of the evening, however, vary widely with the teller, each using the party to dramatize his own point regarding Dreiser's personality. As Carl Van Vechten recalled some forty years later, Dreiser's failure as a host supplied "the town with gossip for a month, and was eventually described with a good deal of imagination by three writers [Boyd, Rascoe and Anderson], each with his own version" (xi).

One measure of the party's failure is the fact that none of the guests understood or remembered its purpose. Swanberg (272) and Lingeman (220) have suggested that the gathering was motivated by Dreiser's concern over the Cotillo-Jesse Clean

Book Bill, then before the New York state assembly. And certainly this is a logical assumption, for both Dreiser and Liveright were most alarmed by the intent of this bill, which, according to its sponsors, would make the obscenity laws "horse-high, pig-tight and bull-strong" (Cleaton, 61). If passed, it would have certainly threatened the scheduled publication of *The "Genius"* later in 1923. Yet, if Dreiser did plan the gathering to rally opposition to the Clean Book Bill, the effort was indeed ineffectual. Van Vechten and Boyd recalled no particular purpose; Powys remembered that Dreiser had invited him merely "to meet some friends" (131); Rascoe insisted that it was a promotion party held on the eve of the publication of one of Dreiser's books (300); and Anderson assumed that Dreiser had arranged it in his honor to make amends for a previous affront (335). If Dreiser had a political agenda, no one, seemingly, was aware of it.

Ernest Boyd was the first to present a published version of the party, including it in a 1924 essay on Fitzgerald to demonstrate Dreiser's indifference to the reverence of "the youngest of his disciples." As Boyd reconstructed the scene, all of Dreiser's typically hard-drinking guests, prior to Fitzgerald's arrival, had sat in a large semicircle "gazing with disconsolate incredulity at a table covered with bottles of near-beer." This pall of sobriety was then lifted by the appearance of Fitzgerald, who, having heard of the gathering, came fortified by liquor, much already consumed but some intended as a gift to "the dean of modern American fiction." Fitzgerald's "heroic resolution," however, went unrewarded, for Dreiser unceremoniously ignored the overture. As Boyd concluded his account, "After a gallant effort to engage Dreiser in literary discussion, [Fitzgerald] retreated to a seat near his overcoat and proceded to extract from the pocket of this garment a substitute for the intoxication of mind which he had anticipated" (221-22).

Llewelyn Powys in *The Verdict of Bridlegoose* (1926) also recalled the drunken Fitzgerald's "maudlin deference" in addressing Dreiser and compared his arrival to some young Dick Lovelace's "bursting into Ben Jonson's room"; however, Dreiser's treatment of Fitzgerald was not recorded. Rather, Powys was more concerned with Dreiser's egocentrism and general indifference to his guests. According to Powys' version, Dreiser positioned himself in the middle of the room and

began to philosophize, following "the flounderings of his own wayward imagination, which like a mammoth whale, with snortings and spoutings, plunged onward over the limitless ocean of life . . . ." He seemed impervious to the fact that his guests were not mixing well. Mencken, described as "a veritable tweedledum," vainly tried to enliven the atmosphere by "making schoolboy talk with a kind of boisterous *bonhomie*." But to no avail. Van Vechten sat quietly and looked uncomfortable, "drooping like an aging madonna-lily." And Ernest Boyd claimed that he was not well. Apparently, for Powys, even the intrusion of Fitzgerald did not add significant zest to a dismal evening (131-33).

Upon the publication of *The Verdict of Bridlegoose*, Burton Rascoe, apparently unaware of Boyd's account, complained that "with a blandly naïf indiscretion" Powys had misrepresented the events of a party that had until then been "famous in the sub-rosa annals of New York's literary history because of its ghastly and abject failure." Since Powys had "spilled the beans," Rascoe now felt compelled to set the record straight. The error in Powys' account, Rascoe contended, was that he had failed to recognize the extent of Dreiser's social ignorance, an ignorance which resulted in two grievous blunders: first, Dreiser had not considered the possibility that despite living and working in New York City his guests might not be well acquainted with each other; then, being at best a casual drinker himself, he had not realized that they would expect something alcoholic in the way of refreshments. Thus, he made no introductions, "had not an ounce of liquor, vinous or spiritous, in the house," and placed his guests in straight-backed chairs along the wall "like a row of dummies." After what had seemed an interminable "wake," hope sprang to their faces at the arrival of the liquor-bearing Fitzgerald, who Rascoe insisted had been invited. He arrived late, however, because he had gone from speakeasy to speakeasy searching out the perfect bottle of champagne to present to Dreiser and had sampled numerous options enroute. Once in the apartment, he stumbled around the room, peering into each face, before locating his host and bestowing the gift "with an eloquent speech of homage." Dreiser heard Fitzgerald out, took the champagne, and deposited it in the icebox. After waiting another hour for the bottle to be returned, Dreiser's guests filed out "as if they were pallbearers in a cortege"

(299-302).

The most positive and fully developed account was given by Sherwood Anderson, who identified Dreiser's inveterate shyness in social situations as the cause of the party's awkwardness. According to Anderson's version, recounted in *Sherwood Anderson's Memoirs* (1942), the gathering was arranged in his honor to make amends for Dreiser's seeming boorishness. Anderson recalled that when he moved to Greenwich Village in the winter of 1922-23, he had long admired Dreiser but had never met him. Thus, upon moving to St. Luke's Place and learning that "the great man" was his neighbor, he went over to make his acquaintance. When Dreiser responded to the doorbell, Anderson introduced himself. Dreiser in return muttered, "Oh, hello," and shut the door in Anderson's face. Anderson was furious until later in the day he received a note from Dreiser confessing his uncontrollable embarrassment at their initial meeting and announcing a party he had arranged to introduce Anderson to some friends.

At the party itself, Anderson recalled, Dreiser's guests chatted for a couple of hours in a large room lined with bottles of liquor, beer and wine, but no drinks were offered. Finally, Mencken chided Dreiser for his stinginess. "Go to hell, Mencken," Dreiser replied good-naturedly. "If you fellows haven't sense enough to help yourselves, you can go without."

About this time, Fitzgerald arrived with several bottles of champagne. When Dreiser answered his ring, Fitzgerald introduced himself and presented the champagne as a gift. Much as he had done earlier with Anderson, Dreiser merely grunted, "Hello. Thanks." Then, he took the bottles and closed the door, leaving Fitzgerald outside in the hall. When Dreiser returned to his guests, he put the champagne on the floor and sat disconsolately in a chair. As Anderson interpreted the moment, Dreiser had wanted to invite Fitzgerald in and share him with those present, but on the spur of the moment he could not cope with his embarrassment. Such incidents were "all very characteristic of Dreiser, the awkwardness--that is also in his prose--the thoughtfulness for others, the kindness always covered by a gruff manner" (333-40).

Anderson's account clearly clashed with H.L. Mencken's memory of the incident. Although Mencken did not leave a full-blown narrative of the evening's activities, he did respond to

Anderson's version in the margin of his personal copy of *Sherwood Anderson's Memoirs*, now the property of the Enoch Pratt Library in Baltimore. "Another lie," wrote Mencken, referring to Anderson's description of Dreiser's treatment of Fitzgerald. "Fitz came in and was politely treated by Dreiser" (Mayfield 208).

Although Anderson's account occasionally surfaces,[1] both Dreiser and Fitzgerald biographers have tended to agree with Mencken's assessment. As Arthur Mizener has noted, "Anderson's version, with its unique details, its suspiciously stylized dialogue, and its neat tie-up with a previous experience of Anderson's own with Dreiser, appears the least trustworthy of any of the accounts" (333). Of the other four versions, those by Powys and Rascoe have been drawn upon most frequently by biographers, probably because they are the most fully developed. Typically, however, the retelling is a synthesis of two or more accounts, with the biographer adding occasional details. It might also be noted that the anecdote has been considerably more popular with Fitzgerald's biographers than with Dreiser's. Of the major Dreiser biographers, only Swanberg has given the party significant attention (272). On the other hand, the incident has become a staple of Fitzgerald biography.[2]

Dreiser himself apparently made no comment on the affair. Even the diary that he kept during his residence at 16 St. Luke's Place contained no specific mention of the gathering. There is, however, one reference that might be read as one guest's logical response to an evening of wretched abstemiousness. For January 20, 1923, Dreiser recorded his having received a letter from Carl Van Vechten "telling me where I can buy boot-leg" (*American Diaries* 396).

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[1]See, for example, Ellen Hopkins' "Where They Lived." *New York* 16 (7 March 1983): 46.

[2]Fitzgerald biographers who have retold the story of Dreiser's party include Arthur Mizener in *The Far Side of Paradise: A Biography of F. Scott Fitzgerald* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1949), pp. 153-54; Sara Mayfield in *Exiles from Paradise: Zelda and Scott Fitzgerald* (New York: Delacorte, 1971), p. 59; André Le Vot in *F. Scott Fitzgerald: A Biography*

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Play Review

From the 1890s to the 1990s: *Sister Carrie* on the Modern Stage

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When I saw last year's Broadway production of Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, I remember being impressed at how remarkably closely the play adhered to the book. How callow I was in those days. The new dramatic production of *Sister Carrie* takes such faithfulness to new heights. The unusual length of the play, which can be seen straight through, or in two parts on separate days, compares in my recollection only to the London/ Broadway production of *Nicholas Nickleby* of the early 80s. Playwright Louis Lippa and director Ken Marini follow the text amazingly closely. Lippa has written many pages of commendably credible dialogue, while Marini has staged virtually every significant scene in the novel, plus a few more.

I will have a few things to say later on about those extra scenes and about fidelity to the text in general, but since this is also a review, let me begin by saying that the new production of *Sister Carrie* (by The People's Light & Theatre Company in Malverne, Pennsylvania) is sensational, a treat not only for Dreiserians of all stripes, but for anyone who is willing to commit to its seven-hour length. It's well worth it.

Lippa, Marini, and the rest of the company have collaborated to stage a novel that I had thought was unstageable--and I'm sure I wasn't alone in my misjudgment. Using minimal backdrop scenery, the production evokes urban exteriors through superb choreography. A series of doorframes on casters configures the interiors of apartments and offices. Scene

changes--and there are many--take place within the flow of the drama.

The effects can be dazzling. When Carrie comes to Chicago, for example, her sister Minnie picks her up and takes her from the train station onto the bustling avenue, and from there to the poor working class neighborhood where she and Sven reside. The transitions are breathtaking: in the station, the people mill about, suggesting a busy terminal; this crowd gives way to the shopping street, where they march quickly back and forth, now smart shoppers in a great big hurry. Carrie allows herself to be gathered up and swirled about in the arms of one passer-by, beautifully symbolizing her seduction by the lure of the city. The Hansens' neighborhood is evoked by a quick costume change to dark and shabby clothes, and by a series of explosively choreographed sidewalk confrontations among resident toughs. All of this takes place wordlessly to music (which is historically accurate and consistently excellent throughout) within five minutes--and it's astonishing.

This expressionism is more than economical; it stimulates the imagination to recreate what could not have been successfully depicted on stage. The costumes are crucial to the success of this kind of staging, and the designer, Lindsay W. Davis (assisted by P. Chelsea Harriman), rises to the task. Given the minimal scenery, the costumes provide the concrete link to verisimilitude in the production. Davis's costumes range literally from rags to riches, and are convincing through the entire spectrum.

The acting is generally first-rate. Elizabeth Meeker, Tom Teti, and Stephen Novelli give impressive performances as Carrie, Hurstwood, and Drouet. The remaining members of the company all play multiple roles (over a hundred altogether) in a collective tour-de-force of protean portrayals. Worthy of special mention from among this gallery of characters is Ceal Phelan's wonderful performance as stoop-shouldered, world-weary Minnie Meeber Hansen.

Of course Dreiser readers will wonder how the book holds up on stage. The short answer is that it survives very well, though not in its pristine state. But let me elaborate. All adaptations involve interpretive decisions, and Lippa and Marini make their share. Because of the ambiguity that surrounds the two

protagonists, *Sister Carrie* presents more problems for playwright, director, and actors than, say, Steinbeck's *Grapes* did. Lippa and Marini confront them boldly.

Carrie and Hurstwood have fuzzy motivations. (By contrast, Drouet's consistency has made him a relatively easy character to play; recall Eddie Albert's excellent performance in William Wyler's otherwise wretched 1952 film version, *Carrie*, as well as Stephen Novelli's fine work in the present production.) Carrie's and Hurstwood's depth of character makes them fun to talk about, but hard to write and play.

Essentially, this kind of ambiguity doesn't translate directly to the stage. To my mind, Louis Lippa's most challenging task was to create Hurstwood and Carrie on stage as understandable characters--not reflecting surfaces--and render their change over time in a way that would be dramatically interesting without betraying the ambiguity of Dreiser's vision. How sympathetic should Carrie be in success, and Hurstwood in failure? Answering such questions necessarily involves interpreting the novel, and Lippa does not flinch from doing so. The results are always interesting, ambitious, and creative, but they may not be completely satisfying to the Dreiser purist. The majority of the changes fall into two broad and familiar categories: class and gender.

During one of the hourly intermissions, one of my companions said to me, "Karl Marx would be proud of this production." And indeed he would have been: Dreiser comes off sounding like Upton Sinclair at times. Lippa's adaptation augments the novel's social commentary and turns it into a persistent push for class consciousness which simmers throughout the play before Hurstwood's decline enables it to reach a rolling boil in the last hour or two. Carrie's sweatshop experience now includes a scene in which a sidewalk union organizer is beaten by the police. When Hurstwood and Carrie walk in the park during their courtship, they are now interrupted by a labor demonstration. Hurstwood scolds a panhandler for interfering with his enjoyment of public space. The police drive this same homeless man off a park bench in a scene that is repeated during the play, and which thus becomes a leitmotif for the widespread insensitivity of the moneyed classes to the have-nots. This recurring sense of class struggle and activism (and there's more to it than I've recounted here) explicitly prepares the audience for

Hurstwood's work as a scab (a brilliantly staged scene) and his eventual assumption into the ranks of the homeless himself.

How would Dreiser have reacted to this frankly left-leaning view of events? Consider what has happened: Lippa has taken the novelist's evident sympathy for the poor--both working and unemployed--and placed it into the context of an established ideology. The problem is that Dreiser never stuck to established ideologies himself, at least not for long. Malcolm Cowley described his mind as being "like an attic in an earthquake, full of big trunks that slithered about and popped open one after another, so that he sometimes spoke as a Social Darwinist, sometimes as a Marxist, sometimes as almost a fascist, and sometimes as a sentimental reformer" (59). Dreiser was clearly not a man to be pinned down, but that is what happens to him here. *Sister Carrie* is certainly no paean to capitalism, as Dreiser wrote it, but neither is it a folk song of the labor movement.

I found the treatment of gender in the play to be even more problematic. Lippa has updated the sexual politics of the novel for twentieth century consumption, but in doing so he has saddled Carrie with so much modern feminist rhetoric that she is unrecognizable at times underneath it.

Put simply, Lippa and Marini make Carrie into a twentieth century career woman--in the 1890s. The difference is not so much in her actions as in the self-awareness that now goes with them. The most significant result is an active, angry Carrie whose resentment at Drouet's treatment of her could even be called vitriolic. Likewise, when she discovers that Hurstwood is married, she exclaims to him, "You're as bad as Charlie! Both of you have treated me like baggage!"

This righteous indignation doesn't ring true to the character Dreiser created, but it's consistent with a certain view of the world that runs through the play. Mrs. Julia Hurstwood, for example, receives a much more sympathetic portrayal than most readers of *Sister Carrie* might expect. She retains her high-handed imperiousness, but she's also a victim, casually dismissed by her husband and driven to her hostile response. We can even feel sorry for her.

Such sympathy necessarily comes at the expense of her husband. George Hurstwood comes off about as badly as a legitimate reading of the book will allow. He is insensitive, jingoistic, conniving, thoughtless, and lazy: hardly the nineties

man, no matter which century we're talking about. One telling instance: when Carrie, caught in the familiar bind, rushes to make dinner after a hard day at work, Hurstwood criticizes her afterwards for not bothering to clear the table. On the day that I attended, the audience hissed him.

In assessing these adjustments to Dreiser's plot, let me backtrack a moment to consider what must have been one of Lippa's most vexing problems, that of Carrie's passivity. However true to the novel they may be, passivity and stasis don't play well on stage. Carrie's oddly placid demeanor is not normally the stuff of tragic heroines.

Lippa solves the problem by giving Carrie motivation. He and Marini do a marvelous job of dramatizing her lust for money and the things it buys. She starts out rosy-cheeked and innocent, dazzled by the wealth of the city and wanting to share in it. She later turns into the calculating material girl we know so well from the book. Her metamorphosis (no other word will do) is fueled by the duplicitous treatment she receives from Drouet and Hurstwood. One important new scene in the play is a furious fight between Carrie and Drouet in which Carrie shows an acute--and not always credible--knowledge of Drouet's sexual conduct. So angry is Drouet at his exposure that he walks out on her. This abandonment leaves her with no home to go to, and therefore with little choice once Hurstwood tricks her onto the train. Economically powerless to fight her virtual abduction, she has nowhere to turn except inside herself.

Carrie consequently hardens, becoming the familiar, sharp-eyed, inscrutable character who cautiously drifts from one situation to another. She tells Hurstwood that she'll accompany him to New York, but she also tells him that she reserves the right to leave him at any time. By this roundabout dramatic route--which increases sympathy for the victimized Carrie--we finally reach the character we know. Dreiser makes her recognizable from the beginning; Lippa has her change into herself.

Lippa's interpretive decisions in his adaptation of the novel are a less extreme version of the ones that have resulted in the recent restagings of Shakespeare which have been set in the wild West and other such anachronistic locations. Directors of such productions argue that they are no more radical than a truly historically accurate presentation would appear in this day and age.

Indeed, we never see Shakespeare played with young men in the female roles, even though the role-playing often enhances complexities of the frequent gender-switching in certain scripts. To play it that way now would call a different kind of attention to gender-switching, one that Shakespeare could not have intended. But what did Shakespeare intend? What amounts to a corruption of the original intent? What amounts to an unwarranted interpretive decision?

Directors of adaptations and revivals these days are nearly all "restorers" to some degree. They try to make a play into a contemporary theatrical experience, not an artifact of the time it was written. There's a practical reason for this, of course: most theatergoers are not purists. They are looking for entertainment. Underneath the market argument, though, is the philosophical question of which is more important, the letter of the text or its spirit.

Which brings me back to *Sister Carrie*, which has been the site of one restoration debate already, the one which produced the now-familiar "unexpurgated" edition. In deciding which edition of *Carrie* to use, Lippa and Marini have it both ways. They give us the casually philandering Hurstwood of the unexpurgated (restored) version, but the Carrie of the play owes much to the original published text, including a dramatization of the famous Miss Madenda in her rocking chair at the end. The latter scene is presented on a split stage, simultaneous with Hurstwood's suicide, thereby dodging the problem of which to place first.

In bringing their hybrid version to the stage, Lippa and Marini have chosen the spirit over the letter of the text. But like Shakespeare's modern interpreters, they have had to decide just what that spirit is. Though I hasten to point out that this production is predominantly faithful to the novel (which is not exactly ancient, after all), Lippa and Marini have clearly made some important changes in order to bring it to the stage. As restorers, they have chosen to adjust some of Dreiser's emphasis. They have therefore taken an interpretive risk.

I think it pays off. First of all, the play is unmistakably Dreiser. The adaptation updates the story, though, and I think that's valuable. No viewer of this *Sister Carrie* will fail to identify with these images of the homeless. Some may even recall the days when belonging to a union was something to be proud of. The sexual harassment of Carrie on the job (nicely brought

off by Rozwill Young as her foreman) will ring true to a modern viewer, as will the accent on her subsequent economic powerlessness as a victimized housewife. Speaking as a theatergoer, I thoroughly enjoyed this play. My (somewhat less than purist) sense as a Dreiser scholar is that the script survives these modifications of Dreiser's original vision, though the stridency of the changes makes it a narrow escape in places. The production as a whole is a powerful and memorable day--and night--at the theatre.

Note: At this writing, no final decisions have been made about whether *Sister Carrie* will go on tour. We can only hope that it travels long and far.

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Book Reviews

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Dreiser's Novels and Role Theory

Identität und Rolle bei Theodore Dreiser: Eine Untersuchung des Romanwerks unter Rollentheoretischem Aspekt, by Kurt Müller. Paderborn: Schöningh, 1991. 312 pp.

"Identity and Role in Theodore Dreiser: A Study of the Novels from the Perspective of Role Theory" is not an easy read, but whatever the struggle required to wade through its heavy academic German, the reward is well worth the effort. With the aid of identity theory and role theory, Müller shows how the main characters in four of Dreiser's novels fail to achieve a stable self within society and how a similar pattern of failed social and psychological development is apparent in Dreiser's own life. Then, using sociology of knowledge and ideology critique (*Ideologiekritik*), Müller expands the horizon for the insights gained so that early twentieth-century American society and ideology are seen as characterized by the loss of a coherent system of meaning and a splintering into disparate sub-traditions (48). The problems of achieving a coherent identity and constructing a functional role within society are thus not simply personal or fictional matters but are constitutive of the environment in which Dreiser's literary characters and Dreiser himself lived.

Müller's book is at its core a "biography and works" study, but Müller inverts the traditional structure of this approach by beginning with the works. Much of recent literary theory has downplayed or even eradicated the author in order to shift the reader's focus to the text itself or to the discourse out of which it is formed or to the often unacknowledged ideology upon which

it is based. Müller's aim here is to offer a coherent and consistent interpretation of Dreiser's works and life, and to see them as themselves consistent with the historical development of American culture in the first quarter of the twentieth century. We are a long way away from a view of literature as the naturalistic representation of objective social forces acting on individuals; rather, literature is seen here to function as a means for constructing and processing reality (not "Wirklichkeits*abbildung*," but "Wirklichkeits*verarbeitung*"). Reality, like identity, is not a given; it's a construct. In this regard, Müller not only explicates Dreiser, he also updates him.

The study begins with an introductory chapter that includes a survey of Dreiser criticism and a description of the author's method and its theoretical base. Then follow three chapters on *Sister Carrie*, *The Titan* and *The Financier*, and *An American Tragedy*. Chapter 5, the longest, presents an extended treatment of Dreiser's biography with references to his other writings. A concluding chapter on Dreiser's historical context is followed by a select bibliography and an index.

Drawing upon numerous works of Dreiser scholarship through 1985, Müller takes the impetus and inspiration for his study from a review by Thomas Riggio in 1977 ("The Divided Stream of Dreiser Studies," *Studies in the Novel* 9:211-16) and from Robert Penn Warren's *Homage to Dreiser* (1971). By providing a methodologically rigorous (and scholarly) expansion of Warren's essayistic study which identified a correlation between structural elements in the novels and Dreiser's personal conflicts, Müller hopes to achieve Riggio's requested "'angle of vision that shows the way or ways a writer's career coheres over the long haul'" (20). He accomplishes this by applying to Dreiser's novels and biography a critical model derived in an admittedly eclectic fashion from various sociologists (e.g., Veblen, Riesman, Goffman, Luckmann, Dreitzel, and others) and psychologists (especially Erikson) in order to be able to isolate the dialectical relationship between personal identity and social role playing that pervades the novels and Dreiser's biography. (Incidentally, most of Müller's sources are available in English.)

Critics have long noted the contradictions and inconsistencies in Dreiser's work. Müller hopes, however, to be able to identify a perspective from which one can recognize these "flaws" as

bearing meaning within the novels and, indeed, within the biography. To achieve his goal, Müller provides a tightly woven and detailed analysis that builds a cumulative momentum throughout the book. Rather than try to summarize a progressive argument that draws its power both from the richness of detail discussed and from the application of appropriate social psychological and ideology critical insights to those details, I will cite a few representative observations from Müller's discussion of *Sister Carrie*, *The Financier*, *The Titan*, and *An American Tragedy* so that one can gain a sense of how Müller's method leads him to read specific details and then how these details so interpreted yield a consistent reading of Dreiser the works and Dreiser the man.

In *Sister Carrie* the motif of the theater and the theme of social role playing are central to the novel and together create an inversion of the Horatio Alger myth, since success in the novel is achieved by clever "impression management" (Goffman) and "playing" the self (53-54). Carrie's "amorality" is not the expression of a natural and essential innocence, but is rather the result of a failed socialization process due to a lack of positive and internalized role models in her childhood (85-86). Her acting is compensation for her inability to enter into a relationship with another person (86); one might say that she acts on the stage because she cannot act in life. And the longing motif, which Dreiser's authorial voice claims is the expression of artistic sensibility, is really only the expression of a permanent inner emptiness and emotional disconnectedness (87). Noting common traits between Carrie and Dreiser, Müller reads *Sister Carrie* as an indicator of a repressed dimension of subjective misery in Dreiser, but expands the significance of this insight by stressing that Carrie's and Dreiser's pathological personalities are "normal" within a culture which itself has lost its secure identity (94).

While Dreiser intended the Cowperwood trilogy to be an apotheosis of the autonomous self-made man and of "self-sufficient idealism," Müller sees in *The Financier* and *The Titan* evidence of Dreiser's own latent psycho-social conflicts (98). The novels read like a conscious illustration of Veblen's "pecuniary culture" (106), and the "conspicuous consumption" of things--and women--reveals a social outsider seeking compensation for his need for recognition in society (123). Despite

Dreiser's naturalistic rhetoric, the novels undermine the primacy of objective reality by emphasizing how specific interests shape reality through the control of information: the Chicago Fire is not as destructive as the hysteria it causes, and this hysteria could be avoided if Cowperwood did not see in it an opportunity for financial gain (139-40). The novels thus are characterized by a structural tension between their naturalistic surface and an underlying sceptical and relativist attitude toward language and reality (145).

In *An American Tragedy* Roberta and Sondra embody different sides of Clyde's personality, Roberta his sexual and socially contaminated side and Sondra his pure and immaculate side, so that the development of the "love triangle" can be seen as an unconscious motivation on the part of Clyde to repress and finally discard the contaminated part of his ego (184). The central theme of Book III is the relativity and arbitrariness of social determinations of what constitutes reality, and although the novel as a whole is often seen as the highpoint of American naturalism, Book III actually undermines a naive naturalistic theory of representation (191-92). Indeed, in Book III even Clyde's subjective sense of self is determined by constructs of reality that are projected onto him. Book III is, therefore, not about moral responsibility, but rather expresses a radically sceptical and relativist view of language, morality, and reality (193). Read in this way, Dreiser occupies a place in a tradition that leads from Nietzsche to Barthes, Foucault, and Derrida (192).

Having arrived at a point where Dreiser's fiction is seen as proto-poststructuralist, Müller's tactic of now turning to Dreiser's biography might seem at first thought theoretically out of place. It isn't. He returns to his readings of the novels as expressions in the characters and the action of various social and psychological dysfunctions that are also symptomatic of problems within the culture at large, and with the insights gained there turns to Dreiser's biography (and some of his other writings) and discovers evidence of the same dysfunctions he has identified in the novels. He stresses, though, that his goal is not to show that Dreiser was abnormal, but rather that certain individual social and psychological experiences in a particular society at a particular historical moment can be understood within that context as normal because the experiences of the

individual replicate the experiences of the culture as a whole (246). Müller concludes his discussion of Dreiser's biography with a seemingly old-fashioned compliment revalidated with a new-fashioned term: although clearly a precise observer and analyzer of society, Dreiser was so successful at creating literary characters and situations because in them were *inscribed* the subjective conflicts of the author himself (271; my emphasis). Müller's study makes an important contribution to Dreiser criticism, to American Studies, and to a theoretical reassessment of literary naturalism. It's not to be missed.

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New Approaches to *Carrie*

Pizer, Donald, ed. *New Essays on Sister Carrie*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991. 127 pp. $22.95 (cloth), $8.95 (paper).

This collection, edited by a foremost scholar in American realism, is one of the volumes in The American Novel Series being published under the general editorship of Emory Elliot, University of California, Riverside. Professor Elliot's aim is to make available for students of American literature introductory critical guides to widely read American novels. The volume on *Sister Carrie* includes, besides Donald Pizer's introduction, four original essays: Thomas P. Riggio, "Carrie's Blues"; Barbara Hochman, "A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Actress: The Rewards of Representation in *Sister Carrie*"; Richard Lehan, "*Sister Carrie*: The City, the Self, and the Modes of Narrative Discourse"; and Alan Trachtenberg, "Who Narrates? Dreiser's Presence in *Sister Carrie*." Exceeding the general editor's modest purpose, these essays have resulted in a symposium highly appealing to current Dreiser criticism. The discussants represent not only young and old generations of Dreiser critics but those concerned with other topics in American studies.

Pizer opens the discussion with the most important question:

"How can a novel seemingly so unconsciously shaped and so inept in its devices and language hold generation after generation of sophisticated readers?" Not only have Dreiser readers the world over testified to this observation, but many of Dreiser's contemporaries and those who came after--Farrell, Warren, Wright, Algren, Mailer, Bellow, Auchincloss, Dickey, Doctorow--have all in one way or another been impressed and influenced by Dreiser's fiction. Wright, for example, singling out *Sister Carrie* and *Jennie Gerhardt*, wrote in his famous *Black Boy*: "It would have been impossible for me to have told anyone what I derived from these novels, for it was nothing less than a sense of life itself. All my life had shaped me for the realism, the naturalism of the modern novels, and I could not read enough of them."

Each of the essays here addresses the composition of this seminal text. Although the current controversy about the two versions of *Sister Carrie* is not in the scope of discussion, it turns out that comparison of the texts has shed significant light in each of the essays. Pizer defends the 1900 edition on thematic and structural grounds while he regards as weaknesses in the Pennsylvania edition (1) a "novice" writer's overextension of incidents and authorial commentaries early in the novel and (2) the inappropriateness of Emma and Hopkins's "coarse" experiences to Carrie's rise and Hurstwood's fall. Lehan, on the other hand, proposes a third version as the best text, an eclectic combination of the two which will restore only selected, not all, cuts made in the 1900 edition. In his comments on the history of critical debates over Dreiser, Pizer provides a most judicious and concise account of Lionel Trilling's relationship to Dreiser. Trilling's extolment of James's "estheticism" at the expense of Dreiser's predilection for Marxism and plebeianism, enhanced by the rise of the New Criticism, was primarily responsible for Dreiser's lowest reputation during the 1940s and 1950s. "Both Trilling and the New Criticism," Pizer explains, "demanded that literature render the complexities of life in a complex manner . . . and Dreiser was held to be deficient in this quality." Pizer's introduction reminds one of Dreiser's statement about *Sister Carrie* in 1901: "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." The symposium has, in a way, confirmed

Dreiser's *simple* manner in drawing his portrait of an American woman as James drew his in a *complex* manner. But most of the discussions here have also confirmed Dreiser's complex manner, a manner which Dreiser felt "effective" but which eluded the New Critics.

Pizer considers the recent new historicist approach to Dreiser criticism "still jargon-ridden and thesis-bound. Carrie is often depicted as a dupe of 'consumerism' and 'commodification,' and her lust for objects is proclaimed as the principal theme of the novel." True, the books Pizer criticizes do not always focus on Dreiser's themes and techniques, but these new historicists are interested in using Dreiser's, and other American novelists', works to generalize their views on American culture rather than in analyzing the novels. Although future study with this approach may prove more pertinent to Dreiser scholarship at hand, Pizer suggests that future Dreiser scholars not depart from the old historicism, which has served Dreiser criticism well in the past. He aptly mentions Dreiser's stint as "prophet" in *Ev'ry Month*, which casts considerable light on Dreiser's own social and psychological being before and during the composition of *Sister Carrie*. For a biographical sketch, Pizer also mentions Dreiser's numerous magazine articles of the late 1890s like "Haunts of Nathaniel Hawthorne," "The Chicago Drainage Canal," and "Women Who Have Won Distinction in Music." Perhaps more pertinent to *Sister Carrie* are such pieces as "The Transmigration of the Sweat Shop," "Whence the Song," and "The Story of a Song Queen's Triumph."

Riggio's essay on Carrie's character concentrates on her "blues," as a Shakespearian critic might focus on Hamlet's melancholy. To Riggio and indeed to any serious Dreiser reader, Carrie is an ambivalent and subtly drawn character upon which the novel thrives. Riggio, however, makes the important point that her "destiny is unclear because her identity, from beginning to end, is only in the process of being formed." Not only is Riggio's observation based on biography, especially the young Dreiser's relationships to his family, but Riggio takes much pain to show Dreiser's almost unconscious use of metaphor of life and art in depicting this process. Such a textual and stylistic analysis is useful to understanding both surface realities and internal feelings underlying them. Dreiser, as Riggio shows, draws such a slight countenance as Carrie's "frown" at certain

moments in her life or in her role as actress to signal her more paradoxical feelings brewing inside. Her melancholy is thus rendered by realistic detail rather than by an impressionistic technique. In contrast to James, who draws his portrait with an abundance of finely formed impressions and little historical detail, Dreiser uses metaphor so sparingly with a great amount of external detail that Carrie's inner life at times flickers like a gem.

Hochman's exposition, based on the old historicism, demonstrates that Carrie is portrayed, just as Dreiser is perceived, as an artist capable of representing "otherness" and expressing his/her own feelings. Dreiser biographers have indeed portrayed him as an extraordinary man of compassion and of self-preoccupation. Such a portrait is reminiscent of his calling Mark Twain "the double Twain." The dualism in Dreiser's own character, as Hochman sees it, is responsible for endowing Carrie's character with a "dialectic" of connectedness and autonomy, "support and independence," or what Riggio calls "dependency and coyness." Carrie's act of representation, seen in her own life and in her role on the stage, has its origin in desire and its satisfaction in a process that begins with liaison and ends in liberation. "Carrie," Hochman says, "proliferates objects of unfulfillable desire, until the condition of longing itself becomes the ground of satisfaction." This reading corresponds to a romantic interpretation of *Sister Carrie* more than it does to a naturalistic one. For the incidental forces controlling life, as Dreiser seems to say, command that whatever achievement one makes, one will always be dissatisfied. Discontent, the inevitable result of one's longing, is nevertheless a symptom of the romantic sensibility. Hochman's reading, I might add, suggests that the twin traits of longingness and individuality in Carrie's character also correspond to those of the American national character.

Lehan's essay cogently demonstrates that Carrie's and Hurstwood's "material" fortunes are measured by Spencer's *First Principles*: "And just as the planets cannot go beyond the limits set by the solar system, so Dreiser's characters cannot go beyond the limits set by money." Action in the novel perfectly fits such a naturalistic/mechanistic theory, but one might find it difficult to apply Spencerian principles to character, particularly to Carrie who Dreiser deliberately makes ambiguous and

mysterious. While Lehan advances his argument, he becomes adamantly opposed, rightly so, to the recent new historicist reading of *Sister Carrie*. In this approach, Lehan explains, "the text itself is turned into the tropological equivalent of capitalistic desire" when it should remain a narrative, a novel, on its own merit and development.

Finally, Trachtenberg challenges Richard Poirier's view that, in *Sister Carrie*, narrative voice is incoherent while character is "negligible." Trachtenberg shows how the narrator in the beginning coordinates social facts with character and, as the story unfolds, following the manner of the nineteenth-century realistic novel, uses the omniscient narrative voice that exercises itself "from beyond and behind" the autonomy of character. Thus, the narrative voice in *Sister Carrie* is not only coherent but intimately related to the individual characters. Trachtenberg's analysis smacks of a version of the new historicism, for he cites William James's notion that "consciousness is (1) the *experience* of thought . . . and (2) inseparable from the world of things of which we speak of being conscious of." Quoting Dreiser's passage from the 1981 edition, "We must understand that not we, but the things of which we are the evidence, are our realities," Trachtenberg argues that reality for Dreiser does not mean the natural forces as defined in naturalistic criticism; instead it means the "representivity," the social and historical nature of humankind. To Trachtenberg the narrative voice of *Sister Carrie* mediates between "Dreiser's thingness of words and the wordness...of things." The characters, in short, "cannot say so for themselves; it takes the narrator to say it to us for them." This reading, then, reaffirms what William J. Handy and other Dreiser critics have long noted about *Sister Carrie*.

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Standard Bibliography Revised and Expanded

Theodore Dreiser: A Primary bibliography and Reference Guide, by Donald Pizer, Richard W. Dowell, and Frederic Rusch. Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1991. 308 pp. $75.00.

Students of Dreiser at any level will welcome the appearance of *Theodore Dreiser: A Primary Bibliography and Reference Guide*, a revised and substantially expanded version of *Theodore Dreiser: A Primary and Secondary Bibliography* (1975). To skim its inventory of works by and about Dreiser is to confirm statistically what critics and scholars already know: the Dreiser industry is thriving.

"Writing by Theodore Dreiser," the first half of the book, demonstrates how much the Dreiser canon has changed since 1975. In particular, several major new Dreiser editions have appeared in this interval. Among numerous contenders, perhaps the most significant are *Sister Carrie*, *American Diaries, 1902-1926*, and *An Amateur Laborer*, published by the Pennsylvania Edition; but a number of other important editions, in English and translation, have also joined the list.

The section devoted to Dreiser's periodical writings (especially in the pre-Carrie years) has been greatly expanded. Periodical articles have been included only if Donald Pizer (the compiler of this section) considers the evidence for Dreiser's authorship firm: thus, some pieces recently identified by T. D. Nostwich, Richard Lingeman, and others have been omitted. Nonetheless, the number of early newspaper articles attributed to Dreiser has increased more than any other category of his writings. This portion has been revised, as well, to reflect the substantial new information about the early period which researchers have unearthed since the mid-seventies. Because of work done by T. D. Nostwich, we now know, for instance, that Dreiser wrote dozens of pieces for the *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* under the headline "Heard in the Corridors"; and that the articles which later became the sources for "Nigger Jeff" appeared in the *St. Louis Republic* in January 1894, not September 1893.

Thanks to the discovery of the first two issues of *Ev'ry*

Month--lost to readers until a few years ago--we know as well what Dreiser (as "The Prophet," "S. J. White," "The Sentinel," and "Edward Al") wrote in the first months of his tenure as the editor of a popular woman's magazine. Thus, the bibliography adds seven new Dreiser articles from 1895. And because we now know that V. D. Hyde and Sallie Joy White were *not* two of Dreiser's free-lance magazine pseudonyms, but instead real women, several magazine articles from the nineties have disappeared from the list. The section on periodicals concludes with several previously unpublished Dreiser fragments which have appeared in the last decade and a half.

Even by itself, the section listing "Miscellaneous Separate Publications" shows the profusion of new Dreiser material. The bibliography lists five volumes of Dreiser's journalism not yet accessible in 1975: *Theodore Dreiser: A Selection of Uncollected Prose*, edited by Donald Pizer; the two-volume *Selected Magazine Articles of Theodore Dreiser: Life and Art in the American 1890s*, edited by Yoshinobu Hakutani; and two volumes of newspaper pieces--*Theodore Dreiser: Journalism. Vol. 1, Newspaper Writings, 1892-1895* and *Theodore Dreiser's "Heard in the Corridors" Articles and Related Writings*--edited by T. D. Nostwich. These collections alone will undoubtedly provoke significant new commentary on Dreiser's early roots.

"Writings about Theodore Dreiser, 1900-1989," the second (and larger) part of the bibliography, has also been greatly expanded. It includes over nine hundred new entries--published works as well as dissertations--in print since the bibliography's first edition. These entries are particularly engrossing, for they document the large amount of new work--and new kinds of work--being done on Dreiser, work which continues to confirm his reputation as a writer. The brief annotations (generally objective but occasionally evaluative) are cogent and helpful.

Theodore Dreiser: A Primary Bibliography and Reference Guide is a handsome oversized volume, easy to read even with a two-column format. It is organized logically and thus simple to use. Each of the eight divisions within "Writings by Theodore Dreiser" is arranged chronologically, with an index immediately following the primary bibliography. Entries included under "Writings about Theodore Dreiser, 1900-1989" are broken down by year, then arranged alphabetically within each year.

The compilers of this volume, like its predecessor, are to be

commended for their meticulous work. The attention to detail and concern for accuracy reflected in every section of the bibliography will make it all the more valuable as a scholarly tool and, no doubt, a catalyst to future research.

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More Grist for the Dreiser Mill

Papers on Language and Literature,
Volume 27, Number 2, Spring, 1991.
165 pages (Dreiser Issue).

This special number of PLL contains nine articles by rookie and veteran Dreiserians. In addition, seven chapters (some never completed) of Dreiser's projected novel *The Rake* are published here for the first time. This is the 1915 version of the work planned to fictionalize the Roland B. Molineux murder case as opposed to the earlier holograph of the same name subsequently developed into *The 'Genius'*.

Most of the scholarship in the issue relies on manuscripts, correspondence, and other materials from the Dreiser collection at the University of Pennsylvania. As such, it serves to remind us what a treasure trove the Dreiser papers remain, still stimulating fresh insights when mined by perceptive researchers. Articles include Arthur D. Casciato's analysis of the interaction between Dreiser and his guide/secretary Ruth Epperson Kennell that produced the novelist's diary of his experiences in The Soviet Union, Robert Coltrane's revealing discovery of the alternating pattern of selfishness and selflessness in the selection and ordering of the biographical portraits in *Twelve Men*, and an intriguing handwriting analysis by Rose Gatté based on the holograph draft of "A Story of Stories." Also included is a fascinating dissection of the legal, moral, and social dimensions of Clyde Griffiths' actions in *An American Tragedy*. The analysis constitutes the winning essay in a contest sponsored by Dreiser's publishers Boni and Liveright in 1926 for which the contestants were to explain in 10,000 words whether or not Clyde was guilty of murder in the first degree. The winner was Washington

and Lee law professor Albert Levitt, admirably introduced by Phillip Gerber in a preface to the prize essay. James M. Hutchinson contributes an article charting the textual history of *The Financier* and Robert M. Myers writes about the discovery of Dreiser's personal copy of *McTeague* in the open stacks of the University of Miami library. Myers speculates that the novelist amended his later comments about Norris's work to lessen the impression of influence. Rounding out the collection are essays by Kathryn M. Plank, Frederic Rusch and Thomas Riggio. Plank, who also provides a helpful (short) introduction to the *Rake* chapters earlier in the issue, develops the thesis that in *An American Tragedy* Dreiser "depended less on historical facts and factual details than many people have argued." She also shows how Dreiser subsequently misrepresented the circumstances of the other "murder" cases he considered and rejected for fictionalizing. She argues he did this to strengthen the impression that Chester Gillette's actions constituted a typically American "crime." Rusch, using the dummy for "The Hand of the Potter" in place of the missing page proofs, establishes Dreiser's revisions during the publication preparation of the play. In so doing, he makes a strong case for this scholarly methodology. Finally, Riggio's contribution explores the details surrounding the final hours of Dreiser's life and includes Helen Dreiser's contemporary account from her calendar book.

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Letters

Snooty Putdowns?

To the Editor:

I must protest Arun P. Mukherjee's charging me with having set the trend of "snooty putdowns" of Dreiser in my 1948 *Theodore Dreiser: Apostle of Nature* (see p. 33 of her contribution to the Brockport Conference number of *Dreiser Studies*, Fall 1990). She correctly quotes from my preface, where I wrote "Theodore Dreiser . . . appears to have been the victim of contradictions that any high-school graduate should know enough to avoid." But by ignoring my language, the sentences that follow, and the nature of Dreiser criticism at the time, she wholly misrepresents my meaning.

I don't think my prose excessively subtle. I deliberately use the word "appears" and go on to say that we can't accept appearance as the reality: "Yet it is impossible to follow Dreiser's career without realizing that he cannot be so easily dismissed" (I then expand on that a bit). Finally I suggest that I intend to interpret the development of those apparent (please note that word) contradictions--in short, exhibit the logic of Dreiser's life. I was attempting to do that at a time when many critics couldn't avoid indulging in snooty putdowns. I was trying systematically to put an end to such putdowns, to the extent that Lionel Trilling subsequently implied I was something of an uncritical apologist. I cannot understand how anyone who has read my book or other statements about Dreiser can make the accusation Ms. Mukherjee has made. She would leave me more irritated and depressed than I am if I didn't see that she has also profoundly misinterpreted the thrust of what F. O. Matthiessen, Robert Penn Warren, and Harold Bloom have said. Blind to contexts, she gets the words right and the meanings wrong.

She also (p. 37) wrongly attributes to me the claim that Dreiser was content to be a passive spectator of the American scene. My chapter dealing with Dreiser as a magazine free-lancer, entitled "Spectator," describes what I have regarded

as his spectatorial attitude at that time. I find vestiges of that attitude at other times. But nowhere have I ever indicated that he was a passive spectator throughout his career. In fact, I take pains to show his evolving into the sort of activist Ms. Mukherjee wants him to have been.

Back in 1937, when I'd completed my Master's Essay on Dreiser, I sent him a copy. (We were then unacquainted.) In it I had roughly set forth the view of his development that later would inform my book. He replied by calling my interpretation "Quite correct." He even hoped it could be published. Although an author may not be the best judge of the validity of what commentators say about him, at least in this instance Dreiser certainly did not think I'd been unfair or outrageously mistaken. I wish that Ms. Mukherjee's "oppositional consciousness" had not prevented her from perceiving that her Dreiser and mine are in many respects quite compatible.

Robert H. Elias
West Tisbury, MA

Arun Mukherjee's Reply:

[Editor's Note: This is an abridgement of a reply of approximately 1,600 words. Since space limitations do not enable *DS* to print letters of such length, persons who wish to read the full response should contact Professor Mukherjee for a copy.]

Sorry as I am to have given offence to Professor Elias, whose pioneering work on Dreiser I deeply admire despite some disagreements, I must say I am quite baffled by his statement that I "wholly misrepresent his meaning." Since I believe that meaning is an elusive thing that happens somewhere between the writing of words and the reading of them, I cannot "represent" some one else's meaning, only interpret it. And interpretation, admittedly, is liable to errors and Bloomian "misreadings."

I also believe that there is often a gap between what one intended to say and what one's discourse actually says to one's readers. Although Professor Elias may not have intended to "put down" Dreiser, the cumulative effect of his book, for me,

led me to believe that his words did. Since Professor Elias charges me of misconstruing his words, I can only describe the effect of his words on me by linking the remarks I quoted to a few more passages.

I will begin with the "Preface" which Professor Elias does not think I have read right because of the qualifying sentences beginning with "Yet...." Since I had quoted only a sentence fragment, let me now quote the whole paragraph and argue for why I did not think the sentences beginning with "Yet" were antithetical to the earlier statement.

> Theodore Dreiser is a challenging figure. Arguing in the role of a determinist on the one hand that men are helpless, and assuming in the role of social reformer on the other hand that men can act and choose, he appears to have been the victim of contradictions that any high school graduate should know enough to avoid. Yet it is impossible to follow Dreiser's career without realizing that he cannot be so easily dismissed. He cannot be dismissed as a confused genius; he cannot be dismissed as a foggy giant; he cannot be dismissed as a man who, despite a sophomoric philosophy, wrote great novels. (*Theodore Dreiser: Apostle of Nature*, vii.)

When I read that paragraph, although I was clear as to Professor Elias' contention that Dreiser cannot be "so easily dismissed," I was not clear what Professor Elias thought of the "sophomoric philosophy" full of "contradictions that any high school graduate should know enough to avoid." Was he reporting a widely held opinion or was he concurring with it? The sentence, I believe, is equivocal and strongly suggests, to me at least, that Professor Elias shared the negative evaluation of Dreiser's philosophy. I do not think that the sentences beginning with "Yet" mean that "we can't accept appearance as reality," as Professor Elias suggests in his letter. For had they implied that, then the book would have refuted that there were any such contradictions in Dreiser's philosophy. It would have shown that what appeared to "apparent contradictions," were actually not contradictions but a coherent perspective on life. Instead, the book's project is, and is defined as such, to trace those very same "contradictions."

The second paragraph of the "Preface," in which Professor Elias divests himself of the responsibility to pronounce whether Dreiser "wrote great novels," committing himself only "to investigat[ing] the apparent contradictions, trace their development, and interpret them in relation to Dreiser's career," suggested to me that Professor Elias was, on the one hand, accepting the existence of these "apparent contradictions" (which suggested to me that Professor Elias was using the word not in the sense of reality belying appearance but in the sense of "readily seen; open to view; visible; readily understood or perceived; plain or obvious") and, on the other hand, not taking the line of defence that Dreiser's novels were great despite the "sophomoric philosophy." Instead, the book was only going to "investigate" the development of these "apparent contradictions."

I wonder why Professor Elias was so shy about showing his hand. I would have liked it better had he unequivocally said that he did think that Dreiser was worth writing a book on because, despite his "sophomoric philosophy," he wrote great, or at least, good novels. However, since the book so vigorously traces the "apparent contradictions," without ever arguing that they are not "real," only "apparent," and without ever saying that the calibre of the novels is not affected by their philosophical "contradictions," the total effect of the book, at least for this reader, was negative vis-a-vis the worth of Dreiser's work. . . .

His second objection to my comments, that I attribute to him the "claim that Dreiser was content to be a passive spectator of the American scene," is just. I assumed, unwarrantedly, that my comment would be read in the context of *Sister Carrie*, which was written during the period when Professor Elias does find him to have been a "spectator." What I intended to suggest was that I disagree with the way Professor Elias and many other critics have created an irreconcilable separation between Dreiser the novelist and Dreiser the activist, since I believe that his novel writing was part of his activism (See, for instance, Dreiser's piece, entitled "True Art Speaks Plainly," written very soon after the publication of *Sister Carrie*). Instead, I end up suggesting that Professor Elias considered Dreiser to have been a passive "spectator" all his life, which is certainly not true. . . .

Dreiser's inferior status is partly attributable to the half-hearted, equivocal stance many eminent Dreiser critics have

taken on him. And that is all I was saying when I noted that Professor Elias set a trend by writing those comments that I have interpreted as a negative judgement. I do not, of course, deny the possibility that I may be wrong. In that case, Professor Elias' stature as a pioneering Dreiser critic is solid enough to withstand attacks from gadflies like me.

In conclusion, although I do interpret Professor Elias' assessment of Dreiser's philosophy as negative over all, and disagree with it on that score, that does not mean that I do not respect his scholarship. Indeed, his book remains the foundation of Dreiser criticism and I have learnt much from it.

Toronto, Canada

News and Notes

The first issue of the International Dreiser Society's *Dreiser Newsletter* was published in October and mailed to persons who had indicated an interest in becoming charter members. Among the contents of the premiere issue is an airmail interview with Richard Lingeman, reprints of two articles from the Terre Haute *Tribune-Star* about a September visit of Vera Dreiser to Dreiser's birthplace, and a progress report on the Pennsylvania Edition of *Jennie Gerhardt.* According to textual editor James West, publication of *Jennie* is scheduled for the early fall of 1992, and copy-text for the edition is Dreiser's composite manuscript of 1910-11. . . . Laura Hapke writes that she expands on some of the ideas in the article which appears in this issue in a book to which she has contributed in the Twayne Literature and Society series, edited by Leo Marx. Scheduled for June 1992 publication, the book is entitled *Tales of the Working Girl: Wage-Earning Women in American Literature, 1890-1925.* The Dreiser sections appear in one chapter comparing Dreiser with O'Henry and another linking Dreiser to the "upward mobility" working-girl novel of the 1920s. . . . Dreiser's *Plays of the Natural and Supernatural* is the subject of a paper to be presented by Keith Newlin at the MLA Convention in San Francisco in late December. Newlin recently completed a dissertation at Indiana University that included a study of Dreiser's plays.

Announcement

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INTERNATIONAL DREISER SOCIETY

You are invited to become a Charter Member of the ***International Dreiser Society***, an association of scholars, professors, graduate students, and other persons who have an interest in the life and works of Theodore Dreiser.

The Society will offer a means of

- perpetuating Dreiser's name and literary reputation
- promoting the establishment of a Dreiser society within the MLA
- sustaining *Dreiser Studies*
- providing forums, such as a newsletter and gatherings at conventions, for the form and informal exchange of ideas among Dreiser scholars

If you are interested in becoming a Charter Member, please send the form on the next page to

Professor Miriam Gogol
Department of English
College of Basic Studies
University of Hartford
West Hartford, CT 06117

(form on next page)

NAME:

ADDRESS:

TELEPHONE NOS. (W) (H)

Check appropriate boxes:

[ ] I will join you at the ALA Conference in San Diego, CA, May 28-31, 1992.

[ ] I cannot attend the ALA Conference, but I would like to become a Charter Member of the Society at a total cost of $20.00 per annum (membership will include a subscription to *Dreiser Studies*, the Society newsletter, and free admission to Society social functions; please do not pay at this time).

[ ] I would like to become a Charter Member and also donate $____ toward establishing the Society.