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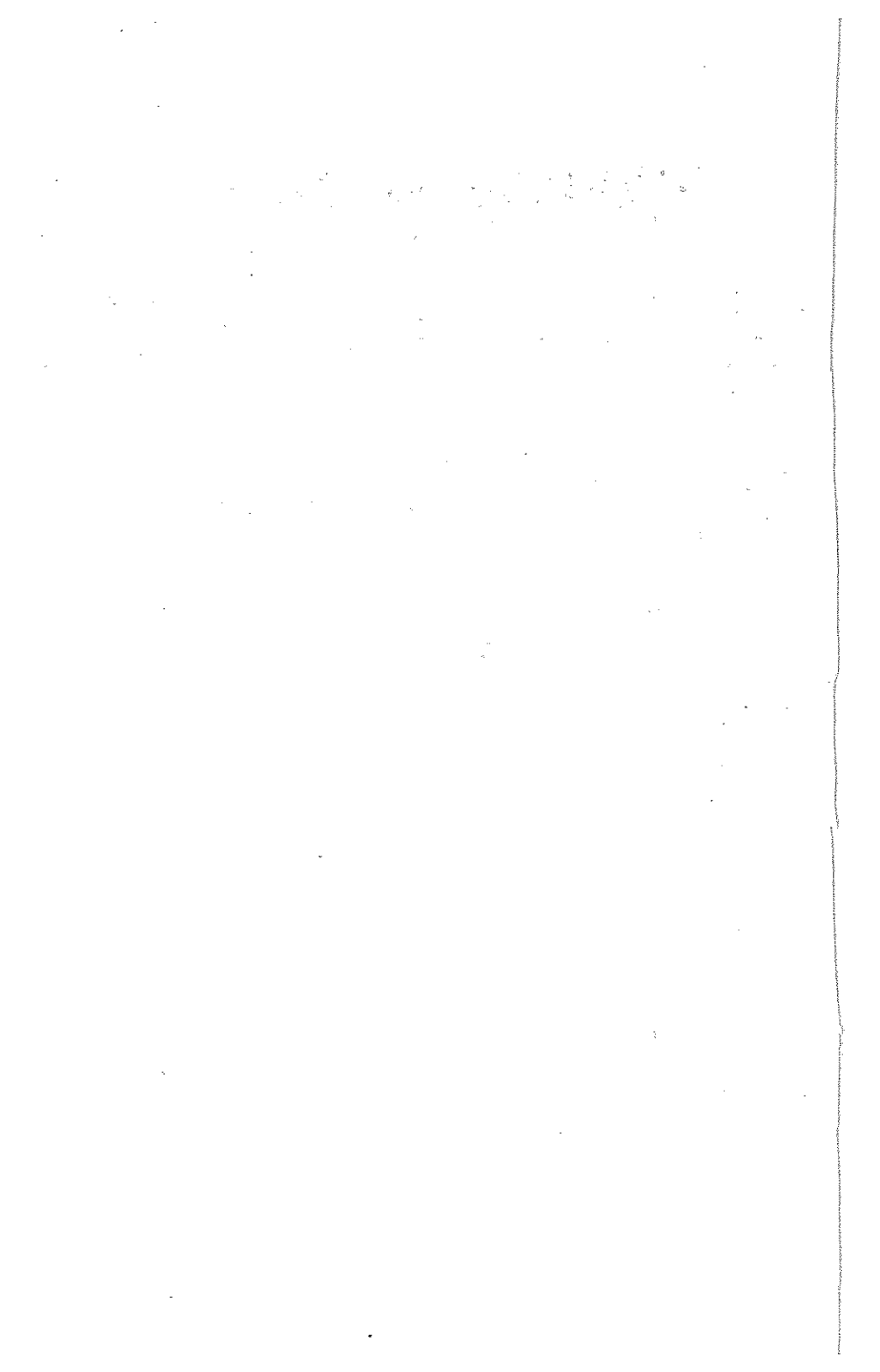
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# The “Realistic” Application of Irony: Structural and Thematic Considerations in *An American Tragedy*

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So you are dead,  
    Mine enemy,  
    And I  
Who view your frozen soul,  
    Grieve.  
    For in your end  
    I see  
    That I must die...  
--Theodore Dreiser, "The Symbol"

In the final chapter of *Dawn*, Theodore Dreiser discusses the function of education in his and others' lives concluding that development, training, and knowledge have a necessary but limited role to entertain, to relate past events, and to educate one for employment; but as to the ideal that it somehow improves one spiritually, this is a fantasy: "...some such form of education... may be necessary to complete this cycle of seventy years—it's human or mental experiences, its inherent changes and reactions, to let the illusion run its course, but beyond that, what else?" (589). The point of this passage and innumerable others is that the human condition itself is ironic. Humans need structure, purpose, and education in their lives but the de-ouement of such development is remedial and transient. Throughout

Dreiser's writing there is a playful dramatic irony that posits human development as necessary but as foolish, that sympathetically views individual human action as preeminent but that removes us to a distanced, ironic perspective, revealing the futility of the human condition.

This is the case in *An American Tragedy*; yet, the irony in this novel, though pervasive, inundating almost every line of the text, is diffused to the extent that it is often unrecognized. The undisguised and obvious quality of Dreiser's irony has precluded many readers from recognizing or analyzing its function.<sup>1</sup> Irony is often misunderstood, unnoticed, or misread, because as Wayne Booth asserts in *The Rhetoric of Irony* it requires one to move outside the text and to assume intention. As concerns *An American Tragedy*, irony is so pervasive, so clearly related to societal values and literary forms outside the text, so stable,<sup>2</sup> that we are easily blinded to its significance in revealing not only a dialectic method of characterization but also the very dramatic structure of the work.

Irony, in *An American Tragedy*, functions on one level to shift our perspective, removing us to a comfortable distance at which we can observe the folly of Clyde and Roberta, as well as all other characters. But this blatant irony that is often practiced when describing Clyde and his motives, is juxtaposed, often in the same passage, by prevalent instances of sympathetic characterization; thus, there is the obvious dialectic play within the narrative description of Clyde, Roberta, and others that both undermines the characters, exposing their flaws, and that identifies with them creating empathy. For example, when the thoughts of Samuel and Gilbert Griffiths are related concerning the employment of Clyde in their factory, a satiric tone undermines their philosophy concerning the need of social and economic classes:

Neither could tolerate the socialistic theory relative to capitalistic exploitation. As both saw it, there had to be higher and higher social orders to which the lower social classes could aspire. One had to have castes. One was foolishly interfering with and disrupting necessary and unavoidable social standards when one tried to unduly favor any one—even a relative. (I,180-81)

The immediate function of this statement is to justify the placement of Clyde in a low-paying, menial job in the shrinking room, and while the very act of Clyde being placed in a "shrinking" room reveals a degree of ironic intention, the focus here is on an economic theory. Notwithstanding Dreiser's own pronouncements on the inevitability of social and economic classes which might discount any ironic intention in this quotation, the satire in this passage, if not clear when first read, is corroborated by Clyde's reflections on the luck of Gilbert, who will inherit control of the Griffiths' factory without having worked any harder than other employees, and by the narrator's summation of how Samuel and Asa's inheritance was unfairly distributed favoring Samuel, thus allowing him to build the factory.<sup>3</sup> Further, the irony of this statement is revealed in Samuel Griffiths' eventual reversal on this issue, which occurs when he realizes that his harsh treatment of Clyde was a contributing factor in the murder of Roberta:

Yet Samuel Griffiths, on his part, going back in his mind to all that had occurred since Clyde had arrived in Lycurgus. His being left to work in that basement at first and ignored by the family. Left to his own devices for fully eight months. Might not that have been at least a contributing cause to all this horror? And then being put over all those girls! Was not that a mistake? (II, 176)

What might appear as a simple satire on capitalism, on naturalism, or on the "law-of-the-jungle" philosophy in the first quotation is complicated by a sympathetic depiction of Samuel Griffiths that is conveyed in the second passage. This contrast of satire and sympathy is accompanied by a parallel shift in narrative voice. The narration in the passage concerning the Griffiths' laissez-faire philosophy is conveyed in tagged, indirect discourse, which maintains a certain narrative distance that is increased by the irony; but in the second passage where Samuel's thoughts on his own culpability are communicated, there is a shift in narrative technique from tagged, indirect discourse to free, indirect discourse. In other words, the third person pronouns are dropped (untagged) in the final four sentences of the second

quotation. Thus, the narrative distance between reader and character is reduced reflecting the sympathetic content of this passage.

Kenneth Burke in *A Grammar of Motives* states that when we are discussing the "literal" or "realistic" application of irony, we could substitute the term "dialectic" for irony, since "true" irony always is involved in an opposition in which irony is juxtaposed to humility. Burke says, "True irony, humble irony, is based upon a sense of fundamental kinship with the enemy, as one 'needs' him, is 'indebted' to him, is not merely outside him as an observer but contains him within, being consubstantial with him" (514). Without this consubstantiality, this understanding between the one being satirized and the witness of the satire, there could be no irony, since irony depends on shared values or shared sympathies. On one level, the pervasive, ironic depictions of Samuel, Clyde, Roberta, or any other Dreiserian character are opposed by empathic statements creating a true or dialectic irony.

From the satire on religion involved in McMillan saving Clyde's soul by not saying anything on Clyde's behalf to the governor, which could have saved his life, to the humorous irony involved in Sondra's statement to Clyde concerning the accouterments and size of her luxurious kitchen: "Aren't all kitchens as big as this?" (I,373), irony is used to evoke a dialectic complication that creates a "reality" effect by allowing us to view characters from various perspectives. But, besides this obvious play of sarcasm and sympathy in all characterizations, irony, on a structural level, performs the function of foreshadowing coming events. This ironic foreshadowing operates by juxtaposing anticipated scenarios with which the reader is familiar to ironic deconstructions of these conventional developments. This dramatic use of irony forms a pattern that could be characterized as foreshadowing and reversing. This secondary level of irony moves us into structural considerations, into what we could call anticipation and fulfillment of form in art.

This dramatic or structural irony is based on a theorem of necessity that Kenneth Burke describes in the following simple manner: "... what goes forth as A returns a Non-A" (*A Grammar of Motives*, 517). Irony as a means of foreshadowing inundates *An American Tragedy*. Early in the novel Clyde expresses his goal of making only the best contacts in his new

otel job, and we feel a certain sympathy for Clyde and wish him success, at this statement is immediately revealed as ironic when the narrator tells us that such an idea on Clyde's part is proof of "a soul that will never grow up," and we expect, as it does, that this passage foreshadows Clyde's eventual imprudent behavior. But there is a double irony at work in this passage, which is not apparent until the beginning of Book II, when Clyde working at the exclusive Union League Club in Chicago as a bellboy conducts himself prudently by dressing well and by cultivating good manners and does encounter a man who offers him a great opportunity and a future, his uncle. Again, using Burke's theorem, we can say that what goes forth as A (Clyde's prudence and good contacts at the Green-Davidson) comes back as Non-A (Clyde's imprudent outings with the other bellhops and his contact with a prostitute and Hortense); but this irony is doubled or tripled when in Book II, we can say again that what goes forth as A (Clyde's renewed and improved efforts at prudence and good contacts while working in Chicago and when first living in Lycurgus) come back as Non-A (Clyde's imprudent behavior towards Roberta, her pregnancy and her murder). And we can further say that this doubling to tripling play of dramatic irony is all contained or foreshadowed in the above quotation concerning the Green-Davidson since we are given in that first instance a formulae that fits subsequent actions by Clyde: Efforts at advancement through prudence and good contacts will always fail.

On a third level, that of plot structure, irony functions similarly to foreshadow and reverse the expectations of the reader, but at this level the irony alludes to popular story lines.<sup>4</sup> These prevalent narrative modes, such as the working-girl plot or the rags-to-riches narrative or the sentimental novel structure are familiar to readers and create certain "expectations" and "necessities" of development, but Dreiser brings into being a dialectic irony by employing then reversing these structures, so again "what goes forth as A comes back as Non-A." This process can be demonstrated by looking at the use of what is often called the "Bildungsroman" novel. The prototype "Bildungsroman" begins with a young man (Clyde) who knows little about the world. The rising action develops around the young man's harsh encounter with the "real" world (Clyde's poverty and experience with Hortense), which climaxes in a situation that almost destroys the pro-

tagonist (the car crash or Roberta's pregnancy). The falling action would usually involve the humbled-protagonist applying the "hard knocks" of his early life to his present experiences and succeeding (not Clyde); thus, we have an ironic reversal to what at first appears to be a novel in which a youth is educated by the experiences of life.

This is corroborated when Clyde mentions several times that his lack of education has kept him from succeeding and when his lawyers use Clyde's inadequate education as a tactic to sympathetically portray him at the trial, but this lack is usually displayed ironically as in the following passage where Gilbert is forced to give Clyde a raise and a better position in the factory: "Well, the fact is," went on Gilbert, "I might have placed you in the accounting end of the business when you first came if you had been technically equipped for it." (the phrase 'technically equipped' overawed and terrorized Clyde, for he scarcely understood what that meant.)" (I,235). We feel a certain sympathy for Clyde since his lack of education causes him to be terrorized by Gilbert's use of the term "technically equipped"; on the other hand, there is great irony in the fact that Clyde is succeeding, receiving raises and a new position in management, despite his deficiency of formal education. While the novel employs then undermines this popular "Bildungsroman" form, on another lever, it reinstates the efficacy of such common, narrative structures, creating sympathetic expectations. We cannot help hoping that Clyde's development goes well and that he is educated by his actions or that he achieves his rags-to-riches dream by marrying Sondra or that America proves to be the place where the Adamic myth can come true and where Clyde can find a Edenic paradise in Lycurgus or that his family can find it in their "Westering" quest; but each of these popular narratives is reversed in a process of dramatic irony: "what goes forth as A, comes back as Non-A."

Yet, for us, the novel goes beyond the mere negation of "A." In dialectic process, the terms "A" and not "A" are transcended by a third term that incorporates the apparent contradictions or the paradoxical aspects of the thesis and antithesis. That young boys, like Dreiser or Clyde, grew up with Horatio Alger dreams cannot be denied, and that these dreams must be included in any explanation of why Clyde acts as he does is presupposed, but to imagine that Dreiser's novel attempts a simple elimination or rever-



al of such romantic ideals ignores the extent to which such narratives are necessary to tell Clyde's story.

Contrary to the now popular notion that Dreiser, and other realists, are merely attempting to "objectively" represent their social milieu and that such "factual" novels not only falsely claim referentiality but also are superfluous to the extent that they duplicate work that is done in newspapers, *An American Tragedy*, in a dialectic drama of narrative discourses, continuously shifts the reader's perspectives of Clyde revealing both ironically and humbly the limits of any type of narration to capture fully why Clyde acted as he did and to explain his culpability in Roberta's murder—even Clyde does not know the degree of his own guilt. The failure of the Western Griffiths' and McMillan's religion or of the Eastern Griffiths' Puritanical work ethic or of Clyde's initiation into the world of "hard knocks" or of the judicial system or of the penal system or of any idealized system or narrative trope to fully depict or explain Clyde's life and death demonstrate not the failure of these ideals and narrative structures but the extent to which they are necessary to critically reveal the failure of our societal values. As a realist Dreiser's literary nemeses were the sentimental novelists who idealized life and ended every story happily, but rather than simply reject and destroy these enemies, Dreiser ironically employs their popular narrative tropes in an act that makes him at one with his enemies, that recognizes the degree to which the idealized narrative discourses carry the values that he wishes to depict and question. And irony is the dramatic technique that allows Dreiser to structure, into an accurate proportion, the contradictory manifold of forces that affected Clyde and other young Americans who died tragically when attempting to follow the ideals posited by their society.

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<sup>1</sup>Donald Pizer and Richard Lehan are notable exceptions to this blindness of irony. Pizer analyzes numerous examples of irony in *An American Tragedy* and Lehan in *Theodore Dreiser: His World and His Novels* argues that by the end of the novel "almost every word has either double meaning or can be read in a double context," which results in his claim that most passages in *An American Tragedy* are "heavy with irony" (167); but what

has not been demonstrated by past readers and what is of profound structural and thematic importance is the dialectic function this irony.

<sup>2</sup>Dreiser's irony is "stable" to the extent that we, as readers, are incessantly reminded that the narrator is consistently undercutting the characters and American societal beliefs and institutions with irony. Wayne Booth, in *A Rhetoric of Irony*, gives five methods by which the reader might detect irony, and of these five *An American Tragedy* displays all consistently: straightforward warnings (as when we are told that "Clyde had a soul that was not destined to grow up" (I,174); proclamation of a known error (as when Sondra states "Aren't all kitchens as big as this?" (I,373); conflicting facts in the work (as are developed throughout Book III, especially during the trial), clash of style (as has been repeatedly noted by admirers and detractors of the novel); and conflicts of belief (again, as has been the all too prevalent description of Dreiser's thinking). So there is no difficulty in detecting the irony in *An American Tragedy*.

<sup>3</sup>One such example of Dreiser's pontification on the need of classes in society is contained in *Dreiser Looks at Russia* where Dreiser analyzes and appreciates the Russian experiment in communism, but where he also finds parts of the social experiment to be illogical in that they go against the ways of nature: "Personally, I am dubious of the result because I cannot even conceive of a classless society any more than I can conceive of life without variations and distinctions" (79).

<sup>4</sup>Numerous published essays have explored the use of popular fictional modes in *An American Tragedy*: Carla Mulford Micklus's essay "*An American Tragedy*; or The Tragedy of the Adamic Myth," discusses how the novel deconstructs the myth of an American Adam; Martin Bucco's article "The East-West Theme in Dreiser's *An American Tragedy*," reveals the reversal of the popular "westerling" or go-West-young-man mode; Harold Beaver, in his book *The Great American Masquerade*, describes Dreiser's plots and his characters as stereotypical in that they rely on simplistic reversals of popular fictional forms: "For the art of the cliché lies at the very core of Dreiser's art. Almost all his plots have their origin in popular literature... In each instance, however, Dreiser reverses the basic moral assumption of the popular myth" (143). Two other good examples of articles that have recognized the extent of Dreiser's employment of popular narra-

ve tropes are: "Carrie's Sisters: The Popular Prototypes for Dreiser's heroine" by Cathy and Arnold Davidson and "Plot as Parody: Dreiser's attack on the Alger Theme in *An American Tragedy*" by Paul Orlov.

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# Jennie Gerhardt: A Daughteronomy of Desire

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The semantic ambiguity of my title—does a daughteronomy<sup>1</sup> locate desire *in* the daughter (for what or whom?) or *for* the daughter (by whom and why?)—announces both a recognition and a collapsing of such differentiation. How does Jennie Gerhardt/*Jennie Gerhardt* image/ imagine what it means (again, to whom and why?) to be a white immigrant daughter of the under-class in urban America at the turn of the twentieth century? Silently enduring class oppression and sexual exploitation, Jennie, in her Griselda-like position, embodies and encodes the dutiful ideal daughter who, in Dreiser's politics, is also the ideal "sister, mother, sweetheart."<sup>2</sup>

Dreiser reinscribes conventional ideologies of class and sexual politics by scripting the working-class daughter as enabler of others' acquisition of agency while denying her own. Jennie's body is the site at which the protagonists' competing desires intersect, the playing field for psychosocial, material, and political dynamics. Though the novel disrupts the hierarchical gendered structure of the (legally recognized) nuclear patriarchal family, it endorses a silencing of the woman who is un"true,"<sup>3</sup> or as Dreiser would have it, not "good," particularly the "new woman." Following the poor reception of Sister Carrie's (1900) meteoric rise to stardom and wealth, *Jennie Gerhardt* (1911) is praised as "the best American novel [H.L. Mencken had] ever read, with the lonesome by Himalayan exception of Huckleberry Finn."<sup>4</sup>

Jennie's abdication of self—self-effacement, self-sacrifice, self-denial—appeals to and is promoted by the accepted taste<sup>5</sup> of contemporary patriarchal readership since it props a construction of "cultural filiality."<sup>6</sup> Though Dreiser substitutes a naturalistic genre for the sentimental romance which would, in closure, marry Jennie and Lester,<sup>7</sup> he nevertheless posits a paternal function and paternal metaphor<sup>8</sup> that depends upon, as it does in the

sentimental novel, an accommodating daughter who stabilizes the family. Letter's mystified "There's no explaining a good woman" is an authorial fiat *not* to disrupt the regulatory function of the daughter.

Family life, Judith Lower Newton suggests, "should be part of our construction of 'material conditions,'"<sup>10</sup> so too, material conditions should be part of our construction of family life. The Gerhardts, representatives of "how the other half lives," struggle to eke out a daily existence in urban Ohio in the 1880s and their intrafamilial relations enact those described by Dreiser's contemporaries Jane Addams and Helen Campbell and by historians Carl Degler, Ceclie Neidle, Stephanie Coontz, Alice Kessler-Harris, and Leslie Woodcock Tentler among others.<sup>11</sup> While children's labor may have made the difference between starvation or survival, adult status was conferred upon a working son (often for fear he may run off and contribute nothing to the family income) while a daughter's labor was often for the benefit of her brother. Brother Sebastian, aspiring "masher," does not want his family to shame him by talking to him in public, yet it is for his benefit, the securing of a ten dollar fine, that Jennie will become a "fallen woman."

Yet Jennie's experience departs from her sisters' in that she is deprived of a working girl's rite of passage. She has no adolescent peer group Tentler describes as the foundation for sex role socialization. A young woman's group in the work community often established both cooperative, supportive working relations and social codes. Dress styles, evening entertainments, and potential mates were concerns constitutive of adolescent culture. Unlike her peers, Jennie works with her mother, has no social freedom (born of negotiating power of wage earning power) nor courtship rituals and *is* supporting dependents since her father lies abed sick and "helpless," disabled more by capitalistic arrangements than by personal limitations, worried about the "doctor's bill, the interest upon the mortgage, together with the sums owed butcher and baker"(3). His disabled capacity for labor heightens Jennie's already heightened sense of loyalty and obligation, but it is her sexuality rather than (as) her labor that enables the family to survive and further advances the possibility of her siblings' ability to seek, if not upward mobility, other opportunities.

Though the title of the novel moves the usually anomalous daughter from margin to center, it also reminds us that Jennie, though posing as

Mrs. Kane or Mrs. J.G. Stover, is *always* her father's daughter and as such cannot escape the exchange value she embodies in a patriarchal society. She is, as Lawrence Hussman writes, Dreiser's "personification of giving as a way of life,"<sup>12</sup> but what she gives *up* is not only her body but also her position in the hierarchical, however elementary it may be, kinship structure.<sup>13</sup> Jennie's affair with Brander forecloses on Gerhardt's power to negotiate the exchange of his possession: he confronts Brander with "My daughter is my daughter. I am the one who will say whether she shall go out at night, or whether she shall marry you, either" (64). Gerhardt, lacking the language and privileges of Brander's class—Gerhardt shies away from Brander at their initial meeting—cannot be Brander's affine in the system and resists Brander's advances not simply because neighbors question his authority over his daughter, but also because he understands class oppression forces the impossibility of social linkage with Brander.<sup>14</sup> Put another way, Gerhardt has a penis while Brander possesses the Phallus.

Though the love scene with Brander may be read as "sympathetic handling of the situation" or the "natural" consequence of Brander's charity,<sup>15</sup> I would suggest Dreiser attempts to co-opt the reader, to align the reader with a politics that would entitle Brander to Jennie's body: "If all beauty were passing, and you were given these things to hold in your arms before the world slipped away, would you give them up?" (77). Though Jennie's motive for usurping/erasing her father's privilege ironically originates in filial and sibling loyalty, the politics of the father-daughter relationship allow Gerhardt to act out what he believes is betrayal. He dispossesses his daughter for negating her signification of Gerhardt honor, for arousing "paternal undecidability"<sup>16</sup> and for initiating separation out of his physical and psychological enclosures, out of his/her class, depriving a future (working class) husband of sexual possession, for jamming the "traffic in women."

Lynda Boose points out that the traditional Western marriage ceremony is a ritualization that simultaneously "eradicates daughterhood and relocates her dangerous fertility inside the authorized status of wife/mother" and celebrates not union of man and wife but separation of father and daughter (68); Jennie, lacking "authorized status," is doubly cursed for unlawful sexual relations *and* for individuating. Gerhardt believes he is

inned against when Jennie, violated, violates social code and his primary claim.

As a father substitute, fifty-two year old avuncular Brander, who in terms of social status, authority, age, and gender, is completely polarized to Jennie, literalizes the father-daughter dynamic Lynda Zwinger analyzes in her stunning *Daughters, Fathers and the Novel*.<sup>17</sup> What Zwinger calls the "daughter of sentiment" is a representation of woman as response to the middle-class (narrative) "omnipresent and unvoiced paternal desire" (4); she is a "heterosexual patriarchal alibi" whose "utter self-abnegation and blind complicity" (8) ensures the deployment and management of heterosexual relations and exogamous exchange. Gerhardt the proletariat has no property or power to transmit to his oldest son, but those limitations are eclipsed in the figure of upper-class Brander. In fact, Gerhardt is temporarily marginalized in the narrative; eclipsed by the mother-daughter dyad, he is removed to Youngstown while the family lives in Cleveland.

Brander's involvement with Jennie is a psychopolitical act that allows him as a father figure to act out the incestuous specter lurking in the background while foregrounding Jennie's social subjugation that (en)genders her "interior colonization."<sup>18</sup> The "small fortune" of \$400 he sends her (money for sex) is the only means Dreiser makes available to her of providing her family with a furnished cottage. Brander's sudden death emblemizes a disembodiment which reifies the patriarchal power structure, the name and the law-of-the-father theorists have claimed depends upon disembodiment. Lacan represents the Phallus as "less the organ [penis] that it symbolizes" than the veiled "privileged signifier" of patriarchal power: "It is in the name-of-the-father that we must recognize the support of my symbolic function which, from the dawn of history, has identified his person with the figure of the law." Jane Gallop reminds us that this function includes the "patronym, patriarchal law, patrilineal identity, language as our inscription into patriarchy" while Irigaray reminds us women's use and exchange values are constitutive of the symbolic order.<sup>19</sup> Brander becomes a dead absent father and his absence becomes a double presence visible in Jennie's pregnant body and in his alliance with the paternal metaphor. Jennie, then, embodies a double disempowerment<sup>20</sup> which triplicates itself in the body of a daughter.

Vesta, handicapped by gender, is also "weak and feeble" (102) and dies, textually from a fever, but subtextually from a lack of any legitimation: having no acknowledged patrilineal identity, she is no one's to exchange or give away. Though Gerhardt could subsume a father's role in his grandfatherly entitlement—he is the one who insists on naming her—he dies before Vesta matures sexually. It is not because she is the "lamb of innocence embody[ing] Jennie's faith in the goodness of Nature"<sup>21</sup> that she is sacrificed; rather, she is a commodity that cannot go to market since she is not authored, and a disinvestment of her social value is achieved only by a divestment of her body. She is, in fact, initially concealed from Lester.

Working as a domestic for the Bracebridges,<sup>22</sup> Jennie's plans to provide for her family are disrupted by her meeting Lester Kane, polished wealthy personage whom Jennie could not resist: "...this man drew her. If she had realized in what way she would have fled his presence then and there" (129). Sexually aroused "...for the first time in her life, [she felt] an interest in a man on his own account. He was so big, so handsome, so forceful" (127-8). Jennie's desire is potentially dangerous to male hegemony and must be contained: the good daughter gone bad is a working-class prostitute. Should Jennie act on her desire as *her* desire she would assume an agency denied the daughter in the paternally directed narrative. Denied a subject position, Jennie is always the object; she must incite desire but remain passive, or as Zwinger puts it: she must "be and have the object of desire" (67).

When Hussman claims the "introductory description of [Lester] perfectly encapsulates the qualities of the twentieth-century man and of Dreiser himself, a portrait that mixes determinism and free will" (53), he neglects to mention some other qualities that are, historically, influencing the new century white male identity. It is not surprising that Dreiser characterizes Lester as "essentially animal-man", as "strong, hairy, axiomatic and witty" (*JG* 133) in light of contemporary fascination with the primitive and with the chivalric romance. London's *Call of the Wild* (1903) and *The Sea Wolf* (1904) follow on the heels of a plethora of historical romances that Amy Kaplan has maintained represent the "spectacle of masculinity" as political agency acting out imperialistic conquests.<sup>23</sup>



Theodore Roosevelt's "The Strenuous Life" (1906) addresses "you men [of Chicago] who preeminently and distinctly embody all that is most American in the American character" (3). Promoting territorial expansion, Roosevelt calls for an acting out of "virile," "manly," and "adventurous" (4) qualities. What critics have dubbed the "cult of masculinity"<sup>24</sup> represents a collective ego ideal of the empowered male body, entitled to "grasp the points of vantage" perceived as a "legacy of duty" (Roosevelt 11). If Roosevelt is primary spokesman for the strong male body, Dreiser's Lester is a primary imaging of that strong man "veneered by education and environment" (*JG* 133) whose "theory of life" rested on a "right method of living... a quiet acceptance of social conditions as they were" (135).

Class conditions, as they were, are eroticized for Kane as they were for Brander; Lester, too, can offer money for sex, financial support to the Gerhardts in exchange for Jennie's body, the "prize," site at which consumer and consumed converge. Though Lester alienates himself from his wealthy family by choosing to carry on his "experiment" with Jennie, he does, finally, reinstate himself into high society by rejecting Jennie and marrying the rich widow Letty Pace. Though Dreiser would have us accept at face value Lester's residual regret: "His was... that painful sense of unfairness which comes to one who knows that he is making a sacrifice... to policy" (369), that policy is one of white male privilege which allows him a "curious rejuvenation in the social and business spirit" (373). Leo Bersani's point that the realist novel "must castrate desire" since desire can "subvert social order"<sup>25</sup> is an apt description of Dreiser's erasure of Jennie's desire. Female desire, so insatiable and threatening in *Sister Carrie*, is eleven years later in *Jennie*, neutralized in favor of a white male-dominated capitalist economy: adopting two orphans, Jennie is relegated to the private sphere while Lester is "immersed in his great affairs" (371). Lester's desire aligns itself with the display of conspicuous leisure and consumption in the body and property of Letty Pace.

Old Gerhardt's desire is to reconstitute his shattered family and his own image of his fathering. As the paternal (patriarchal capitalist) metaphor becomes more ascendant, the body of the real father becomes more descendant and repressed. He finally moves from a "wee small corner" (244) in a warehouse to Jennie's new country home in Hyde Park and

becomes Lester's caretaker. His clothing, cut from Lester's cast-offs, emblemizes his shrinkage and lack—of social status, of consumption, of individuality, and of wage earning ability. Gerhardt, trope for the exploited "detailed labourer" whose burnt hands erase his part in the "change of hands,"<sup>26</sup> enacts the inseparability of class privilege with the law-of-the-[white]father.

Gerhardt and Lester on their death beds each tell Jennie she is a "good woman" (346, 422). But though Dreiser would have his readers equate daughterly sacrifice to "superior wisdom,"—"Jennie loved and loving, gave" (433)—her exploitation veils the phallic economy of a readerly Same. This "daughter of the poor [father]," is a "sorry figure" for lacking, like her father, the "possess[ion] of the power to strike and destroy," for not demonstrating a willingness to resist her "own fitness and place" (432). Reading *Jennie Gerhardt* not as experience that leaves her "unsullied [and] elevated in character and insight"<sup>27</sup> but as a deployment of daughterly duty can be a process of unveiling, and we may learn that the face (or the phallus) beneath the veil is not, after all, the bearded father's. To Mary Gordon it is "the pimply boy's,"<sup>28</sup> whose bourgeois desire, I would add, is for containment of female desire to enable a politics of her sexual availability on his terms.

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<sup>1</sup>"Daughteronomy" is Sandra Gilbert's term: "Notes Toward a Literary Daughteronomy" in Lynda Boose and Betty Flowers, Eds., *Daughters and Fathers* (Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1989), 256-277.

<sup>2</sup>Infatuated with eighteen-year-old Thelma Cudlipp, forty-year-old Dreiser writes her, "You once said you would be mother & sister and sweetheart to me. I am a little pleading boy now in need of your love, your nother love. Won't you help me. [sic] Please do Honeypot - please do. I beg of you - oh, I beg of you! . . ." quoted in Richard Lingeman, (*Theodore Dreiser: An American Journey 1908-1945* [New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1990]), 30.

<sup>3</sup>Barbara Welter's now classic "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-860" *American Quarterly* 18 (1966: 151-174) discusses the "four cardi-

il virtues—piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity” (152) of mid-nineteenth century middle-class white women.

<sup>4</sup>Lingeman 41-2. Also quoted in Robert Penn Warren (*Homage to Theodore Dreiser* New York: Random House, 1971), 48. Patrocínio P. Schweickart points out that the “woman in the text converts the text into a woman, and the circulation of this text/woman becomes the central ritual that establishes the bond between the author and his male readers” (534) *Reading Ourselves: Toward a Feminist Theory of Reading* in *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*. Robyn Warhol and Diane Price Herndl, eds. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 1991), 525-550.

<sup>5</sup>As John McAleer states, the novel “com[es] to terms with accepted taste” (*Theodore Dreiser: An Introduction and Interpretation*, New York: Doubleday, Rinehart & Winston, 1968), 93.

<sup>6</sup>Boose and Flowers use the term to suggest the cultural dynamic underlying father-daughter relations. (Lynda E. Boose and Betty S. Flowers, eds., *Daughters and Fathers*. [Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1989]), 9. Lynda E. Boose’s “The Father’s House and the Daughter in It: The Structures of Western Culture’s Daughter-Father Relationship” brilliantly analyzes family construction and gender and power hierarchies in the Judeo-Christian tradition (*Daughters and Fathers*. 47-69).

<sup>7</sup>Dreiser cut the marriage from the first manuscript on the advice of Lillian Rosenthal (Lingeman 35-6).

<sup>8</sup>Lacan writes, “So as to make the link between the Name of the Father, in so far as he can at times be missing, and the father whose effective presence is not always necessary for him not to be missing, I will introduce the expression ‘paternal metaphor.’” Quoted in Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose, eds. *Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the école freudienne*. Trans. J. Rose. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1985), 39. Rose points out the father is a function and refers to a law.

Luce Irigaray connects the (father’s) symbolic order to the symbolic system that exchanges women as commodities (“Women on the Market” *This Sex Which is not One* Trans, Catherine Porter with C. Burke. [New York: Cornell UP, 1985]), 171-191.

<sup>9</sup>*Jennie Gerhardt*. (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1911), 348. All references to the text are taken from this edition.

<sup>10</sup>Judith Lowder Newton, "History as Usual? Feminism and the 'New Historicism'." *The New Historicism*. H. Aram Vesser, ed. (New York: Routledge, 1989), 152-167.

<sup>11</sup>Jane Addams, *Twenty Years at Hull House with Autobiographical Notes*. (New York: Macmillan, 1910); Helen Campbell, *Prisoners of Poverty: Women Wage-Workers, Their Trades and Their Lives*. (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1887); Carl Degler, *At Odds: Women and the Family in America from the Revolution to the Present*. (New York: Oxford UP, 1980); Cecyle Neidle, *America's Immigrant Women*. (Boston: Twayne, 1975); Alice Kessler-Harris, *Out-to Work: A History of Wage-Earning Women in the United States* (New York: Oxford UP, 1982); Leslie Woodcock Tentler, *Wage Earning Women: Industrial Work and Family Life in the US, 1900-1930*. (New York: Oxford UP, 1979). See also Louise A. Tilly and Joan W. Scott, *Women, and Work, and Family*, (New York: Holt, Rinehart, & Winston, 1978) chp. 6 and Lyn Weiner, *From Working Girl to Working Mother: The Female Labor Force in the United States, 1982-1980*, (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1985).

That the Gerhardts are German underscores the pietistic origins of old Gerhardt (modeled on Dreiser's own father). Though German immigrants initiated traditions of outdoor folk fests, summer beer gardens and German taverns—by 1860, Milwaukee saw one tavern for every 30 households,—many of their forebears had established pietistic colonies: after 1815, Amish Mennonites settled in Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Indiana; Hutterities in South Dakota and Montana. (Lawrence Fuchs, *The American kaleidoscope: Race, Ethnicity and the Civic Culture*. [Hanover, NH: UP of New England, 1990]), 10-23.) Dreiser's old Gerhardt is a stern Lutheran, and his religious weltanschauung though seemingly at odds with the commodification process of his daughter's body, underwrites it. See Boose, "The Father's House."

<sup>12</sup>Lawrence Hussman, *Dreiser and His Fiction: A Twentieth-Century Quest*, (Philadelphia, U of Penn P, 1983), 50.

<sup>13</sup>Claude Levi-Strauss, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* trans. James Harle Bell, John Richard von Sturmer and Rodney Needham. (Boston: Beacon, 1969). See also Gayle Rubin, "The Traffic in Women: Notes

on the Political Economy of Sex" in *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, Rayna Reiter, ed. (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975), 157-210.

<sup>14</sup>Class alliance would redraw the men's relations into a homosocial structure as analyzed by Rubin, "Traffic" and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia P, 1985).

<sup>15</sup>Hussman, 52 and Philip Gerber, *Theodore Dreiser Revisited*, (New York: Twayne, 1992), 41.

<sup>16</sup>"...the status of paternity itself... can only ever logically be *inferred* (Rose 39)—Mama's baby, Papa's maybe.

<sup>17</sup>Lynda Zwinger, *Daughters, Fathers and the Novel: The Sentimental Romance of Heterosexuality* (Madison, WI: U of Wisconsin P, 1991).

<sup>18</sup>Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics*, (New York: Touchstone P, 1990), 25.

<sup>19</sup>Lacan, "The Signification of the Phallus" (281-91) and "The Function and Field of Speech and Language" (31-113) in *Ecrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1977). Jane Gallop, *The Daughter's Seduction: Feminism and Psychoanalysis*, (New York: Cornell UP, 1982), 74; Irigaray, 170-91.

<sup>20</sup>In contrast to Lacan's psychoanalytic theories, Elaine Scarry analyzes the conflation of power with disembodiment and powerlessness with embodiment in her philosophical *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford UP, 1985).

<sup>21</sup>McAlear, 102.

<sup>22</sup>David M. Katzman's chart, "Propensity of Immigrant Women for Household Labor, 1900," indicates 58,716 German women (36.3% of the group's wage earners) worked as servants in 1900, second only to the Irish--132,662 (*Seven Days a Week: Women and Domestic Service in Industrializing America* Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1981), 67. See also Laura Hapke, *Tales of the Working Girl: Wage-Earning Women in American Literature, 1890-1925*, (New York: Twayne, 1992) for an historicist's analysis of turn-of-the-twentieth-century literary representation of white women's "work culture" (xv).

<sup>23</sup>"Romancing the Empire: The Embodiment of American Masculinity in the Popular Historical Novel of the 1890s" *American Literary History* 2 (4) (Winter 1990): 659-90.

<sup>24</sup>Theodore Roosevelt, "The Strenuous Life: Essays and Addresses. New York: Scribner's Sons, 1906. See also *Meanings for Manhood: Constructions of Masculinity in Victorian America*, Mark Carnes and Clyde Griffen, eds. (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1990); John Crowley, "Howells, Stoddard, and Male Homosocial Attachment in Victorian America" in *The Making of Masculinities: The New Men's Studies*. Harry Brod, ed. (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1987), 301-24; Anthony Rotundo, "Body and Soul: Changing Ideals of American Middle-Class Manhood, 1770-1920" in *Journal of Social History*, 16 (1982): 23-38; Joe Dubbert, "Progressivism and the Masculinity Crisis" in *The American Man* E. Peck and J. Peck, Eds. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1980), 303-20.

<sup>25</sup>Bersani, Quoted in Walter Benn Michaels, "Sister Carrie's Popular Economy," *Critical Inquiry*, 7 (1980): 373-90, 385.

<sup>26</sup>Karl Marx, *Capital* Vol. One. 1867. Trans. Eden and Cedar Paul. (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1962), 60.

<sup>27</sup>Donald Pizer, *Realism and Naturalism in Nineteenth Century American Literature*, (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois P, 1984: 41-52), 47.

<sup>28</sup>Mary Gordon, *Good Boys and Dead Girls and Other Essays*, (New York: Penguin, 1991), 23.

# *Jennie Gerhardt*: Gender, Identity, and Power

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Several critics have convincingly demonstrated that Theodore Dreiser's naturalism is tempered by his sympathy and compassion for characters at odds with society. Yet no one has fully examined how and why this compassion is often reserved for women. Other critics have suggested that Dreiser is "bound in weaknesses and in strength to the values of the sentimental lower class," and as such can never portray any woman except the "traditional seduced working girl of sentimental melodrama" (Shapiro 46-7); but the story of Jennie Gerhardt is not the stereotypical account of a "working girl" in whom desire defies convention. In *Jennie Gerhardt* Dreiser was years ahead of his time as, through the trials of his protagonist, he explores the destructive interdependence of power and powerlessness between men and women. Like Dreiser's first novel, *Sister Carrie*, *Jennie Gerhardt* challenges the old canard that women need love; it is illusory at best in a society where power and powerlessness necessarily provide the basis for interpersonal relationships. Throughout the story Jennie is cast helplessly about, and she suffers many disappointments; yet at the end of Dreiser's novel, one does not get the sense that deterministic forces have changed her. The brutality inherent in a naturalistic world does not exact a toll on Jennie's intuitively superior moral capability. Dreiser's work is powerful because his fiction is filled with compassion and feeling that is in no way accounted for in his deterministic philosophy. This antithetical notion is woven throughout *Jennie Gerhardt* in which he offers the deterministic male world occupied by a powerless woman whom he valorizes as compassionate and morally superior.

The first portion of the novel introduces the miserable economic plight of the Gerhardt family, and perhaps more importantly, it focuses on the seduction of Jennie by Senator Brander. Brander first observes Jennie as

she and her mother are polishing brass-work on the stairs of the hotel. Shortly thereafter, he is beguiled by her as she inquires about taking in his washing for extra money. And it is through the picking up and dropping off of his laundry that the affair between Jennie and Brander blossoms. While Brander is drawn to Jennie because of her innocence and charm, he particularly notices her "mouth...full cheeks—" and "above all, the well-rounded, graceful form, full of youth, health, and that hopeful expectancy which to the middle-aged is so suggestive of all that is worth begging of Providence."<sup>1</sup> Brander's recognition of Jennie's youthful beauty magnifies her requisite position as sexually desirable. Jennie's identity is therefore not so much defined by poverty as by gender. Her value is largely determined by her feminine identity as well: because she is female, the fragile course of Jennie's life depends first and last upon being desired. Thus, rather than simply create a stereotype in Jennie, Dreiser offers the realistic cultural plight of a woman at the turn of the century. He subtly spells out the sexual dynamics of her relationship to Brander early in the novel: Jennie is clearly desirable, tractable, and powerless—Brander not only desires her, but also he is authoritative and empowered. Ultimately Dreiser implies that both Jennie and Brander are trapped by gender identity and sexist conventions that govern their behavior; the assumptions that each character necessarily makes about the other, based on the cultural status quo, creates an inequitable social reality as conscious art.

In their first private meeting at the hotel, Jennie returns Brander's laundry early in an effort to impress him with her promptness. Having asked her to sit down and talk, Brander muses over Jennie's "wondering admiration for his exalted station in life" (22). Indeed, we are told that "it made him feel almost ashamed of the comfort and luxury that surrounded him" as he realized "how high up he was in the world" (22). What is striking here is that Jennie is not marveling over Brander's exalted station in life. In an earlier chapter, we do witness Jennie's comment to her mother that "it must be nice to be famous" (14). Yet here she has not uttered a word beyond a reference to the early delivery of his clothes, and a response to his questions regarding the health of her sister. We know nothing of Jennie's thoughts about Brander at this moment. Because he is a man, influence and authority not withstanding, it is Brander, not Jennie, who is keenly



aware of his position, and he thus interrogates and detains Jennie at will. Although Jennie's position is clearly undermined by tractable indigence, her malleability exists not only because she is economically disenfranchised but also because she is a woman. Jennie is utterly subject to and dependent on Brander's whims and any benevolence that he might extend her. Dreiser thus explores the destructive interdependence between Jennie and Brander, suggesting that they are both victims of Brander's urges, aggression, and his presumption of a right to impose his will on Jennie.

Senator Brander does declare his love for Jennie and he does advance a proposal of marriage; yet these declarations are suspect because of his consuming self interest. Having secured Jennie as a companion, and enjoying his "new entrance into the radiant world of youthful happiness," Brander is confronted with a great senatorial battle. On this occasion we learn that

[f]or two weeks [Jennie] did not even see him, and one evening, after an extremely comfortless conference with his leader, he met her with the most chilling formality. When she knocked at his door he only troubled to open it a foot, exclaiming almost harshly: 'I can't bother about the clothes to-night. Come to-morrow.' (45)

Brander's self interest prevails here as he quickly dismisses Jennie because it suits his purpose. And Jennie accepts that he should "withdraw the light of his countenance if it pleased him" because it is appropriate to her position (45). Following Jennie's rebuff, Dreiser states that she learns "her earliest lesson in the vagaries of men," and he thus implies that uncertainty may be a matter of course for Jennie in her associations with men (45). Brander's rejection of Jennie not only offers a poignant tableau of Jennie as powerless, but also it sheds light on the senator's offer of marriage—which is not so much an offer of love specific to Jennie—as an obligatory offer of respectability. Since Brander has compromised Jennie's virtue, marriage is the only possible way for her to claim a modicum of social acceptability, and it is something that Brander has the power to offer or withhold. Yet because he makes such claims as "I think I'll take her" (40) and "you belong to me" (79), and because of his self-interest, it seems that

a quietly assumed proprietorship, rather than love or a desire for marriage, prompts Brander's proposal, and dictates the dynamics of his interpersonal relationship to Jennie.

Brander clearly seems to be characterized as a typical middle aged politician whose pursuit of Jennie is a quest for youth. We learn that he is "guilty of...questionable...appointments," and that he feels "exceedingly young as he talk[s] to [Jennie]" (19,23). Yet to Dreiser's credit, he does not portray Brander as a melodramatic villain, plotting to win Jennie. In revising the holograph, Dreiser deliberately made all of the main characters less lustful, and Brander in particular, less predatory (Lehan 84). While he may have deliberately made changes in Jennie's character to make her more palatable to his genteel reading audience, that audience would certainly not have balked at finding aggression in a male character. Yet Dreiser chooses to abandon a stereotypical portrait of Brander as easy villain, and in so doing he probes the reality of the dynamics of power and powerlessness between the Senator and Jennie. Dreiser must have realized that any villainous characterization of Brander was unnecessary; by virtue of sexuality, Brander is in a position of power, and men need not necessarily be rogues to exert control in a society where gender forges identity, and where power is so unevenly distributed.

Like Brander, Lester Kane is not necessarily portrayed as a wanton manipulator of women. Much as Dreiser revised earlier portraits of Brander to tone down the Senator's lascivious nature, "in the holograph, Lester is ... a very different kind of character, more lustful and cunning than in the final version" of the novel (Lehan 85). Yet it is clear throughout his courtship with Jennie, that Kane, more than Brander, intends exclusive proprietorship where she is concerned (Pizer 110). The first time he approaches Jennie as she works at the Bracebridges, Lester inquires about her living situation, and he then immediately declares "you belong to me" (130). To apparently seal the bargain he "pull[s] her to him quickly... and put[s] his lips masterfully to hers" (130). In this instance, and in many other situations, the sexual dynamics between Jennie and Lester imply a tacit understanding of the distribution power. Although he is drawn to Jennie's purity of spirit, her attitude toward sex, which is "bound up with love, tenderness," and most importantly, "service," have a tremendous appeal for him

(144). Indeed, Lester believes that “he [has] only to say ‘come’” and “Jennie must obey” (136). He thus not only accepts Jennie’s total devotion, but also anticipates it, which again implies an assumed domination of Jennie.

Dreiser seemed to instinctively know that neither love nor marriage should be important issues for Lester in the course of his relationship to Jennie. Lester is attracted to Jennie “for the purposes of temporary happiness, while marriage [is] of course, out of the question” (131-2). He thus forms a common law relationship with Jennie for several years. Yet he remains restless. Afraid that his relationship with her will cost him his material comfort, he ultimately leaves Jennie for the socialite, Letty Pace, whom he marries. Lester’s reluctance to marry Jennie, and his ultimate abandonment of her is a manifestation of the quintessential power maneuver. Forced into action, Lester’s decision to forfeit Jennie for Letty reflects the pernicious nature of the reciprocal power roles between men and women. Left in the lurch, with her past beyond retrieving, Jennie’s future is vague and frightening. Lester “suffer[s], to be sure,” yet he and Letty “[live] an easy, indolent existence, and he [does] not have to pay very heavily for his past offenses. Jennie, by contrast, . . . pay[s] for the rest of her life” (West 9). Moreover, Lester’s deathbed declaration of love for Jennie rings hollow for several reasons. Because Lester is dying, he has nothing to lose; therefore his proclamation of love has little consequence. It would seem that if he did indeed love her, he might have mentioned it before this juncture. Furthermore, textual evidence suggests that Lester’s confession may not even have been uttered by him. And it seems to be “more in character for Lester not to tell Jennie, on his deathbed, that he loves her” (West 9). The fact that this declaration was clearly added “in a late stage of revision” suggests Dreiser’s apparent recognition that any declaration of love from Lester would seem insincere inasmuch as position and power, not love, have governed Lester’s behavior toward Jennie throughout the novel (West 10). Yet the admission of love is articulated to accommodate a culture that believes that love is an excuse for excess. In spite of the fact that her relationship to Lester has fostered years of impermanence and insecurity, Jennie’s response to Lester’s long-awaited profession of love is characteristically generous.

While Dreiser realistically portrays the powerlessness of a woman at the turn of the century in Jennie Gerhardt, the effects of this disenfranchisement are not necessarily realistically or naturalistically conceived. Jennie is characterized as an "idealist and dreamer... goodness and mercy molded her every impulse" and, regardless of her outward circumstances, this notion never changes (15). The destructive forces of naturalistic determinism do not adversely affect Jennie's moral character. Dreiser "endows Jennie with the same moving quality he had given Carrie—the wonder and excitement of an impressionable sensibility as it encounters for the first time the material beauty and splendors of life" (Pizer 107). Yet in spite of Jennie's penchant for noticing every luxury, Dreiser goes to great lengths to assure us that, while moved by opulence, it is Jennie's "spirit of wonder" and innocence which prevails amidst such glamour. He credits Jennie with a kind of intuitive gratitude for her world as she "follows with instinctive appreciation the holy corridors" of life (17). Nearly "two-thirds of the novel" is "devoted to Jennie's development after her fall" (Pizer 103). And through this development, Dreiser offers "a study of the significant phases in the emotional life of a woman of innate power" which is manifest as strength of character (Pizer 103).

Throughout the novel, Jennie is unselfish and generous. She sacrifices herself for those she loves—for something beyond her (Lehan 87). Like many other nineteenth century literary heroines, Jennie "esteems it a holy privilege to efface [herself] as [an] individual... and grow wings as [a] ministering angel[]" (Chopin 10). And this self-effacement does not seem to take its toll on her spirit. Jennie is constantly disappointed throughout the novel: not only does she suffer abandonment and shame, she endures the deaths of Senator Brander, her mother, her father, her daughter and finally of Lester Kane. Yet only Jennie's outward circumstances change; she does not. Many naturalistic heroines—Crane's Maggie, Norris's Trina, and Howells's Marcia Hubbard—are powerless victims who invariably regress and are ground under by social forces in a deterministic world. Jennie not only survives but she survives without becoming dour, bitter or resentful; she never exhibits any fury at being treated like property. Dreiser's powerless Jennie is almost promethian in a moral sense as she transcends her

problems through some strength of character. Jennie is a superior character who is doomed to fail. That she cannot win is a foregone conclusion; yet we have a sense that she's of a finer fiber than the other characters in the novel.

Because of her sacrifices and passivity, Jennie has been alternately referred to as "fudgy" (Shapiro 16), "just so much dough" (quoted in Hussman 64) and "a nearly fatal flaw in the novel" (Hussman 64). But these assessments do not take into consideration her unique position as a woman at the turn of the century. Through Jennie, Dreiser suggests that, within society's circumscribed power structure, sacrifice, passivity and desirability are almost compulsory in women. It is also likely that Dreiser, who sought public approval, was ever cognizant of that public's rejection of Carrie's bravado; he therefore shies away from creating an aggressive female character and offers instead a heroine whom he states has a "non defensive disposition" (126). Moreover, it is precisely Jennie's passivity, and the unresolved ambiguity about her future, that suggest the fact of her powerlessness as a woman (Elfenbein 127). Dreiser is able to see through his culture and offer a progressive reflection of gender roles in the 19th century. Thus, *Jennie Gerhardt* provides the reader with the perspective of a singular society that is a reflection of the culturally assigned patterns of gender identity for women and men of 19th century America. As a naturalist Dreiser is willing to delineate the foibles of humanity simply because they exist. Yet in spite of, or perhaps because of society's weaknesses and inequities, Dreiser is sensitive to woman's position and thus valorizes his heroine, and attributes moral superiority as the central category of Jennie's identity. Ultimately, the paradox reflected in all of Dreiser's fiction—naturalism tempered by sympathy and compassion for characters at odds with society—is almost invariably reserved for women. And it is fascinating that, although Dreiser is reputedly a man who capitalized on his sexual power—because for him sexual love was overwhelming in its strength and intensity—he is paradoxically sensitive to woman's place in society.

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<sup>1</sup>Theodore Dreiser, *Jennie Gerhardt* (1911; Cleveland: World Publishing Company, 1926), p. 7. All subsequent quotes from *Jennie Gerhardt* are from this edition and appear within parentheses.

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# Dreiser's "The Girl in the Coffin" in the Little Theatre

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On the evening of 3 December 1917, Dreiser's "The Girl in the Coffin," a one-act study of the conflict between duty and desire during a labor strike, received its New York premiere before a crowd of Greenwich Village well-wishers and skeptics. Staged by the Washington Square Players at the Comedy Theatre, the play prompted the Brooklyn *Daily Eagle* to proclaim, "If the Washington Square Players do not produce another play this season they will have justified their existence by the presentation of Theodore Dreiser's powerful and intensely human little drama" ("An All-American Bill"). And Hiram K. Moderwell, the author of *The Theatre of To-Day* (1914), one of the earliest studies of the little theatre, announced in a review for the New York *Republican*: "You will find many an earnest person in New York City this week who will stoutly assert that 'The Girl in the Coffin' is the best one-act American play yet written."

Given this initial rush of enthusiasm, it is interesting to note that modern assessments diametrically oppose this early speculation about the play's merit. Brenda Murphy, for example, in *American Realism and American Drama, 1880-1940*, notes merely that the play was "little noticed at the time" (101). And Helene Keyssar, while arguing that Dreiser's plays should be better known, begins her discussion by condescendingly observing,

It is relatively easy to dismiss Theodore Dreiser's dramas with an amused glance or perfunctory paragraph. Neither in the context of Dreiser's own work, nor placed against the backdrop of American theatre history, do Dreiser's plays seem to make the kind of difference that demands critical attention...

Indeed, the predictions of a few early reviewers that Dreiser's dramas would radically alter the path of American theatre now seem simply foolish if not embarrassing. (365)

Keyssar's first claim—that in the context of his work Dreiser's plays don't matter—seems an instance of rhetorical exuberance, appearing as it does in her opening paragraph. And as I have suggested elsewhere, Dreiser's plays are integral to his philosophical speculations, enabling him to sketch out ideas he would elaborate more fully in *Hey Rub-A-Dub-Dub* (1920).<sup>1</sup> Keyssar's second claim—that in the context of American theatrical history Dreiser's plays do not repay critical attention—is more problematic. Keyssar's apparent misperception about the goals and productions of the little theatre movement is symptomatic of the general problem in American literary history: people trained as literary scholars seem generally unaware of the effect of plays upon audiences, of the role of reviewers in educating those audiences, and in particular the influence of such marginalized venues as the non-commercial theatre in creating an audience receptive to theatrical innovation. Thus Keyssar thrice notes “the public failure of his dramas” (370, 375), unaware that, by little theatre standards, the plays were successes.

While “The Girl in the Coffin” may not be an unrecognized masterpiece, it does typify the sort of play the little theatre presented. Moreover, the obstacles Dreiser encountered in obtaining a production of his play reveal the difficulty non-commercial theatres faced in attaining audiences for their programs. Finally, as Marvin Carlson points out, play reviewers are uniquely poised to shape an audience's response to a play and to influence their expectations by “making intertextual connections, suggesting interpretations, ordering elements, [and by] proposing relationships and emphases by citing particular passages as effective or ineffective” (95). The reviews of “The Girl in the Coffin” not only offer a gauge of audience perception of theatrical experiment but reveal that the critics embraced Dreiser's innovative use of stage realism.



## I

In early 1913 while in Chicago to gather material about Charles Yerkes for use in *The Titan*, Dreiser became acquainted with the personnel and artistic goals of Maurice Browne's Chicago Little Theatre, and he helped to publicize its activities when it went on tour.<sup>2</sup> Exhilarated by the innovations of the Little Theatre, Dreiser interrupted his composition of *The Titan* to write "The Girl in the Coffin." Set in the parlor of William Magnet, the foreman of the striking loom workers, the play explores Magnet's troubled conscience as he struggles to reconcile his personal grief over his daughter's death with his public duty to lead a textile strike in a time of crisis. The play opens with a Greek-like chorus of women speculating about the cause of Mary Magnet's sudden death after a brief illness. Her open coffin dominates the stage, and the profile and hair of the body remain visible to the audience. As the women gossip, we learn that Magnet has become so distracted by his grief that he has abandoned his role as strike leader. The strike is at a particularly vulnerable juncture: for ten weeks the workers have been battling scabs and hunger; if Magnet can persuade the workers of the Tabitha Mill to join the strikers, the cause will be won. John Ferguson, a national strike leader imported to inspire the strikers, has just arrived and is ready to address the workers. But Ferguson doesn't speak Italian, the language of the workers, and the highly-respected Magnet does. As Mrs. Shaefer, a striker's wife, reports, the aptly-named Magnet is the cohesive force of the strike: "here they are holdin' together like human men, and who's done it?... Why, old Magnet's done it. Ferguson never could 'a' brought this strike where it is today without Magnet to back him" (15). The issue the play explores, Mrs. Shaefer makes clear, is the extent of one's obligation to a higher cause: "it's his duty, and no man ain't got a right to go against his duty, no matter how black his trouble may be" (14).

The anguished Magnet resists pleas to address the workers. During an extended conversation with Ferguson, we learn that Mary has died from a botched abortion and that Magnet is nearly inconsolable in his grief and

anger. He rants at Ferguson in a blend of melodramatic and realistic diction:

Damn it, there's some rotten coward, some beast, some low down scoundrel has ruined my girl. I don't know who he is. But I want to know! I want to find out! I want to find him! I want to kill him! It's the only thing I do want. Until I've done that, this strike can go to hell. You can go to hell. They all can go to hell. (46)

After a lengthy discussion in which Ferguson describes his own background, he convinces Magnet to put aside his grief by informing him that "You are not the only man in this town tonight whose hopes are lying in a coffin" (47). Ferguson, it turns out, has just learned that the woman he loves has lied, yet he nevertheless heeds the call of duty. As he tells Magnet, "Life can kill and bury my happiness, but it can't kill and bury my courage" (52). Faced with this model of selfless responsibility and touched with sympathy for Ferguson's grief, Magnet acquiesces. The play closes with Mrs. Littig, Magnet's housekeeper, presenting Mary's ring to Ferguson, the identity of her lover thus revealed in a final gesture.

Dreiser was deeply involved in the composition of *The Titan* when he decided to write "The Girl in the Coffin," and one wonders what prompted him to digress into this excursion into drama and into this particular plot. Dreiser's surviving letters do not indicate a reason; the first reference to the play appears in an undated letter to H. L. Mencken (written before 18 July 1913) in which he notes he is sending a "reading play" for consideration by *Smart Set* (D-M 120).

An event occurred on 7 June 1913, however, which may have provided the inspiration for the play. An audience of 15,000 gathered at Madison Square Garden to watch a cast of about 1,500 strikers from Paterson, New Jersey, reenact the principal events of the textile strike then being waged at Paterson. Written by John Reed and with scenery painted by Robert Edmund Jones, who went on to distinguish himself with sets designed for the Provincetown Players, *The Paterson Strike Pageant* attracted

wide coverage by the press and therefore succeeded in publicizing the strikers' grievances.<sup>3</sup>

The strike had begun on 27 January 1913 after 800 workers of the Henry Dougherty Silk Co. walked out because "the four members of the committee which had carried the workers' protests against resumption of the three- and four-loom system had been fired" (Foner 356). By March 3, the strike had spread to include 25,000 silk workers, many of whom were Italian and Jewish immigrants, and on March 7 "Big" Bill Haywood, the renowned I.W.W. organizer, had arrived in Paterson to coordinate strike efforts as chairman of the general strike committee. The resulting turmoil quickly dominated local and New York papers, and the plight of the workers became a *cause célèbre* for the New York intelligentsia. Strikers regularly had their rights to free speech abrogated; the Paterson press, police, and community leaders tried every means at their disposal to break the strike by arresting hundreds on trumped-up charges and by waging a vicious propaganda battle in the newspapers. Bill Haywood commuted between Paterson and New York's Greenwich Village (where he lived), regularly addressing sympathetic listeners at the Liberal Club, a popular meeting place for writers, artists, and radicals, and at Mabel Dodge Luhan's salon, where her weekly "Evenings" brought together an assortment of socialists, writers, journalists, artists, feminists, and others for animated discussion.

By April neither side was willing to compromise and confrontations between strikers, scabs, and strikebreakers were becoming increasingly hostile. On April 17, private detectives fired upon a group of strikers who were throwing stones, and wounded Valentino Modestino, who was watching the altercation from his porch. His death two days later gave the strike its first martyr (Tripp 109).

By May the strike was in serious trouble: the strike fund was nearly depleted, the workers were starving, and many were growing dispirited. During one of his visits to New York, Haywood was discussing the difficulty of enlisting support for the strike with a gathering of friends, which included Hutchins Hapgood, his wife Neith Boyce, John Reed, and Mabel Dodge Luhan. As reported by Luhan, Haywood's complaint was that the

largely unsympathetic New York newspapers reported only biased accounts of the strike:

Very few [of the New York workers] know what we've been through over there—the drama and the tragedy. The police have turned into organized gunmen. God! I wish I could show them a picture of the funeral of Modestino, who was shot by a cop. Every one of the silk mill hands followed his coffin to the grave and dropped a red flower on it...By God, if our people over here could have seen it, we could have raised a trunkful of money to help us go on. (188)

In keeping with her image of herself as a catalyst of ideas in others, Luhan takes credit for suggesting that Haywood bring the strikers to New York to reenact this pivotal scene: “Show the whole thing: the closed mills, the gunmen, the murder of the striker, the funeral. And have the strike leaders make their speeches at the grave as you did in Paterson” (188).

As Haywood notes, the events of the strike were inherently dramatic and Dreiser, with his sympathy for the labor movement, likely knew of the pageant if he did not actually attend it. He was certainly aware of the strike itself and describes his impressions in *A Hoosier Holiday* (1916): “I could not help thinking, as I stood looking at [the mills], of the great strike that occurred there two years before, in which all sorts of nameless brutalities had occurred, brutalities practiced by judges, manufacturers and the police no less than by the eager workers themselves” (27).

In “The Girl in the Coffin,” Dreiser does not dramatize the Paterson Silk Strike but rather incorporates the strike as the backdrop for his study of the conflict between duty and desire. Events in the play loosely match those of the strike. When Ferguson arrives at the train depot, he is met by a crowd singing the *Marseillaise*; he has come to convince the recalcitrant workers at the Tabitha Mill, the lone holdouts who are preventing the strikers from prevailing, to join in the strike. On March 7 Haywood arrived in Paterson to address the ribbon-silk weavers at Helvetia Hall and was met by several hundred strikers (Tripp 75). (During the *Pageant* the cast sings the *Marseillaise* at the opening and close.) Since many of the workers

Haywood addressed spoke only Italian, he relied on Carlo Tresca, another I.W.W. leader, to interpret, just as Ferguson relies on Magnet to interpret for him. Dreiser also based his characterization of Ferguson upon Haywood. Both are large men noted for their oratorical prowess, and their early histories are a close match. After the death of his father Haywood worked in Nevada mines at fifteen, joined the I.W.W. and organized strikes in various parts of the country. Ferguson tells Magnet that, after the death of his mother, he began work at age ten in Colorado mines; he has won previous strikes in Montana, Oregon, North Carolina, and New Jersey. Finally, the single-most dramatic element of the strike and the pageant—the death and funeral of Valentino Modestino—may have influenced Dreiser's decision to place Mary Magnet's coffin in center stage.

The most realistic of Dreiser's one-act plays, "The Girl in the Coffin" enjoyed an immediate success. Mencken snapped it up for the October *Smart Set* in its original form—a fate rare for a Dreiser manuscript.<sup>4</sup> He sent a manuscript copy to Edgar Lee Masters, who shared with Dreiser a fondness for the Chicago Little Theatre's production of Greek plays. Masters replied on 23 September 1913 that he was moved by the play and encouraged Dreiser to further efforts:

Have read your playlet "The Girl in the Coffin." It's fine. There's a naked horror, Greek in its starkness, of the coffin in the room. The girl dying under circumstances of shame according to the Christian ideal, adds to the passion. What a passion of pity you have! Articulate too—it's terrifying at times. I'd like to see you try a full-sized play. There are craftsmen in plenty—Thomas, Walter, Fitch et al. But not one has an eye for reality; not one really feels with people—or sees the beauty and the terror of life...

P.S. What is it back of the love and grief of the father and the love and grief of the lover that impels a union of their love in a work for men, along a perfectly logical line of racial progress? Aye, there's the fog-bound ocean which Euripides and Aeschylus sought to discover! (UP)

Upon publication in the *Smart Set*, the play immediately attracted the attention of producers. Dixie Hines, an agent for the International Press Bureau and "The Broadway Feuilletonist" for the Chicago *Saturday Evening Telegraph*, wrote to Dreiser on October 1 to say that he would like to offer it to B. Iden Payne, who had recently arrived in Chicago to direct a new company of players sponsored by The Chicago Theatre Society. Dreiser's play would be in good company, for the other playwrights included Stanley Houghton, Arnold Bennett, Shaw and Strindberg (UP). On the same date a letter arrived from William Lengel, who was also producing plays, and who suggested that he call "Coffin" to the attention of Holbrook Blinn, a noted actor then directing a second season of repertory for New York's Princess Players, and to Brett Page, a theatrical producer (UP). Hines and Payne agreed to produce the play but negotiations stalled over the question of royalties. Dreiser, naive about the amount of royalty he could reasonably request, at first set too high a price. After Hines informed him that "we are paying less, very much less," for plays by Shaw, Galsworthy and others, Dreiser agreed to a lower fee, and Hines asked him to bring parts for assignment to actors (Hines to TD, 7, 11, 22 Oct. 1913; UP). The play, however, was not produced by Hines and Payne; the extant correspondence does not reveal the reason.

## II

By the end of 1914 Dreiser had become increasingly aware that earnings from his fiction alone would not support him. *The Titan*, published 22 May 1914, had sold only 8,016 copies by the year's end—the poorest sale of any of his novels thus far. Since he still owed Harper Bros. and Lane Co. \$3000 from past advances, he received no royalties on *The Titan* and still owed his publishers money (Swanberg 177). Since Dreiser was in desperate need of funds, he must have welcomed the news that Emmanuel Reicher of The Modern Stage Society wanted to produce "The Girl in the Coffin."

Reicher was a founding member, stage director and leading actor of Berlin's Freie Bühne. When World War I broke out Reicher came to America, and shortly after his arrival he attempted to found in January

1915 an American version of the Freie Bühne, called simply The Modern Stage. Reicher's theatre has been forgotten by theatre historians, but during its short existence it staged notable plays by Hauptmann, Ibsen, and Björnson. Reicher's plan was noble but economically unsound. The theatre would be supported entirely by subscribers and, with the exception of 100 seats reserved for "guests of honor" and impoverished "art-loving young people," only subscribers would be admitted to performances. The purpose of this scheme, as Reicher told a reporter for the *New York Times*, was to ensure that the theatre would be "wholly independent of the favor or displeasure of the public and the press." Reicher apparently intended to duplicate as closely as possible his experiences in Berlin. The theatre would present mostly European dramas that had seldom or never been staged in America. Like so many other theatre reformers, he planned to set an example for other theatres by selecting the finest "modern" realistic dramas available; he hoped "to train players into a higher form of realistic presentation;" and he wished to encourage "young American playwrights to write plays that depart somewhat from the beaten highroad of general popular taste" ("Coming—A 'Freie Bühne'").

Reicher's original program was ambitious but betrayed his naivete about what American audiences were ready to support. The first season would be comprised of Hauptmann's *Elga*, Ibsen's *John Gabriel Borkman*, Björnson's *When the Young Vine Blooms*, then a bill of three one-act plays—Hoffmannsthal's "Madonna di Anora," David Pinski's "The Dollar," and Dreiser's "The Girl in the Coffin"—and finally Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya*, august company indeed for an untested playwright ("Herr Reicher's Plans"). Dreiser must have headed the list of "young American playwrights" that Reicher wished to cultivate, for the New York *Evening Globe* identified Dreiser as a Reicher playwright on 11 February 1915—only one month after the organization was formed (Sherwin, "The Theatres"). He also received an invitation to attend the dress rehearsal of *Elga*—apparently, he was one of Reicher's "guests of honor" (Reicher to TD, 19 Feb. 1915; UP). And by the end of the month Reicher was prompting Dreiser to finish alterations on the script of "Coffin" (Reicher to TD, 27 Feb. 1915; UP).<sup>5</sup>

Despite Reicher's good intentions, The Modern Stage was doomed from the start. He had formed his plans under the impression that promi-

ment actors and theatres were readily available. However, he soon found that the actors he wanted were suddenly in demand and the theatres were leased. He was therefore compelled to suspend his program after the third performance of *John Gabriel Borkman* when he was unable to find a theatre ("Herr Reicher's Year"). By August he had revised his plans. He wrote to Dreiser to say that "Coffin" "will be again on the program for the coming season" and asked for Dreiser's conditions (9 August 1915; UP). On 8 September 1915 he announced that The Modern Stage was forming an auxiliary branch to be known as the American People's Theatre. Rather than appeal to the artistic and intellectual elite, as The Modern Stage did, the People's Theatre would offer performances exclusively to the working class ("Reicher to Found a People's Theatre"). Basing his plans on his experience in founding the Freie Volksbühne (comprised of 120,000 members and founded after the Freie Bühne collapsed), Reicher would offer workers free membership cards, distributed throughout the city, to which they would affix a 25 cent stamp which would gain them admittance. Reicher leased the Garden Theatre for 30 weeks and planned to offer a season of seven productions, beginning with *When the Young Vine Blooms* in November, to be followed by Hauptmann's *The Weavers* in December, a bill of one-act plays, including "The Girl in the Coffin" in January, *Rosmersholm* in February, three one-act plays by Percival Wilde in March, a "new comedy" by Zoë Akins in April, and *Uncle Vanya* in May. The dramas would play in a system of rotation, first offered for one week to subscribers of The Modern Stage and then for three weeks to subscribers of the People's Theatre ("High-Class Plays").

At this time Dreiser must have been deeply interested in Reicher's experiment in cultivating the masses. Kirah Markham, with whom Dreiser was having an affair, was a member of Reicher's company and acted in *When the Young Vine Blooms* and *The Weavers*. Edgar Lee Masters told Dreiser that Markham had written him "asking me to do five hundred words on your play 'The Girl in the Coffin' for a magazine conducted by Dixie Hines" (Masters to TD, 22 Dec. 1915; UP). The magazine to which Masters referred was an extensive program (containing critical commentary, portraits of the authors and players, and other matter) offered to subscribers 14 days before each performance.



But in early January 1916 Reicher's plans once again collapsed. According to news reports, Reicher had failed to enlist subscribers for the People's Theatre and had consequently fired his associate, Julius Hopp, who had formerly organized the Progressive Stage Society and the Wage Earners' Theatre, and who was responsible for managing the People's Theatre. Hopp claimed Reicher owed him \$400 and promptly sued ("Hopp to Sue Reicher"). On February 3 Reicher announced he had "turned over the production [of *The Weavers*] and its management to the members of the company and given up his role in order that he may make other productions for his organization"—a thinly-veiled notice that he had quit ("Reicher Out of 'Weavers'"). The Modern Stage was no more.

### III

On 2 November 1917 Edward Goodman, the manager of the Washington Square Players, expressed interest in staging "The Girl in the Coffin," but Dreiser at first turned him down. The terms may have been unsatisfactory, or he may not have wished to risk the consequences of a bad production in a city where he was well known, or he simply may have been in a bad mood. After noting Goodman's offer, he wrote, "Am restless and irritated because I can't finish this latest short story. Also because *The Saturday Evening Post* turned down *A Story of Stories*" (*Diaries* 198). Goodman must have wanted "The Girl in the Coffin" badly, for he phoned a week later to offer "\$100 down and \$50 per week for eight weeks." Dreiser, apparently testing Goodman's resolve and perhaps aware that eight weeks was an overly optimistic run, countered by asking "\$200 cash and \$50 per week for six weeks" (202). On November 12 Goodman accepted Dreiser's terms and arrived with the contract and check (*Diaries* 206).

Beginning November 21 Dreiser regularly attended rehearsals of the play, which opened at the Comedy Theatre on December 3. Playing with "Coffin" were three other one-act dramas by American authors, the Players' first all-American bill: Zona Gale's "Neighbors," Samuel Kaplan's "The Critic's Comedy," and J. Garcia Pimentel and Beatrice de Holthoir's "Yum Chapab," a pantomime. By 1917 the Washington Square Players had arrived at the pinnacle of their success, and Dreiser was no doubt aware that

a successful production would validate his work. Moreover, his friends would be in the audience, which only augmented his anxiety. His diary accordingly shows him wavering between excitement, despair, and forced nonchalance as he awaited the production. When he attended the first rehearsal, he noted cryptically: "Go up at 2:45. Find Goodman in charge. Actors on stage. Am introduced. Take seat in front and watch fairly capable first reading. I think these actors may do. Come out at 4:30" (21 Nov. 1917; 216). By November 28 Dreiser was assisting in the rehearsals, but occasionally he bungled: "In trying to make one actress get the idea of Mrs. Shafer I make her cry and have to let her go for day. Bert [Estelle Kubitz] roasts me for my 'brutality'" (222).

By December 2, the dress rehearsal, Dreiser had the jitters. "Rehearsal very bad. I don't like size of coffin, too small and too obscure. Stage setting not bad. Mr. [Arthur] Hohl doesn't look the part of Ferguson, somehow. I feel disgusted, but it goes big. Much applause. Helen Westley, Marion Powys and several others come down to where I am, crying" (226). Although he acknowledged the effective pathos of the production, Dreiser was so skittish that he refused to attend the opening. He did, however, walk past the theatre and noted: "See first fire-sign ever carrying the name of a play of mine. . . Bert and I stand and look at it and she wants to know if I get a thrill out of it. I don't—alas!" While Kubitz went on to the play, an anxious Dreiser stayed home alone before meeting friends at the Knickerbocker to hear the verdict. His fears failed to materialize; the play was a hit: it had "18 curtain calls and many cries for the author. Glad I wasn't there" (*Diaries* 227-8).

Dreiser's friends did not exaggerate the audience's response nor the merits of the production. The Brooklyn *Daily Eagle* noted that "There were loud cries for the author, but Mr. Dreiser did not respond" ("An All-American Bill"). Burns Mantle praised the play as "a dramatic etching done in bold strokes by an artist with a steady hand and a sincere belief in himself and his knowledge of human nature. A fine, true drawing—as true in its psychology as it is photographic in detail" ("New Laurels"). And Channing Pollock proclaimed, "The other three new pieces at the Comedy are insignificant in comparison [to "Coffin"].... The bill, as a whole, is worth seeing—chiefly on account of Mr. Dreiser."

What the reviewers mostly appreciated—and what the Players wished to suggest through their choice of plays—was the realism of situation and dialogue, which in 1917 was still not common in commercial plays. Charles Darnton of the *Evening World* wrote that “Mr. Dreiser’s play is... so sane and true and real that it has the grip of tragedy. The characters talk and look and act like people who have felt the hard grind of labor all their days.” Ralph Block of the *New York Tribune* agreed: the play has “the first natural dialogue of laboring men I have heard on the stage for a long time. The speech makes use of idioms and turns of the tongue that could have been garnered only after a serious and painstaking scrutiny of the kind of life that is represented.” Louis Sherwin of the *Globe and Commercial Advertiser* praised the “sheer emotional force of the play, the truth of the characters, the genuine artistic beauty” (“The New Play”). The *Dramatic Mirror* singled out Arthur Hohl’s performance as Ferguson for its “powerful character analysis” (“Washington Square Players”). And Burns Mantle, in a second review for the *Minneapolis Sunday Journal*, anticipated the few demurrers by noting that the play would “probably not... be included in the lists of plays indorsed by the leagues of uplift, but [it is] sound drama and effective” (“Done by Uplifters”). Indeed, the most condemnatory review appeared in the *Nation*, which denounced the play as “pretentious” and as “a drab bit of realism.” The reviewer clearly preferred more “wholesome” fare and blasted the production because its portrayal of the consequences of marital infidelity “insinuates a dangerous doctrine while ostensibly bent upon a minute study of a humble life.” The play therefore “has little meaning either for life or for art” (F., “The Washington Square Players”). Despite the overwhelmingly positive response to his play, after the dress rehearsal Dreiser, with his fear of crowds, apparently never attended another performance and consequently missed seeing the audience applaud his work.

Two other productions of “The Girl in the Coffin” suggest the range of little theatre approaches to the play and Dreiser’s concern that he receive fair value for his dramatic efforts. On 16 January 1918, Sam Hume of the Detroit Arts and Crafts Players wrote to the John Lane Co. inquiring about the royalty for four performances of “The Girl in the Coffin” (UP). Dreiser asked for \$60, and on February 3 Maude Hume wrote to ask whether he

would reduce the fee to \$40. To educate Dreiser about the economics of the little theatre, Hume noted that the Arts and Crafts Players normally paid \$5 a performance and cited Lord Dunsany in particular as allowing them to perform his plays at that rate (UP). Negotiations evidently stalled, and Hume called the Washington Square Players to buy from them unused performances of "Coffin," paying \$90 for rights to "Coffin" and one other play (*Diaries* 253; Maude Hume to TD, 4 March 1918; UP). "The Girl in the Coffin" appeared with Philip Moeller's "The Beautiful Legend of Pokey, or the Amorous Indian" and Lord Dunsany's "The Golden Doom" on March 21, 23, and 23.

Founded in 1916, the Arts and Crafts Players soon became the foremost exemplar of the new stagecraft, and its productions were widely noticed by other little theatres. Hume began his tenure with the Society by modifying the architect's plans for the theatre, then about to undergo construction, to create what Sheldon Cheney called "one of the best little theatre stages in the country" (90). Hume's modified plaster sky dome, then the second such installation in the United States, his "permanent adaptable setting," and his innovative lighting system enabled the Players to showcase the new stagecraft in its productions. *Theatre Arts Magazine*, then edited by Cheney, popularized the Society's productions, enabling other theatres to follow Hume's example.

When "The Girl in the Coffin" appeared in March, with Hume as Ferguson, the reviewers, who had come to expect great things from Hume's theatre, were not disappointed. While he was acclaimed for his new stagecraft methods, Hume did not neglect opportunities to train his actors in convincingly realistic expression, and he seems to have chosen "Coffin" for that reason. Reviewers commented only briefly on the set, noting merely that it had "been carefully thought out" ("Little Theatre), and instead praised the play's verisimilitude of dialogue and the realistic evocation of pathos. Ralph F. Holmes in the *Detroit Journal* called "Coffin" "A masterpiece of thought and writing" . . . And a masterpiece of acting and production on the part of the players." Holmes, who followed the Players' activities closely, believed "Coffin" to be the best play the Players had yet staged. Under Hume's direction, Dreiser's occasionally verbose writing became for Holmes

“a set of speeches that rank with the most moving I have ever heard from an American pen.” The Detroit *Free Press* concurred, writing that “Coffin” “proved one of the best things Mr. Hume and his players have offered in two seasons.” The reviewer also identified Hume’s use of “an honest-to-goodness coffin as one of the ‘props’” as a singular instance of realistic staging, for the theatre “dallied with disaster” in its commitment to suggesting the pathos of the play (“Arts and Crafts Scores Success”).

With its strong labor theme and realistic style, “The Girl in the Coffin” naturally interested those of a radical bent. On 19 December 1919 Dreiser received a letter from Wayne Arey who was busy forming The Workers’ Theatre Guild, a socialist organization dedicated to bringing serious drama to the workers in an effort to improve their lives. Its inaugural performance would be under the auspices of the Workers Defense Union, Arey wrote in a second letter, and the Guild would offer three plays—Glaspell and Cook’s “Suppressed Desires,” Ervine’s “The Magnanimous Lover,” and “Coffin”—to raise “a fund for the political prisoners and the deportees”—apparently a reference to the incarceration of socialist activists (8 Jan. 1920; UP). The Guild received much favorable press from the socialist *Call*, which devoted a series of seven articles to promoting Arey’s cause and the idea of a workers’ theatre in general. The company was composed of professional actors who were disenchanted with the commercialism of Broadway productions—Arey had been a member of Holbrook Blinn’s Princess Players repertory company (1913) and had appeared in *Blue Grass* (1908), *Vic* (1914) and a film version of *King Lear* (1916) before turning to labor activism.

Like many of the activist theatre schemes, Arey’s lofty intentions were difficult to implement. The bill of plays appeared at the Provincetown Playhouse during an interim between the Provincetown Players’ productions. The expected swarm of workers eager to be uplifted failed to materialize. The price of a ticket—one dollar—was probably a bit steep for the target audience of workers. In addition, other papers, with the exception of the *Call*, were not enthusiastic about the production. J. Ranken Towse of the *Evening Post* called the bill as a whole “lamentable beyond words,” while the *New York Times* merely noted that the plays “have all been seen before” (“Guild Gives Little Plays”). Louis Gardy, the *Call*’s enthusiastic cham-

pion of proletarian theatre, indulged his anger in a lengthy column blasting the hypocrisy of those socialists who talk about a workers' theatre yet who do not show up to support it: "the finest proletarian group of actors in New York played to much less than a hundred auditors one night this week."

Arey's inexperience as a theatre manager also aroused Dreiser's wrath. In granting Arey the right to stage the play, Dreiser had asked for \$70 for seven performances to be paid in advance (TD to Edward Smith, 3 March 1920; UP). But Arey had written to Dreiser January 8—the day before the first performance—asking whether Dreiser would allow the "flat sum of sixty dollars" for seven evening performances and two matinees. On January 30 Arey sent Dreiser \$60, noted that they had to cancel the two planned matinees "for the very good reason that we sold no tickets for those contemplated performances," and promised to send him \$10 at a later date. Arey then received an opportunity to move the production to the Princess Theatre for two weeks and promptly did so without informing Dreiser and without paying either the \$10 still owed or the \$140 for the production at the Princess. Never sympathetic to socialist share-the-wealth philosophy where his own pocket was concerned, Dreiser became enraged at Arey's disregard of his contract. He wrote to Edward Smith on March 3 to enlist his aid in collecting the money Arey still owed him. He noted that Arey had ignored his telegram ordering the immediate cancellation of the play, and his ire was further aroused by a clipping from the New York *Clipper* that reported the production "brought \$3000 gross to the Guild + that royalties were paid all authors."<sup>6</sup> "If he doesn't come across + let the play alone in the future," he concluded, "I propose to show him up in the various theatrical + other papers in a circular letter" (UP).

Dreiser's threats prompted a detailed apology from Arey—but not the money. He wrote Dreiser on March 26 that he did not receive the telegram, but wished he had, for the move to the Princess Theatre was a mistake. "Had [the telegram] come on the opening night it would have been most welcome and would have afforded us a very good reason for abruptly terminating what we could see was going to be a losing engagement for us." Arey enclosed a statement from the manager of the Princess Theatre documenting the Guild's expenses to show that the production had lost money rather than earning a \$3000 profit. The play had folded after one

week. And to buttress his case, Arey also noted that the Theatre Guild had threatened suit over what they regarded as an infringement on their name (and the Theatre Guild took out ads in various papers dissociating themselves from the Workers' Theatre Guild). Dreiser was amused by Arey's account of his woes, but he never received the \$10 owed for the run at the Provincetown Playhouse, nor the \$70 owed for the week at the Princess (TD to Smith, 8 April 1920; UP). The Workers' Theatre Guild attempted no further productions.

#### IV

The foregoing stage history of "The Girl in the Coffin" suggests that, for a while at least, Dreiser's work seemed dramatically compelling to those dedicated to experimental theatre. The play in particular appealed to troupes interested in overcoming the artificiality of commercial productions. What most attracted theatres to this play was its evocation of pathos, its realistic characterization, and especially its employment of naturalistic detail in its staging. As one reviewer marvelled, "the [Detroit] Arts and Crafts Theatre dallied with disaster... in using an honest-to-goodness coffin as one of the 'props' in Theodore Dreiser's play, 'The Girl in the Coffin.'... [T]he very fact that it was a necessary part of the staging has caused producers of one-act plays to fight shy of this particularly keen and good little drama" ("Arts and Crafts Scores Success").

Because of its realistic style and topical subject matter—a botched abortion amid a labor strike—"The Girl in the Coffin" served as an occasion to expand the range of the theatre. Such groups as the Washington Square Players in New York and Sam Hume's Arts and Crafts Players in Detroit saw "Coffin" as an energizing force in American drama that provided a valuable medium for training actors in realistic production and for educating audiences about dramatic innovation. Though now largely forgotten by students of American literature and theatre, Dreiser's campaign to introduce his work to the theatre did affect others, who built upon the path he helped to blaze.

<sup>1</sup>See "Expressionism Takes the Stage: Dreiser's 'Laughing Gas,'" *Journal of American Drama and Theatre* 4 (1992): 5-22. "The Girl in the Coffin" had been previously produced by the St. Louis Player's Club (29-30 Jan. 1917) and by the St. Francis Little Theatre Club, San Francisco (9 Oct. 1917).

<sup>2</sup>See Riggio, ed., *Dreiser-Mencken Letters*, letters from 17 Feb. 1913 through 15 March 1913 (hereafter cited as *D-M*). References to unpublished material in the Theodore Dreiser collection, Van Pelt Library, The University of Pennsylvania, are due to the courtesy of the Trustees and will hereafter be cited as (UP). For recent discussions of the Chicago Little Theatre, see Tingley, and Lock.

<sup>3</sup>The Paterson Strike and the *Paterson Strike Pageant* have been the subject of many good studies. Among the best are those by Tripp, Green, and Nochlin, to which I am indebted.

<sup>4</sup>Dreiser apparently paid "someone else \$50 for work of various kinds" on the play, as he notes in a letter to Mencken, 22 Aug. 1914; *D-M* 152. The identity of this person—or the extent of the work—remains unknown.

<sup>5</sup>The typescript of "The Girl in the Coffin" prepared for The Modern Stage is extant in the University of Pennsylvania Dreiser Collection.

<sup>6</sup>See "Workers Guild Got \$3,000," *New York Clipper* 18 Feb. 1920; 5.

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# Addenda and Corrigenda to *Theodore Dreiser: A Primary Bibliography and Reference Guide:* English Language Instruction Texts Published in Japan

Shigeo Mizuguchi  
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## A

Books, Pamphlets, Leaflets, and Broadsides

### 00-1 SISTER CARRIE

1978-Tokyo: Aiiiku-sha, edited by Shirō Tsunoda (abridged version).

### 11-1 JENNIE GERHARDT

1975-Tokyo: Gaku-shobō, edited by Kimihito Koizumi, Toshio Ōkōchi, and Hisanori Ogura (abridged version).

### 25-1 AN AMERICAN TRAGEDY

1958-Tokyo: Sekkei-shobō, edited by Ryōji Yoshida (abridged version).

## D

Miscellaneous Separate Publications

154-1 *Albertine*. Edited by Masaru Shiga and Motoo Takigawa. Tokyo: Nan'un-dō.

Contains: "Albertine" and "Ernestine" (*A Gallery of Women*).

156-1 *Three Best Short Stories of Theodore Dreiser*. Edited by Naozō Ueno. Tokyo: Nan'un-dō.

Contains: "The Lost Phoebe" (*Free*); "The Shadow" and "Convention" (*Chains*).

158-1 *The Lost Phoebe*. Edited by Naozō Ueno. Tokyo: Nan'un-dō.  
Unverified.

- D58-2 *My Brother Paul and The Old Neighborhood*. Edited by Yoshimori Harashima. Tokyo: Hokusei-dō.
- D60-1 *Will You Walk into My Parlor?* Edited by Shigeo Mizuguchi and Kichinosuke Ōhashi. Tokyo: Kinsei-dō.
- D63-1 *Nigger Jeff and Marriage—For One*. Edited by Osamu Okumara and Koh Kasegawa. Tokyo: Hokusei-dō.
- D66-2 *Nigger Jeff*. Edited by Makoto Nagawara. Tokyo: Kenkyū-sha.
- D67-1 *Lost Phoebe & Other Stories*. Edited by Fujio Aoyama. Tokyo: Simizu-shoin.
- D69-2 *Convention and the Shadow*. Edited by Motoi Kobayashi. Tokyo: Tsurumi-shoten.
- D79-1 *A Doer of the Word*. Edited by Shōichi Andō. Tokyo: Asahi-Shuppan-sha.

## News and Notes

The University of Pennsylvania Press plans to bring out, in the Spring of 1995, a collection of critical, historical, and contextual writings on the 1992 Pennsylvania edition of *Jennie Gerhardt*. To be entitled *Dreiser's Jennie Gerhardt: New Essays on the Restored Text*, the volume will contain some twenty contributions by such scholars as Robert Elias, Richard Lingeman, Philip Gerber, Valerie Ross, Lawrence Hussman, Christopher Wilson, Susan Albertine, Daniel Borus, Clare Eby, Yoshinobu Hakutani, and James L.W. West III, who is editing the collection. The book is designed for scholars, teachers, and students of the restored text... Speaking of *Jennie Gerhardt*, DS wants to alert teachers that Penguin Books has in stock paperback classroom editions of both the 1911 text of Dreiser's novel and the 1992 Pennsylvania text. The 1911 Harpers text appears in the Penguin Classics series, with an introduction and a note on the text by Donald Pizer (ISBN 0-14-039075-8); the 1992 Pennsylvania text is in the Penguin Twentieth-Century Classics series, with historical notes and an introduction by James L.W. West III (ISBN 0-14-018710-3)... Recent correspondence includes a note from Erwin Palmer, who is looking for an editor willing to read his manuscript entitled "Dreiser's Use of Symbolic Imagery in *An American Tragedy*. Palmer's address is Brynnington Apts. 412, 500 West River Road, Oswego, NY 13126.