

D·R·E·I·S·E·R —SOCIETY—



NEWSLETTER OF THE INTERNATIONAL DREISER SOCIETY VOLUME 6 • NUMBER 1 SPRING 1997

THE INTERNATIONAL DREISER SOCIETY: *1996 Annual Business Meeting*

Paul Orlov presided over the 1996 Business Meeting in San Diego, California June 1, 1996. Following a report from Secretary Treasurer, Paul Orlov, that the organization's finances were in good shape, Yoshi Hakutani recommended that senior members of the society donate additional money above their dues to help support young scholars who might want to join. Phil Gerber suggested we encourage young scholars and perhaps help fund a graduate student who wishes to attend ALA conferences to give a paper. Paul commended Margaret Vasey for doing a wonderful job with the Dreiser Newsletter on a very small budget. Miriam Gogol suggested that Paul run this year's financial statement in the Newsletter.

Society members discussed the policy of printing conference papers without getting permission from authors and thus not allowing them to be revised. The procedure will be changed for next year. Paul spoke about trying to increase society membership "aggressively." He "applied" for the position of publicity director and suggested mailing flyers to English departments to look for new members and to offer discounts to graduate papers. Members discussed the possibility of running a graduate student competition and then giving financial help to the winner. Keith Newlen suggested creating a Dreiser Web Site and posting on the American Literature discussion group. Other areas to be tapped: a list of interested Japanese scholars and contributors to Dreiser collections. John Clendenning suggested searching MLA Dissertation Abstracts for authors to contact. Miriam Gogol volunteered to get information about the Dreiser Society into PMLA. Various members discussed problems with Dreiser Studies: submissions, late issues, etc. The issue of planning ahead for the eventuality of finding a new home for the journal was also discussed. It was decided to issue a call for paper's for next year's sessions on an unspecified topic for new scholars and on prospects for future Dreiser Studies (titles to be refined after proposals are received). Call for papers will be September 1 and abstracts/papers will be due Nov. 15 (modified to Dec. 15).

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AMERICAN LITERATURE ASSOCIATION 1996

THEODORE DREISER was well represented at the May 30-June 2 ALA Conference in San Diego, California. **THE DREISER SOCIETY** sponsored two panels on Dreiser scholarship: Session one included essays on "New Editions of Dreiser's Work." The panel was chaired by Paul Orlov. Session two included essays on "New Approaches to Dreiser's Work: Discourses of Class, Culture, Gender and Sexuality." The session was chaired by Yoshinobu Hakutani. The following are abstracts of the Dreiser papers which were presented at the ALA '96 conference.

Should readers wish to obtain copies of or more details about these papers, identifying information about authors appears at the end of each abstract.



Running with Diana: Dreiser's Hunt of American Endogamy

Theodore Dreiser begins and ends his poem, "Diana," with the refrain: "Are your truly friendly / Oh, Diana, / To the aspirations / And the souls / Of men?" This poetic apostrophe to the chaste, hunting goddess reveals Dreiser's ambivalence towards women. For Dreiser, the goddess Diana symbolizes all women and all powerful beings, beings that he needs, if he is to succeed, but beings who may destroy him. For Dreiser Diana becomes his muse, a muse who can inspire or who can destroy. Dreiser asks with fear and trepidation: "Are you truly friendly / Oh, Diana?" The answer, for Dreiser, is that Diana was necessary, if he was to be the iconoclastic artist who redefined American society by questioning the relationships of men and women, relationships that Dreiser depicts as at the heart of social order.

If we take Diana as Dreiser's muse, then we complicate his relationship to women, and we approach this relationship from a new perspective, from Dreiser's self-interested view, and we ask what Dreiser may have asked: what can women do for me? The answer was: everything. All the women in his life, all the women in his novels, become Diana's, and he becomes the devotee following them on the hunt to satisfy his desires. This very terminology of the hunt and of desire reveals Dreiser's selfish but honest attitude toward women. While he may have cared for women, while he may have depicted them sympathetically, while he took Diana as his muse, these factors reveal a self-centered man, one asking what can women give me: how can they help me? But in following Diana on the hunt, in crossing boundaries, in flaunting the exogamous strictures, in breaking the endogamous conventions, in supporting divorce, birth control and abortion, he was

raising social issues that helped him but that helped women as well. In selecting Diana as his muse Dreiser embraces a contradiction: he accepts the sexual antagonism that Gilbert and Gubar describe, but he also seeks symbiotic relationships that allow men and women to gain while pursuing their own self interests.

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Interpretations Natural and Unnatural: Reading of the Pennsylvania Jennie Gerhardt

Jennie Gerhardt illustrates the connection between temperament and the interpretation of a world whose underlying principle is change. As Dreiser writes in the holograph of Dawn, life's "barometric changes" can appear as "all or nothing according to one's compound and experiences," though the true realist understands life's beauty and fullness. Paradoxically, poetic, emotional Jennie is such a realist, for she adapts to change and recognizes the "all" within the flux, filling the world with meaning and imaginatively transforming it into home. Her interpretation, Dreiser implies, is more natural than the "unnatural interpretation" imposed on her by men, who, fearful of ambiguity and instability, read her through the distorting lens of other texts (novels, the Bible) or their own desires. One of these men is matter-of-fact Lester, who reduces everything to verbal formulas and dies believing life is nothing, only a "silly show." Dreiser, however, recognizes that unnatural interpretation is necessary for human beings who live in culture, not nature. Jennie's sexual fall is inseparable from her fall into what Jacques Lacan calls the symbolic order, in which the self is alienated from itself and others. Her spirit is "a mellowness which words can but vaguely suggest," but her sense of self depends upon the words men employ to suggest it. Brander calls her "angel," and she yields her body joyously; Old Gerhardt gives her the "bad name" of "streetwalker," so she feels herself rightly a social outcast. Much of the novel's pathos comes from Lester's failure to give her the name she desires most—"wife." When, on his deathbed he calls her "a good woman," the words are "the one thing that could make everything right," suggesting how much she has needed "some word of feeling" to reveal her own meaning and value.

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Dreiser's "The Girl in the Coffin, or What's Death Got to do With it?"

Dreiser's "The Girl in the Coffin, or What's Death Got to do With it?" explores the function of the play's central "prop," a female corpse. Mary Magnet, daughter of labor leader, William Magnet, lies foregrounded on stage while strike leader John Ferguson convinces the mourning father to address and inspire a group of strikers. Magnet, intent on discovering the identity of the lover who has "ruined" his daughter, Mary dies from a botched up abortion, ironically agrees to support Ferguson, the very "villain" on whom Magnet unknowingly swears revenge. The men affirm their common political goals which, on the evening of the play's enactment, require commitment to public action and are prioritized over the private sphere of experiencing bereavement. The men confirm their mutual influence and respect while negotiating roles and authority over Mary's dead body, a sacrifice to the alliance network that situates each man as affine in a homosocial system. The 1916 play participates in the cultural ideation of female as passive and male as active; in fact, Mary is the ultimate docile body, powerless and finally contained. Her sexuality, threatening to disrupt the system, is erased along with her person, her body. For resisting normative scripts for women, the impregnated, unmarried, and dead Mary emblemizes the normalization of disciplinary power. Her death reifies the deployment of male power in this drama which plays out just how political the personal is. Reflecting contemporary conceptions of sexual politics, Dreiser's play demonstrates the need for an emancipatory politics lack for women who are denied self-determination and self-expression.

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The Distant Pole of Truth: Dreiser's Discourse of Crime and Guilt

This essay accepts as its premise an original literary construction of Dreiser's that many critics have rejected. The variable determinism described at the beginning of Chapter VIII of *Sister Carrie* has been deplored as an inaccurate key to interpretation of the novel. However, I argue that Dreiser uses this innovative paradigm to harmonize the polar concepts of fate and free will, thereby deconstructing attendant notions of guilt and innocence. Key moments of crime from both Dreiser's first novel

(Hurstwood's theft from the safe) and *An American Tragedy* (Clyde's drowning of Roberta) are examined in detail. Neither scene allows the reader the luxury of an omniscient point of view, or of a static philosophical approach, and so neither guilt nor innocence can be responsibly assigned. Such narrative ambivalence is neither inconsistent nor another of the author's notorious stylistic blunders, but is orchestrated for the purpose of criticizing a society that endorses materialism above all and lays the blame for its ills at the feet of a few individuals.

In *An American Tragedy*, the efforts of other characters to understand the forces operating on the protagonist are detailed and exposed as misdirected. Readers know from *Sister Carrie* that people are both determined and free at intervals. If Dreiser's characters are guilty of anything, it is their refusal to accept the free agency toward which the author saw humankind evolving. In such instances, they determine themselves. Importantly, the author does not excuse the actions of his characters on moral or philosophical grounds. But he does force us to confront the question: On what basis do we assume they need excusing in the first place?

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1997 ALA SESSIONS

Sponsored by the Theodore Dreiser Society

PROSPECTS FOR THE FUTURE OF DREISER STUDIES

Chair: Yoshinobu Hakutani, Kent State University and the Theodore Dreiser Society.

- "A Biographical/Feminist Reading of Yvette Eastman's *Dearest Wilding*," Miriam Gogol, State University of New York/Fashion Institute of Technology, New York City.
- "Dreiser as Temperance Advocate? Alcohol in *Sister Carrie*," James L. W. West III, Pennsylvania State University, University Park.
- "Humanism in Dreiser's *The Bulwark*," Stephen C. Brennan, Louisiana State University, Shreveport.

DREISER CRITICISM: INTERTEXTUAL AND INTERAUTHORIAL DISCOURSE

Chair: Paul A. Orlov, Pennsylvania State University, Delaware County Campus, and the Theodore Dreiser Society.

- "Obscuring the Home: Textual Editing and Dreiser's *Jennie Gerhardt*," Annemarie Koning Whaley, East Texas Baptist University.
- "Dreiser and American Literary Paganism," Shawn St. Jean, Kent State University.
- "Dreiser's *Financier* and *Lewis's Babbitt*," James M. Hutchisson, The Citadel.

THEODORE DREISER & CULTURAL DIVERSITY

Theodore Dreiser:

The N-Word, Mencken and Richard Wright

Among the many questions that come to mind in Dreiser studies: Why have contemporary African Americans concerned with literature not been faster in picking up on Dreiser, who is, it seems one of their "natural champions?" It's true that none of Dreiser's novels centers upon what—during his time—was known as "The Negro Problem." Other problems, of seemingly greater dimension, perhaps, and certainly of more immediate intensity, demanded his attention, questions stemming more directly from his own personal struggle with America: the specter of industrial life generally, its deep iniquities, its bleak injustices. Whether or not black people were central to his dramatic personas, the questions of equity and justice he harped on were inclusive over the widest spectrum. Dreiser remained ever the champion of the laboring class and the disenfranchised, and he was concerned always with exclusion, be it political, social, economic, or racial.

It is therefore not surprising that at the Dreiser conference, "Working Girls," held at Brockport in 1990, Earleen De La Perriere, in her address "Sisters in Sable," spoke affectingly about the analogies to be drawn between Carrie's social and economic struggles and those struggles of Carrie's contemporaries—in particular the innumerable African American women in whose instances Carrie's plight is magnified many times over. But since that time it seems that few black voices have been raised, although there is a great deal in Dreiser that should engage those voices. That handful of Dreiser's essays and stories in which blacks figure are invariably sensitive to race, although in these days of political overcorrectness his vocabulary might seem an impediment (but whose among his contemporaries isn't?). In his "Heard in the Corridors" columns (No. 17) Dreiser, within a brief space, employs and reiterates the terms "colored," "negro," and "nigger" with a certain accuracy reflecting the usage of the early 1890's. But "nigger" is carefully reserved for dialogue reflective of racist Southern attitudes clearly at odds with those of the narrator in the episode, whose own preference is for "colored" or, as is more often the case, the generic "negro," which are terms that for many decades afterward remained those tacitly approved by blacks and whites together.

We hear altogether too much these days of the "N-word," particularly after the notoriety attaching to it via the O. J. Simpson trial, and the danger is increasing that the word may find itself taboo even in contexts where its use might otherwise be obligatory. Too many of Dreiser's contemporaries are finding themselves in that same leaking boat; we have already heard serious suggestions for dumping a masterwork like *Huckleberry Finn*, in whose pages the "N-word" stands front and center. Concern rises for other usages. The title of Conrad's *The Nigger of Narcissus* comes to mind. And does Dick Gregory's *Nigger*

pass muster these days? Could the focal point, for Dreiser, become that utterly sympathetic and vehemently anti-lynching.

It is ironic that Dreiser's works may become controversial in ways unanticipated and vastly different from those of his own times, at least in part because he clearly had a champion in African American novelist, Richard Wright. Having fled Jackson, Mississippi, for Memphis in 1925, the seventeen-year-old Wright located a job doing mailings and deliveries for an optical firm. Ambitious and inquisitive, though as he says, extremely naive, Wright connived to gain access to the public library through a man at the company whom he knew read books. Wright had come upon a denunciatory article concerning H.L. Mencken in the local *Commercial Appeal* and wanted to learn why Southerners should be so down on Mencken. His benefactor, "an Irish Catholic [who] was hated by the white Southerners" lent him a library card, which Wright then used as a pass, along with a note he wrote for himself and boldly handed to the librarian: Dear Madam: Will you please let this nigger boy have some books by H.L. Mencken? He used the word "nigger," says Wright, "to make them feel [he] could not possibly be the author of the note."

The volume allowed him was *A Book of Prefaces*, and it came as a revelation. It contained, Mencken's most powerful defense of Dreiser. At that moment, his and scores of other names meant nothing to Wright: Anderson, Dostoevski, Flaubert, Lewis, Crane, Norris, Zola, Masters and others whom Mencken championed. Wright began reading, less for plots or stories than for "the point of view revealed" by the authors. "Reading was like a drug, a dope," creating strange new moods in which he existed for days at a time. He later acknowledged that Dreiser's Jennie Gerhardt and Sister Carrie "revived in [him] a vivid sense of [his] mother's suffering." Young Wright was overwhelmed. From Dreiser's novels he derived "nothing less than a sense of life itself. All [his] life had shaped [him] for the realism, the naturalism of the modern novel, and [he] could not read enough of them."

Had other black men discovered Dreiser? Wright had no inkling. Reading a Negro newspaper, he "never caught the faintest echo of [his own] preoccupation." When he mentioned what he was reading, the response was: "Don't addle your brain." That sense of isolation created a vast loneliness for Wright, but more important, it created also an unquenchable desire to write. Dreiser and his fellow novelists had helped to put the world into a new kind of perspective for Wright, and he wondered if and how it might become possible for him to know people fully enough to set down his own feelings in words on a page. "With [his] vast ignorance, [his] Jim Crow station in life, it seemed a task impossible of achievement." Yet, he now

felt certain he knew "what being a Negro meant," and his reading had stirred in him "a new hunger." He began to anticipate the day when he might migrate North and try his own wings.

In Chicago during particularly unpropitious times—the 1930's—Wright began to turn out stories based upon his Mississippi experiences. Then he turned to the novel. He had in mind the story of an inadvertent Negro murderer caught in the toils of the law. "He was crazy about Dreiser," says poet Margaret Walker, who knew him in those days. He was collecting newspaper clippings about a particular crime and "he was using them the same way Dreiser had done; he would spread them all out [on the floor of his bedroom] and read them over and over and then take off from there in his own imagination." Published in 1940 as something of a literary sensation, *Native Son* at once, for any Dreiserian, lends itself to interpretation as a black version of *An American Tragedy* and an indirect but unmistakable tribute to the writer who had served as mentor. Wright found in Dreiser a mentor; one wonders why so many other voices of the disenfranchised have yet to find in him a kindred spirit.

Philip Gerber
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"Even if you are on the right track, you'll get run over if you just sit there." - *Will Rogers*

"Behold the turtle. He makes progress only when he sticks his neck out." - *Anonymous*

"It is not the size of the dog in the fight, but the size of the fight in the dog that matters." - *Anonymous*

AMERICAN LITERATURE ASSOCIATION SYMPOSIUM
on *The Trickster* October 9-11, 1997
The Cal-Neva Resort, Lake Tahoe, NV

Call for papers:

Author Societies and individuals are invited to propose papers or panels on any aspect of the *Trickster*, *Gambler*, or *Confidence Man* in American Literature. The Symposium will feature an opening celebration, panels all day Friday and Saturday, formal and informal talks by leading experts in the fields and an excursion to nearby Virginia City, Nevada, as well as a closing cocktail buffet all in the dramatic High Sierra setting of sparkling Lake Tahoe, with its boating, fishing, skiing, hiking, and superb clubs and restaurants.

Deadline for proposals:

June 15, 1997. Send to the Symposium Coordinator:

Jeanne Campbell Reesman
Division of English, Classics, Philosophy, and
Communication, University of Texas at San Antonio
San Antonio, TX 78249
Phone 210 458-4374; fax 210 458-5366
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The Hotel:

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Conference registration: \$45.

Rooms: special conference rate of \$85 per night.

Deadline for hotel registration: September 8
Phone 702 832-4000 or 800 CAL-NEVA.

DREISER *in* PRINT

Sexualizing Power in Naturalism: Theodore Dreiser and Frederick Phillip Grove

By Irene Gammel

Gammel's book, published in 1994, by Calgary Press, deserves a second look. The text sheds light on the function of female sexuality in a predominately male genre: naturalist fiction. Gammel reveals that naturalism is frequently implicated in the very power structures it critiques. Reading European and North American naturalism through the lens of feminist and Foucaultian theories of power, Gammel argues that twentieth-century naturalism increasingly deconstructs itself in its depiction of sexuality, inevitably exposing the genre's internal ideological contradictions.

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262 pages

ISBN 1-895176-39-5 \$24.95 paper

Theodore Dreiser: Beyond Naturalism

Edited by Miriam Cogol

The collection presents new essays that raise contemporary theoretical questions about Dreiser's work as a whole. The ten contributing essayists offer original interpretations of Dreiser's works from such disparate points of view as feminism, new historicism, post-structuralism, psychoanalysis, film studies, and canon formation. The contributors include: Shelley Fisher Fishkin, Irene Gammel, Nancy Warner Barrincan, Scott Zaluda, Miriam Cogol, Leonard Cassuto, Paul A. Orlov, Lawrence Hussman, M.H. Dunlop, and James Livingston.

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ISBN: 0-8147-3073-6 \$45.00 cloth

Dreiser's Russian Diary

Edited by Thomas P. Riggio and James L. W. West III

Theodore Dreiser's *Russian Diary* is an extended record of the American writer's travels throughout the Soviet Union in 1927-28. Dreiser was initially invited to Moscow for a week-long observance of the tenth anniversary of the October Revolution. He asked, and was granted, permission to make an extended tour of the country. This previously unpublished diary is a firsthand record of life in the USSR during the 1920's as seen by a leading American cultural figure. It is a valuable primary source, surely among the last from this period of modern history.

297 pages

ISBN 0-8122-8091-1 \$38.50 cloth

NEW DREISER TEXTS from the UNIVERSITY of PENNSYLVANIA PRESS

Dreiser's Jennie Gerhardt:

New Essays on the Restored Text

Edited by James L.W. West III

Included in the volume are examinations of historical contexts, investigations of autobiographical elements in the novel, and studies of influence. The contributors are Robert Elias, Philip Gerber, Richard Lingenan, Yoshinobu Hakutani, Lawrence Hussman, Susan Albertine, Leonard Cassuto, Clare Eby, Christopher Wilson, John Humm, James Hutchisson, Nancy Warner Barrincan, Valerie Ross, Miriam Cogol, Arthur Casciato, Judith Kucharski, Daniel H. Boris, Emily Clark, and James L.W. West III, editor of the collection. The volume of criticism, based on the restored text of *Jennie Gerhardt* published in 1992 by the University of Pennsylvania Press, aims to begin a new examination of the novel. The Pennsylvania edition was the catalyst for this collection: it has provided a different text of the novel, heretofore known only to a handful of readers and until now never subject to interpretation.

232 pages

ISBN 0-8122-1513-3 \$12.95 paper

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Dearest Wilding

Edited by Thomas P. Riggio

A memoir, with love letters from Theodore Dreiser to Yvette Eastman. At once a candid memoir and an intimate chapter in the life of a modern woman, Yvette Eastman's vivid narrative also contributes richly to the life story of Theodore Dreiser. As perhaps the last reminiscence of Dreiser and his circle that will ever appear, *Dearest Wilding* promises rewarding reading to scholars, critics, and general readers.

276 pages

14 black and white illustrations

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