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Authentic Existence and the ‘American Dream’ in Dreiser’s Fiction

BAKALÁŘSKÁ PRÁCE

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I have no objections to the bachelor thesis being borrowed and used for study purposes.

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1. INTRODUCTION – THE ‘AMERICAN DREAM’

If we ask ourselves what makes a nation, the most common answer would probably be the national attributes such as the same language, race, shared territory or history platform. But then how is it in the case of the United States of America? Its language, English, is originally a language from the British Isles, its population consists of many people of different races and cultural backgrounds. It would be quite problematic even to speak about some common past or a specific territory.¹ So, what is it then that makes the United States of America? Harvard’s Sacvan Bercovitch argues that this “nation is defined by the mythic word America”² and for him “America is a myth.”²

Taking the definition of myths, in the original meaning of the word they are “stories, usually concerning superhumans or gods, which are related to accompany or to explain religious beliefs: they originate far back in the culture of oral societies. A mythology is a system of mythical stories which, taken together, elaborate the religious or metaphysical beliefs of the society.”³ Myths are important in functioning as building blocks of the nation, more precisely they “shape the way we see the world, how we think of ourselves, where we look for origins and purpose, including national origins and purpose.”² Finally, “every great culture has had a myth to concretize its goals and give it momentum.”⁴

The core myth of America can be considered the ‘American Dream’ or the ‘Dream of Success’; to wit, the belief that every man, through the power of his will and determination, can achieve material prosperity in his life regardless of his origins and environment. Myths that are closely connected with the ‘Dream of Success’, or in some ways make its fiber, are the myths of the frontier and the westward movement, and also the myth of a self – made person. All of them are rooted deep in American history, but what transformed them into myths was human imagination and also a belief in man and the possibility of a better life.

These myths have been mirrored in various periods until now in many good works of art. In point of fact, they have partly been created through art, in particular through literature.

When considering the proverbial concept of the ‘American Dream’ it is necessary to consider its historical roots. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the first European settlers came to North America. Some of them were attracted by the possibilities of gaining material prosperity, some of them such as the ‘Pilgrim Fathers’ fled from England to escape religious persecution. Under the leadership of John Winthrop, the Puritans set up the colony of Plymouth. The settlers:

[...] regarded America as [...] the land of Canaan, to which God once led Moses and the Jews from their Egyptian captivity. They also referred to it as the New Jerusalem or “the City on the Hill”, that is, the city created by God for the redeemed Christians after the Last Judgment, or the new church announced by Christ in his first sermon.⁵

These Puritans considered themselves a chosen people predestined by Divine Providence. The individuals from both groups as well as other immigrants who came in the following centuries saw America as a Promised Land, the land of opportunities, the land in which they can start a new better life. The term used for expressing this utopia is the ‘American Dream’.⁶

However, there has always been a discrepancy between dreams and reality. In the United States many immigrants were free from religious and political persecution though not always from economic oppression, especially from the nineteenth century on. America was not always a land of chances for, e.g., women, who had to follow their prescribed roles by the society; Amerindians, who were deprived of their land and thus of their living, or for the African Americans in the South, ostracized because of the society’s prevailing racial prejudices.

2. THEODORE DREISER'S 'DREAM OF SUCCESS'

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Theodore Dreiser was one of the first authors who explored the false nature of the 'American Dream' and the hollowness and shallowness of its goals. The 'Myth of Success', its means and consequences, is a recurring theme in his three novels *Sister Carrie*, *Jennie Gerhardt* and *An American Tragedy*. In Dreiser's fiction, be it at the beginning or towards the end of his career, his major characters Sister Carrie, Lester Kane, Clyde Griffiths are all attracted by the lure of their dreams as moths to the light, not seeing the futility and vanity of their aims. Dreiser is always sympathetic with their plights:

[...] few novelists respond to human beings as sensitively as he does. He admires or pities all kinds of men – the forceful money-makers; the weak ones who are born to fail and suffer; the brilliant women who walk in and conquer; the respectable men and the disreputable ones; the masters and the slaves; the happy ones and the victims of meaningless forces who are condemned to live a life of pain, frustration and denial. [...] He understands them.¹

Dreiser's focus revolves often around outsiders and their dreams, people from the poorest classes and also women. Contemporary feminists, as Miriam Gogol notices, have rather interestingly, very ambiguous feelings towards him:

On the one hand they are repulsed by some of his own relationships with women. He was a known womanizer, who was not above writing identical love letters to two different women; in fact, he often wrote to at least two lovers at the same time. By his own account, to have to remain faithful to any woman would almost have "killed" him (6 June 1917, Diaries). [From his lovers, and wives, however, he expected 'monogamous devotion']. Later in life he confided to his niece Vera Dreiser that he was in love a thousand times, or "most likely never at all."² [Finally, the only woman he admired and loved in his life was his mother.]

On the other hand, many of his heroines show characteristics “that we would call feminist: primarily their independence in social, economic, and vocational spheres. They pursue worldly goals and through their drive succeed in obtaining them.”²

The compassion and the sense of awe with which Theodore Dreiser approaches all of his characters is closely connected with the sensitive social fact that in his writings he was heavily drawing upon his own experiences. Dreiser’s biography is always closely linked with his novels, thus to understand some of the depictions of his characters and their motives it is necessary to consider the relations of his own life-narrative.

Dreiser was the twelfth of thirteen children of a German immigrant John Dreiser. The family always suffered from material deprivation, therefore he could have easily put himself into the shoes of Clyde Griffiths or Sister Carrie who strived to escape their poor family’s environment. Moreover, Dreiser was also familiar with the feelings of human alienation, estrangement and loneliness in the world (which he depicts so well in his novels). In a way he was an outsider himself, never really accepted by his schoolmates both because of his immigrant family background and also because of his appearance:

Already stretching out toward his full height of six feet, one and half inches, Dreiser was unusually thin; his large upper teeth were crowded and bucked, his mouth twisted, and his right eye lower than his left and slightly turned out from the line of vision. He was shy and unsure of himself, and his classmates thought him “gawk”.³

Because many of his characters and plots are based on real people and events, by some of his critics he was accused of “merely copying from life.”⁴ Taking the examples of *Sister Carrie* or *Jennie Gerhardt*, the plots were inspired by the lives of his four sisters; the characters of Jennie Gerhardt and Mrs. Gerhardt are depictions of Dreiser’s loving, patient and caring mother. Furthermore, Dreiser knew well from his own experience the religious

bigotry of Clyde's parents and old Gerhardt, for in his childhood he suffered greatly owing to the strictly Catholic upbringing of his father. Finally, he did not hesitate to use closely also the material from the lives of people whom he knew or read about during his journalistic career; one good example is the actual drowning of Roberta Alden and the real subsequent trial of Clyde Griffiths in *An American Tragedy*.

Dreiser, even though maybe not intentionally, by drawing in his writings on the scope of experience which was far away from the one of the well-to-do, broke through the Genteel Tradition:⁵

[...] the Genteel Tradition valued all that Dreiser despised. [...] Whereas Dreiser emphasized elemental drives and passions, genteel commentators insisted on the superiority of refinement and cultivation. Whereas Dreiser's sensibility was fundamentally tragic, that of the genteel custodians of culture was cheerily, if not blindly, optimistic. Whereas Dreiser understood his duty to reveal, regardless of the consequences, the crude forces at the center of American life, genteel publishers and editors saw their task as guiding and uplifting their readers.⁶

Theodore Dreiser considered himself a realist author. His aim was to show "life as it is, the facts as they exist, the game as it is played."⁷ For Dreiser "every human life [...was] intensely interesting,"⁷ he was preoccupied with human ideals, with "the struggle and the attempt to realize those ideals, the going back on [one's] own trail, the failure, the success."⁷ And even where "there [were] no ideals [...] there [was...] the personal desire to survive, the fight, to win."⁷

If anything was sacred to Dreiser it was the right of an individual to see the world of fact through his own eyes⁸ and that was what probably attracted him to the world of journalism. Dreiser's family was poor, he himself left for Chicago to work in badly paid jobs in stores and restaurants. Meanwhile, he was trying fill in the gaps in his education by reading the classics; his last attempt at formal education was one year at the University of

Indiana. From 1890 he worked as a reporter for five years for various newspapers, such as the *Chicago Daily Globe* or the *New York World*. In that period, as Shelley Fishkin notices, the soil for the newspaper market was more fertile than ever, owing to the doubling of America's population and to the increase of literacy and education.

At first, the young Dreiser imagined the world of newspapers and reporting as a romantic and adventurous one. Only later, as was the case with most of the characters of his novels, does he realize the difference between dream and reality. As a novelist, Dreiser "would return [...] to subjects, styles, and strategies he had first explored as a journalist."⁹

Theodore Dreiser was a good observer and his stories were often taken as literal transcripts of their time. Truth was inextricably linked with empirical fact for him.¹⁰ Dreiser lived in the period of the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century. By 1900, the United States was the richest and the most productive industrial country in the world. It was the age of new inventions; electricity became the chief source of energy, the telephone became more widely used, and new publishing technologies made books more available to the general reading public. Between 1890 and 1910 the country's population increased fifty percent, mainly due to the millions of new immigrants from Europe and from China. Mass production allowed for the production of standardized goods for low prices and higher profits. More and more economic power remained in the hands of nationwide corporations and monopolistic trusts led by titanic industrialists like John D. Rockefeller or Andrew Carnegie who gathered great fortunes, which widened the gap between the rich and the poor, the haves and the have nots, so to say. During the same period, department stores, with huge display windows, appeared offering more goods to buy than ever before. As Oxford's Rachel Bowlby puts it:

[...] department stores had been established as one of the outstanding institutions in the economic and social life of the late nineteenth century; and

together with advertising [...] they marked the beginning of present-day consumer society. Stores, posters, brand-name goods, and ads in the daily and magazine press laid the groundwork of an economy in which selling and consumption, by the continual creation of new needs and new desires, became open to infinite expansion, along with the profits and productivity which lay behind them.¹¹

Shopping became a new way of passing the leisure time mainly for women from the middle and upper classes. “Impulse buying replaced the planned buying”¹² and the fixed price policy was introduced.

Furthermore, in his writings, Theodore Dreiser provides a detailed picture not only of the industrial progress, but also of the consequences it had on the American society of the time. In *Tragic America* he criticizes the society’s hypocrisy and blindness when it comes to the great gap between the American rhetoric of good ethics and religious standards over against hard American realities. In Dreiser’s opinion:

[...] equal opportunity for all cannot possibly and by the very same phrase mean unlimited license for the cunning and the greedy who take advantage of that equal opportunity to establish or, in other words, unlimited individual privileges, and the power that goes with the same, while the remaining ninety to ninety-five per cent of the citizens of this land trudge in comparative want. And yet, that is exactly what has happened. The cunning and the strong have made great use of the land of real opportunity.¹³

On the one hand, there were extremely rich people, but on the other hand, also extremely destitute people living in the dirty slums who wondered where they would get their daily food. As a reporter, Dreiser, from the very beginning, knew both worlds well:

He shared their familiarity with poverty, deprivation, failure, jealousy, and exclusion from the American dream of success; he understood the desperation that often grew out of being poor in a land of plenty. But unlike most newspaper readers and reporters Dreiser constantly searched for meaning in the chaotic

jumble of facts that surrounded him, constantly wondered where it all led, and to what end.⁸

In such a society, as Dreiser points out in his novels, the individuals' fates are not determined by their good or evil deeds, but rather by the chances of coincidence and also their desires. As R. P. Warren puts it, what is rather shocking about Dreiser's world is "the implication that vice and virtue, might, in themselves, be mere accidents, mere irrelevances in the process of human life, and that the world was a great machine, morally indifferent."¹⁴ Dreiser himself admitted that: "he was pointing out no moral"⁷; he did not attempt to show through his characters that if one behaves in a certain way, that happiness and recognition are the inevitable consequence.

If anything rules the lives of Dreiser's protagonists, it is the society with its conventions. Dreiser understood that the "man's plight was social and not fated"¹⁵; he saw the influence of the social environment on the individual as totally evil. He shows the American society as a real jungle that is built on the Darwinian notion of the survival of the fittest, despite all its legal, moral, or social conventions.¹⁶

Theodore Dreiser in his youth became disappointed by religion, and finally found refuge in naturalistic thought; he accepted the notion of materialistic mechanism, which he later reduced to notions of 'chemisms'. Through these Dreiser thinks he can explain all phenomena, according to him: "Life is chemism, personality is chemism, the emotions are chemisms."¹⁷

Dreiser imagined even the society as a whole as:

[...] a mechanical addition of atomic individuals, each an independent package of force [...] each determined somehow by chemic forces, each pushing or yielding, as it comes into contact with forces larger or smaller than its own [...].¹⁷

In opposition to the society's forces and the materialistic goals of the 'American Dream' it represents, stands the flux of Nature. Many of Dreiser's heroes and heroines, such as Sister Carrie or Clyde Griffiths, following their aspirations and desires, undergo the transition from the country to the city, but regardless of their successes or failures, they can never achieve true happiness in the world outside Nature.

3. *SISTER CARRIE*

Sister Carrie was Dreiser's first novel, published in 1900 by Doubleday, Page and Company. It was so controversial that it nearly went unpublished. Finally, a minimum number of copies was printed without any advertisement. Dreiser himself did not get more than one hundred dollars for the novel and it was not until 1911 when critics who liked *Jennie Gerhardt* started to reconsider *Sister Carrie*.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the novel was accused of immorality, for some of its themes and characters challenged the cultural taboos of the time. For the heroine of *Sister Carrie*, Dreiser made a girl who gets to the top through her sexual relationships with different men and is not punished in the end for her depraved behavior as a 'fallen woman' would typically be in the period before Dreiser. Moreover, Dreiser by his plain matter of fact style thematically speaking, exposed the 'American Dream', and dared to show that money is not everything the human soul needs for satisfaction.

'Sister' Carrie is, first of all, a term that suggests innocence and ignorance. When Carrie Meeber comes from the country to the city of Chicago, she is "bright, timid, and full of the illusions of ignorance and youth."¹ Carrie is amazed by the city:

To the child, the genius of imagination, or the wholly untraveled, the approach to a great city for the first time is a wonderful thing (6). [...Carrie] realized in a dim way how much the city held – wealth, fashion, ease – every adornment for women, and she longed for dress and beauty with a whole heart. (17)

Sister Carrie is drawn by the city's magnetism, a force that brings with it the promise of the 'American Dream' but that also controls the lives of its inhabitants and defrauds them of their own free will. The channel of the force to the individual is through desire: "This desire

to attend and be part of the great current of the city is one that seldom bases itself upon well mastered reasons. It is simply a desire, and as such, seldom begs for explanation.”²

Carrie Meeber is described as a character who is like “a wisp in the wind, moved by every breath of passion, acting now by [her] will and now by [her] instincts, erring with one, only to retrieve by the other – a creature of incalculable variability” (57). Dreiser tells us that “[she] had no excellent home principles fixed upon her;” (60) the desire that drives her life is money: “something everybody else has and [she] must get [...something that] was power in itself”(48).

Carrie’s, as well as other characters’ world in the novel, is one of prices and of price tags. Dreiser always shows Carrie’s end via how much money she exactly has. We know that as a laborer in a shoe factory she earns four and half dollars a week that her board costs four dollars per week; we are even told that a cheap lunch costs about ten cents. At the end of the novel, when she is becoming a famous actress, her climbing up on the social ladder is described again by the means of the gradual increase of her salary.

Sister Carrie shows the great extent to which money governs not only the love relationships but also the family relationships. For example, Hanson and Minnie do not offer Carrie a place to stay out of pure charity, but rather because they see the profit they can make from charging her for the board. Once Carrie loses her job they uncompromisingly want her to return home.

If we look at the relationships Carrie maintains in the novel, all of them, whether with a “drummer” (3) Charles Drouet, or with G. W. Hurstwood, are based on her prospects of material advancement.

Drouet is what we would call today a traveling salesman, a representative of the class that raised itself to a higher economic echelon thanks to the industrial boom. When Carrie meets Drouet in the train, she is attracted to him, for he is described as a “masher” (3), “one whose dress or manners are calculated to elicit the admiration of susceptible young women” (3). Because Carrie is out of work, Drouet later invites her for lunch and offers to pay the rent for her flat, so that he will have access to the said flat. Basically then, Drouet tries to buy her. However, Carrie, being what we would call today a pragmatist, is content with being given an opportunity to get rid of her sister’s poor home environment, and it is enough of a consolation for her that Drouet promised to marry her sometime in the future.

The situation changes when Carrie first meets Hurstwood, the manager of the ‘Fitzgerald and Moy’s’, for she realizes that he is a representative of a class even above the Drouet’s:

[Hurstwood] had a good stout constitution, an active manner, and a solid, substantial air, which was composed in part of his fine clothes, his clean linen, his jewels, and, above all, his own sense of his importance [...] he was shrewd and clever in many little things, and capable of creating a good impression. (33)

By this point Carrie has already learned to distinguish between the various degrees and kinds of wealth. She comprehends that Hurstwood has better manners; his appearance, and the quality, if not striking aspect of clothes make him immediately more appealing to her.

However, in the end, Carrie realizes that she has been in love neither with Drouet nor with Hurstwood. Both relationships are shown as built more on a sense of gratitude and pity than on anything else. Finally, Carrie did not give her heart to anyone, but on the other hand no one really wanted it. For Drouet, she was a beautiful doll, and for Hurstwood a way of dealing with his middle age crisis: “She could feel that there was no warm, sympathetic

friendship back of the easy merriment with which many approached her. All seemed to be seeking their own amusement, regardless of the possible sad consequences to others ” (324).

In *Sister Carrie* even the institution of marriage is shown not as a sacred bond between two people based on love and understanding, but rather as a sort of contract grounded in a motivation for profit from both sides. If we take the marriage of Hurstwood and Julia:”There was no lost love between them. There was no great feeling of dissatisfaction” (66). Their agreement works on the basis of him giving her all the material comfort a middle class wife might need, and she helps him to create his public identity of a respectable head of a family. The problems start to appear when Hurstwood unexpectedly breaks the contract by refusing to pay for his wife’s and family’s desires for new clothes, race horse tickets, or vacations. In return, Julia threatens him to break their agreement by spreading the information about his extramarital affair in society life, which would undoubtedly ruin his career and social position. The Hurstwoods conventional marriage becomes a symbol for many others that were functioning in the same way. The institution of marriage is described by Dreiser as “society’s own tinder-box” (62), something which as time passes becomes dryer and dryer to the point of being tinder and thus easily lighted and destroyed.

Carrie, living in the world of material objects, is finally treated as a commodity herself. At the beginning of her relationship with Drouet, once they have lunch together, he gives her the twenty dollars to buy new clothes. He might be doing it out of sheer compassion, but the crucial fact that he does not miss the opportunity to touch her hand suggests that with the money he is trying to buy exclusive access to her.

It is significant that throughout the whole novel Carrie always gets more money for her body, for the way she looks more than for the work she performs. Her theatre success is

based rather on her physical appearance, her freshness, the beauty of the youth and her imitative skills that are those of children, rather than for her talent.³

The art of imitation has always been natural for Carrie: “She possessed an innate taste for imitation and no small ability. Even without practice, she could sometimes restore dramatic situations she had witnessed by re-creating, before the mirror, the expressions of the various faces taking part in the scene” (117). Moreover, Carrie uses her skills for the reproduction of other women’s features that Drouet admires. In fact, instead of having her own personality she becomes the imitation of someone else’s desires, confirming the status of women only as subjects of male desire. Sadly, Carrie demonstrates that what is important is not a female’s identity but the way she is able to play, to fulfill her role as a sexual object enjoyed by others.

The world of Veblen-like ‘conspicuous consumption’ is always closely connected with advertising and the selling of images of the self. Carrie is portrayed as a master of self-projection:

Carrie was an apt student of fortune’s ways – of fortune’s superficialities. Seeing a thing, she would immediately set to inquiring how she would look, properly related to it. [...] Fine clothes to her were a vast persuasion; they spoke tenderly and Jesuitically for themselves. When she came within earshot of their pleading, desire in her bent a willing ear. (75)

Finally, Carrie becomes a sort of advertisement herself in accepting to live in one of the most luxurious hotels in the city for nearly rent-free. The hotel management knows well that because of her appearance and social-material success she will attract guests. As a celebrity Carrie becomes the icon of the ‘American Dream’ and success herself; her identity thus develops into a social one.⁴

In a society where self-esteem is shown as being based on the material⁵, the individual identity is built wholly through the things money can buy: “The commodity makes the person and the person is, if not for sale, then an object whose value or status can be read”.⁶ In that concrete social world, clothing plays an important role; the acquisition of the appropriate [item] for the time (seasons of fashion) is what creates a lifestyle, recognizable by the other members of the society.⁷ “In modern cultures where the individual is afraid of absorption and obliteration, dress styles continually change and serve [also] a segregating function.”⁸ Clothing, apart from things such as serving to help one pass work and leisure time, distinguishes particular classes and individual class identities. In general:

[...H]uman society is made up of a number of subsocieties arranged hierarchically in terms of power and wealth [...]. Within each group there are honors to be gained, privileges to be conquered, and relative ease and security to be enjoyed.⁹

Because of the huge differences in wages, the distinctions between the classes at the time were significant. Dreiser in his novels depicts the whole social spectrum of the period. In *Sister Carrie* the Hansons stand lowest on the social ladder. The life of the Hansons is portrayed as one of drudgery and desperateness, without any hope for advancement. Carrie's brother-in-law works as a cleaner of refrigerator cars, he “was of a clean, saving disposition, and had already paid a number of monthly installments on two lots far out on the West Side. His ambition was some day to build a house on them” (9). Minnie, Carrie's sister, already took the ideas of her husband's as hers: “She was now a thin, though rugged, woman of twenty-seven, with ideas of life colored by her husband's, and fast hardening into narrower conceptions of pleasure and duty than had ever been hers in a thoroughly circumscribed youth” (11).

The Vances represent yet another level of American society; they are not as rich as the Hurstwoods, but they have a life style that allows them to dedicate their time to pleasure, be it art or gastronomy. Carrie's first meeting with Mrs. Vance makes her feel inferior; she senses they do not belong to the same class:

The whole street bore the flavor of riches and show, and Carrie felt that she was not of it. She could not, for the life of her, assume the attitude and smartness of Mrs. Vance, who, in her beauty, was all assurance. She could only imagine that it must be evident to many that she was the less handsomely dressed of the two. It cut her to the quick, and she resolved that she would not come here again until she looked better. At the same time she longed to feel the delight of parading here as an equal. Ah, then she would be happy! (227)

Carrie is one of only a few Dreiser characters who finally manage to trespass class boundaries; she begins as a worker in a shoe factory, continues as an amateur actress, and ends up as a theatre star, living in one of the most expensive hotels in town.

In *Sister Carrie*, characters' behavior and lives are shaped not only by money but also by closely connected social roles. As Kenneth S. Lynn suggests "[they] are all actors, their personalities are not expressions of themselves, but of the roles they are playing."¹⁰ These roles are the building stones of the whole social worlds of the cities of Chicago and of New York. It is significant that the environment, in which Carrie feels best, is theatre. There, as well as outside of it, what is important is not the way people truly are, their true core identities, but what roles they represent and play. Eliseo Vivas compares society aptly to a masked ball where everyone is wearing masks and where the greatest offence is to appear without it.⁹

Furthermore, Dreiser compares American society to the sea: "In such a world, the only reality is movement, the only good is upward movement, the only objects worth having are those one can't afford."¹¹ Carrie is the character who started out very low and goes ever

higher in the opposite direction; Hurstwood is the one who starts out very high and reaches newfound depths of lowness. Dreiser's naturalistic plot of Hurstwood's decline: "revolve[s] around strength and weakness, not good and evil [...the] essential matters are youth and age, freshness and exhaustion. Behind the plot of decline is the Darwinian description of struggle, survival and extinction."¹²

Hurstwood's downfall is carefully drawn from the beginning. For the first time we meet Hurstwood in Chicago when he has a respectable position as a manager of the 'Fitzgerald and Moy's', and he is therefore a part of the rich upper crust of the economic and social life of the society. For him his family life is not satisfying, but serves well its purpose of preserving his social identity. However, when he meets Carrie, the whole equilibrium is shaken and what follows is Hurstwood's theft of the money from the company's safe, which structurally lies significantly in the middle of the novel.

The second part of the novel, which takes place in New York, pictures Hurstwood's physical as well as mental deterioration. His social sinking is described in terms of having less money and hope in finding a new job. He ends up spending all his time by sitting in the rocking chair, which becomes a symbol for his apathy: "He buried himself in his papers and read. Oh, the rest of it – the relief from walking and thinking! [...] He forgot his troubles, in part" (252).

Finally, in *Sister Carrie* Hurstwood is shown practically helpless against what seems his fate in the world of the novel. In the end, as he gets to the very bottom, Carrie becomes a famous actress and star: "Carrie embodies the spirit of youthful aspiration, Hurstwood the spirit of middle-aged desperation: their two stories together reveal the pattern of all life."¹³ Fates of both characters are shown as natural results of the deterministic forces of their environment.

To conclude, all the world of *Sister Carrie* is one of unsatisfied and in fact unsatisfiable desire, the world of Veblen-like ‘conspicuous consumption’ that works on the truthful presumption that “materialistic desire is not only powerful but unquenchable, for possession only momentarily slakes the thirst for ‘things’.”¹⁴ The human soul’s inclination is never to be content with what one has, one always wants more and more. Sister Carrie did everything to reach what she believed was her dream, because she was convinced that material and social success would bring her true happiness; yet finally, “Amid the tinsel and shine of her state [she] walk[s], unhappy” (368).

With experience Carrie does not grow in self-knowledge, she is only awakened in the matter of desire. As Ames notices, one of the reasons why Carrie is successful as an actress is that she has the expression of human desire written by nature in her face. Whereas other artists can express it through music or poetry, actually Carrie becomes a symbol for human longing itself.

Isolation and loneliness, in fact very modern existential feelings, are only the natural results of Sister Carrie’s goals in life: “Chicago, New York; Drouet, Hurstwood; the world of fashion and the world of stage - these were but incidents. Not them, but that which they represented, she longed for. Time proved the representation false” (368). In the end, Carrie remains unsatisfied dreaming in her rocking-chair about happiness as she may never feel because she is never given to understand the paltry nature of her inauthentic dream:

Sitting alone, she was now an illustration of the devious ways by which one who feels, rather than reasons, may be led in the pursuit of beauty. Though often disillusioned, she was still waiting for that halcyon day when she should be led forth among dreams become real. (369)

Finally, *Sister Carrie* can be taken as a tragic or even cautionary tale of the values of the 'American Dream'. The novel ends with Hurstwood's death and Carrie's lack of inner contentment; there are no pregnancies or births which could leave us with hope that something will change for American society in the future.

4. *JENNIE GERHARDT*

Well known about *Sister Carrie* is the issue raised with the near rejection of its publication for immorality; however, what is less known is the impact it had on the young Dreiser. He suffered greatly from a sense of futility, which deepened into depression and consequently almost to suicide.¹ During the following ten years he got to a very despairing bottom of his psychic existence, just as Hurstwood did in *Sister Carrie*. In that period Dreiser was able to write neither articles to support himself sufficiently nor to continue the work on his novels, including *Jennie Gerhardt*, which he had already in mind at the time of the publishing of *Sister Carrie*. He believed that what finally saved him was “the presence of the sane conservative oversoul,”² in other words some inner sense of direction, which helped him to overcome the emptiness and insanity of his life at the time. On his recovery Dreiser returned back to the editing of newspapers and magazines, and the work on his second novel.

The novel was originally called *The Transgressor*; however, finally Dreiser decided to name it after the main heroine *Jennie Gerhardt*. At that time, Dreiser already worked for some time as an editor and it might be the reason why with *Jennie Gerhardt* he did not repeat the same mistakes of *Sister Carrie*, for this time he was more willing to take into account the public’s taste and opinions.

Jennie Gerhardt was finally published in the spring of 1911 by Harper’s; due to censorship, its length was cut from 723 pages to 425. “A few passages were excised on moral grounds”; e. g., when Lester and Jennie are discussing contraceptives; also, all the ironic comments on the manners of the time and satirical descriptions of religion were expunged.³ The censorship cleaned the last remaining ‘impurities’ and certainly helped readers accept *Jennie Gerhardt* with greater ease, not challenging their stereotypes too much.

Dreiser makes the heroine of his novel, Jennie Gerhardt, into a girl from a working class stratum, who transgresses many of society's conventions and taboos of the time. However, with Jennie unlike with Sister Carrie, Dreiser makes sure that to an extent she is punished for her trespasses by the exclusion from the society that condemns her.

Jennie Gerhardt is a very peculiar character, for in comparison with other Dreiser characters such as Lester, Carrie or Clyde she does not want much, except for being a good mother, sister and wife.⁴ Jennie is not possessed by materialistic monomania, and she is rather content with what she has and faces stoically what life brings her. Unlike the others, Jennie is the child of nature untouched by the 'American Dream'.

In a forceful comparison of Jennie Gerhardt with Sister Carrie, John J. McAleer claims: "Jennie is a woman of feeling rather than of intellect [...] where Carrie is self-seeking, Jennie is self-giving."⁵ When Carrie gives herself to Drouet and Hurstwood it is because she is well aware of the possibility of her financial and social advancement, when Jennie does the same thing with Senator Brander it is out of a sense of obligation to her brother in prison.⁵ Both women are "victims of the society in which they live, but ambition betrays Carrie while Jennie is undone by her sense of duty."⁵

Sister Carrie is the 'New Woman', who realizes the possibilities opened by the city and by life in general for her, Jennie in many ways represents the stereotype of a Victorian woman for whom the family hearth is the sole centre of her existence. Dreiser himself admits that for him Jennie was a sort of "a male fantasy figure, [...] based in part on his own mother [...] all-loving, all-giving, all-sacrificing."⁶

In the Victorian Era, in general, the position of a woman was very different from nowadays; hence it was not possible for Jennie to function autonomously as an individual human being. Her status was completely dependent on the economic status of her father and

later her husband. The attainment of suffrage did not solve the question of equality more than the fourteenth and fifteenth Amendments solved the question of Black Africans in American life.⁷ According to the law, whereas a husband could have divorced his wife, she could not have divorced him, also children always remained his ownership. Furthermore, women were expected to fulfill the roles prescribed by the society for them; as Martha Vicinius describes it:

The cornerstone of the Victorian society was the family; the perfect lady's sole function was marriage and procreation (the two needless to say, were considered as one). All her education was to bring out her 'natural' submission to authority and innate maternal instincts. Young ladies were trained to have no opinions lest they seem too formed and too definite for a young man's taste, and thereby unmarketable as commodity.⁸

Women were required to have just enough education to be able to follow the conversation of their husbands and people of his circle. As Ruskin in his *Of Queen's Garden* puts it: "A man ought to know any language or science he learns, thoroughly: while a woman ought to know the same language or science only so far as it may enable her to sympathize in her husband's pleasures, and in those of his best friends."⁹ Basically, from a woman it was required to be a patient listener, for she was not expected to have her own opinion on the matter discussed.

Jennie Gerhardt can be seen as the embodiment of female vulnerability in the society owing triplefold to her gender, to her social position and to her lack of education. At the age of eighteen, she has "not as yet been trained to any special work,"¹⁰ her only training is in the way of performing domestic duties; in point of fact, her only schooling is one of a 'housewife'. Jennie's mother's situation is very similar to hers, suggesting the near impossibility of leaving one's own environment: Mrs. Gerhardt is "no weakling"(3), she takes "in washing, what little she [...can] get, devoting the intermediate hours to dressing the

children, cooking, seeing that they got off to school, mending their clothes, waiting on her husband, and occasionally weeping” (3).

Mrs. Gerhardt’s occupation is in sharp contrast with that of Mrs. Bracebridge who has very little to do, for she performs only her social duties. Jennie’s work at her house was more decorative than anything else, for she was to “wait on her mistress, to brush her hair and to help her dress. She was also to answer the bell, wait on the table if need be, and do any other errand which her mistress might indicate” (109). On the one hand, Mrs. Bracebridge is in a disadvantaged dependent position on her rich husband but on the other hand at least, unlike Mrs. Gerhardt, she does not have to face discrimination over her social class.

Jennie Gerhardt, like her mother, has no way of escaping the world in which she will always remain economically dependent on other people, be it as a lover or as a servant. Working later as a paid domestic Jennie becomes in fact double exploited, both for her class and for her gender. A good illustration is when Jennie starts working at the Bracebridge house; she acquires a lot of unwelcome attention from the male guests at the house, she is for them like a “honey-jar to flies” (126). Jennie is even propositioned several times and Lester felt: “as if somehow she could be reached – why, he could not have said. She did not bear any outward marks of her previous experience. There were no evidences of coquetry about her, but still he ‘felt that he might’” (128). Lester and the others only seemed to follow the general presumption that working girls, especially domestic servants were “sexual adventurers who would, if not closely watched, initiate sexual liaisons with sons and husbands.”¹¹ Thus they were considered to be, along with other women who broke the family circle such as divorcees, prostitutes, or adulterers, a dangerous moral threat to society.

In fact Jennie’s only means of advancement in life, social as well as financial, is through men who are always regarded as potential husbands. The first one is George

Sylvester Brander, a single man of fifty-two and a United States Senator from Ohio, for whom Jennie and her mother do the laundry services. After he truly falls in love with Jennie, he tries to help her and her family by supporting them. When Jennie's brother Bass is arrested for stealing coal, Brander pays the bail to get him out of prison. In the emotional aftermath, he makes love to Jennie. Very soon Brander has to leave for Washington and promises Jennie to marry her when he gets back. Unfortunately, meanwhile, as Jennie finds out only from the newspapers, he dies of typhoid. She is left alone, pregnant and poor in the society, which condemns fiercely any extra-marital affairs. She starts considering herself unmarriageable.

The second man of her life is a thirty-six years old Lester Cane, the son of a wealthy carriage builder. From the first moment he was attracted to her:

This strong, intellectual bear of a man, son of a wealthy manufacturer, stationed, so far as material conditions were concerned, in a world immensely superior to that in which Jennie moved, was, nevertheless, instinctively, magnetically, and chemically drawn to this poor serving maid. She was his natural affinity, though he did not know it – the one woman who answered somehow the biggest need of his nature. (131)

Even though they spent many years together, finally Lester marries someone else of the same social position. For the whole time and even after his death Jennie remains emotionally and economically dependent on him.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman was stunned that at her time humans were the only animals in the natural world where the female was dependent on the male for food, “the only animal species in which the sex-relation [was] also an economic relation.”¹² Thorstein Veblen explains that the institution of marriage goes back to the history of archaic societies where women were seized from the enemy as trophies. This practice “gave rise to a form of the

ownership-marriage, resulting in a household with a male head.”¹³ All of the economic power stays thus in the hands of the male, the female obtains her status through him:

From the day laborer to the millionaire, the wife’s worn dress or flashing jewels, her low roof or her lordly one, her weary feet or her rich equipage – these speak of the economic ability of the husband. The comfort, the luxury, the necessities of life itself, which the woman receives, are obtained by the husband, and given her by him.¹⁴

In a society in which the building stones are considered marriage and family, Jennie being without a husband and having a child out of wedlock becomes thus an outsider. It is interesting to notice that Dreiser portrays Jennie on the one hand stereotypically as a working class female victim; however, on the other hand, Dreiser delineates Jennie as a superior character because of her connection with Nature. From the latter point of view, she stands above the world of the society and the world of the ‘American Dream’. Jennie’s spirit expresses the force of life and love:

This daughter of poverty [...] was a creature of a mellowness of temperament which words can but vaguely suggest. There are natures born to the inheritance of flesh that come without understanding, and that go again without seeming to have wondered why. Life, so long as they endure it, is a true wonderland, a thing of infinite beauty, which could they but wander into it wonderingly, would be heaven enough. Opening their eyes, they see a conformable and perfect world. Trees, flowers, the world of sound and the world of color. These are the valued inheritance of their state. If no one said to them “Mine”, they would wander radiantly forth, singing the song which all the earth may some day hope to hear. It is the song of goodness. (15)

In her life Jennie chooses the path of love; she always cares for the people around her, regardless of her own needs. From her early childhood on she was helping her mother with domestic duties and took care of her brothers and sisters: “she knew that there were other

girls whose lives were infinitely freer and fuller, but, it never occurred to her to be meanly envious; her heart might be lonely, but her lips continued to sing.” (16)

Later in the relationship with Lester, for Jennie love is all: “she appears to live only to please [him]. Close to what nowadays we might regard as abject, she wants only to serve him as lord and master; she is willing to be a doll-like presence, his little girl, and ready to give up her own hopes so that he can enjoy the social and financial advantages of status.”¹⁵

Lester Kane stands in opposition to the values of love and nature Jennie embraces. He and his family are products of their environment representing the values of the ‘American Dream’. Lester is described as being: “[...] the natural product of a combination of elements – religious, commercial, social” (133). Even though he loves Jennie, when he is to choose between marriage with her and losing his father’s heritage, he prefers the money and social prestige to love. Lester does not understand the consequences of his decision until the very last moments of his life when he finally acknowledges the importance of the spiritual marriage with Jennie. Only then does he realize that the sole thing that mattered in life is how great was the quality of their love.

Lester dies not understanding the meaning of life. It is easier for him to think that he was “moved about like chessmen by circumstance over which [he had] no control” (400). In contrast, Jennie, not accepting social determinism, finds the ultimate comfort in the flux of Nature. Thus she preserves her integrity even when death takes away from her all the people she loves. Jennie comprehending the laws of the circle of birth and death knows that life must go on and finally adopts two orphans, Rose Perpetua and the boy Henry.

To conclude, Jennie Gerhardt is shown as a very contradicting character for the period and that is what makes her so real and believable. She is portrayed as both a saint and a

sinner at a time when the status of the female soul was regarded to be rather less complicated than that. One critic writes:

Women were classified into polar extremes. They were either sexless ministering angels or sensuously oversexed temptresses of the devil; they were either aids to continence or incontinence; they facilitated or they exacerbated male sexual control.¹⁶

Jennie, not reflecting only the 'angel' or 'whore' female stereotype, makes a very modern character, the one who stands closer to actual human nature. A good illustration of the contradiction of her personality is when she gives birth to her daughter Vesta, and according to society's laws, having a child out of wedlock means becoming an outcast. However, from the higher perspective of the law of Nature, she is perfectly innocent:

Jennie was now to witness the unjust interpretation of that wonder of nature, which, but for Brander's death, might have been consecrated and hallowed as one of the ideal functions of life. Although herself unable to distinguish the separateness of this from every other normal process of life, yet was she made to feel, by the actions of all about her, that degradation was her portion and sin the foundation as well as the condition of her state. [...] She felt no useless remorse, no vain regrets. Her heart was pure, and she was conscious that it was filled with peace. (99)

Finally, Jennie's heroism lies in her ability to change or grow with experience, but in her ability to resist the forces of society and live according to the morality of care.¹⁷

5. *AN AMERICAN TRAGEDY*

Theodore Dreiser deals with the theme of the ‘American Dream’ in most of his novels; however, with *An American Tragedy* he does not hesitate to discuss even further the sad consequences of the said ‘American Dream’s’ materialistic monomania. Unlike in *Sister Carrie* or *Jennie Gerhardt* the price paid by the characters for following their vision of the better world is death. The novel was originally to be called significantly, *Mirage*, suggesting the blindness of an American society living in a delusory world of the ‘Dream of Success’.

An American Tragedy was published in 1925 and it was Dreiser’s first real popular success. He worked on it “longer and [more] steadily than upon any of his other [...novels]”¹, partly thanks to the reissuing of *The Genius* for which he got enough money to be able to concentrate only on his writing. *An American Tragedy* is considered Dreiser’s masterpiece.

Already in 1894, Dreiser noticed that there was a particular kind of crime, repeating itself: “a young man, struggling to rise out of poverty, murders a working girl, whose prior claim on him blocks his marriage to a rich girl.”² Dreiser considered this pattern typically American for he saw it so often, especially during his career as a journalist. He finally decided to make the dream of rising from poverty to wealth through an advantageous marriage a subject area of his novel. As a model for *An American Tragedy* he took the actual case of the murder of Grace Brown by Chester Gillette in Herkimer County, New York, in 1906. Dreiser changed some of the individual social facts such as Roberta’s family background, which was not as poor as it is portrayed in the novel. In fact, in order to stress the impact of the environment on the characters, he uses more of his own poor childhood memories. On the other hand, especially in the third part of the novel, he utilizes almost

verbatim transcriptions of the lawyers' speeches of the real case as well as parts of the letters Grace Brown wrote to Chester Gillette.

The main hero of *An American Tragedy* is Clyde Griffiths. Clyde is Dreiser's very typical character who, as Sister Carrie, comes from a poor family background and strives to get for himself most of what the 'American Dream' stands for, money and social position. In that respect he presents a sort of Everyman who is trapped in the world of forces that are beyond his control.

From the moment we meet Clyde in the book one in the street with his parents on their fanatical mission work, he is portrayed as an outsider, even the bystanders feel like he does not belong to the world of drudgery: "That oldest boy don't wanta be here. He feels outa place, I can see that. It ain't right to make a kid like that come out unless he wants to. He can't understand all this stuff, anyhow"³. "[Clyde] seem[s to be] decidedly more sensitive than most of the others" (5) and he cannot fail to notice the discrepancy between what his father is preaching about the mercy of God and the Griffith's actual desperate economic and social position. He himself feels destined to greater things; growing up in the impoverished environment he is driven by the force of desire: "And so starved had been Clyde's life up to this time and so eager was he for almost any form of pleasure, that from the first he listened with all too eager ears to any account of anything that spelled adventure or pleasure" (58).

Clyde's first step towards his ambitions is a job in a drugstore where he meets famous actors and people from the theatre. Soon, he feels he can get higher and takes a job as a bellhop in the hotel Green-Davidson in Kansas City. There, the whole 'New World' opens for him, as the one from fairy-tales:

It was all so lavish. Under his feet was a checkered black-and-white marble floor. Above him a coppered and stained and gilded ceiling. And supporting this,

a veritable forest of black marble columns as highly polished as the floor – glassy smooth. And between the columns which ranged away toward three separate entrances, one right, one left and one directly forward toward Dalrymple Avenue – were lamps, statuary, rugs, palms, chairs, divans, tête-à-tête – a prodigal display. (32) [...] This, then, most certainly was what it meant to be rich, to be a person of consequence in the world – to have money. It meant that you did what you pleased. [...] That you possessed all of these luxuries. That you went how, where and when you pleased. (49)

From the point Clyde enters the hotel lobby, he is under a spell, succumbing to the illusion that money can solve all problems in life. He considers the way of materialism a path to the earthly Paradise. In that respect “his soul [is] not destined to grow up” (193) until the very end.

Book one closes with Clyde’s first disaster, when he goes for a ride with other bellhops, they run down a young girl. Clyde has to escape to Kansas City where he ends up meeting his rich uncle, Samuel Griffiths, a manufacturer from Lycurgus in New York. Thanks to that connection, he gains employment in the family factory. First, he works at the very bottom in the shrinking room to learn the business, later he becomes a supervisor over a group of working class girls in the stamping department. One of his employees is also Roberta Alden, the daughter of a farmer Titus Alden.

Clyde and Roberta are driven towards each other from the very first moment they meet. The connection they have is shown as being a natural one, for they come even from similar backgrounds: “somewhat after the fashion of Clyde in relation to his family and his life, she too considered her life a great disappointment [...] and from her youth up she had seen little but poverty” (279). Despite their similarities, in the end, however, their relationship ends in disaster because they both decide to go against the flux of Nature for the fatal lure of the ‘American Dream’. In Clyde, Roberta was “sensing the superior world in

which, she imagined he moved, and being so taken with the charm of his personality, was seized with the very virus of ambition and unrest [...]” (287).

Clyde believes himself in love with the sweet and devoted Roberta at the beginning, but just when they start to have a more intimate relationship, Sondra Finchley suddenly enters the picture. Clyde becomes afflicted with the same virus as Roberta (and the whole society) regarding Sondra, who for him represents the world he was always aspiring to:

[She was] as smart and vain and sweet a girl as Clyde had ever laid his eyes upon – so different to any he had ever known and so superior. [...] she was the most adorable feminine thing he had seen in all his days. Indeed her effect on him was electric - thrilling - arousing in him a curiously stinging sense of what it was to want and not to have – to wish to win and yet to feel, almost agonizingly, that he was destined not even to win a glance from her. (251)

Sondra Finchley is a member of the ‘nouveaux riches’, she can be seen as a symbol of the carelessness and superficiality of the whole upper-class generation of the Jazz Age. Sondra as a character is completely invented by Dreiser, there is no one like her in the Gillette case. Nevertheless, she resembles very closely Horatio Alger’s beautiful, wealthy young ladies.⁴ It is noteworthy that her portrait is much less realistic than the one of Roberta, presumably because Dreiser was best at writing about the environment he knew well, the one of the have-nots.⁵ On the other hand, Sondra’s poor characterization serves well the purpose of her being only a representation of certain class attributes of the circle into which Clyde so desperately wants to enter.

Clyde by the fickleness of fate ends up having relationships with both Roberta and Sondra at the same time. Through a series of juxtapositions, he begins to comprehend how the two spheres, which he might enter through marriage, are very different from each other. On one of the road trips with Sondra, Clyde sees Roberta’s home and he is horrified:

[...] the decayed and sagging roof. The broken chimney to the north – rough lumps of cemented field stones lying at its base; the sagging and semi-toppling chimney to the south, sustained in place by a log chain. The unkept path from the road below, which slowly he ascended ! [...] To think that this was Roberta's home. And to think, in the face of all that he now aspired to in connection with Sondra and this social group in Lycurgus, she should be demanding that he marry her! [...] The poverty! (492)

After that experience, Clyde comes to the conclusion that marrying Roberta, who cannot offer him more than her love and a baby, would be a social suicide. He would basically return to the poverty of the working classes from which he has been trying to escape.

When the pressure from both sides becomes insupportable, Sondra wants him to spend more time at parties with her, and Roberta on the other hand forces him to marry her immediately under threat of public exposure, Clyde starts to think about getting rid of his pregnant sweetheart.

Dreiser's world of *An American Tragedy*, as well as of his other novels, all show the restrictions of class distinctions: "the lines of demarcation and stratification between the rich and the poor in Lycurgus were as sharp as though cut by a knife or divided by a high wall" (286). For example, Roberta knows well that to be even interested in Clyde or anyone socially superior is considered taboo. The same restriction for her went in the opposite direction, it was not regarded proper for her to be in contact with the lower classes of "the foreign family girls and men, - ignorant, low, immoral, un-American!" (286)

The society, despite claiming equal opportunities for all, makes sure that the poor will stay where they are, and the protected rich will remain as well. Clyde never really manages to enter higher society, for he always remains an outsider who is only allowed to look over the insurmountable class walls.

The only rule valid in the society is the one of the survival of the fittest; therefore, from the beginning both Roberta and Clyde are destined to fail because they do not have the ruthlessness of Sondra or Gilbert. Neither of them is strong enough to survive outside their own environment and their class; they are, in point of fact, both a representation of the “native type of Americanism which resists facts and reveres illusion” (279). Finally, they pay with their lives for respecting neither the laws of Nature nor the laws of society.

One of the themes that appears throughout the whole novel is the topic of justice and moral ambiguity. The most obvious example is the degree of Clyde’s guilt. Even though he originally plans to murder Roberta, the actual drowning is more or less an accident. If Clyde is guilty, it is maybe from not trying to save Roberta and swimming away, nevertheless it is a question to what extent this can be considered a cold-blooded murder.

Moreover, the world of *An American Tragedy* is one of determinism and predestination. Clyde’s fate is tragic because it is from the beginning shaped by the forces that he can neither influence nor even properly understand; in fact, Clyde is a victim:

[...] a victim of his temperament, a victim of time, a victim of a society that he cannot fully accept or totally reject, a victim of a world that is in constant struggle. Most of all he is the victim of his romantic illusions: his belief in the possibility of self-fulfillment and purpose when life, in reality, is moving in a furious circle, the center holding all in balance, like a raging whirlpool nowhere.⁶

Then it is hard to judge who is more responsible for the murder, Clyde, his parents or society itself? Dreiser indicates that Clyde fails not because he would be a bad person, but because he is an ordinary one. It is notable that, from the structural point of view, the prologue, which introduces the poor boy standing in the street with his parents, is almost identical to the epilogue. The foregoing suggests that Clyde Griffith’s tragedy might repeat itself, thus his fate becomes a universal one.

The theme of moral ambiguity is also presented in the novel through the religious characters. *An American Tragedy* is probably Dreiser's fiercest attack on organized religion. A notion of religious faith that should give the characters a higher moral purpose is shown as essentially vapid and empty.

Theodore Dreiser already touched the topic in *Jennie Gerhardt* with the criticism of the figure of the old Gerhardt, who is a reflection of Dreiser's bigoted father. Another example is Lester Kane and his family's Catholic faith, which represents another of society's conventions. In Dreiser's view, the Church uses its power only for the manipulation of the masses of the poor, who are the most vulnerable, because of the need for hope in a better life. Dreiser is from the beginning against organized religion, which is in his opinion, as he puts it in *Tragic America*, only money- and power- famished:

For in America, it is the religionist, his minister, his priest, his bishop or his cardinal who, side by side with the money lord, is seeking power – and even power over the money lord himself, his government and his slaves. So much so that in thousands of American papers and magazines to-day are to be found inspired articles and editorials boosting the value and comfort of religion. And among these are to be found the handwriting as well as the subtle propaganda of the Catholic Church, the strongest and slyest and most devastating of all! But always with its dream of supreme power for itself, and itself alone.⁷

In *An American Tragedy* the theme of religion is presented mainly through Mr. and Mrs. Griffiths and Reverend McMillan. Clyde's parents are characterized as stern evangelists who force the whole family to preach the word of God in the streets. They live for the higher goodness; however, their lives in general seem futile and ineffective. With their faith they could save neither Clyde's sister Esta from eloping with a traveling actor and having a child out of wedlock nor Clyde from the execution.

Of all the characters, it is probably Mrs. Griffiths whose faith seems the most genuine. She is the emotional core of the family who at the same time manages to support Asa Griffiths when he is ill and Clyde in prison waiting for the electric chair. In order to help Clyde to get money for the appeal she even ends up writing for the newspapers about his case. Nevertheless, in spite of all her love and compassion, she cannot bring Clyde the consolation he seeks:

It was as though there was [...a] wall or impenetrable barrier between them, built by the lack of understanding [...]. She would never understand his craving for ease and luxury, for beauty, for love – his particular kind of love that went with show, pleasure, wealth, position, his eager and immutable aspirations and desires [...]. She would look on all of it as sin – evil, selfishness [...]. (926)

Another religious person in *An American Tragedy* is Reverend McMillan, the evangelist minister who comes to the prison to save Clyde's soul. He is probably the most striking example of moral ambiguity. Clyde becomes more open with him and divulges that he originally planned to kill Roberta. Afterwards, when McMillan is asked by the Governor about Clyde's guilt, he is not able to defend him and thus indirectly contributes to his execution.

Finally, in *An American Tragedy* as well as in Dreiser's other novels, religion is shown as not understanding human nature or passions, thus not being able to offer any comfort to the troubled soul. In the end, most of the compassion and understanding Clyde receives from his fellow prisoners in the death house, not from the representatives of religion.

To conclude, with *An American Tragedy* Dreiser definitely demolishes and repudiates the 'American Dream'⁸, showing how for Clyde and others it turned into an American Nightmare! What is rather shocking is the suggestion that if the 'American Dream' preaches that everyone can become rich and successful, *An American Tragedy* shows that everyone can become a murderer.⁹

6. CONCLUSION

Theodore Dreiser died in 1945 in Southern California. Already during his lifetime he had both staunch supporters and despisers among critics and other writers. Dreiser was on the one hand praised by many for his themes and real characterization, on the other hand condemned for the flaws of his literary style.

Sinclair Lewis was one of the fellow writers who thought highly of Dreiser. When he became the first winner of the Nobel Prize for literature, in the acceptance speech he did not forget to praise Dreiser:

Dreiser more than any other man, marching alone, usually unappreciated, often hated, has cleared the trail from Victorian and Howellsian timidity and gentility in American fiction to honesty and boldness and passion of life. Without his pioneering, I doubt if any of us could, unless we liked to be sent to jail, seek to express life and beauty and terror.¹

By this announcement, he expressed a meaning for the literary public that it should have been Dreiser to get the credit.¹ However, it was not until after his death he was properly acknowledged as a writer; only later his works such as *Sister Carrie* or *An American Tragedy* took their place in the American literary canon. Finally, already with his early fiction, Dreiser became an inspiration for other authors such as F. S. Fitzgerald or Ernest Hemingway.

As for Dreiser's literary style, he was notoriously famous for the tendency of misusing large words where "small ones would do"², for being fond of "high-flown, Latinate, inappropriately complicated ways of saying things"² and last but not least "for writing in the manner that must have struck him as pleasingly 'literary' or 'erudite'"². His style might have been a result of his lack of formal education. Many writers such as Arnold Bennett or the

whole school of the New Criticism denounced Dreiser's style, stressing the importance of the correct use of language.

To conclude, already during his lifetime Dreiser was given a whole range of labels: naturalist, humanist, idealist, communist and later also feminist. In one way or another, he fulfilled all of them.

Dreiser was often labeled a naturalist; however, he considered himself more of a realist, using some of the ideas of environmental determinism. He was influenced to a great extent by Jacques Loeb's *The Mechanistic Conception of Life*; nevertheless as Eliseo Vivas notices, he was never a consistent mechanist, always showing more than the meaningless universe:

As editor, he is always telling us that the picture he paints is meaningless. But within his novels his men and women always find life has a driving significance which overpowers them. Sometimes the meaning it has is sinister; sometimes pathetic; sometimes tragic. But meaning it always has.³

Dreiser's greatness lies in his style but in his sympathetic attitude, his humanism. He feels compassion for the plights of his characters; or as F. O. Matthiessen points out: "He never really adhered to the pitiless implications of the Darwinian universe. As he admired the strong and sympathized with the weak, he became deeply involved with them both."⁴ Finally, Dreiser believed in the power of the human capacity for hope, which can endure against outside forces.

In spite of having faith in the individual, Dreiser thought society on the whole to be lost and evil. He saw American society in particular as corrupt, driven only by the force of materialism that is the 'American Dream'.

During his lifetime Dreiser saw too much of the discrepancy between the American rhetoric of equality and the harshness of the American reality to remain optimistic about the future; he expressed his disappointment in *Tragic America*. Dreiser portrays society as class ridden, with great gaps between the haves and the have-nots. An apt illustration of the way society works is the scene of the fight between the lobster and the squid in a tank in *The Financier*. The lobster reduces the squid bit by bit to its end and Coperwood realizes that these rules are valid in the human world as well, “the strong live off the weak”.⁵

After braving his discontent with the situation in the United States, in 1927 Dreiser left for the first time for Russia. Even though he realized the weaknesses of the Russian government and Communism in general, what he admired was the belief of the Russians in the possibility of building a better new world ⁶. Even though Dreiser later entered the Communist Party, he always thought himself more of a socialist, who believed in the right of the individual for a decent life without suffering.

Last not least, Theodore Dreiser was by many called a feminist for his focus revolves so often around female characters. As Clare Eby notices: [Dreiser did] not have a single way of depicting women, [he did not] concentrate on a particular type as a representative of the feminine condition.”⁷ Dreiser created a wide range of heroines in his work from Sister Carrie, who uses her powers to achieve her desires, to self-abnegating Jennie Gerhardt, to Roberta Alden, the latter of whom goes even further beyond the notion of a passive victimized female. In his courage to challenge the stereotypes of portraying women at the time, he becomes among all the other labels a proto-feminist as well.

ENDNOTES

1. INTRODUCTION – THE ‘AMERICAN DREAM’

¹ Sacvan Bercovitch, “The Myth of America”, *Litteraria Pragensia* No.25 (Prague: Department of English and American Studies and Centre for Comparative Literature, 2003) 1.

² Sacvan Bercovitch, “The Myth of America”, 2.

³ Martin Gray, *A Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Edinburgh: York Press, 1992) 187.

⁴ John J. McAleer, *Theodore Dreiser – An Introduction and Interpretation* (New York: Holt, Reinhart and Winston, Inc., 1968) 29.

⁵ Martin Procházka, et al., *Lectures on American Literature* (Prague: Karolinum, 2002) 8.

⁶ Martin Procházka, et al., *Lectures on American Literature* 7.

2. THEODORE DREISER’S DREAM OF SUCCESS

¹ Eliseo Vivas, “Dreiser, An Inconsistent Mechanist”, *Critical Essays on Theodore Dreiser*, ed. Donald Pizer (Boston: G. K. Hall and Co., 1981) 34.

² Miriam Gogol, “Introduction”, *Theodore Dreiser – Beyond Naturalism*, ed. Miriam Gogol (New York and London: New York University Press, 1995) viii.

³ John J. McAleer, *Theodore Dreiser – An Introduction and Interpretation* (New York: Holt, Reinhart and Winston, Inc., 1968) 8.

⁴ Donald Pizer, *Sister Carrie, A Norton Critical Edition* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1991) 387.

⁵ F.O. Matthiessen, *Theodore Dreiser* (United States of America: William Sloane Associates, Inc., 1951) 65.

⁶ Daniel H. Borus, “Dreiser and the Genteel Tradition”, *Dreiser’s Jennie Gerhardt, New Essays on the Restored Text*, ed. James L. West III (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995) 115.

⁷ Otis Notman, “Mr Dreiser”, *Sister Carrie, A Norton Critical Edition*, ed. Donald Pizer (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1991) 482.

⁸ Shelley Fisher Fishkin, *From Fact to Fiction, Journalism and Imaginative Writing in America* (London: The John’s Hopkins University Press, 1985) 100.

⁹ Shelley Fisher Fishkin, *From Fact to Fiction*, 88.

¹⁰ Shelley Fisher Fishkin, *From Fact to Fiction*, 99.

¹¹ Rachel Bowlby, *Just Looking: Consumer Culture in Dreiser, Gissing and Zola* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985) 2.

- ¹² Rachel Bowlby, *Just Looking: Consumer Culture in Dreiser, Gissing and Zola*, 3.
- ¹³ Theodore Dreiser, *Tragic America* (London: Constable and Company Ltd., 1932) 15.
- ¹⁴ Robert Penn Warren, “Sister Carrie”, *Sister Carrie, A Norton Critical Edition*, ed. Donald Pizer (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1991) 542.
- ¹⁵ John J. McAleer, *Theodore Dreiser—An Introduction and Interpretation*, 72.
- ¹⁶ Stuart P. Sherman, “The Naturalism of Mr. Dreiser”, *Critical Essays on Theodore Dreiser*, ed. Donald Pizer (Boston: G. K. Hall and Co., 1981) 7.
- ¹⁷ Eliseo Vivas, “Dreiser, An Inconsistent Mechanist”, 31.

3. SISTER CARRIE

- ¹ Theodore Dreiser, *Sister Carrie, A Norton Critical Edition*, ed. Donald Pizer (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1991) 1.
Page references in brackets are to this edition.
- ² Theodore Dreiser, “Reflections”, *Sister Carrie, A Norton Critical Edition*, ed. Donald Pizer (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1991) 410.
- ³ Philip Fisher, “The Naturalist Novel and the City”, *Sister Carrie, A Norton Critical Edition*, ed. Donald Pizer (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1991) 557.
- ⁴ Rachel Bowlby, *Just Looking: Consumer Culture in Dreiser, Gissing and Zola* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985) 64.
- ⁵ Rachel Bowlby, *Just Looking: Consumer Culture in Dreiser, Gissing and Zola*, 59.
- ⁶ Rachel Bowlby, *Just Looking: Consumer Culture in Dreiser, Gissing and Zola*, 26.
- ⁷ Rachel Bowlby, *Just Looking: Consumer Culture in Dreiser, Gissing and Zola*, 28.
- ⁸ John Patrick Diggins, *Thorstein Veblen: Theorist of the Leisure Class* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992) 155.
- ⁹ Eliseo Vivas, “Dreiser, An Inconsistent Mechanist”, *Critical Essays on Theodore Dreiser*, ed. Donald Pizer (Boston: G. K. Hall and Co., 1981) 32.
- ¹⁰ Kenneth S. Lynn, “An Introduction”, *Sister Carrie, A Norton Critical Edition*, ed. Donald Pizer (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1991) 502.
- ¹¹ Kenneth S. Lynn, “An Introduction”, 504.
- ¹² Philip Fisher, “The Naturalist Novel and the City”, 555.
- ¹³ Richard Lehan, “The Romantic Dilemma”, *Critical Essays on Theodore Dreiser*, ed. Donald Pizer (Boston: G. K. Hall and Co., 1981) 141.
- ¹⁴ Kenneth S. Lynn, “An Introduction”, 503.

4. JENNIE GERHARDT

- ¹ F.O. Matthiessen, *Theodore Dreiser* (United States of America: William Sloane Associates, Inc., 1951) 94.
- ² F.O. Matthiessen, *Theodore Dreiser*, 99.
- ³ Richard Lingeman, “The Biographical Significance of *Jennie Gerhardt*”, *Dreiser’s Jennie Gerhardt, New Essays on the Restored Text*, ed. James L. W. West III (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995) 13.
- ⁴ Clare Virginia Eby, “Jennie Through the Eyes of Thorstein Veblen”, *Dreiser’s Jennie Gerhardt, New Essays on the Restored Text*, ed. James L. W. West III (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995) 91.
- ⁵ John J. McAleer, *Theodore Dreiser – An Introduction and Interpretation* (New York: Holt, Reinhart and Winston, Inc., 1968) 93.
- ⁶ Richard Lingeman, “The Biographical Significance of *Jennie Gerhardt*”, 15.
- ⁷ Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *Women and Economics, A Study of Economic Relation Between Men and Women as a Factor in Social Evolution*, ed. Carl N. Degler (New York: Harper and Row, Publisher’s Inc., 1966) 17.
- ⁸ Martha Vicinius, *Suffer and Be Still, Women in the Victorian Age* (Don Mills, Ontario: Fitzhenry and Whiteside Limited, 1972) 10.
- ⁹ Martha Vicinius, *Suffer and Be Still, Women in the Victorian Age*, 129.
- ¹⁰ Theodore Dreiser, *Jennie Gerhardt* (London, New York: Kessinger Publishing Co., 2005) 2. Page references in brackets are to this edition.
- ¹¹ Nancy Warner Barrineau, “Domestic Labor in *Jennie Gerhardt*”, *Dreiser’s Jennie Gerhardt, New Essays on the Restored Text*, ed. James L. W. West III (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995) 132.
- ¹² Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *Women and Economics*, 5.
- ¹³ Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York: Dover Publications Inc., 1994) 16.
- ¹⁴ Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *Women and Economics*, 9.
- ¹⁵ Robert H. Elias, “Janus-Faced *Jennie*, *Dreiser’s Jennie Gerhardt, New Essays on the Restored Text*, ed. James L. W. West III (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995) 7.
- ¹⁶ Martha Vicinius, *Suffer and Be Still, Women in the Victorian Age*, 167.

¹⁷ Judith Kucharski, “Jennie Gerhardt: Naturalism Reconsidered”, *Dreiser’s Jennie Gerhardt, New Essays on the Restored Text*, ed. James L. W. West III (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995) 22.

5. AN AMERICAN TRAGEDY

¹ F.O. Matthiessen, *Theodore Dreiser* (United States of America: William Sloane Associates, Inc., 1951) 189.

² John J. McAleer, *Theodore Dreiser – An Introduction and Interpretation* (New York: Holt, Reinhart and Winston, Inc., 1968) 127.

³ Theodore Dreiser, *An American Tragedy* (New York: Literary Classics, 2003) 7.
Page references in brackets are to this edition.

⁴ Shelley Fisher Fishkin, *From Fact to Fiction, Journalism and Imaginative Writing in America* (London: The John’s Hopkins University Press, 1985) 124.

⁵ F.O. Matthiessen, *Theodore Dreiser*, 197.

⁶ Richard Lehan, “The Romantic Dilemma”, *Critical Essays on Theodore Dreiser*, ed. Donald Pizer (Boston: G. K. Hall and Co., 1981) 142.

⁷ Theodore Dreiser, *Tragic America* (London: Constable and Company Ltd., 1932) 17.

⁸ John J. McAleer, *Theodore Dreiser – An Introduction and Interpretation*, 127.

⁹ Shelley Fisher Fishkin, *From Fact to Fiction*, 125.

6. CONCLUSION

¹ Leonard Cassuto and Clare Virginia Eby, “Introduction”, *The Cambridge Companion to Theodore Dreiser*, ed. Leonard Cassuto and Clare Virginia Eby (London: Cambridge University Press, 2004) 1.

² Shelley Fisher Fishkin, *From Fact to Fiction, Journalism and Imaginative Writing in America* (London: The John’s Hopkins University Press, 1985) 98.

³ Eliseo Vivas, “Dreiser, An Inconsistent Mechanist”, *Critical Essays on Theodore Dreiser*, ed. Donald Pizer (Boston: G. K. Hall and Co., 1981) 37.

⁴ F.O. Matthiessen, *Theodore Dreiser* (United States of America: William Sloane Associates, Inc., 1951) 237.

⁵ Leonard Cassuto and Clare Virginia Eby, “Introduction”, 143.

⁶ F.O. Matthiessen, *Theodore Dreiser*, 215.

⁷ Clare Virginia Eby, “Dreiser and Women”, *The Cambridge Companion to Theodore Dreiser*, ed. Leonard Cassuto and Clare Virginia Eby (London: Cambridge University Press, 2004) 143.

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SUMMARY

Authentic Existence and the ‘American Dream’ in Dreiser’s Fiction

(Autentická existence a „americký sen“ v Dreiserově fikci)

Cílem této bakalářské práce bylo analyzovat pojetí mýtu „amerického snu“ v následujících dílech Theodora Dreisera: *Sestra Carrie*, *Jennie Gerhardtová* a *Americká tragédie*. První kapitola nás uvádí do problematiky mýtu „amerického snu“ a vysvětluje jeho kulturní a historické kořeny. Další část se zabývá již konkrétně Dreiserovým pojetím daného konceptu a zároveň dává do kontextu autorův život a jeho fikci. Následující tři kapitoly pojednávají o hlavních hrdinech a hrdinkách a jejich vyrovnání se s realitou „amerického snu“ a společností, ve které žijí. V závěru se zabývám Dreiserovým přínosem pro americkou literaturu, jeho stylem, spisovateli, kteří jím byli ovlivněni a v neposlední řadě také termíny, pod které je autor tradičně i netradičně zařazován.

V úvodní kapitole se seznamujeme s pojmem mýtu „amerického snu“. Každý národ do jisté míry spojuje a vytvářejí specifické atributy jako např. společný jazyk, rasa, sdílené území či historie. V případě Spojených států amerických, které jsou zemí přistěhovalců a tudíž zemí mnoha kultur, je společným stavebním kamenem mýtus. Konkrétně mýtus „amerického snu“, jinými slovy víra, že každý může skrze svojí odhodlanost, vytrvalost a tvrdou práci dosáhnout v životě úspěchu bez ohledu na svůj původ a prostředí, ze kterého pochází. „Americký sen“ má svoje kořeny v historii, ale mýtem se stal částečně díky umění, zejména literatuře, která toto téma od počátků reflektuje.

„Americký sen“ vznikl v době, kdy na nový kontinent přijíždějí emigranti z celého světa. Tito lidé viděli Spojené státy utopicky jako zemi zaslíbenou, jako místo, kde mohou začít nový, lepší život. Nicméně sny a realita se lišily. Mnoho přistěhovalců uteklo ze své

rodné země před náboženskou či politickou persekucí, ale ani na novém kontinentě se nevyhnuli útlaku ekonomickému a zejména některé skupiny, např. ženy, indiáni nebo afričtí Američané, diskriminaci.

Druhá kapitola se zaměřuje na Theodora Dreisera jako jednoho z prvních autorů, který popsal falešnost mýtu „amerického snu“ a jeho ideálů. Všichni Dreiserovi hlavní protagonisté, Carrie Meeberová, Lester Kane nebo Clyde Griffiths, jsou stejně jako celá americká společnost zaslepeni materialistickou monomanií. Protikladem konzumnímu způsobu života a materiálním hodnotám stojí Příroda, od které se ale většina postav (až na Jennie Gerhardtovou) odvrací a proto nenachází v životě naplnění. Dreiserův svět je světem bez morálního řádu, postavy nejsou odměněny či trestány za svoje chování, jejich život je spíše určován vlivy společnosti a jejími konvencemi, které nejsou s to ovlivnit. Avšak Dreiserova velikost nespočívá v jeho naturalismu, ale spíše v jeho humanismu, citlivosti a soucitu, s kterým přistupuje k člověku. Jedním z důvodů může být fakt, že Dreiser ve své fikci často čerpá z vlastního života. Nakonec Dreiserovo dílo je hodnotné také jako dobová kulturní studie. Theodore Dreiser pracoval dlouhá léta jako žurnalista a právo člověka vidět svět svými vlastníma očima bylo pro něj, i později jako pro spisovatele, nedotknutelné. Dreiser ve svých dílech reflektuje, že technický pokrok a okázalá spotřeba přinesly pouze větší rozdíly mezi bohatými a chudými, ale ne nezbytně štěstí a vnitřní spokojenost lidské duši.

Další kapitola *Sestra Carrie* se soustřeďuje na stejnojmenný román a jeho hlavní hrdinku. Carrie Meeberová je jednou z mála Dreiserových postav, pro kterou se sen o úspěchu stane skutečností. Z chudé nezaměstnané dívky na začátku se dostává až na samý vrchol společnosti jako dobře placená herečka. Skrze Carrie Meeberovou nás Dreiser provádí světem „amerického snu“, světem cen, reklamy a velkoměsta. Touha po bohatství a sociálním

vzestupu je určujícím faktorem pro vztahy jak rodinné, tak milostné. Je příznačné, že Carrie se nakonec stává sama komoditou, sexuálním objektem i reklamou, bydlíc v jednom z nejdražších hotelů ve městě skoro zdarma. Následně Carrie v podstatě ztrácí svou osobní identitu pro identitu sociální. Dreiserův svět románu, ať už v *Sestře Carrie*, nebo v jeho dalších dílech, je postavený na sociálních rolích a třídách, kde jsou důležitější masky, které člověk nosí, než jedincovo pravé já. Carrie se sice podaří opustit svojí sociální třídu pro sféru „vyšší“, ale přes všechny materiální a sociální úspěch její srdce zůstává v závěru prázdné, jelikož nepochopila bezcennost svého snu o úspěchu.

Čtvrtá kapitola *Jennie Gerhardtová* představuje další Dreiserovu stejnojmennou hrdinku. Jennie, na rozdíl od Carrie Mebeerové, nechce od života víc než být dobrou matkou, sestrou a ženou. Jennie nedotknuta hodnotami konzumní společnosti žije v souladu s Přírodou. Protikladem jí stojí její láska Lester Kane, který je naopak zosobněním materialistické stránky „amerického snu“.

Jennie i přesto, že díky svému pohlaví, postavení a vzdělání je společností diskriminována v podstatě třikrát, si nakonec jako jediná uchovává osobní integritu a nezávislost, nepodléhající šalbě „amerického snu“ a jeho hodnotám. Do tradiční role ženy jako oběti viktoriánské společnosti tak Dreiser obsadil postavu, která morálně převyšuje všechny ostatní.

Poslední kapitola *Americká tragédie* pojednává o Dreiserově nejpropracovanějším a také nejúspěšnějším románu. *Americká tragédie* je finálním odmítnutím „amerického snu“, z kterého se stává spíše americká noční můra. Na rozdíl od předchozích dvou románů *Sestra Carrie a Jennie Gerhardtová*, hlavní hrdina Clyde Griffiths za svůj pokus o žití v přeludu „amerického snu“ zaplatí smrtí. Clydův osud je znázorněn jako osud univerzální. Sociální a materiální úspěch, po kterých Clyde touží, jsou hodnoty společnosti obecně

schvalovány. Pokud „americký sen“ slibuje, že každý se může stát úspěšným a bohatým, *Americká Tragédie* naznačuje, že každý člověk zaslepený ambicí se může stát vrahem.

Závěrečná část shrnuje Dreiserovu reputaci jako spisovatele. Od začátku byl Theodore Dreiser na jedné straně obdivován mnohými pro svá témata a postavy, ale na straně druhé zatracován pro svůj literární styl, který obsahoval četné množství chyb a špatně užitých slov. Dreiser již za svého života dostal mnoho „nálepek“; byl považován za naturalistu, humanistu, komunistu a také proto-feministu. Svým způsobem se mu je podařilo naplnit všechny.

APPENDIX - PHOTOGRAPHS



1. *Young Theodore Dreiser in 1907.*
2. *Theodore Dreiser at work.*
3. *Theodore Dreiser with his wife Helen Patges Richardson.*
4. *Theodore Dreiser's birthplace in Terre Haute.*
5. *First edition of « Sister Carrie », New York, Doubleday, 1900.*

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