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Success and Failure in Selected Novels of Theodore Dreiser

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Poděkování

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1. Preface

In my diploma thesis I attempted to analyse selected novels of Theodore Dreiser, focusing mainly on the motif of success and failure; in his works this motif is omnipresent. Moreover, I concentrated on the question: How is Dreiser's life experience reflected in his novels? After having studied relevant sources I came to the conclusion that my analysis of Dreiser's fiction would be more interesting if I simultaneously compared his novels with his autobiographies, *Dawn* and *Newspaper Days*. Dreiser lived through countless intellectual conflicts concerning religion, philosophy and social order, which strongly influenced his work. Had he not written frankly about his most intimate affairs in his autobiographies, the analysis of his fiction would lack the comparative dimension, which many critics find crucial.

Concerning the novels, I have decided to examine *Sister Carrie*, *Jennie Gerhardt*, *The "Genius"*, *An American Tragedy*, and *The Trilogy of Desire* (*The Financier*, *The Titan*, *The Stoic*). The selection might seem random, however I find it reasonable because each of the novels reflects different aspects of Dreiser's life experience. The only piece of work I hesitated to include was *The Trilogy of Desire* as it is a biography of an American tycoon, which has seemingly nothing to do with Dreiser's own life. Nevertheless, his motives for writing such a voluminous work and his identification with the main character are interesting and worth mentioning.

When examining the selected novels, I worked on three levels. Firstly, I tried to disclose the real models of the fictional characters; secondly, I examined the successes and failures of the characters; thirdly, I focused on Dreiser's perception of the world, especially his social views, and the way he presented it through his characters. I drew mainly from critical analyses that were published after 1950; nevertheless, I also paid attention to older critiques. Professor Donald Pizer distinguishes four periods in criticism of Theodore Dreiser.¹ Up to the 1930s the critiques focused on "the validity of

¹ Pizer, Donald. Dowell, Richard W. Rusch Frederic E. *Theodore Dreiser: A Primary and Secondary Bibliography*. G.K. Hall & Company, 1991. p. 91

Dreiserian naturalism” and “the social and ethical acceptability of his fiction.”² Later they scrutinised “the contradictions and inconsistencies in his philosophical and political ideas.”³ From the mid-1950s the scope of critique was “knowledge about Dreiser’s life, writing, and thought as an aid to interpretation.”⁴ In the last phase, beginning in the 70s, Dreiser’s work has been a subject of academic criticism, which works on the assumption that his “fiction has proven especially adaptable to that portion of contemporary literary theory which argues that all communication is closely related to the values and beliefs of its own time.”⁵ In order to get an idea of the then society, the critiques search for the “underlying assumptions ... about class, gender, and social value,”⁶ which Dreiser formulated in his fiction.

As for the sources, I was lucky to find all the novels in the libraries of Charles University, except *The Stoic*, which I managed to obtain from a second hand bookshop. The critiques on Theodore Dreiser as well as his autobiography, *Newspaper Days*, are available in the National Library, except for *Two Dreisers* by Ellen Moers, *Homage to Theodore Dreiser* by Robert Penn Warren, and *Dawn*, which I bought abroad.

² Pizer, Donald. *Critical Essays on Theodore Dreiser*. G.K. Hall & Co. Boston: 1981. p. X

³ Ibid. p. X

⁴ Ibid. p. X

⁵ Pizer, Donald. Dowell, Richard W. Rusch Frederic E. *Theodore Dreiser: A Primary and Secondary Bibliography*. G.K. Hall & Company, 1991. p. 91

⁶ Ibid. p. 91

2. Dreiser's Youth

On 27th August 1871, the ninth child was born in Dreiser's family; the boy was named and baptised Herman Theodore.⁷ His father, John Paul Dreiser, was a pious Roman Catholic who left his hometown Mayen, Germany in 1844 to avoid conscription. On his travels around the Middle West he met and fell in love with a young girl, Sarah Mary Schänäb, who was a daughter of a wealthy farmer. As her family were members of a small sect, The Mennonites, an official marriage with a catholic was impossible. The only way to marry John Paul was to elope; in 1851 Sarah did so and was consequently disinherited by her furious father.

At the beginning, luck was with the newlyweds; John Paul became a production manager of a woollen mill and after a few years he built his own. Unfortunately, the idyll had a short shelf life. The mill burned completely down and soon after John Paul was seriously injured when working on its reconstruction; moreover, his three sons successively died. Years of hardship followed; in fact, the Dreisers never got over the misfortune and languished for the rest of their lives, taking on "the complexion of poverty and failure."⁸ Later, they moved to Terre Haute, Indiana, a relatively small, industrial Mid-West town, where the majority of people suffered materially and the minority of the rich lived in luxury. Such was the American reality – whereas only a few were lucky and made a fortune, the rest drudged and lived below the breadline. Into such poor conditions, Herman Theodore was born.

The experience of Dreiser's early youth – extreme poverty, coldness, religious prejudice, obscurantism and the abysmal gulf between the rich and the poor – scarred him forever. His father, broken and resigned, took refuge in religious contemplation and only mother's love and solicitude would soothe the sensitive boy, who later described himself as "an emotional and sentimental child"⁹. He realised clearly the misfortune of the family, which strongly influenced his sense of social justice.

⁷ In fact, he was the twelfth, but his three older brothers had died before he was born.

⁸ *Dawn*. p. 12

⁹ *Ibid*. p. 19

At his father's desire, at the age of six, Dreiser joined a German catholic school, which was another blow that left deep imprint on his mind. In *Dawn*, when talking about his education, he says: "To contrast the American public school with the Catholic parochial system, I now regard the first as in the main a real aid to intelligence and freedom of spirit and the second an outrageous survival of a stultifying medievalism which should be swept away to its last detail."¹⁰ Dreiser never really recovered from both the experience of catholic education and religious blindness of his father, which became one of the major topics of his literary works.

The Dreisers were always on the move, changing first their lodgings in Terre Haute many times, then moving to Evansville, and for some time settling down in Chicago. Dreiser was deeply fascinated by the city to which he paid tribute in his writings. "Hail, Chicago! First of the daughters of the new world,"¹¹ he later wrote in his autobiography. However, the life in Chicago was very demanding and the Dreisers could not afford it. They moved again, to a small town Warsaw, Indiana that was "one of the most agreeable minor residence towns."¹² There, Dreiser began to attend a public school, which he heartily welcomed. "Gone were the black-garbed nuns, with their ultra-solemn countenances and their dull, dogma-repressed minds,"¹³ he remembers when talking about the atmosphere at the school that was completely different from his previous experience. His teachers soon recognised his talent and guided him towards literature; Dreiser became an ardent reader. He realised that in literature he had come across an unlimited source of motives and ideas that could stretch his imagination. One of the most enlightening recognitions that he gained from literature was that "the world is not like the Catholic Church says it is."¹⁴ It made him contemplate about the meaning of life and seek for his own ways of philosophical thinking.

Dreiser finished school at the age of sixteen; although he was diligent and studied hard, he did not continue to complete the High School course because he did not see any prospects. He rather tried some physical labour at a farm but as he was of a weak constitution he could not bear it long; in fact, he got exhausted after a day and a half. In

¹⁰ Ibid. p. 26

¹¹ Ibid. p. 156

¹² Ibid. p. 185

¹³ Ibid. p. 191

¹⁴ Ibid. p. 199

spite of the first failure, he kept hopes alive, being “caught by the American spirit of material advancement.”¹⁵ It is likely that it was both his dreadful fear of poverty and his ambitiousness that were beyond his endurance; he was of the opinion that “not to want to be rich or to be willing and able to work for riches was to write yourself down as a nobody.”¹⁶ Having remembered the sojourn in Chicago, Dreiser decided to leave home to try his luck there. However, the life in Chicago was not a bed of roses. While he did the most inferior and poorly paid jobs, he read and dreamt of better future. After two years, his former teacher helped him to become a student at Indiana University when she paid the school fees.

At the university Dreiser turned his mind to the studies of literature, history and philosophy. He particularly dwelled on philosophical treatises and latest discoveries of natural sciences. Yet, more than books, it was the life that interested him – “for it is not what one reads but what one lives that truly marks the mind.”¹⁷ Dreiser was an exceptional observer, which he later proved in his news reports and fiction. Formal education might have been momentous but he rather valued direct experience. At the end of the academic year he successfully passed all his exams and bade farewell to the university ground.

In the same year, in 1890, Dreiser suffered a blow when his mother, the only kindred spirit he had, died in his arms. Later he wrote that the atmosphere in the family was “as if an explosion had occurred and many had been killed or injured.”¹⁸ From that time on, he lacked any bond to his native soil; he came back to Chicago and again carried out ordinary jobs. On his occupational errands he encountered people of very different social standing, whose varied lives and tangled relationships provided a rich material for his first journalistic attempts in the *Daily Globe*, where he was accepted after he had been declined by many respectable newspapers. In the 1890’s Dreiser gradually acquired a reputation as a competent and tireless reporter with a sense of detail and veracious account of what he witnessed. He was engaged in investigative journalism and writing reviews, and successively wrote for several newspapers in

¹⁵ Ibid. p. 293

¹⁶ Ibid. p. 293

¹⁷ Ibid. p. 389

¹⁸ Ibid. p. 514

Chicago, St. Louis and Pittsburgh; finally he moved to New York in 1895, where he found it more difficult to break through. First he became the managing director of a magazine *Every Month* that was published by a music production company Howley, Haviland & Co;¹⁹ after two years he quitted and began writing sketches of everyday life for prominent American magazines; finally he ended up at Pulitzer's newspaper *World*. At that time, he slowly began to feel disillusionment. "Men such as myself were mere machines or privates in an ill-paid army to be thrown into any breach."²⁰ News writing was not a way to wealth and glory, indeed. Moreover, the discrepancy between "the professed ideal and preachments of such a constantly moralizing journal as the *World*"²¹ troubled him. He constantly pondered how to change his life.

At the turn of the century, in 1898, Dreiser married his fiancée, Sara White, whom he had met in 1893. It had been a long time since the engagement and had it not been for Sara's pleading Dreiser might not have made the final step; he was torn between his desire for personal freedom and Sara's attraction. Moreover, he never recovered from the loss of his beloved mother. Therefore, more than becoming his wife, Sara was a substitute. It is necessary to mention that even though they later separated and Dreiser unmercifully coped with his matrimonial mistake in *The "Genius"*, Sara was of a great help to him, teaching him grammar, and correcting and rewriting his books.²²

Dreiser, obsessed with the idea of becoming famous and renowned, had been thinking of writing plays. Nevertheless, under the increasing pressure of his friend, a journalist and writer Arthur Henry, he began writing first short stories realising that this was a better way of expressing his feelings and beliefs. He took full advantage of his earlier writing experience, observations and steadfast determination, and tried to record veracious and severe reality of American every-day life, which he did quite convincingly, howbeit his work was often misunderstood and deprecated.

¹⁹ The company produced famous songs of his brother Paul Dresser, who helped Dreiser to get the post.

²⁰ *Newspaper Days*. p. 487

²¹ *Ibid.* p. 487

²² Dreiser's literary style was very often a target of criticism. Indeed, literariness was something he apparently lacked, which was the only thing that made his opponents and defenders concur. They criticised him for literary clumsiness and lengthy minute descriptions, which considerably decreased suspense. Even his knowledge of English was a target of mockery. His literary clumsiness might have been caused by the fact that his parents never spoke English and bilingual Dreiser was to some extent autodidact, who wrote, "as if he hadn't a native Language". See: Pizer, Donald. *Critical Essays on Theodore Dreiser*. G.K. Hall & Co. Boston: 1981.

3. The “Genius”

In literature we usually find authors who write about others, and authors who write about themselves. However, there are also some authors who even when trying to write about others more or less write about themselves. Such is the case of Theodore Dreiser; his work “cannot be assessed – cannot indeed be understood – apart from the man.”²³ A reader who is acquainted with his autobiographical works must inevitably come to the conclusion that in each of his novels is an imprint of his hypertrophied ego. His “autobiographical writings are scarcely distinguishable from his fiction.”²⁴

Regarding the novels of Theodore Dreiser, it might seem appropriate and logical to begin with his first fruit, *Sister Carrie*. Most of Dreiser’s biographers do so sticking to the chronological order. Hopefully, we will not offend anybody by violating the tradition if we focus first on his semi-autobiographical novel *The “Genius”*. To outline the personality of Theodore Dreiser and the forces that shaped his young mind, we would hardly find more suitable source. *The “Genius”*, a story of Dreiser’s “own growing up, the deprived one, the yearner, the quester,”²⁵ together with his autobiographies, *Dawn* and *Newspaper Days*, provide rich material indeed. In this novel, besides his own life, Dreiser faithfully describes the reality of the American world of arts at the turn of nineteenth century. Unfortunately, as a piece of art, the novel itself is rather of a poor quality,²⁶ as it “contains unquestionably some of Dreiser’s worst writing.”²⁷ However, our aim is not to minutely retell or analyse the long-winded novel, but rather take notice of some crucial passages to understand Dreiser’s character, the ambivalent way of his thinking and the forces that shaped his mind.

²³ Shafer, Robert. An American Tragedy. In: Pizer, Donald. *Critical Essays on Theodore Dreiser*. G.K. Hall & Co. Boston: 1981. p. 258

²⁴ Warren, Robert Penn. *Homage to Theodore Dreiser*. New York: Random House, 1971. p. 9

²⁵ Ibid. p. 104

²⁶ *The “Genius”* was by many reviewers ranked as Dreiser’s worst novel. H.L. Mencken called it a literary behemoth. (In: Pizer, Donald. *Critical Essays on Theodore Dreiser*. G.K. Hall & Co. Boston: 1981. p. 247); *New York World* laconically mentioned that the novel, containing approximately three-hundred-and-fifty-thousand words, could have been by three-hundred-and-fifty-thousand words shorter. (In: Baturin, Sergej Sergejevič. *Theodore Dreiser*. Bratislava: Obzor, 1987).

²⁷ Matthiessen, Francis Otto. *Theodore Dreiser*. New York: William Sloane, 1951. p. 164

The main character of *The „Genius“*, is an anaemic and emotional creature who aspires to be an artist. His artistic disposition makes him attentive to the remarkable and singular. On the other hand, he is absolutely ignorant of the ordinary – a quality that is unmistakable with artists – and as every person of a restless soul, Eugene is permanently attracted by what he lacks. For a man who was born in Alexandria, Illinois, the object of his desire is Chicago; and for a man who is a bashful dreamer and idealist the object is a woman. Eugene’s weak constitution and different interests make him jealous of others; he is envious of their pleasures and opportunities. In spite of being of an emotional nature, he experiences difficulties with expressing himself. However, his invincible belief in himself, his desire for power and success as well as his will to live, prove to be the driving forces that enable him to overcome all the sorrows and failures that would break anyone else’s spirit.

Should we change Alexandria, Illinois, for Terre Haute, Indiana, we get almost veracious psychological profile of Dreiser, whose hypersensitiveness and dependence on his mother as well as contempt for his father played a major role in shaping of his character. The tight bond with his mother caused his inability to love any other woman; the animosity towards his pitiable father made him eager for success. “He felt from childhood onward that, somehow, for all his weaknesses, dreaminess, and ugliness, he was especially chosen to be great.”²⁸ “I’m not an ordinary man and I’m not going to live an ordinary life.”²⁹ The life stories of both Eugene Witla and Theodore Dreiser are practically alike. In fact, Eugene Witla is Dreiser’s faithful alter ego. “He re-enacts all the main stages in Dreiser’s career up to the writing of *Jennie Gerhardt*,”³⁰ except for the fact that Eugene is a painter and illustrator.

After working for some time as a type-setter and living through his first love disappointment, Eugene leaves for Chicago, a cosmopolitan city of opportunities that attracted young men from the country. “This was what Chicago did to the country. It took the boys.”³¹ Eugene is enchanted by the glamour and vividness of the city, although he also realises its dark side. “If it smiled on the strong or the lucky, it was

²⁸ Warren, Robert Penn. *Homage to Theodore Dreiser*. New York: Random House, 1971. p. 14

²⁹ *The „Genius“*. p. 612

³⁰ Matthiessen, Francis Otto. *Theodore Dreiser*. New York: William Sloane, 1951. p. 159

³¹ *The „Genius“*. p. 39

pitiless to those who failed.”³² In spite of changing several jobs, he does not make any real friends – he is too solitary and introspective to be sociable; nevertheless, he is deeply fascinated by artistic beauty. Earning his living as a bill collector, Eugene, a man of imagination keen mainly on the art of painting, seeks inspiration in museums and galleries, and finally enrolls in evening classes, where he timidly but capably makes his first attempts to transform reality into drawings and pictures. As a diligent and talented learner, with a help of his instructor, he soon gets a job as an illustrator for a newspaper.

Dreiser’s initial experience in Chicago was that of an outsider. Nevertheless, it was experience of an outsider who saw himself as ‘the chosen one’. Although it was very difficult for him to meet the costs of living, as he did only inferior jobs, he did not abandon his hopes. Being convinced that he was born to become a man of letters, he slowly and patiently wormed his way into the *Daily Globe*, where he was employed on trial, after having wisely resigned from the attempts to get a job with some prominent Chicago’s newspaper. With the assistance of magazine’s copy-reader and a friend, John Maxwell, he gradually acquired essential journalistic skills. On the one hand Maxwell drove Dreiser to philosophy introducing him into the works of Schopenhauer, Spencer and Voltaire, and encouraged him to hold on writing; on the other he cynically claimed that “life is a God-damned stinking, treacherous game, and nine hundred and ninety-nine men out of every thousand are bastards,”³³ which also had partial influence on Dreiser’s way of thinking.

Apart from being attracted by the arts, Eugene is also attracted by women; the aroused lust almost swallows his mind up. “Now, and of a sudden, he was plunged into something which awakened a new, and if not evil, at least disrupting and disorganizing propensity of his character.”³⁴ When he achieves his first ‘victory’, he is proud of it and feels “what it is to own a woman.”³⁵ Eugene does not hesitate to unscrupulously satisfy his sexual appetite. For him, the poor girls, whom he uses and leaves, are only the means to satiate his lust. It is natural, although severe reaction of a man who suffers inferiority complex to grow his self-confidence by exploiting the others.

³² Warren, Robert Penn. *Homage to Theodore Dreiser*. New York: Random House, 1971. p. 15

³³ *Newspaper Days*. p. 59

³⁴ *The „Genius“*. p. 44

³⁵ *Ibid.* p. 47

What we have just said about Eugene is first of all true for Dreiser. “Most men are secretly proud of their triumphs with women – their ability to triumph – and any evidence of their ability to attract, entertain, hold, is one of those things which tends to give them an air of superiority and self-sufficiency which is sometimes lacking in those who are not so victorious.”³⁶ In this psychological excursus Dreiser did not reveal the hidden truth of a man; he only promoted the subjective to the objective. The idea of a man as a triumphant lady-killer does not show the essence of a man but of Dreiser, who did not hesitate to use women as a means “to solace his mortally wounded ego.”³⁷

The course of events begins to change at the moment Eugene meets Angela Blue. She is different than the women he has known so far. Angela looks young, innocent, unsophisticated. “It does not take sexual affinity long to manifest itself, once its subjects are brought near to each other.”³⁸ Both Eugene and Angela are helpless under the weight of emotions. They are physically drawn to each other in spite of having absolutely different interests and attitudes; she is neither intellectually nor spiritually equal to him. Whereas Angela is wholly conventional – she values moderation, endurance and clear distinction between good and evil, Eugene does not care for conventions at all and his philosophy is incongruous with conventional morality.

Although for a moment Angela makes Eugene “feel the sacredness of love and marriage,”³⁹ his artistic soul cannot be satisfied by anything that is material. He seeks an ideal of a woman; for him, common matrimony is a life in the shackles. On the other hand, he is strongly attracted by Angela’s family; his mind is disturbed by disunity, being fascinated by and recoiled from their peaceful way of life at the same time. Whereas “they obeyed the ten commandments in so far as possible and lived within the limits of what people considered sane and decent,”⁴⁰ “his own moral laxity was a puzzle to him. He wondered whether he were not really all wrong and they all right.”⁴¹ He dwells upon the matter of good and evil, morality and perversity, and all he can make out of it is confusion.

³⁶ *The „Genius“*. p. 47

³⁷ Warren, Robert Penn. *Homage to Theodore Dreiser*. New York: Random House, 1971. p. 20

³⁸ *Ibid.* p. 65

³⁹ *The „Genius“*. p. 84

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* p. 127

⁴¹ *Ibid.* p. 127, 128

Dreiser's first wife was Sara White and her resemblance to Angela Blue leaps to the eye. In *Newspaper Days*, when describing his encounter with Sara White, Dreiser writes: "I felt a very definite point of view in her, very different from mine. In her was none of the variability that troubled me: if ever a person was fixed in conventional views it was she."⁴² Despite all the differences, that finally proved to be irreconcilable, he was hypnotised and fascinated by her. "I was more than ever moved by her grace and force. What sobriety! What delicacy of feature!"⁴³ In fact, it was not only Sara White who attracted Dreiser's attention; he was "lured by a number of the others."⁴⁴ At the same time, his thoughts dwelled on Sara White and her sister, and he did not even scruple to go out with an Irish girl, Miss Ginity, whose literary metamorphosis is Ruby Kenny. Both relationships, the real and the literary, were bound to fail. Dreiser realised that the affair with Miss Ginity was "only a momentary flame"⁴⁵ – for Eugene, Ruby is only a mistress. Under given circumstances, Eugene's proposal to Angela White is as incomprehensible as Dreiser's proposal to Sara White.

From a psychological point of view we might argue that Sara White possessed all the qualities that Dreiser subconsciously valued and consciously despised. To cope with the trauma of his youth concerning Christian upbringing he had to destroy a person who was the embodiment of Christian morality. From the very beginning he knew that such a relationship was doomed to failure – not only because he was a womaniser but also because he considered a marriage to be a refuge for the average. Why did he marry Sara White, then? As it is typical with Dreiser he offers a deterministic explanation, saying that "this was all a part of my essential destiny."⁴⁶ However, simultaneously he adds: "I can imagine no greater error of mind or temperament than that which drew me to her."⁴⁷ This is a typical conflict between Dreiser's belief in predestination on the one hand and the power of reason on the other, and this very inherent ambivalence makes him a notable subject of literary research.

⁴² *Newspaper Days*. p. 261

⁴³ *Ibid.* p. 265

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* p. 254

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* p. 259

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* p. 260

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* p. 260

After the engagement, Eugene sets out for New York where he strenuously makes his way up as a painter and illustrator. However, he soon realises, that true artists are not usually rich, and watching the spectacle of material display around him makes him depressed: “he came to the conclusion that he was not living at all, but existing.”⁴⁸ For Eugene – as well as for Dreiser – the quality of life is directly proportional to the amount of money that one possesses. The way to money leads through both painstaking work and social capital, and Eugene masters both. He embarks upon a two-year affair with an open-minded artist, Christina, who not only enables him to meet the right people but also supports him in his way of thinking. She is of the opinion that marriage is an obstacle in an artist’s life, and her simple and straight manners concerning sexual matters enchant him as he thinks the same. There is every indication that he has found a kindred spirit. Alas, this relationship, as well as the relationship with Rubby Kenny, is bound to fail. Not only because Christina, as a freethinking artist, wants to be free, but mainly because Eugene has already been engaged to Angela.

For years, Eugene hesitates with the wedding, being disturbed by doubts. On the one hand he rationally realises the irreconcilable gap between them, on the other he is too weak to break the engagement, as he does not want “to hurt any person’s feelings.”⁴⁹ To cut the Gordian knot, he seeks refuge in deterministic self-justification imagining that “perhaps he was destined to take her!”⁵⁰ This ambivalence has its roots in the conflict between the will of an individual and the will of society. Eugene feels like a victim of a tricky game and goes “to his marriage as a man goes to fulfil an uncomfortable social obligation.”⁵¹ No wonder then, that in the very last paragraph of *Newspaper Days* we read: “... I undertook that perilous adventure with the lady of my choice – and that, of course, after the first flare of love had thinned down to the pale flame of duty. Need anything more be said? The first law of convention had been obeyed, whereas the governing forces of temperament had been overridden – and with what results eventually you may well suspect.”⁵²

⁴⁸ *The „Genius“*. p. 154

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* p. 173

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* p. 179

⁵¹ *Ibid.* p. 202

⁵² *Newspaper Days*. p. 502

No matter which book we read, *The "Genius"*, *Dawn* or *Newspaper Days*, we still can see one personality and one fundamental problem behind – a questionable relationship to women, caused partly by Dreiser's inferiority complex, as he was "a weak, spindly boy, incompetent at games and cowardly in the rough and tumble of boyhood,"⁵³ and partly by his fixation on his mother, which made him incapable of loving anybody else. In any case, he would be an extraordinary subject for psychoanalysis; as a youth he apparently perceived the world through the prism of his libido, which is best manifested in *The "Genius"*, where he „wrote unblushingly about his own frantic and erotic career,"⁵⁴ and his passionate love affairs that wrecked his woeful marriage.

In Dreiser's life, women functioned as a cure with immense side effects. Not only did the affairs ruin his marriage but also his career as editor of *Delineator*. Nearing forty, he fell in love with "an eighteen-year-old beauty named Thelma,"⁵⁵ a daughter of a widow, Annie Ericsson Cudlipp, who was employed by the same company.⁵⁶ Although the relation remained purely ethereal, without any sexual encounter apart from one random kiss, he paid dearly for the flush of love, as he was fired after the girl's mother had urged his employers. Needless to say, this love affair also appears in *The "Genius"* almost without any change, except for the names.

At first sight it seems that Dreiser's – and consequently Eugene's – unconventional manners were a result of his artistic spirit, as conventionality is usually in contradiction with art. Nevertheless, the truth is that it was rather a demonstration of his mental confusion. His luckless search for an ideal of a woman was in fact a quest for his beloved mother. For all his life he felt the emotional loneliness of a solitary man, whose egotism did not enable him to experience true love except for self-love. The refuge he took in the concept of determinism might indicate both a kind of defeatism and cowardice to accept responsibility – he who is not a master of his destiny shall not be blamed.

⁵³ Warren, Robert Penn. *Homage to Theodore Dreiser*. New York: Random House, 1971. p. 14

⁵⁴ Lehan, Richard Daniel. *Theodore Dreiser: His World and His Novels*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1974. p. 117

⁵⁵ Lingeman, Richard R. *Theodore Dreiser: An American Journey*. New York: Wiley, 1993. p. 245

⁵⁶ Butterick Publishing Company that focused on women's and fashion magazines.

Although it might appear that the central theme of *The "Genius"* is 'a woman', as Eugene's affairs embrace nine,⁵⁷ the essence of the novel is in fact 'the will to power', which "however displayed, is fascinating."⁵⁸ Dreiser was convinced that the driving forces of the successful are money and sexual desire; and vice versa – that "the desire for money and sex had their common source in the desire for power."⁵⁹ The simplest way to manifest one's power is to seduce a woman; consequently, as a woman can be a source of money, one can secure other kinds of power. To Dreiser's eyes, a man was a predator driven by animal instinct to seize as much as possible, let it be money or women, which, in fact were only different entities on the scale of success.

However, not to judge Dreiser unfairly, portraying him as a sexual maniac and an acquisitive monster, we must admit that he was not to a large extent responsible. Should we accept for a moment the deterministic point of view, we must come to the conclusion that it was his upbringing that predestined him. Throughout Dreiser's works we find ever-present conflicts between fate and desire, religion and philosophy, wealth and poverty, the will of society and the will of an individual, finality and infiniteness. This ambivalence is likely to have been caused by the fact he was "the product of two very different parents."⁶⁰ On the one hand his mother, who "was beyond or behind so-called good and evil,"⁶¹ and on the other his rigid father, who believed that "Catholicism ... was the true religion," and that "an atheist was a criminal."⁶²

Not only the contrast between the "non-moral ... dreamy woman, who did not know how life was organized,"⁶³ and the high-principled, dogmatic father, but also the discrepancy between what he had been taught about life and what reality he actually experienced, must have had adverse influence on the young man's mind. Thus Dreiser's thinking reflects his upbringing; he possessed the qualities of both his parents – thoughtfulness, solicitousness and helpfulness of his mother, and whimsicality and

⁵⁷ Stella Appleton, Margaret Duff, Angela Blue – Eugene's wife, Ruby Kenny, Miriam Finch, Christina Channing, Nora Whitmore, Frieda Roth and Suzanne Dale

⁵⁸ *The „Genius“*, p. 407

⁵⁹ This is a typical feature of his characters, although only Frank Algernon Cowperwood was really successful.

⁶⁰ Lehan, Richard Daniel. *Theodore Dreiser: His World and His Novels*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1974. p. 4

⁶¹ *Dawn*. p. 10

⁶² *Ibid.* p. 15

⁶³ *Ibid.* p. 10

complexity of his father. His ruminating on life appears paradoxical, as his mind oscillated between admiration of the wealthy, powerful and successful, and sympathy with the poor, weak and miserable. However, should we take into account his own experience with extreme poverty, we understand both his never-ending strain to work his way up and at the same time his dream of social justice, as he never forgot the destitution of his family.

4. Sister Carrie

Dreiser's first novel, *Sister Carrie*, whose name might be an allusion to the works of Dreiser's favoured writer, Honoré de Balzac, and his novels *Cousin Pons* and *Cousine Bette*,⁶⁴ was published in 1900, and despite the author's expectations was not received with enthusiasm. In fact, it was rather "a resounding failure."⁶⁵ However, not because the readers rejected it – the public did not have much chance to get acquainted with the novel. The reason was that the publisher,⁶⁶ who was bound by the contract with Dreiser, disliked the manuscript because of its 'immorality' and thus "made publication almost a furtive affair."⁶⁷

The silence that settled over the novel depressed Dreiser; the reviews were scarce and the number of sold copies poor. Not only did his renown as a writer remain distant, but also his financial situation was unsatisfactory. Instead of earning money and a reputation as a novelist, he got almost destitute. The rumours about the novel that went around partly discredited him so the publishers were reluctant to accept his articles and stories. As a direct consequence of both the indifference towards the novel and a sudden chill in relations not only with publishers but also with his contemporaries, Dreiser's world collapsed. His ego was bruised and his mental health got ruined; he suffered "serious mental breakdown, a near approach to suicide, and a ten-year-long disappearance from the literary world."⁶⁸

From a contemporary point of view, the story of Caroline Meeber might seem trivial. There had probably been hundreds girls like Carrie. However, they had never been subject to a novel. In 1901, W. M. Reedy wrote: "The scenes of the book are laid

⁶⁴ Moers, Ellen. *Two Dreisers*. London: Thames and Hudson Ltd., 1970. p. 74

⁶⁵ Warren, Robert Penn. *Homage to Theodore Dreiser*. New York: Random House, 1971. p. 37

⁶⁶ The first edition was published by Doubleday, page & Co. in 1900. Although the book was recommended by the firm's reader Benjamin Franklin Norris, an American novelist, the owner of the company tried to persuade Dreiser not to insist on observing the contract to publish such an 'immoral' book. However, Dreiser firmly stood his ground and Doubleday had to print the copies. Nevertheless, he did nothing to promote the book.

⁶⁷ Moers, Ellen. *Two Dreisers*. London: Thames and Hudson Ltd., 1970. p. 171

⁶⁸ *Ibid.* p. 173

always among a sort of people that is numerous but seldom treated in a serious novel.”⁶⁹ In *Sister Carrie* Dreiser depicted a lifelike story of an unscrupulous girl, who after her first experience with hard labour realises that being hardworking and fair means to achieve nothing; she would do and practically does anything not to die as ‘nobody’.

The critics reproached Dreiser for immorality as he did not try to make any ethical judgement. “Carrie not only escaped punishment – Dreiser did not even regard her as sinful.”⁷⁰ Had Carrie suffered for her conduct, the story would not have been scandalous. Moreover, Dreiser dared to doubt the then moral conception. “Society possesses a conventional standard whereby it judges all things. All men should be good, all women virtuous. Wherefore, villain, hast thou failed! For all the liberal analysis of Spencer and our modern naturalistic philosophers we have but an infantile perception of morals.”⁷¹ This immensely outraged devotees of traditional morality.

Dreiser partly suffered religious education in its worst form, and felt compelled to oppose dogmatic and one-sided ecclesiastical interpretation of life; he “was expounding his conviction of the essential purposelessness of life and attacking the conventional ethical codes which to him seemed to hold men to standards of conduct that had no rational basis.”⁷² He cast doubt upon reductive, simplifying and schematic interpretations of life, and rather tried to explore its complexity. As a skilled reporter, he faithfully described what he had seen and experienced; he neither presented any moral values nor varnished reality. His veracious image of American life was a thorn in the side of its advocates as it deconstructed the erroneous assumption that road to success is for everybody.

Whereas for the generation of genteel tradition the world was a paradise made of illusions, for Dreiser it was a jungle dominated by fate, where nobody is in control of their destiny; people are like animals, driven only by their instincts. Human will has to bow to the inevitable and the humans are only creatures of circumstances; consequently, no one can be blamed for something beyond his control. The world of Dreiser lacks any

⁶⁹ Reedy, William Marion. “Sister Carrie”: A Strangely Strong Novel in a Queer Milieu. In: Pizer, Donald. *Critical Essays on Theodore Dreiser*. G.K. Hall & Co. Boston: 1981. p. 157

⁷⁰ Matthiessen, Francis Otto. *Theodore Dreiser*. New York: William Sloane, 1951. p. 61

⁷¹ *Sister Carrie*. p. 87, 88

⁷² Walcutt, Charles C. Theodore Dreiser: The Wonder and Terror of Life. In: Pizer, Donald. *Critical Essays on Theodore Dreiser*. G.K. Hall & Co. Boston: 1981. p. 63

purpose, and without purpose there is neither ethics nor morality; his philosophy lies 'beyond good and evil'.

Both defenders and opponents of Dreiser refer to his intellectual non-morality, yet the good-evil conception penetrates through *Sister Carrie*. Even though Carrie's questionable behaviour is not punished, in many philosophic excursions Dreiser indirectly expresses his subjective attitude towards Carrie and thus foreshadows further development of the story. At the very beginning we read: "When a girls leaves her home at eighteen, she does one of two things. Either she falls into saving hands and becomes better, or she rapidly assumes the cosmopolitan standard of virtue and becomes worse. Of an intermediate balance, under the circumstances, there is no possibility."⁷³ However trite the thought might seem, the two-dimensional, either-or, better-worse, good-evil pattern is always present. Nevertheless, from deterministic point of view, the human is not free to choose – it is the circumstances that rule.

How can then the traditional Christian ethical system stand up? Should we accept the fact that the humans are only creatures of circumstances, they cannot be made responsible. Consequently, it appears as if the bipolar perception of morals were irrelevant. And that is exactly what Dreiser tried to point out. "There are those who dully and naively divide the world into evil and good,"⁷⁴ he wrote in *Dawn*; and in *Sister Carrie*, he added a third dimension that lies 'beyond good and evil' – utility.

Many times in the novel Carrie finds herself in a plight that begs Hamlet-like questions. To take or not to take money from Drouet? To leave or not to leave Drouet? To flee or not to flee with Hurstwood? To leave or not to leave Hurstwood? For a Christian, these questions would be a matter of morality and conscience; for pragmatic Carrie, it is a question of her personal advancement. The life story of Carrie graphically shows the conflict between traditional Christian morality and Dreiser's non-morality, as she succeeds and fails at the same time.

⁷³ *Sister Carrie*. p. 3, 4

⁷⁴ *Dawn*. p. 13

4.1. Success of Caroline Meeber

In a simplified way, we might read the novel as an adventure of a country girl, who tries her luck in Chicago, and after some difficulties at the beginning, she finally basks in the glory, leaving only scorched earth behind her. We might also read it as a fable with the lesson that fame and glory are not always accompanied by happiness. Last but not least, we might read it as a fairytale about a simple girl who wins fortune by sheer chance. All the readings could be possible, had it not been for the fact that *Sister Carrie* is neither an adventure, nor a fable nor a fairy tale. None of the characters are two-dimensional, none of the situations can be reduced to one-sided interpretation. The characters and situations are mutually interwoven and form a vivid and complicated picture of both success and failure.

The model for the main character of his first fruit, Caroline Meeber – called *Sister Carrie* by her family, was Dreiser's sister Emma, whose life story was almost alike. She came to Chicago in quest for independence and by chance became a mistress of an older architect. Dreiser later remembered that “her whole life, outside of labour, was devoted, apparently, to the selection of men she considered as having sufficient charm of face and manner to enjoy a share of her favors.”⁷⁵ Later, she fell in love with a chief of a luxurious restaurant and they fled Chicago after he had stolen over three thousand dollars from the company's safe. To avoid prosecution, he sent back most of the money; they changed their names and started a new life in New York. In Dreiser's novel, the architect metamorphosed into Drouet and the chief into Hurstwood.

Moreover, when depicting Carrie's arrival to Chicago and her first steps in the city, Dreiser drew upon his former experience. It often happens that our dreams are shattered and seem hardly realisable when confronted with reality, and this is exactly what Dreiser lived through during his stay in Chicago. When he was sixteen, he set out for a journey that was “the very substance of adventure.”⁷⁶ Inexperienced, in a naive hope of working his way up, having been “caught by news of the tremendous activity of

⁷⁵ Ibid. p. 149

⁷⁶ Ibid. p. 295

Chicago,”⁷⁷ and soon disappointed and confused, he muddled along for almost two years until he was saved by his former teacher and joined Indiana University.

When nearing Chicago, *Sister Carrie* has stars in her eyes, she is “dreaming wild dreams of some vague, far-off supremacy, which should make it [Chicago] prey and subject the proper penitent, grovelling at a women’s slipper.”⁷⁸ Moreover, Drouet, a masher whom she meets on the train, full of the joys of spring, paints a vivid picture of the city life – no wonder that Carrie’s expectations are high. Nevertheless, arriving to Chicago and seeing the sorrow of everyday life, she quickly comes back down to earth; her first impression, when she meets her sister Minnie, is gloomy. “Amid all the maze, uproar and novelty, she felt cold reality taking her by the hand. No world of light and merriment. No round of amusement. Her sister carried with her much of the grimness of shift and toil.”⁷⁹

Undoubtedly, the life style of Minnie and her bitter husband, Sven Hanson, would desolate stronger characters. The Hanson’s remind the first puritans who do not know but Calvinistic toil and self-repression; there is no space for sensations as they might divert one to the evil. They strive hard to adapt to circumstances and their life is a symbol of hopelessness; they are “dead before they are in the grave.”⁸⁰ Instead of finding understanding, Carrie finds intolerance and coldness. This is apparent in the conflict concerning the visit in the theatre that clearly demonstrates the difference between the Hanson’s and Carrie, who has her head in clouds. Whereas Sven Hanson is “thinking of a full career of vanity and wastefulness which a young girl might indulge in,”⁸¹ Carrie craves for pleasure and dwells on high-flown speculations. Both the Hanson’s and Carrie are earthbound; nevertheless, while the Hanson’s are limited by their narrow-mindedness, Carrie is limited by her desires – “her imagination trod a very narrow round, always winding up at points which concerned money, looks, clothes or enjoyment.”⁸² Still, she is neither a naïve girl nor a simpleton; her seeming gullibility

⁷⁷ Ibid. p. 293

⁷⁸ *Sister Carrie*. p. 4

⁷⁹ Ibid. p. 11

⁸⁰ Lehan, Richard Daniel. *Theodore Dreiser: His World and His Novels*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1974. p. 69

⁸¹ *Sister Carrie*. p. 33

⁸² Ibid. p. 51

and naivety are only one side of her complex personality. The darker side develops only slowly.

The first trial comes when Carrie loses her job and meditates on the future. At this very moment she almost decides to humbly lower her head and come back home. Nevertheless, Drouet the saviour appears on the scene. In fact, to Carrie, Drouet is even more – a redeemer and an ideal of a man, even though only temporarily. What is Carrie to Drouet, then? His help and support might be equally a result of sympathy and selfishness – these two motives often come together. However, the most likely reason for his grace is enjoyment. Had it not been for his social standing, he would probably suffer a similar fate as Carrie. They are both vainglorious and in some way naïve, they lack a slightest sign of intellect and noble ideals are foreign to them. They both know that money means power, but the relative value of money evades them. Nevertheless, money is the basis of their relationship and by taking it Carrie willingly accepts the role of a kept woman – a weird way to freedom and independence. This human error and failure, as a Christian would perceive it, is in fact her first success, as it enables her to effortlessly move up.

When Carrie encounters Hurstwood, “a man who was more clever than Drouet in a hundred ways,”⁸³ the doubts concerning her existing life begin nibbling at her mind and she slowly realises that she could move up again. “Hurstwood seemed a drag in the direction of honor”⁸⁴ and Carrie “imagined that across these richly carved entranceways where the globed and crystalled lamps shone upon panelled doors, set with stained and designed panes of glass ... was happiness.”⁸⁵ However false her ideas are, she yields to Hurstwood’s pleadings and enchanted by his love she gets the impression of a change for a better and more honourable way of life.

Making her way up, she acts hypocritically and dishonestly; being with Hurstwood in her thoughts, she reproaches Drouet for his reluctance to marry her and thereby she soothes her guilty conscience – in her blindness she sees him as the guilty one.

⁸³ Ibid. p. 93

⁸⁴ Ibid. p. 131

⁸⁵ Ibid. p. 115, 116

Moreover, when he comes to know about her affair with Hurstwood and is justifiably angry, she behaves totally ungratefully.

“You oughtn’t to have had anything to do with him”, said Drouet in an injured tone, “after all I’ve done for you.”

“You,” said Carrie, “you - what have you done for me?”

Apparently Carrie has clamped the lid hard on her memories, forgetting that Drouet picked her out of the gutter and provided for her. “Why hast thou forsaken me?” Drouet might have asked. The answer would be an easy one: “You are no longer useful.” Should a balloon be rising up, one must jettison the dead weight.

When she faces the dilemma whether to return to Drouet and thus admit that she has erred, or to flee with Hurstwood, who has treated her unjustly, concealing his marital status, she gives preference to the second eventuality. When lured out by Hurstwood, who has misappropriated ten thousand dollars, she is free enough to come back. Still she chooses to stay with the embezzler, feeling another chance; life in New York with dishonest and temporarily wealthy Hurstwood is more promising than life in Chicago with decent and ordinary Drouet. However, it is not rapacity that drives Carrie, “she is too full of ‘wonder’ ever to be greedy.”⁸⁶ The crucial forces are “drag of desire for all which was new”⁸⁷ and “drag to something better,”⁸⁸ which is best demonstrated when she later turns her back upon Hurstwood the minute she feels that his state of affairs could ‘drag’ her down to lower level.

Should we seek some extenuating circumstances for Carrie’s conduct, we would probably find only a quiver of remorse, which is quickly chased away by the thought of ‘a nice jacket’, ‘a nice pair of button shoes’ and ‘stockings’. Carrie is a typical embodiment of human weakness; she is driven by the desire for something better and succumbs to temptation without any sign of resistance. From the point of view of Christian morality, she fails as she chooses the easier, alas, ungodly way, “for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction.”⁸⁹ An allusion to Carrie’s

⁸⁶ Matthiessen, Francis Otto. *Theodore Dreiser*. New York: William Sloane, 1951. p. 70

⁸⁷ *Sister Carrie*. p. 23

⁸⁸ *Ibid.* p. 102

⁸⁹ Matthew 7:13-14 (King James Version)

failure is also hidden in the revelation to Minnie, where Carrie takes the role of a temptress. Although Dreiser sees the origins of dreams in irritation of nerves,⁹⁰ only metaphysics can explain its contents. The age-long symbol of Hell – the deep pit – bodes ill; the waters might symbolise the river Styx; Carrie falling down the rock reminds the fall of Icarus. Undoubtedly, whatever explanation we come to, all the signs imply downfall.

Carrie is a fallen angel, falling prey to all the lures she encounters. Nevertheless, the puritan reading public might have accepted the novel at least as an allegory,⁹¹ had it not been for the fact that the moral lesson is perverted. At the very end of the novel, Dreiser comes out with a bizarre explanation of Carrie's actions. Let us recall the Hanson's as representatives of convention, who do "not better [their] situation save by honest labor." On the contrary, Carrie finds "honest labor ... unremunerative and difficult to endure." Measured by common laws, Carrie does not do anything that breaks them. She adapts well to the society where money makes the dreams come true. From utilitarian point of view she succeeds. Nonetheless, she violates the convention, as she "abandons the admired way." Instead, she takes "the despised path leading to her dreams quickly." To add fuel to the flames Dreiser asks: "who shall cast the first stone?" He could have as well said: "Judge not, that ye be not judged."⁹² It is possible that Dreiser used the biblical concept not only to purge away Carrie's guilt but also his own, as he himself was torn between convention and "longing for that which is better,"⁹³ and as well as Carrie he could not resist the temptation.

⁹⁰ *Sister Carrie*. p. 79

⁹¹ We can observe allegorical pattern in *Sister Carrie*. In the first contract with Doubleday, the name of the novel was *The Flesh and the Spirit*. (Matthiessen, Francis Otto. *Theodore Dreiser*. New York: William Sloane, 1951. p. 70)

⁹² Matthew 7:1 (King James Version)

⁹³ All the quotations above (except for ⁹²) come from the expurgated version of *Sister Carrie* (Dreiser, Theodore. *Sister Carrie*. Moscow: Higher School Publishing House, 1968. p. 546). Dreiser added several paragraphs containing a kind of moral lesson to appease the critics who reproached him for immorality. The unexpurgated version, which I used for my analysis, ends with Hurstwood's suicide.

4.2. The Fall of Hurstwood

“The central vitality of the novel ... lies in Hurstwood.”⁹⁴ His destiny is no less interesting than that of Carrie. The life stories of both Carrie and Hurstwood are precipitous, although each of them is heading a different direction. The lots of Carrie and Hurstwood are in contrast and yet, after Carrie reaches the top and Hurstwood touches the bottom, “frozen into annihilation,”⁹⁵ the world balance appears to remain untouched. If the life story of Carrie is justifiably regarded as questionable, the life story of Hurstwood, who became “the first unforgettable tragic figure of American literature in the twentieth century,”⁹⁶ rather arouses sympathy. It might even seem that the first part of the novel is just a lengthy introduction to the fall of Hurstwood.

In the background of Hurstwood’s miserable end might be the failure of his family life. Although he and his wife share a double bed, they do not share their troubles and joys; tolerance and respect are absent. They live in a marriage that aroused from his youthful and imprudent choice. Nevertheless, the matrimony enables him to maintain his social position. He is not of an adventurous character and rather takes things as they come; had it not been for Carrie, his humdrum existence might have continued undisturbed. However, after the encounter he gets a new lease of life – a feeling that is an inevitable sign of a fatigued family life. “The reason for this experienced individual’s interest ... was a flowering out of feelings which had been wintering in dry and almost barren soil for many years.”⁹⁷ Together with the new impulse he realises the misery of his own matrimony. “I am practically alone. There is nothing in my life that is pleasant or delightful. It’s all work and worry with people who are nothing to me.”⁹⁸

Hurstwood and Carrie have the same experience – they rub shoulders with people about whom they do not care. Indifference and shallowness – these are the qualities that shape the atmosphere in hypocritical and smooth-tongued society. People participate in

⁹⁴ Matthiessen, Francis Otto. *Theodore Dreiser*. New York: William Sloane, 1951. p. 73

⁹⁵ Moers, Ellen. *Two Dreisers*. London: Thames and Hudson Ltd., 1970. p. 3

⁹⁶ Loving, Jerome. *The Last Titan: a Life of Theodore Dreiser*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005. p. 146

⁹⁷ *Sister Carrie*. p. 121

⁹⁸ *Ibid.* p. 128

social events for the reasons that are best expressed in Oscar Wilde's *Picture of Dorian Gray*: "There is only one thing in the world worse than being talked about, and that is not being talked about."⁹⁹ One becomes 'somebody' by being seen and heard of in the right circles. Unfortunately, however merry and friendly the society might seem, one feels intrinsically lonely – and so do Hurstwood and Carrie.

Nevertheless, the root of their mutual attraction is neither loneliness nor profound thoughts. Whereas resigned Hurstwood simply seeks a way to make up for his unsatisfactory life, pragmatic Carrie feels "Hurstwood's passion as a delightful background to her own achievement."¹⁰⁰ Their motives differ considerably and their relationship is predetermined to fail. They both long for independence and happiness, believing that money bring it; besides money they do not know any values.

As well as in Carrie's case, the first trial of Hurstwood lies in cracking the dilemma whether to take or not to take the money; and in the same way "the chance presides over this scene."¹⁰¹ The chance makes Drouet and Hurstwood cross Carrie's path at critical moments, and it is the chance again that makes the ever-locked safe stay unlocked. However, unlike Carrie, who does not risk anything but her honour, Hurstwood's stakes are really high. It is likely that he has not intended to steal. Nevertheless, when he faces the temptation, his dubiousness does not stem from his conscience – "the true ethics of the situation never once occurred to him, and never would have, under any circumstances."¹⁰² Actually, he only counts the cost of the deed – what he fears is not potential remorse but the spectre of public denigration. Had the latter eventuality been eliminated, he would probably take the money at once; in this respect he is an unprincipled villain. However, unlike Carrie, who also has "no excellent home principles fixed upon her,"¹⁰³ he pays dearly for his sin as he robs himself of his family, friends, career and finally life.

When describing the isolated world of the Hanson's, in which Carrie is caught, Dreiser says that "transplantation is not always successful in the matter of flowers and

⁹⁹ Wilde, Oscar. *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. p. 22

¹⁰⁰ *Sister Carrie*. p. 197

¹⁰¹ Matthiessen, Francis Otto. *Theodore Dreiser*. New York: William Sloane, 1951. p. 74

¹⁰² *Sister Carrie*. p. 234

¹⁰³ *Ibid.* p. 78

maidens.”¹⁰⁴ We can add that the same applies for Hurstwood as well. After he steals and consequently returns part of the money, and moves with Carrie to New York, he is not the same man anymore. Unlike the Hurstwood of Chicago – a jolly, well-up saloon manager, the Hurstwood of New York is “an inconspicuous drop in an ocean.”¹⁰⁵ Although he manages to become a part-owner of a resort in Warren Street, his new existence undoubtedly lacks glitter and easiness of his existence in Chicago. “A man’s fortune or material progress is very much the same as his bodily growth. Either he is growing stronger ... or he is growing weaker.”¹⁰⁶ It is not surprising that in the case of Hurstwood the second eventuality is true, as he has already passed the apex of his career and life. The weight of middle-age, or rather approaching old-age descends on him. However, as he is not used to meditate on himself, he hardly comes to realise it. “Tomorrow [is] another day,”¹⁰⁷ he consoles himself as the days pass by. Reading the newspapers, apathetically and resignedly, he deludes himself that he would get over; nevertheless, inactivity is the effect.

Dreiser’s psychological analysis of Hurstwood’s spiritual and intellectual decay, which terminates in death, is certainly one of his masterpieces; and since Dreiser “is not interested in his characters as individuals, but as social types,”¹⁰⁸ we might perceive Hurstwood’s downfall as a symbol of the whole American society, “in which there are no real equals, and no equilibrium, but only people moving *up* and *down*.”¹⁰⁹ As a saloon manager of reasonable wealth, Hurstwood is a favoured man; as an ordinary person without sufficient financial resources no one cares for him. In fact, he himself becomes ‘nobody’ after he blends into the mass of beggars and drifters. The fickleness of fate is graphically demonstrated in the incident with a beggar who asked for alms when, in Chicago, Carrie, Drouet and Hurstwood come out of the theatre. Whereas Drouet gives him a dime “with an upwelling feeling of pity,”¹¹⁰ Hurstwood barely takes a notice. Now, in New York, he himself takes the role of the beggar and the rich look

¹⁰⁴ Ibid. p. 54

¹⁰⁵ Ibid. p. 305

¹⁰⁶ Ibid. p. 338

¹⁰⁷ Ibid. p. 386

¹⁰⁸ Asselineau, Roger. Theodore Dreiser’s Transcendentalism. In: Pizer, Donald. *Critical Essays on Theodore Dreiser*. Boston: G.K. Hall 1981. p. 100

¹⁰⁹ Matthiessen, Francis Otto. *Theodore Dreiser*. New York: William Sloane, 1951. p. 75

¹¹⁰ *Sister Carrie*. p. 139

past him. Not only does the ironic twist resemble Jesus's words: "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me,"¹¹¹ but it also reveals the dark side of the individualistic society, which convulsed by a crisis hardly cares about those who failed.

Dreiser drew heavily upon his own experience when he described Carrie's arrival in Chicago and identically did he when depicting Hurstwood's failure. New York, the two-faced city, lured people of all sorts, and Dreiser was no exception. However, only few were lucky to get ahead and enjoyed heavenly pleasures; most drudged and struggled on without any chance of advancement. Not surprisingly, sixteen-year-old Dreiser, who had dreamt of reaching for the stars, found himself among the majority of the unlucky, who lived through unimaginable misery. For two years he eked out, moved from place to place and changed several menial jobs. Then a chance meeting took his burden off – he began studying at Indiana University with the help of his former teacher.

Dreiser's second encounter with New York began in 1894, when the worst economic depression before the Great Depression culminated. He came to the city to try his luck, and again, as seven years ago, his situation was grey and gloomy. "New York was difficult and revolting. ... In New York the outsider or beginner had scarcely any chance at all, save as a servant."¹¹² In Chicago, St. Louis and Pittsburgh Dreiser was an experienced newsman; in New York, "so vast, so varied, so rich, so hard," he could "offer merely a gift of scribbling."¹¹³ Instead of successful resumption of his journalistic career, New York gave him a cold welcome. Thousands unemployed and homeless men, who lived on charity bread, wandered the streets in hope to find at least a place to stay overnight. When making his rounds of newspaper offices, with negative outcome, he personally experienced how the jobless might feel. After several refusals, as the offices were "overrun with applicants,"¹¹⁴ he went to City Hall Park, opposite the grand buildings, where the prominent editor's had a seat, and watched the "large company of bums, loafers, tramps, idlers, the flotsam and jetsam."¹¹⁵ At this point he not only recalled the immense gulf between the rich and the poor, but also realised that unlike

¹¹¹ Matthew 25:40 (King James Version)

¹¹² *Newspaper Days*. 482

¹¹³ *Ibid.* 474

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.* 463

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.* 464

success, failure was everyday phenomena. Out of this total contrast “the idea of Hurstwood was born.”¹¹⁶ R. D. Lehan, who is concerned with the origins and background of Dreiser’s novels, wittily remarks: “Hurstwood was the imaginative product ... of Dreiser’s own fear of failure.”¹¹⁷

¹¹⁶ Ibid. 464

¹¹⁷ Lehan, Richard Daniel. *Theodore Dreiser: His World and His Novels*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1974. p. 58

5. Jennie Gerhardt

The fiasco of the first publication of *Sister Carrie* undermined Dreiser's will and determination. Moreover, he suffered another blow when his father died. Again, life turned its back on him. Not only did he fail as a writer, but also his attempts to start again as a journalist were luckless. Even though *Sister Carrie* was published and positively accepted in England, which was encouraging, the American publishers were reluctant to contract with him. Finally, he found an editor in chief of a small company, who agreed to pay in advance for the next novel and Dreiser began working on *Jennie Gerhardt*. However, his state of mind was failing, which might have been caused both by the disillusion and by the fact that he was again short of money. The work on *Jennie Gerhardt* drew out to almost ten years.

Although some reviewers again blamed Dreiser for immorality, generally the novel was received incomparably better than *Sister Carrie*. H. L. Mencken even did not hesitate to call *Jennie Gerhardt* "the best American novel ... with the lonesome but Himalayan exception of 'Huckleberry Finn'."¹¹⁸ However, we must bear in mind that he wrote this in 1911, fourteen years before the publication of Dreiser's masterpiece, *An American Tragedy*. Retrospectively, comparing to other Dreiser's novels, *Jennie Gerhardt* seems "second rank of Dreiser's achievements."¹¹⁹

When writing the novel, Dreiser again drew from memories of his parents and siblings. "*Jennie Gerhardt* is based more explicitly upon the Dreiser family than any other of the author's novels."¹²⁰ Whereas the story of *Sister Carrie* was inspired by the life of his sister Emma, "Jennie's story is the composite story of Mame and Sylvia."¹²¹ Mame encountered "a prominent lawyer and officeholder in Terre Haute, ... which

¹¹⁸ Mencken, Henry Louis. A novel of The First Rank. In: Pizer, Donald. *Critical Essays on Theodore Dreiser*. G.K. Hall & Co. Boston: 1981. p. 209

¹¹⁹ Wadlington, Warwick. Pathos and Dreiser. In: Pizer, Donald. *Critical Essays on Theodore Dreiser*. G.K. Hall & Co. Boston: 1981. p. 214

¹²⁰ Gerber, Philip L. *Plots and Characters in the Fiction of Theodore Dreiser*. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1964. p. 78

¹²¹ Lehan, Richard Daniel. *Theodore Dreiser: His World and His Novels*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1974. p. 83

ended in intimacy and what by some might be deemed seduction.”¹²² Sylvia had an affair with a ne’er-do-well, Don Ashley, who abandoned her since she “was really little more than a street girl to him, a mere temporary diversion.”¹²³ However, Sylvia was alone and pregnant. Unlike Dreiser’s sisters, whose moral profile judged by the then criteria is questionable, Jennie is of a refined, poetic and ethereal character, as if she were the embodiment of goodness and mercy; the unfortunate lot of *Jennie Gerhardt* calls for compassion. As in *Sister Carrie*, the central motif is a life-story of a poor American girl. However, whereas Carrie is a self-interested and desirous, Jennie is a benign idealist, a saint who patiently endures the misery of life – poverty and gruelling work; “her heart might be lonely, but her lips continued to sing.”¹²⁴

As for Mr. and Ms. Gerhardt, they are practically faithful metamorphoses of Dreiser’s parents. Whereas in *Sister Carrie* he alluded to his family only in the juxtaposition of Carrie and the Hanson’s, in *Jennie Gerhardt* he did not mince his words when describing religious insanity of Mr. Gerhardt – that is to say Dreiser’s father, who “accepted literally the infallibility of the Pope, the Immaculate Conception, the chastity and spirituality of all priests and nuns, trans-substantiation on the altar, forgiveness of sins, communion and the like.”¹²⁵ Dreiser “looked on him as mentally a little weak”¹²⁶ and in this way he described him in the novel.

The beginning of *Jennie Gerhardt* with the description of the Gerhardt family, who live literally on the breadline, faithfully reflects miserable life conditions of the Dreisers. They were loaded down with debts and the children had to go to the depot for the leftovers of coal that fell of the wagons – exactly as the Gerhardts children do. One of Dreiser’s sisters also met a man, who became the family benefactor and their “mother, being without moral bias or social training ... entered into this arrangement to the extent of permitting the child to keep the money.”¹²⁷ Understandably, their father, who “no longer had any sane judgement of life or its needs,”¹²⁸ was not informed.

¹²² *Dawn*. p. 13

¹²³ *Ibid.* p. 260

¹²⁴ *Jennie Gerhardt*. p. 29

¹²⁵ *Dawn*. p. 5

¹²⁶ *Ibid.* p. 6

¹²⁷ *Ibid.* p. 13

¹²⁸ *Ibid.* p. 54

Unlike Carrie's relationship with Drouet, "the seduction of Jennie is not regarded as evil,"¹²⁹ as the motive is noble; unfortunately, death prevents senator Brander from marrying Jennie and thus making their relationship legitimate – there the problems begin. This sudden and accidental twist makes Jennie a pariah and a pitiful figure; not only the society but also her own father exhibits exceptional grudge against her because of her moral failure. Nevertheless, he paradoxically loves the posthumous child – as if he wanted to make him a redeemer of Jennie's sins. Apart from her mother, there is only one indulgent person – doctor Ellwanger, whom "despite his Lutheran upbringing, the practise of medicine ... had led ... to the conclusion that there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamed of in our philosophies and in our small neighborhood relationships."¹³⁰

Desperate straits make Jennie ponder over her future and she cannot break out of the vicious circle – she needs somebody to love, but she cannot get seriously acquainted with anybody because of the child. In *Sister Carrie* it is Drouet who by chance appears on the scene at the right time; in *Jennie Gerhardt* it is Lester Kane and Jennie yields to him, as "she was his natural affinity."¹³¹ Lester Kane is a man of "a naturally observing mind, Rabelaisian in its strength and tendencies, but confused by the multiplicity of things ... the uncertainty of their justification." Although "born a Catholic, he was no longer a believer," moreover "he was by no means sure that he wanted marriage on any terms."¹³²

The fact that Jennie conceals the presence of her child might seem dishonest both with Lester and Vesta. Her mind oscillates between love and the truth, and she chooses love. For her, unlike for Carrie, money is not paramount. She is not a self-centred person; she takes the role of a kept woman for the sake of pure love and so does Lester take the role of her provider and a man. However tragic and pathetic her situation is, we can hardly call dishonest her conduct that stems from love. She considers her life a failure and concerning the then morals it is a failure, indeed. Nevertheless, it is a failure

¹²⁹ Matthiessen, Francis Otto. *Theodore Dreiser*. New York: William Sloane, 1951. p. 112

¹³⁰ *Jennie Gerhardt*. p. 107

¹³¹ *Ibid.* p. 136

¹³² *Ibid.* p. 137

caused by the unfortunate and unexpected death of senator Brander, after which Jennie becomes an innocent and involuntary victim of causality.

The illegitimate bond with Lester places Jennie into another awkward situation – she either has to deceive or immensely hurt her own father, as Lester does not intend to marry her. The fact that she chooses a white lie is rather an act of mercy and respect than felonious deception. Moreover, it is in fact Lester, who is primarily to blame, since he does not legitimate their relationship. However, he also finds himself in an unenviable position – his family prefers him to marry Letty Pace, a woman of his class and he has to keep his love affair secret. When it later comes out, the pressure of society and economics shows that however powerful love is, it “may hold out for a time but eventually stands defenceless.”¹³³

Jennie’s tragedy lies in her unfulfilled relationships. First, it is senator Brander, a conscientious and dedicated man, who passes away before he can keep his promise of marriage. Second, it is Lester, who is alive but indecisive about the bonds of matrimony. When she stays abandoned and lonely, a cruel twist of fate deprives her even of Vesta. Finally, Jennie locks herself away into her own world of goodness and tenderness, taking charge of two orphans, and thereby accomplishes purpose of her life.

Jennie, as well as Carrie, finds herself in a world where money rules. However, she does not become obsessed with Mammon, and is not a thrall of selfish desires. Although Lester secures her materially, she does not indulge in shallow revelry; as every contemplative character, she seeks the meaning of life in transcendence. What might seem a life failure could in fact be perceived as a success of a sorely tried woman, who not only withstands adversity, but also resists the lures of material world.

¹³³ Gerber, Philip L. *Plots and Characters in the Fiction of Theodore Dreiser*. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1964. p. 82

6. An American Tragedy

For many years Dreiser paid attention to the kind of murder that neither originated in hatred nor was an act of retribution, but rather stemmed from the desire to get ahead at all costs. There had been several cases of wilful murders committed by young men, who needed to get rid of their mistresses either to avoid scandal or because the women were a threat to their marriages. “There was, Dreiser recognized, something distinctly – and frighteningly – *American* about the nature of the murders,”¹³⁴ which were a result of “obligations, rules, and taboos” that “dominated relations between the sexes,” – “the bonds of sexuality were so strong that they could be broken only by violence.”¹³⁵

Although *An American Tragedy* is based on an actual crime, a murder of pregnant Grace Brown who was drowned by her lover Chester Gillette, a nephew and an employee of a shirt manufacturer, the details of the murder as well as the characters are slightly modified. Thus Clyde’s way to the crime appears to be determined by fate, and Roberta’s death is more or less a result of an accident rather than premeditated murder. The effect Dreiser achieved by the changes again fits in his conception of the world, where life itself has no purpose and the humans are only creatures of circumstances and captives of causality without control over their destiny.

However, the main theme of *An American Tragedy* is not a murder – it is the desire to move up; a theme that Dreiser already depicted in *Sister Carrie*. Craving for personal profit drives both main characters, caught in modern secularised society and blinded by the glamour of success. The murder, although only intended, as Roberta dies accidentally, is only a logical consequence of uncontrollable desire. Whereas Carrie gets ahead over dead bodies only metaphorically, Clyde Griffiths has innocent blood on his hands; and unlike the life story of immoral Caroline Meeber, the life story of Clyde Griffiths, who is burdened with Christian morality, represents a struggle between good and evil.

¹³⁴ Gerber, Philip L. *Plots and Characters in the Fiction of Theodore Dreiser*. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1964. p. 127

¹³⁵ Moers, Ellen. *Two Dreisers*. London: Thames and Hudson Ltd., 1970. p. 210

In the novel Dreiser elaborated many aspects of American life and as always, instead of moralising, he simply disclosed the dismal reality. Although the prevalent dream of success gradually grew into idolatry, and the tales of ambitious boys who went from rags to riches kept alive hopes of the American poor, in practise “democracy or not, plates of bullet-proof glass seemed effectively to isolate one American economic class from another.”¹³⁶ The only means to break through to the higher level was money, and people generally believed in its power. Yet, the way one comes into possession was under the microscope; the wealthy were generally respected only when they made their way up not only within the pale of legality but also within the compass of propriety that was dictated by Christian morality. In reality, to get ahead legally was not so difficult. However, to succeed and not to violate good manners was impossible for the vast majority. Not without reason, the original title of the novel was *Mirage*, which best demonstrates Dreiser’s view on the illusion that the world of material success presents.

As it is typical of Dreiser, in the psychological study of the main character, he put himself into Clyde Griffiths’ shoes to the extent, that except for the murder it is difficult to distinguish what is his imaginative construct and what is his own experience. “He could ... easily identify with someone, who had grown up in poverty, had fallen in love with a simple and conventional girl, and had become trapped between a sense of duty and ... desire for a beautiful woman who represented a life of wealth and luxury.”¹³⁷ The early youth of both Clyde and Dreiser is characteristically identical. After Eugene Witla, Clyde Griffiths is another Dreiser’s metamorphosis – or at least partial metamorphosis, as Clyde rather represents who Dreiser had wanted to be than who he actually was. Nevertheless, Clyde’s hunger for money and a good reputation, insatiable sexual desires “intensified by parental thou-shall-nots,”¹³⁸ and consequent burdensome remorse, appear to be a faithful paraphrase of Dreiser’s early youth. Further, we might presume that Dreiser’s own desire to get rid of his legitimate wife, after he embarked

¹³⁶ Gerber, Philip L. *Plots and Characters in the Fiction of Theodore Dreiser*. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1964. p. 128

¹³⁷ Lehan, Richard Daniel. *Theodore Dreiser: His World and His Novels*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1974. p. 142

¹³⁸ Grebstein, Sheldon Norman. An American Tragedy: Theme and Structure. In: Pizer, Donald. *Critical Essays on Theodore Dreiser*. G.K. Hall & Co. Boston: 1981. p. 314

upon an affair with Helen Patges Richardson,¹³⁹ was a strong reason for writing the novel.¹⁴⁰ Dreiser had already coped with his matrimonial mistake in *The "Genius"*, where he also let his wife's incarnation die. If Goethe saved himself from self-murder by writing *Die Leiden des jungen Werther*, then we might assume that Dreiser transformed his murderous thoughts into his novels.

When portraying the other characters, Dreiser, similarly as in *Jennie Gerhardt*, drew upon his immediate experience of his parents, and again indirectly but clearly expressed his mindset: "The history of this man and his wife is of no particular interest here save as it affected their boy of twelve, Clyde Griffiths."¹⁴¹ It seems as if he obliquely reproached his own parents, since they irrecoverably affected the young and sensitive boy, Theodore Dreiser.

Clyde's father, Asa Griffiths, is a blend of Dreiser's father and Asa Conklin, "a man most weak and variable" and "an impractical dreamer,"¹⁴² who was an owner of an estate agency in Chicago, and for whom Dreiser used to work. It seems that Asa Conklin was an oddity of a man, "so wholly ridiculous and impossible,"¹⁴³ as Dreiser's father, who seemed to be "concerned much more with the hereafter than with the now."¹⁴⁴ Out of these two men Asa Griffiths was conceived – "one of those poorly integrated and correlated organisms, the product of an environment and a religious theory, but with no guiding or mental insight of his own."¹⁴⁵ Similarly, Mrs. Griffiths is a blend of Dreiser's mother and Mrs. Conklin, who ran a religious mission. "The mainstay for both Conklin and his wife was religion,"¹⁴⁶ and religion is what Dreiser again contended with when depicting the Griffiths.

¹³⁹ She was Dreiser's twenty-three-year-younger cousin, who became his second wife.

¹⁴⁰ Moers, Ellen. *Two Dreisers*. London: Thames and Hudson Ltd., 1970. p. 210, 211

¹⁴¹ *An American Tragedy*. p. 11

¹⁴² *Dawn*. p. 471

¹⁴³ *Ibid.* p. 476

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.* p. 5

¹⁴⁵ *An American Tragedy*. p. 11

¹⁴⁶ *Dawn*. p. 472

6.1. Prisoner of the Past

Undoubtedly, childhood experience plays a major role in shaping one's character and the fundamental sensation of Clyde's early youth is embarrassment. Primarily, he is ashamed of his parents, "unimportant looking"¹⁴⁷ street preachers, and consequently of himself, as he has to be present at their missions, facing "indifferent street audience."¹⁴⁸ Even "an idler and loafer" notices "the psychological error of all this" saying that the "oldest boy ... feels outa place" and "can't understand all this stuff."¹⁴⁹ Although Clyde certainly feels more than he is able to express, which is a usual symptom of childhood, he understands that something must be wrong. The discrepancy between proclaimed "love and mercy and care of God,"¹⁵⁰ and severe reality that has little "to do with the remote and cloudy romance which swayed the minds of his mother an father"¹⁵¹ is too striking. Even though Clyde's parents later realise how humiliating effect the missionary work has upon him, and cease to make him participate, his ego is irrecoverably wounded.

Besides embarrassment, it is gnawing enviousness that consumes Clyde's mind. Similarly as Dreiser himself, he senses social inferiority and is "full of primal pain of wanting and not having."¹⁵² His desire for money, luxury and beautiful girls lies in the background of his persistent effort to extricate himself from the misery he lives through. Being torn between the Christian religion, which tells him what he should be like, and his individual and self-centred needs, he soon rejects religion in favour of the material world.

Rather than intellectual powers, Clyde uses intuition; in this respect he is similar to Carrie. He knows that there is 'something wrong' on the religious mission, as well as he senses that 'things are not right' when his parents grieve over his sister Esta, who runs away with a lover, and gives birth to an illegitimate child. Furthermore, he wisely

¹⁴⁷ *An American Tragedy*. p. 4

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.* p. 4

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.* p. 7

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.* p. 6

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.* p. 5

¹⁵² Warren, Robert Penn. *Homage to Theodore Dreiser*. New York: Random House, 1971. p. 21

senses that he is limited by his own family background as well as Carrie senses that the world of Hanson's, and later Hurstwood's decay would drag her down. The only way out and up is to sever one's ties with what keeps you down, or at least to become independent – and Clyde feels that “he must do something for himself soon.”¹⁵³

It is a natural way of forming one's personality that a child on the journey from youth to maturity opposes their parents, especially their father, and Clyde is an illustrious example. His thoughts revolve around theatre, motion pictures and galleries – the kind of amusement his parents refuse as sinful – and he feels the right to go anywhere with his own money. He leaves school, since he believes that education is an obstacle in the race for wealth, and secures “a place as an assistant to a soda water clerk,”¹⁵⁴ which, as he imagines, “would provide him ... with all the ice-cream and sodas he desired.”¹⁵⁵ Clyde's hunger for everything he lacks again resembles Carrie, whose “craving for pleasure was so strong that it was the one stay of her nature.”¹⁵⁶ He is amazed by the new world he encounters, good-looking and well-dressed girls, who talk about “such interesting things – parties, dances, dinners, the shows they had seen.”¹⁵⁷

The world Clyde heads towards is definitely not a world of intellect; it is rather glitter and prodigality that he is bewitched by right through. The hotel, where he later works as a bell-hop, is “a peculiar symbol for the glamour and the waste of the modern American city.”¹⁵⁸ However, for Clyde the hotel primarily represents the real world, opposed to the illusory world of his parents. Metaphorically, a hotel is a place where all the vices of the world concentrate, and Clyde, whose desires are frustrated by conventions, readily accommodates to the environment, where the only meaning of life is to make and splash money.

However, Clyde's first sexual encounter clearly demonstrates how inconsistent his accommodation is. Let a naïve, lustful, romantic dreamer go into a brothel and he will be either deceived or disillusioned. Being enticed by the other bell-boys to go to such a

¹⁵³ *An American Tragedy*. p. 26

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.* p. 26

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.* p. 27

¹⁵⁶ *Sister Carrie*. p. 32

¹⁵⁷ *An American Tragedy*. p. 28

¹⁵⁸ Matthiessen, Francis Otto. *Theodore Dreiser*. New York: William Sloane, 1951. p. 193

house, Clyde experiences both. First, he feels sympathy with the fille de joie, as she fools him with the refrain of an innocent girl who by a stroke of life found herself at such a dreadful place. Later, after he yields, “because of the moral precepts,” he sees the act as “decidedly degrading and sinful.”¹⁵⁹ His mental attitude to women is apparently warped – his subconscious mind still inclines to the convention whereas he consciously struggles against it. He feels desire and attraction together with contempt and repulsion. Clyde’s inner conflict stems from the discrepancy between his consciousness of Christian principles and his compulsion to satisfy natural desires.

What Clyde actually lives out is a typical internal conflict of a weak Christian in the pagan world. Through his short life, Clyde struggles between the values of good, represented by Christian morality, and the evil, represented by his natural tendencies. From the cradle he has been told what is good and what is evil, which has understandably left so deep an imprint on his psyche that in spite of rational repudiation of Christianity, the latent moral code emerges anytime there is a direct contrast between his actions and his subconscious mind. Simply put, Clyde is a prisoner of his past.

However, Clyde’s self-infatuation and self-centred interests soon suppress the bright side of his personality, which he graphically demonstrates by sneaking off after the unfortunate car accident. Although he is not guilty, the fear of “punishment and the unending dissatisfaction and disappointment”¹⁶⁰ is stronger than his self-esteem and honour. Clyde is “a poor, simple boy, who pursues neither honor nor glory nor distinction.” His goals are “no further from him than the nose on his face.”¹⁶¹ Nevertheless, the inner struggle between good and evil, and consequent inconsistencies in his conduct, are inseparable features of his personality.

¹⁵⁹ *An American Tragedy*. p. 77

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.* p. 165

¹⁶¹ Moers, Ellen. *Two Dreisers*. London: Thames and Hudson Ltd., 1970. p. 228, 229

6.2. Pride Comes Before the Fall

Clyde's life story is determined by chances and incidents. He happens to secure a job in a drug store and later in a hotel; he is involved in an unfortunate car accident and flees Kansas City. When working at the Union League Club in Chicago, by chance he meets his uncle Samuel Griffiths, a wealthy collar manufacturer of Lycurgus, who gives him a chance "to do something and be somebody."¹⁶² Needless to say that Clyde the interloper snatches the opportunity to move up. Moreover, although starting from scratch, he too soon mentally appropriates the social standing of his wealthy relatives and becomes conceited.

Clyde's contradictory feelings remain virtually the same concerning their inconsistency. Nevertheless, the contempt for "people so far below him"¹⁶³ takes the place of moral doubts. When he meets Rita and considers a chance of "a relationship which might not be a very difficult to modify or escape,"¹⁶⁴ he suppresses his desire for an easy "approach to pagan pleasure,"¹⁶⁵ not on transcendental grounds, but as it could endanger his connections with his uncle's family. The Griffiths are terribly mistaken about Clyde's "moral and religious character,"¹⁶⁶ when promoting him to a head of a stamping room, operated by twenty-five women. No greater harm would be done, should they let a dog-fox in a henhouse, which Clyde later shows by giving Roberta a try-out because of her round, blue and intelligent eyes, and pleasing lips and nose, rather than because of her experience.

Mutual affection, caused by shared experience of early youth, is the motive that makes Clyde and Roberta trespass the demarcation line between convention and desire. They grew up in extreme poverty; their parents, "honest, upright, God-fearing and respectable,"¹⁶⁷ identically refuse reality and are full of illusions. Both Clyde and Roberta want to break out the vicious circle of destitution. However, whereas Roberta,

¹⁶² *An American Tragedy*. p. 179

¹⁶³ *Ibid.* p. 244

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.* p. 137

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.* p. 233

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.* p. 265

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.* p. 280

“seized by the very virus of ambition and unrest that afflicted him,”¹⁶⁸ only dreams of enjoying Clyde’s love and standard of living, he aims steeply upwards. Still, he cannot help but being attracted to her. What Dreiser calls “a chemic or temperamental pull,”¹⁶⁹ is in fact the very same frustrated sexual desire that made Dreiser himself exploit girls for the sake of his satisfaction. Clyde does not intend to legitimate his relationship with Roberta, “he could be very happy with her if only he did not need to marry her.”¹⁷⁰ Even before he seduces Roberta by contemptible extortion, he has already, although vaguely, another girl on his mind – Sondra Finchley, a girl of the Griffiths’ world, to which he aspires to belong.

Since the moment Clyde accidentally encounters Sondra, Roberta becomes a burden. Unlike Roberta who has “nothing”, Sondra is a girl who has “everything.” Comparing to Sondra’s position and beauty, Roberta has very little to offer. On the one hand Clyde sees a chance to marry into a prominent and wealthy family. On the other there is only an ordinary and prosaic life with Roberta. Had it not been for her unwanted pregnancy, he would simply turn his back upon her. However, there is the expected child – another witness of Clyde’s past that endangers his future. In such an awkward and delicate situation, from his perspective, a murder is a comprehensible, “seemingly easy and so natural”¹⁷¹ solution. And yet Clyde, non-aggressive and unenergetic, would not possibly think about it had it not been for another coincidence. While going to post a letter to Sondra, he buys a newspaper and comes across an article describing the disappearance of two young people at Pass Lake.

Although the internal split Clyde lives through strikingly reminds the age-old struggle between good and evil, the answer does not lie within the either-or formula. On the one hand Clyde can act honestly by marrying Roberta and thus legitimate their relationship and their child. However, this would thwart his prospects of getting ahead. On the other hand he can simply leave Roberta to her fate. Nevertheless, subsequent disgrace would have the same effect as if he married her. In both cases, the gate of success would remain locked. He comes to the place where the good-evil matter

¹⁶⁸ Ibid. p. 287

¹⁶⁹ Ibid. p. 292

¹⁷⁰ Ibid. p. 296

¹⁷¹ Ibid. p. 507

becomes a matter of the point of view. Whereas from the standpoint of Christian morality only the marriage could alleviate Clyde's previous failure, and whatever else is evil, from Clyde's subjective standpoint whatever decision he makes, the result is bad anyway. He finds himself in a tight corner and the only solution is to bypass the good-evil pattern. Although the voice of conscience reminds him of Christian values every now and then, his instinctive tendency towards personal bliss is dominant. Clyde's future depends on Roberta's existence or non-existence, and his own good lies in her non-existence. If she were accidentally annihilated, the question of good and evil in connection with her would become irrelevant. And that is exactly what runs through his head.

Even though Clyde painstakingly selects the scene of the crime and lures out the unsuspecting girl into the boat under false pretence of looking for a suitable place for their honeymoon, the question whether he is really ready to murder remains open. While he becomes "a static between a powerful compulsion to do and yet not to do,"¹⁷² Roberta falls off the boat by accident, and the only misdeed Clyde commits is that he cowardly lets her drown, and sneaks away as well as after the car accident in Kansas City. Nevertheless, he is neither a cold-blooded criminal, nor a cunning schemer, and "everything Clyde does is so inept that he is discovered at once."¹⁷³

Whether Clyde is technically guilty of murder or not, his fate is sealed long before the official trial takes place. Without being aware of it, he becomes a pawn in a political game played by the county coroner, Fred Heit, and the district attorney, Orville W. Mason. As well as Clyde has utilised every possible means for his own benefit, now he himself becomes a mere means in the attorney's career. The question of guilt and innocence is irrelevant; he simply must be guilty, as it is convenient for Mason's advancement. Neither the investigation nor the trial tries to clarify Clyde's motives and the extent of his misdemeanour. Nobody doubts his guilt. In fact, nobody even considers the possibility of his innocence.

¹⁷² Ibid. p. 563

¹⁷³ Matthiessen, Francis Otto. *Theodore Dreiser*. New York: William Sloane, 1951. p. 203

However, it is necessary to admit that Clyde, “the most arresting example of feeble and blundering incapacity,”¹⁷⁴ gets lost in his own lies and thereby only deepens mistrust of his investigators. Even Clyde’s attorney, Belknap, sees the course of events too unlikely for the jury to believe. Moreover, it is a question whether Belknap’s concern is to help Clyde or himself, as he simultaneously wants to defeat Manson for political reasons. Both parties use questionable methods to achieve their goal; Manson’s assistant fakes evidence, and Belknap comes up with a dressed up version of the events that could soften up the jury. It is interesting that both Mason and Belknap partly share Clyde’s experience. Mason’s world-view is influenced by his poor youth, and Belknap knows very well what it is like to have affairs with two women at the same time. However, neither of them sympathises with Clyde. There is no time for feelings; the only objective is to win the case. It is paradoxical that all the men involved dream of success and they are determined to do almost anything to work their way up. In this respect they do not differ from Clyde. However, unlike him, they do not cross the boundary of what is socially respectable and acceptable.

¹⁷⁴ *An American Tragedy*. p. 677

7. Trilogy of Desire

The Financier, *The Titan*, and *The Stoic*, published in 1912, 1914 and 1947 respectively, represent a specific sort of a documentary novel,¹⁷⁵ in which Dreiser portrayed the life and times of a typical robber baron, “a financial wizard nonpareil,”¹⁷⁶ Frank Algernon Cowperwood. In the trilogy Dreiser focused on economic and political situation in America in the second half of the nineteenth century. He mainly drew from public sources, and most of the material he gathered up from the newspapers. However, he also got to know some prominent financiers personally, as he wrote a series of articles about the most successful ones.

The Financier covers the first success and failure of Frank A. Cowperwood. After making his living as a bookkeeper for Waterman & Co., and later as a clerk for Tighe & Company, he opens his own brokerage, and successively specialises in doing business with loans and bonds, taking advantage of both his faculty and political contacts. As well as other Dreiser’s male characters, Cowperwood is immensely attracted by women. What he seeks is passion; he approaches women emotionally rather than intellectually; he treats them in a macho-like and business-like manner; the Seventh Commandment is nothing to him as it is nothing to Dreiser himself. In fact, the reason Cowperwood was based on Yerkes rather than on some other prominent magnate was the countless sexual affairs of the imposing tycoon.¹⁷⁷ In this respect Cowperwood strongly resembles Eugene, that is to say Dreiser himself. Again we can notice the concept of the world governed by ‘the will to power’, which is among others manifested by the desire to dominate the gentler sex.

As a commencing broker Cowperwood encounters and falls in love with an attractive, wealthy woman, Mrs. Lillian Semple, who is prematurely left a widow. He is attracted towards her by urgent and almost uncontrollable passion; moreover, her

¹⁷⁵ Although *An American Tragedy* is also based on a real event, it is too interwoven with Dreiser’s imaginative constructs to be regarded as a documentary novel.

¹⁷⁶ Gerber, Philip L. *Plots and Characters in the Fiction of Theodore Dreiser*. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1964. p. 87

¹⁷⁷ Matthiessen, Francis Otto. *Theodore Dreiser*. New York: William Sloane, 1951. p. 131

indifference only arouses his combative soul. For him, to conquer is as natural as to breathe, and he does not “delude himself with any noble theories of conduct in regard to her.”¹⁷⁸ Even though his business ideas are almost visionary, his affairs are conditioned by momentary gusts of passion. Lillian, five-years his senior, is “nothing more to him than the shadow of an ideal,”¹⁷⁹ still he induces her to marry him, as a decent family life is a precondition for social and thus financial advancement. Nevertheless, the marriage actually does not prevent him from embarking upon another love affair.

When Cowperwood gradually wins a fair reputation in Philadelphian financial and social circles and continues to thrive, a sudden stroke of fate spoils his long-time effort. The Great Chicago Fire gives rise to a slump, and Cowperwood, working for the city treasurer, loses public money in a risky stock speculation. He is charged of larceny and sentenced to four years and three months in solitary confinement, of which he serves thirteen months before being granted a pardon. Nevertheless, he is not a greater villain than the other people involved in the political-economic intrigues; he is just chosen as a scapegoat by politicians and financiers who want to save their own skin.

In *The Titan*, Cowperwood gets ahead again as a phoenix arising out of the ashes – being released from the prison, and re-making a fortune during the panic of 1873, he remarries his mistress Aileen Butler, moves to Chicago, where he bankrupts his competitors and takes over the street-railway system. “In the five hundred and more pages of *The Titan* we are told how he came, how he saw, and how he fought and conquered.”¹⁸⁰ However, it is necessary to add that although he does not lose his wealth, at the end he again becomes defeated by even more powerful forces of revolting masses, which thwart his intention to gain monopoly control over public transport in Chicago. Yet, “even in disaster he asks for no quarter, no generosity, no compassion. Up or down, he is sufficient unto himself.”¹⁸¹

If in *The Financier* Cowperwood shows some human qualities, in *The Titan* he is completely devoid of anything that could be called sentimental or emotional; he is

¹⁷⁸ *The Financier*. p. 77

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.* p. 64

¹⁸⁰ Edget, E. F. Dreiser and His Titan. In: Pizer, Donald. *Critical Essays on Theodore Dreiser*. G.K. Hall & Co. Boston: 1981. p. 235

¹⁸¹ Mencken, H.L. The Titan. In: Pizer, Donald. *Critical Essays on Theodore Dreiser*. G.K. Hall & Co. Boston: 1981. p. 240

“merely an extraordinary gamester – sharp, merciless, tricky, insatiable.”¹⁸² Needless to say, his life in Chicago continues to be a mixture of business and love affairs. *The Titan* might be regarded as “merely a record of the adventures in vice of Cowperwood and the creatures of both sexes with whom he surrounds himself.”¹⁸³ His second marriage gets wrecked in the same way as the first one – Cowperwood encounters another young girl, Berenice Fleming, whose love to some extent compensates his business failure.

The Stoic, published posthumously, as Dreiser finished the last part of the trilogy instantly before his death, is an account of both Cowperwood’s life with Berenice and his last struggle, an attempt to develop and control London’s underground system, a project too demanding for the aging tycoon, who finally dies under the weight of the exertion. After he is gone, another businessmen finish his work, and his millions fade like a dream. Although the end of the novel begs a question of the futility of his long-life effort, one cannot keep from pondering whether and how the world would develop had it not been for these business ‘Titans’, who despite their self-centredness and avidity used their creative force to contribute to the development of humankind. “In the long haul, seeming evil produced positive good.”¹⁸⁴

Dreiser’s attitude to the nouveau riche was completely different from the standpoint of the muckrakers.¹⁸⁵ “Dreiser was undertaking to reveal a more dire secret than the muckraker had ever suspected; he was undertaking ... to show the workings of his mind and soul, to show his acquisitiveness, ... to place him not only in society but in nature, in the economy of the universe.”¹⁸⁶ One cannot keep from thinking that he actually sympathised with the mighty and ruthless man Cowperwood, that is to say his real model, Charles Tyson Yerkes, a Philadelphian financier and speculator, who had the power to create and destroy and thus determine other people’s fates. “If the career of the fictional Eugene Witla had been a projection of Dreiser’s image of himself as artist, that of the real Yerkes gave an even grander scope of self-indulgent daydreams of

¹⁸² Ibid. p. 240

¹⁸³ Edget, E. F. Dreiser and His Titan. In: Pizer, Donald. *Critical Essays on Theodore Dreiser*. G.K. Hall & Co. Boston: 1981. p. 235

¹⁸⁴ Gerber, Philip L. *Plots and Characters in the Fiction of Theodore Dreiser*. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1964. p. 91

¹⁸⁵ Matthiessen, Francis Otto. *Theodore Dreiser*. New York: William Sloane, 1951. p. 130

¹⁸⁶ Warren, Robert Penn. *Homage to Theodore Dreiser*. New York: Random House, 1971. p. 77

identification with the Nietzschean superman.”¹⁸⁷ Although in the trilogy Dreiser delineates the questionable way the wealthy tycoons made a fortune, the emergence of gigantic monopolies and omnipresent political machinations, the whole piece of work seems to be more a glorification of the powerful than a social critique. Dreiser adopted social-Darwinistic views, Spencer’s idea of the survival of the fittest, and Nietzsche’s concept of the superman,¹⁸⁸ and the resulting impression resembles a heroic epic. Cowperwood “seems to be an all-conquering hero to the novelist who created him.”¹⁸⁹

In *Sister Carrie*, *Jennie Gerhardt*, *The “Genius”* and *An American Tragedy*, Dreiser shifted conventional perception of morality, exploring the territory beyond good and evil; in the trilogy he went even further, as he described the world where everything is governed purely by strength and weakness. In such a world the categories of good and evil not only cease to matter, they simply become irrelevant. The only purpose of life is to fight; all the living creatures live on each other; death is inevitable and the only thing one can do before being defeated is to seize as much as possible. If the other Dreiser’s characters, let it be Eugene, Carrie, Hurstwood, Jennie, Lester or Clyde, have something that could be called conscience, Frank A. Cowperwood has nothing of the sort; the only thing he recognises is power.

Unlike Eugene, Carrie, Jennie and Clyde, Cowperwood comes from a comfortable background; his father is a well-to-do banker, “ambitious to get ahead socially and financially,”¹⁹⁰ and young Cowperwood shares most of his father’s qualities. He is “a natural-born leader, ... courageous and defiant,” who cares “nothing for books” and rather wants “to know about economics and politics.”¹⁹¹ As a young boy, when pondering on the organisation of life, he happens to witness a mortal combat between a lobster and a squid, and comes to the conclusion that things “live on each other.”¹⁹²

This recognition together with his desire for wealth, prestige and dominance determines his next actions. Cowperwood realises that to succeed means to be like the

¹⁸⁷ Ibid. p. 56, 57

¹⁸⁸ Matthiessen, Francis Otto. *Theodore Dreiser*. New York: William Sloane, 1951. p. 132

¹⁸⁹ Edget, E. F. Dreiser and His Titan. In: Pizer, Donald. *Critical Essays on Theodore Dreiser*. G.K. Hall & Co. Boston: 1981. p. 236

¹⁹⁰ *The Financier*. p. 26

¹⁹¹ Ibid. p. 27

¹⁹² Ibid. p. 29

lobster, which devours the squid. Whatever he later embarks upon, let it be business or seducing a woman, he does it with a consummate mightiness of a man whose paramount aim is to conquer and benefit; he is self-interested, egoistical and pragmatic, and by no means concerned with anything that lies beyond the scope of his own satisfaction. He reasons beyond conventional morality, and probably beyond morality at all; the only thing he obeys is his motto: "I satisfy myself."¹⁹³ His Machiavellian brain does not stop at anything, let it be bribery, deception or telling lies. Nevertheless, together with his desire to succeed at all costs in anything he embarks, Cowperwood is also a great benefactor, howbeit all his benefactions "were designed always to promote his own popularity."¹⁹⁴

Although Cowperwood indeed stands out as a superman, whom only "inevitable forces can crush,"¹⁹⁵ let it be the Great Chicago Fire, the pressure of masses or his own death, yet he is a human to the extent that he lives through personal sorrows. Both his marriages end in ruins, and his longing for social prestige does not come to expectations; the generation of prominent, old-fashioned and to some extent two-faced bankers and businessmen does not take him to their bosom, as they neither accept his undisguised desires nor approve of his methods. Thus, being intrinsically alone, the only thing that he holds is money and power consequent upon this.

¹⁹³ Ibid. p. 161

¹⁹⁴ Gerber, Philip L. *Plots and Characters in the Fiction of Theodore Dreiser*. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1964. p. 91

¹⁹⁵ Ibid. p. 107

8. Success and Failure

“Throughout his major novels, Theodore Dreiser reiterates the story of individuals crippled by environment, hoodwinked by illusion, buffeted by ill-favored circumstance, helplessly tossed thither and yon by the blind winds of chance.”¹⁹⁶ Indeed, it is a question if a single character presented in the selected novels has their life well in hand; even Frank Cowperwood, who seems to be almost almighty, yields to larger powers. They are all pawns “in the hand of a blind or malevolent fate.”¹⁹⁷ We might feel that through the prism of Dreiser’s determinism, all human endeavours are in vain, since the die has been cast. Nevertheless, what has been determined is not the destiny of the characters but their individual predispositions. They have their lives well in hand to the extent that they can always choose their way and so they do; all of them choose the way of money.

It appears that the desire for wealth and success is an inseparable part of American identity, deeply rooted in history. However, the original puritan idea of becoming wealthy by permanent hard work headed towards transcendency, as the aim was to be achieved in succeeding generations. The American dream at the turn of the nineteenth century became perverted – whereas for the older generations the essence was hard work and hope, the generation at the turn of the century wants to get rich at all costs, without effort and primarily fast. “Success is what counts in the world, and it is little matter how success is won,”¹⁹⁸ Dreiser wrote in one of his articles. It is likely that he spoke his mind as he himself was “consumed by yearnings for wealth, display and power,”¹⁹⁹ and “often saw his work as a mere instrument to satisfy his grossest aspirations ... his artistic ambition was painfully intermingled with ambition for money and fine clothes.”²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁶ Ibid. p. 21

¹⁹⁷ Warren, Robert Penn. *Homage to Theodore Dreiser*. New York: Random House, 1971. p. 11

¹⁹⁸ Ibid. p. 39

¹⁹⁹ Ibid. p. 16

²⁰⁰ Ibid. p. 32, 33

Dreiser and his characters were born into the world where to be successful does not mean to be a good person, but to be wealthy. The transcendental dimension had vanished. “The doctrine of the Survival of the Fittest articulated the primary law of American behavior by making clear how the rich few had in the post-Civil War years shackled almost unbreakable controls over the many.”²⁰¹ In his novels, Dreiser delineates the society as a pyramid, where people climb up over one another. However, the space atop is little. Should one person get higher, another one has to fall, and the higher this swap comes up the more drastic the fall is. Moreover, the idea of society as a pyramid has another implication – the higher a person is the lonelier they are.

In the previous chapters we have tried to examine the life stories of Carrie, Hurstwood, Jennie, Clyde and Cowperwood.²⁰² What did they achieve? It is not an optimistic picture. Carrie basks in the glory, but in fact she is depressed and dissatisfied. Hurstwood wrecks his career and makes his way to a suicide. Clyde is so eager to climb up that he does not hesitate to consider a murder, and finally is executed, however innocent he is. Jennie is driven by noble motives, but the fate is against her, and she lives alone, caring for two orphans. Only Frank lives life to the fullest, but he dies unexpectedly at the moment he expects it least.

Should we say if they succeed or fail, we would hardly find an easy answer. On the one hand, we can measure success purely by wealth and social standing; on the other hand, we can judge it from the perspective of Christian morality, which Dreiser opposed. The latter perspective shows that all the characters failed. Cowperwood and Hurstwood commit adultery; Carrie, Jennie and Clyde fornicate. They all lie, Hurstwood steals, and Cowperwood bribes. Carrie, Clyde and Frank are driven by the desire for possession and social standing, which might be seen as vanity or even greed. Hurstwood is a hypocrite who “lost sympathy for the man that made a mistake and was found out.”²⁰³ However, he himself keeps his wife in the dark concerning Carrie, and when he is found out, instead of losing sympathy with himself, he blames his family.

²⁰¹ Matthiessen, Francis Otto. *Theodore Dreiser*. New York: William Sloane, 1951. p. 217

²⁰² I deliberately omit Eugene, as he in fact represents the life story of Dreiser himself. Moreover, there are tens of other minor characters who are worth analysing, but it is not purpose of this thesis.

²⁰³ *Sister Carrie*. p. 85

Jennie Gerhardt is a case apart. As well as Carrie she is a young shy girl, enchanted by luxury and comfort, but that is the only thing they have in common. If Jennie likes senator Brander's potency to be generous, it is not because she wants to take advantage of it, but because she admires the generosity itself. If she were wealthy, she would most likely be as generous as the senator. If senator Brander had not died, they would get married and their fornication would probably pass unnoticed. Alas, senator Brander dies and Jennie becomes a woman sufferer. However, unlike the others, her intentions are earnest.

It might seem irrelevant to judge the characters according to Christian law. However, Dreiser was at loggerheads with many of his critiques because he violated the law both in reality and in his novels. Unlike the writers of genteel tradition, who described the world as it should be, Dreiser portrayed it as it actually was. "The elder generation was in love with illusions, and looked at truth through a glass darkly and timorously."²⁰⁴ Not so Dreiser. As a result, *Sister Carrie* was considered amoral; *The "Genius"* was banned, after a long struggle of the New York Society for Suppression of Vice.²⁰⁵ *The Titan* was "drastically reduced by editorial pressure,"²⁰⁶ because of Cowperwood's love affairs. Of course, from contemporary point of view, the novels are not objectionable, as the perception of morality has shifted. Nevertheless, because of his explicitness, Dreiser was regarded as "revolutionary hero."²⁰⁷

As for the material and social success, all the characters long for a better life. Carrie, Jennie and Clyde run away from poverty; Hurstwood runs away from the misery of his marriage; Frank moves ahead from wealth to more wealth. At first sight we can see a striking similarity between Carrie and Clyde except for the consequences of their actions. They both exhibit craving for success and wealth rather than intellectual qualities, and they both exploit the other sex for their own benefit. From the moral standpoint they fail. However, materially and socially Carrie succeeds – maybe because unlike Clyde, she is lucky in being born as a woman. She could not have made Drouet pregnant, and when leaving him she does not have to solve such a terrible dilemma as

²⁰⁴ Sherman, Stuart P. The Naturalism of Mr. Dreiser. In: Pizer, Donald. *Critical Essays on Theodore Dreiser*. G.K. Hall & Co. Boston: 1981. p. 4

²⁰⁵ Warren, Robert Penn. *Homage to Theodore Dreiser*. New York: Random House, 1971. p. 90

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.* p. 89

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.* p. 90

Clyde when deciding what to do with Roberta. It is a questionable advantage; nevertheless, the result speaks for itself. Carrie rises up like Icarus, and unlike Clyde's, her wings do not melt.

Jennie might be seen as Carrie's sister, because both characters were based on Dresier's sisters; but although "Jennie, like Carrie, enters the world of wealth by seduction,"²⁰⁸ in other respects they differ considerably. Whereas Jennie "is all love and affection; Carrie is all ambition."²⁰⁹ For Jennie a better life means a better life for everybody. She is by no means selfish; on the contrary, she is attentive and sympathetic. She "is not seduced by the glitter of wealth. She is no gold digger, she is capable of love,"²¹⁰ which makes her a rare bird among the others, as a "fantasy character" and an "ideal woman."²¹¹ However, her selflessness prevents her from being successful in the terms of material advancement.

Hurstwood is a wretch. Had it not been for his encounter with Carrie, he might have enjoyed his modest wealth and decent social status. Instead, he gradually falls down, step by step, until he vanishes at the bottom of the social pyramid. Instead of dying naturally as a respectable bar tender, he dies voluntarily as a lonely beggar.

Cowperwood is a real embodiment of Machiavelism, "before which men quailed and women shivered delightedly."²¹² He is strong and cunning – these are qualities that make him stand out from the other characters. As well as Hurstwood, he mingles among higher society; however, he never makes such a fatal mistake; he walks a tightrope, but is careful enough to hedge against potential danger. Even when he once fails and ends up in prison, he keeps hopes alive, being driven by some intrinsic force, which is something Hurstwood lacks; besides, Cowperwood's successes are always more prominent than his failures. Thus he permanently rises up.

All the characters come from different stories; yet, when reading Dreiser's novels we might get the impression of one colossal saga about the American society in the

²⁰⁸ Ibid. p. 43

²⁰⁹ Gerber, Philip L. *Plots and Characters in the Fiction of Theodore Dreiser*. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1964. p. 77

²¹⁰ Ibid. p. 77

²¹¹ Lehan, Richard Daniel. *Theodore Dreiser: His World and His Novels*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1974. p. 87

²¹² Warren, Robert Penn. *Homage to Theodore Dreiser*. New York: Random House, 1971. p. 132

second half of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century. In one of the essays on Dreiser we read that *Sister Carrie*, *Jennie Gerhardt*, *The Financier*, *The Titan*, and *The "Genius"* "constitute a singularly homogenous mass of fiction."²¹³ The essay was written in 1915, long before the publication of *An American Tragedy*, and even longer before the publication of *The Stoic*. Nowadays, looking at the Dreiser's works with a distance, we can see that the latter novels did not break the homogeneity.

Although the motive of success and failure might not be primary, it is not insignificant. Dreiser's naturalistic philosophy, influenced by Darwin, Spencer and Nietzsche, lies in his belief, that our society "is a jungle in which the struggle for existence continues."²¹⁴ Success means existence, and failure non-existence. In this respect, all the characters failed, as they did not leave any descendants.²¹⁵ Socially, to succeed means to be 'somebody'; to fail means to be 'nobody'. Carrie and Cowperwood are lucky enough to succeed; the others fail. Dreiser himself was so scared of being 'nobody' that he made a lifelong effort to become 'somebody', in which he succeeded.

²¹³ Sherman, Stuart P. The Naturalism of Mr. Dreiser. In: Pizer, Donald. *Critical Essays on Theodore Dreiser*. G.K. Hall & Co. Boston: 1981. p. 5

²¹⁴ Ibid. p. 7

²¹⁵ Only Jennie gives birth to a child. However, the girl dies.

9. Conclusion

The objective of my diploma thesis was to analyse the motif of success and failure in selected novels of Theodore Dreiser, and to illustrate how this motif reflects Dreiser's own life story and experience. To get an idea of Dreiser's life I read through his autobiographies *Dawn* and *Newspaper days*, which proved to be very good and interesting sources of information about Dreiser's childhood and youth. Then I studied selected secondary sources, mainly post-war critiques, which focus on the reflections of Dreiser's life in his fiction. Both on the critiques and Dreiser's autobiographies I based my further analysis of the following novels: *Sister Carrie*, *Jennie Gerhardt*, *The "Genius"*, *An American Tragedy*, and *The Trilogy of Desire* (*The Financier*, *The Titan*, *The Stoic*).

After having read both Dreiser's autobiographies, the fictions and the critiques, I arrived at the conclusion that in each of the selected novels we can find an imprint of his life experience. Two novels could be regarded as written out of his life – *Sister Carrie* and *Jennie Gerhardt*, which are based on the life stories of his sisters. *The "Genius"* is a semi-autobiographical novel, and we might perceive it as an indirect account of his youth. Even though *An American Tragedy* was inspired by real events, far from Dreiser's own experience, he again made use of his memories, when portraying the family of Clyde Griffiths. *The Trilogy of Desire* seems to be a case apart, as it is an attempt of a historical novel. However, Dreiser's choice of the topic is in accordance with his quest for wealth and glory, and he cannot deny his identification with the main character. Although it is a novel neither out of his life nor about his life, we can read it as a novel of his unfulfilled desire.

As for the motif of success and failure, Dreiser challenged the erroneous assumption of the defenders of the American Dream that everyone can achieve success. Unlike the authors of genteel tradition, he did not describe the world as it should have been, but as it actually was. Thus his novels are full of disappointment, disillusionment, meaningless pursuit of wealth, broken families and disorganised lives. Although success and failure

seem to be opposite entities, Dreiser shows that what one considers success, others might consider a failure and vice versa, depending on the point of view.

In his novels, Dreiser questioned the traditional literary conception of American society. Firstly, he challenged traditional morality, inferring that decency and godliness are obstacles on the road to success (mainly in *Sister Carrie*, *Jennie Gerhardt* and *The "Genius"*). Secondly, he cast doubt on the basic principles of democracy, showing that the higher on social ladder one is, the more benefits they enjoy (in *An American Tragedy* and *The Trilogy of Desire*). Thirdly, he unprecedentedly introduced a human as a selfish and bestial creature, driven by atavistic animalism.

Although many opposed Dreiser – “and these included the great majority of journalistic reviewers and most academic critics”²¹⁶ – some of the respected authors appreciated his literary contribution, among others Sherwood Anderson, who wrote: “The feet of Dreiser are making a path for us, the brutal heavy feet. ...The men who follow Dreiser will have much to do. ... But because of Dreiser, we, in America, will never have to face the road through the wilderness, the road Dreiser faced.”²¹⁷

²¹⁶ Pizer, Donald. Dowell, Richard W. Rusch Frederic E. *Theodore Dreiser: A Primary and Secondary Bibliography*. G.K. Hall & Company, 1991. p. 92

²¹⁷ Anderson, Sherwood. Dreiser. In: Pizer, Donald. *Critical Essays on Theodore Dreiser*. G.K. Hall & Co. Boston: 1981. p. 13, 14

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