

# 150 years since the birth of Theodore Dreiser, the great American novelist

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26 August 2021

August 27 marks the 150th anniversary of the birth of writer Theodore Dreiser in Terre Haute, Indiana. Dreiser was the author of a number of the most important American novels ever written, including *Sister Carrie* (1900), *Jennie Gerhardt* (1911), *The Financier* (1912), *The Titan* (1914) and *An American Tragedy* (1925). The last-named was his crowning achievement, perhaps the most perceptive work of fiction ever written about the pursuit of the “American Success Dream” and its devastating social and psychic consequences.

Dreiser also wrote journalism, short stories and a number of fascinating memoirs, including *A Book About Myself* (1922, later republished as *Newspaper Days*, 1931) and *Dawn* (1931). In *Dreiser Looks at Russia* (1928), the writer chronicled his 1927 visit to the Soviet Union. *Tragic America* (1931) was a volume of Dreiser’s essays devoted to the situation in the US following the Wall Street Crash. In 2011, the University of Illinois Press published *Theodore Dreiser: Political Writings*.

One survey of US literary history, published in the middle of the last century, noted that because Dreiser “reveals the very nerves of American society he has exerted a more profound, a more lasting influence than any other novelist on twentieth century realistic fiction in America. Several generations of writers are already his debtors” (*Literary History of the United States*, 1953). His influence, the same volume remarked, is discoverable in “a seriousness of approach to the material of American life.” He was “faithful to his art and made no compromises with the censors and the prudes.”

The novelist had an immense impact on many significant figures in American literature, including prominently Sherwood Anderson, John Dos Passos, Sinclair Lewis, F. Scott Fitzgerald (who “looked up to Dreiser with awe,” according to a biographer), James T. Farrell and Richard Wright.

Soviet filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein developed a screenplay of *An American Tragedy*, which was never filmed. Erich Von Stroheim considered a film version of the same novel, and Josef von Sternberg directed an adaptation of *An American Tragedy* (1931), which Dreiser disliked. *A Place in the Sun*, a somewhat bowdlerized version of Dreiser’s book—thanks to the McCarthy era—directed by George Stevens, appeared in 1951. Legendary left-wing German stage director Erwin Piscator produced a stage version of *An American Tragedy* that premiered in Vienna in 1932. The famed novel has also been adapted for opera, radio and television.

Dreiser, a figure of intense integrity, candor and sensitivity, could burst into tears, it is said, at the sight of some of the pain-stricken or careworn faces he observed on the street.

The article posted below was originally published in the *Bulletin*, a predecessor of the *World Socialist Web Site*, in June 1991. The appreciation of Dreiser’s work took the form of a review of Richard Lingeman’s valuable biography of the novelist.

Numerous events and publications have been devoted to the anniversary of Dreiser’s birth. However, by and large, the writer’s dedication to

representing social life in unsparing, objective-realistic terms, as an exponent of the “naturalist” school, does not meet with contemporary academic or literary critical approval. Moreover, despite Dreiser’s obviously strong and angry determination to expose the plight of his female characters, to the extent of titling two of his major and most moving works, *Sister Carrie* and *Jennie Gerhardt*, after such protagonists, feminist critics have expressed “concern” about “his investment in gender stereotypes,” as one commentary notes, and these same critics’ examinations “of Dreiser’s treatment of female sexuality often reach negative and even censorious conclusions.” Nothing less could be expected from such reactionary quarters.

There is no reason to modify the 1991 article’s wholehearted admiration for Dreiser, whose notion that the “whole test of a book” was whether it was “true, revealing, at once a picture and a criticism of life,” remains as valid today as when the author first articulated it.

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Richard Lingeman’s two-volume biography of Theodore Dreiser provides a thorough account of the life and work of the man who is arguably this country’s greatest novelist. The first volume, *At the Gate of the City, 1871 – 1907*, was published in 1986, and the second part, *An American Journey, 1908 – 1945*, in 1990.

Lingeman (born 1931), the executive editor of the liberal publication *The Nation*, appears to have conscientiously assembled the biographical material. In any case, the presentation is sufficiently even-handed so that the attentive reader can draw his or her own conclusions about this fascinating and difficult life.

Anyone familiar with *An American Tragedy*, *Sister Carrie*, *The Financier*, or virtually any of Dreiser’s works would certainly look to a biography to answer a number of questions: What social and historical forces are reflected in his work? What background produced the burning emotional intensity one experiences in his novels? What were his own social conceptions? What drove him to write his books in the particular fashion he did? What literary influences helped form Dreiser as an artist?

It is certainly possible at least to begin to answer these questions through a critical reading of Lingeman’s book, in combination with Dreiser’s novels themselves.

Dreiser was born in Terre Haute, Indiana in 1871. Immediately following the Civil War, Terre Haute—the birthplace also of the great socialist and workers leader Eugene V. Debs—along with the rest of the United States, enjoyed an industrial boom. But a “boom” necessarily includes the dislocation and ruination of entire social layers. Unfortunately for the Dreisers, the economic decline of the family began about the time of Theodore’s birth, as the ninth of 10 children produced by a stern German-born Catholic father and a Mennonite mother who had converted to Catholicism.

John Paul, Theodore’s father, who had been at one point a partner in a woolen firm and the manager of its mill, suffered a sharp drop in social position and income. The causes of the family’s various misfortunes and

severe poverty, which Dreiser sought in later years to ascribe solely to his father's religiosity and stubbornness, seem to have been primarily economic: changes in the woolen industry itself and the financial panic of 1875.

The Dreiser family household appears to have been an emotional cauldron. Dreiser's mother, Sarah, was a dominating figure who insisted on making her children dependent on her warmth and love. The very intensity of the relations within the family sent the most sensitive and observant of the children spinning off like skyrocketers.

Theodore's eldest brother, who called himself Paul Dresser, ran off at an early age and went into show business, becoming the most popular songwriter of the 1890s ("On the Banks of the Wabash," "Just Tell Them That You Saw Me"), a specialist in the maudlin "mother" song. Several of Theodore's sisters ran off to Chicago or New York to "live in sin" with older, and even married men.

One senses in reading about the Dreiser family an enormous restlessness, a dissatisfaction with life as it is offered and seething desires which take a number of forms, desires which are no doubt related to the rise of industry and big cities and modern American capitalism, but which are not identical with them.

The family, after years of trying to cling to middle class respectability, actually began to disintegrate in 1878, when Sarah and her three youngest children moved to Sullivan, Indiana, ostensibly for financial reasons. Theodore subsequently lived in Evansville, Indiana, Chicago and Warsaw, Indiana, before attending the state university in Bloomington in 1890, the year of his mother's death.

In 1891, Dreiser began a career as a reporter in Chicago on what Lingeman refers to as a "disreputable" newspaper, the *Daily Globe*. A year or so later, working in St. Louis on the *Globe-Democrat*, he met his future wife, Sara ("Jug") Osborne White, a shy, refined school teacher. At a certain point Dreiser decided to make his way to New York City where his brother Paul was the toast of Broadway. He worked his way east, writing for newspapers in Toledo, Cleveland, Buffalo and Pittsburgh, before settling in New York in 1894.

The significance of Dreiser's experiences in these industrial cities cannot be overestimated. Covering train wrecks, murders, lynchings, strikes, local political scandals and the social activities of the wealthy, and walking through the wretched slums and tenements of booming industrial centers, Dreiser witnessed firsthand the growth of vast fortunes and vast misery. He was both drawn to and repelled by the gigantic social process underway. He wanted both to be part of it and to smash it up. This ambivalence never left him.

Dreiser's stay in Pittsburgh seems particularly significant. It presents a striking image which encapsulates the various forces which made him such a remarkable artist. He lived in the city two years after the famous Homestead steel strike of 1892, the site of which he visited by trolley. He also paid a visit to the stately mansions of Schenley Park. He got a job on the *Dispatch*, whose explicit policy was never to comment on social conditions. Dreiser was assigned to the police beat, which apparently gave him plenty of time to read. It was in a library donated by Andrew Carnegie that he sat and read the novels of Balzac, the great French writer, who was much admired by Karl Marx. In Lingeman's words: "Theodore was filled with awe at Balzac's teeming mural of Parisian life. All those grasping, greedy people were so dispassionately scrutinized: no attempt was made to idealize them. ... This view of life hit Theodore with the force of a revelation. ... Why couldn't a young novelist anatomize an American city as Balzac did Paris?"

It was also in Pittsburgh that Dreiser came upon the works of Herbert Spencer, the social Darwinist and popularizer of the notorious phrase, the "survival of the fittest." Spencer, trained as an engineer, "envisioned the universe as a great machine driven by divine hydraulic powers. Force was the basis of motion and matter. Force persisted through all time; it had

been triggered by something—an uncaused cause, which Spencer called the Unknowable. ... The end product of evolution was equilibrium—in the case of humankind a state of perfect harmony between desire and environment, supply and demand, population and resources. Individuals are moved by the force of desire, not ideals or ethics. In maximizing his own satisfaction and happiness, the strong individual necessarily displaces the weak in the competition for the earth's scarce resources—the survival of the fittest." (Lingeman)

Spencer's outlook, which provided a justification for the ruthless development of industrial capitalism, gained its most ardent American disciple in Andrew Carnegie, who made the phrase, "All is well since all grows better" into his personal motto.

Dreiser, surrounded by furnaces and factories ceaselessly operating, was attracted to a view of the universe and man himself as machines driven relentlessly and inexorably by an external force. His religious, even mystical, tendencies would be reconciled with "scientific principles" and the overwhelming desires that tormented him could be explained away as the result of "biochemical compulsion," completely beyond his control.

Even when he turned to the left politically in the late 1920s, Dreiser never broke from Spencerian and deterministic conceptions. He never broke completely with the rural 19th-century philistinism characteristic of the lower-middle class.

Between 1895 and 1897, Dreiser edited *Ev'ry Month, The Woman's Magazine of Literature and Music*. In 1898 he struck out on his own as a freelancer. Sometime in the summer or fall of 1898, at the urging of his friend Arthur Henry, Dreiser began to write *Sister Carrie*. Lingeman's comments on Dreiser's realism seem appropriate here: "His family's struggles with convention, his exposure to the underside of urban life as a reporter, his 'conversion' to Darwinism and Spencerism, his love of Balzac, his view of society as a reflection of nature, his fascination with city scenes in which he found beauty in ugliness, his sexual initiation in the bordellos and boardinghouses in the Middle West—one could go on; Dreiser was simply naturally inclined toward writing about life as it was rather than as the idealists thought it should be."

Dreiser's sister Emma was the immediate inspiration for the character of *Sister Carrie*. In 1894, while living in Chicago, she had fallen for a 40-year-old clerk named L.A. Hopkins, a married man. Hopkins reacted to his wife's discovery of his and Emma's "love nest" by absconding to Montreal with \$3,500 in cash and \$200 worth of jewelry taken from the safe of his employers, a chain of saloons. He subsequently returned most of the money and he and Emma lived in New York for a time.

*Sister Carrie* relates the story of Caroline Meeber, an 18-year-old girl from a small town who arrives in Chicago in 1889. She is almost instantly dissatisfied with the drab existence led by her sister and brother-in-law, and the future offered her as a factory worker. She responds to the advances of an energetic and attractive traveling salesman and eventually moves in with him, primarily because that seems to offer a brighter, more cheerful future.

Very few writers, if any, have been more acute than Dreiser in demonstrating that emotion and, above all, love, are the product of a complicated set of social circumstances. Without a trace of moralizing, Dreiser proves that love is not accidental or arbitrary, that it is not something that swoops down on human beings out of heaven. He shows in all his stories that men and women fall for particular people for very real reasons, physical, psychological, social and economic. There is nothing cynical in this.

Carrie decides to accept Drouet's advances because, on the one hand, he is genuinely attractive, attentive and he cares for her and, on the other hand, because he offers a way out of the loneliness, coldness and economic desperation of lower-middle-class existence in Chicago. If he weren't good-looking and amusing, his dollars would hold no interest for her; if he weren't offering a little financial security and a roof over her

head, he wouldn't be nearly so attractive.

And there is nothing cynically either in the fact that she subsequently loses interest in Drouet in favor of George Hurstwood, a far more sophisticated and socially prominent man. Hurstwood, like the real-life Hopkins, steals his employer's money in a memorable scene and takes off with an unwitting Carrie to New York City. Hurstwood's descent and transformation into a broken, ignominious derelict and finally a suicide, is paralleled by Carrie's somewhat accidental but brilliant success as an actress. The final passages of the novel, in which Hurstwood turns on the gas and stretches out on his flophouse bed to die, directly contradicted the turn of the century self-satisfaction and national optimism.

The events surrounding *Sister Carrie*'s publication are themselves worthy of novelization. Dreiser sent the manuscript to the publishing firm of Doubleday, Page, perhaps because of the presence of Frank Norris, employed as a reader, whose novel *McTeague* he had admired. Norris, in any case, read *Sister Carrie*, declared it a "masterpiece," and pushed Walter Hines Page to publish it. The firm officially accepted the book, but Frank Doubleday, when he returned from a European vacation, was horrified. He declared the book "immoral" and stated that he didn't think "the story ought to be published by anyone."

Dreiser insisted that a verbal agreement existed, and the firm, having received legal advice, agreed to issue the book. However, it did nothing to publicize or market *Sister Carrie*. On the contrary, Doubleday consciously tried to bury the book, with some success. Between November 1900 and February 1902, only 456 copies of the book were sold, making Dreiser \$68.40 in royalties.

Lingeman quotes Dreiser's response to the charge of "immorality," which gets to the heart of his subversiveness: "What the so-called judges of truth or morality are really inveighing against most of the time is not the discussion of mere sexual lewdness, for no work with that as a basis could possibly succeed, but the disturbing and destroying of their little theories concerning life, which in some cases may be nothing more than a quiet acceptance of things as they are. ..."

The immensity of Dreiser's crushing disappointment at the response to *Sister Carrie* can be measured by the fact that he was unable to complete another novel for more than a decade (although he had begun *Jennie Gerhardt* in January 1901) and that he was thrown into a moral and psychological crisis, a nervous breakdown in reality, which brought him to the lowest point of his life.

By April 1903, paralyzed by a sense of failure and shocked by the criticism of his work, Dreiser spent his last dollar on food, packed up his meager belongings and was prepared to live on the streets of New York. A chance encounter with his brother in Manhattan led to his admission to a sanatorium. After two months of that, having decided that physical labor was what he needed to cure his emotional difficulties, Dreiser went to work for the New York Central Railroad, a period recorded in *An Amateur Laborer*, an unfinished work.

Between 1905 and 1910 Dreiser made a very successful career for himself as a magazine editor. This was a period in which he consciously turned his back on Art in favor of Commerce, undoubtedly identifying the former with failure, psychological collapse and poverty.

In 1910, having been fortified by the relative success of a republished *Sister Carrie* in 1907, which sold 4,600 copies, Dreiser gave up the magazine business and returned to novel writing. Over the next three years, one of his most productive periods, he wrote or completed four novels, *Jennie Gerhardt*; *The Genius*, 1911; *The Financier*, 1912; *The Titan*, 1913.

The writing of *The Financier* and its sequel, *The Titan*, marked a significant turning point for Dreiser. He announced that he was through writing books about women and that "the man shall be at the centre of the next three or four novels." He seems to have drawn the conclusion, based partly on his own commercial experiences, that he ought to write hard,

businesslike novels, exalting the selfishness and amorality of the breed of capitalists produced in the US in the last quarter of the 19th century.

Dreiser based his novel and the character of Frank Cowperwood on the life of traction magnate [owner of streetcar monopoly] Charles T. Yerkes, "Robber Baron and Connoisseur of fine art and beautiful women," in Lingeman's words. Yerkes openly flouted conventional morality, declaring brazenly, "Whatever I do, I do not from a sense of duty, but to satisfy myself." Lingeman comments, "Such statements were congenial to Dreiser's idea of Cowperwood as a kind of Nietzschean superman, a concept in vogue among intellectuals in the early 1900s."

*The Financier* embodies a striking contradiction. Dreiser undoubtedly felt a certain admiration for the ruthless energy of Yerkes and his like. He also projected onto the character of Cowperwood many traits he wished he himself possessed. Cowperwood's ruthlessness extends not only into the field of finance. His pursuit of women reveals something of Dreiser's own fantasies. It is not for nothing that *The Financier*, *The Titan* and *The Stoic* (published much later) are entitled the *Trilogy of Desire*.

Dreiser's sense of social justice and his keen awareness of the human misery wrought by capitalism also make themselves obvious in *The Financier*. He reconciled these contradictory tendencies by once again calling on Spencer, who had "taught that every force produced a counterforce, every action a reaction, resulting in constant change until an ultimate balance—'suspended equation'—was reached. Dreiser ... saw society as a Darwinian jungle; but he also saw it as ruled by Spencerian laws, which imposed a pattern on the endless struggle between haves and have-nots, resulting in an eventual balance whenever one side became too powerful."

*The Financier*'s publication in 1912, to generally favorable comment, established once and for all Dreiser's literary status. As H.L. Mencken, the social commentator and "iconoclast," and an early supporter of Dreiser's work, wrote to him: "You are gaining a definite place ... as the leading American novelist. ... New serious novels are no longer compared to (William Dean Howells') *Silas Lapham* or to *McTeague* but to *Sister Carrie* and *Jennie Gerhardt*."

In 1916 Dreiser was obliged to conduct a battle against censorship directed against *The Genius*, which was written in 1911, but not published until four years later. The Cincinnati-based Western Society for the Suppression of Vice, part of the notorious Anthony Comstock's national network of "anti-smut" organizations, launched a complaint with Dreiser's publisher and the US Postal Department.

Many of the attacks against Dreiser and others during this period were couched in patriotic and anti-German language. Much was made of "alien" or "ethnic" ideas and authors with "hyphenated" names who represented a threat to people of "American stock." Lingeman points out: "The forces of the Old Order reacted to the alien threat and sought to restore the primacy of Victorian or 'Anglo-Saxon' culture and purge the nation of 'foreign' values clustered around naturalism, Freudianism and socialism. It was an intellectual war, but a sociological one as well. Behind the genteel critics stood the cruder forces of the old nativism, on the one hand, and of the state, on the other."

What Lingeman hints at, but is incapable of spelling out, is that lying behind the "anti-vice" and "anti-foreigner" campaigns was the actual struggle of social classes. The bourgeoisie made use of extremely reactionary elements of the petty bourgeoisie to whip up an atmosphere of "pro-Americanism" and "national unity" as part of its campaign to prepare the population for intervention in World War I and to isolate and witch-hunt revolutionary tendencies in the working class. The execution of Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) organizer Joe Hill took place in November 1915. Persecution of IWW members in the West and Southwest was widespread, and the infamous Everett (Washington) Massacre was carried out in the fall of 1916.

Dreiser spent the war years in the Bohemian ambiance of Greenwich

Village, associating with radicals like Max Eastman and Floyd Dell. In 1919, he moved to California with the woman with whom he was to spend most of the rest of his life, Helen Richardson.

Dreiser began writing his masterpiece, *An American Tragedy*, in the summer of 1920 in Los Angeles. The factual inspiration for the book was the Gillette-Brown murder case of 1906, newspaper clippings of which he had saved at the time. Chester Gillette, the son of a Salvation Army officer, met a factory girl, Grace (Billy) Brown, in the shirt factory owned by his uncle, where he worked in Cortland, New York. When Billy became pregnant, Gillette apparently took her out on a boat on Big Moose Lake in the Adirondacks, struck her with a tennis racket and pushed her overboard.

His trial was splashed across the pages of the yellow press, as the scandal sheets had a field day with the story of an ambitious young man who killed "Miss Poor" in order to marry "Miss Rich." The fact that there was no "Miss Rich" didn't stop them—they invented one! Lingeman remarks: "What struck him (Dreiser) was Chester's strict religious background, his seemingly ineffectual father and stronger mother, his poverty, his early wanderings, his chance meeting with the rich uncle—like a scene from a Horatio Alger novel—his ambiguous social position as a poor relation in Cortland, his affair with Billy Brown, and his involvement with a girl from a wealthy family, which drove him to murder his pregnant factory-girl sweetheart."

*An American Tragedy* describes, mercilessly and relentlessly, the grinding up of a human being by the brutal machinery of American capitalist society. What makes it all the more powerful is that the victim, Clyde Griffiths, fervently believes in that society and wishes nothing more than to be a respected member of it. The true pathos of the petty bourgeois, his manipulated dreams, his aspirations to prestige and good society, his willingness to sacrifice everything human in himself, his self-mutilation and self-abnegation in the name of "advancement," his terror and wonder at the workings of the ruling class—none of this has ever been presented more clearly.

The story is simple enough. Clyde Griffiths, like the real-life Chester Gillette, works for his uncle in a collar factory. Condemned to isolation and terrible loneliness because of his lowly economic status on the one hand, and his connection (in name only) to the lofty Griffiths family on the other, Clyde falls into a relationship with a girl who works under him. Their affair must remain secret because it is forbidden for members of management to associate with the workers. Roberta Alden, Clyde's girlfriend, becomes pregnant precisely at the time he is introduced into the town's better circles and a romance with a "golden girl," Sondra Finchley, opens up unimagined possibilities of wealth, luxury and beauty. Unable to obtain an abortion, Clyde draws what for him becomes the only logical conclusion and murders Roberta, both because he doesn't ever want to marry her and because her condition would ruin beyond repair his standing in the town. His arrest and eventual execution follow inevitably.

*An American Tragedy* is a terrifying novel. Dreiser's determinism, his sense that the universe is driven by force and compulsion, never worked to better effect. Griffiths' actions are absolutely logical according to the standards of the society itself. How can he do anything but eliminate Roberta, who bars the way to his dream world, who hangs around his neck like a millstone, who threatens to drag him down into the drab, wretched existence he knew as a child?

No one who reads *An American Tragedy* can ever forget the buildup to Roberta's murder. The boat on the isolated lake. The dark trees on the shoreline. The straw hat Clyde wears. The stillness. The camera with which he accidentally strikes her. The boat capsizing. Her cries. The voice in his ear: "But will you now, and when you need not, since it is an accident, by going to her rescue, once more plunge yourself in the horror of that defeat and failure which has so tortured you and from which this now releases you? You might save her. But again you might not! For see

how she strikes about. She is stunned. She herself is unable to save herself and by her erratic terror, if you draw near her now, may bring about your death also. But you desire to live! And her living will make your life not worth while from now on."

*An American Tragedy* is a revolutionary book because the serious reader will almost inevitably draw the conclusion that such a monstrous social system which demoralizes, tears apart and exterminates human beings, human beings who believe in it, who worship it, must itself be destroyed.

It is for this reason that Dreiser is treated like a "dead dog" by the literary establishment in this country. On the whole, the professors, critics and journalists who make up what is called the intelligentsia want no part of Dreiser and no part of *An American Tragedy*. Henry James, who describes in minute and stylish detail the emotional relations of articulate middle-class people, is more their cup of tea. But Dreiser understood things about life that James never dreamed of.

Dreiser never wrote another significant novel after *An American Tragedy*, but this work itself certainly settled the issue of his place in American and world literature.

Dreiser began to move to the left politically in the late 1920s, or at least he began to think about it. He visited the Soviet Union in 1927, for the 10th anniversary celebrations of the October Revolution, precisely during the period when the bureaucracy was consolidating itself. He didn't have anything very enlightening to say about his experiences, if Lingeman's book is an accurate indicator. After the trip, he commented: "Personally, I am an individualist and shall die one. In all this communistic welter I have seen nothing that dissuades me in the least from my earliest perceptions of the necessities of man. One of these is the individual dream of self-advancement, and I cannot feel that even here communism has altered that in the least."

In the conflict between Trotsky and the Left Opposition and Stalin and the Soviet bureaucracy, Dreiser saw only a personality conflict. "Trotsky and some of his associates in the minority group were in a temper of revolt. ... Stalin and his group were in the majority and there was nothing left but that they (Trotsky's group) be ejected. And, though he has a tremendous following he was ejected, for the Russians realize their strength lies in unity."

Dreiser became a pro-Stalinist, although not an abject stooge. In 1933 he refused to sign a petition protesting the imprisonment of Trotsky's followers in the USSR. Dreiser told Max Eastman, in words that vividly reflect the pragmatism he proudly proclaimed, "Whatever the nature of the present dictatorship in Russia—unjust or what you will—the victory of Russia is all important. I hold with Lincoln: Never swap horses while crossing a stream."

At the time of the Moscow Trials and the organization of the Dewey Commission to defend Trotsky against the slanderous and murderous accusations emanating from Stalin, Dreiser signed a petition condemning Dewey's effort because it would "lend support to fascist forces." The following year, however, he apparently refused to sign a statement which supported the findings of the purge trials.

Dreiser played a different and obviously more creditable role in organizing writers and intellectuals in defense of Harlan County coal miners and other sections of workers in 1930. The respect with which Dreiser was regarded was enormous. His words carried great weight. At a meeting in his New York apartment, Dreiser managed to collect "almost everyone in the literary world." Lingeman, paraphrasing a participant's account, gives this picture: "Standing behind a table, white-maned, tall, and massive, Dreiser rapped for attention, mumbled something unintelligible and then, folding and unfolding his handkerchief, read a prepared statement. He described the abysmal condition the country was in. ... After this sorrowful litany, he looked up and said quietly, 'the time is ripe for American intellectuals to render some service to the American worker.'"

In October 1931, at the behest of the Communist Party, Dreiser took a trip to Pinesville, Kentucky and held hearings to highlight the plight of striking miners.

Dreiser spent the last years of his life in California, wasting much of his time on attempts to reconcile scientific discoveries with religious faith. His posthumously-published *Notes on Life* is a mixture of scientific tidbits, mystical quackery and occasional insight. Just before his death, in an apparent expression of political contrariness, Dreiser actually joined the Communist Party, with which he had had little to do for years. (An earlier application had been rejected.) He died in December 1945.

To every worker or middle-class person who wants to broaden his or her understanding of social and psychological relationships, who wants to know the truth about capitalistic society and what it does to people, Dreiser's works are a basic necessity. It is high time there was a revival of interest in his novels. After reading them, one wonders how one ever got along without them. Lingeman's book is a useful accompaniment to the novels themselves.

Responding to the criticism that a character of his was not sympathetic, Dreiser once wrote, summing up his conception of realism: "The whole test of a book—to me—is—is it true, revealing, at once a picture and a criticism of life. If it measures up in those respects we can dismiss sympathy, decency, even the utmost shame and pain of it all."



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