# *Theodore Dreiser: Naturalist or Theist?*

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In literary criticism, Theodore Dreiser's name has become synonymous with "naturalism." Naturalism, however, has certain philosophical problems attending it. While apparently freeing an individual from the tensions of normal ethical systems, such as a religion, naturalism fails, finally, to provide any relief for the one problem that most of the systems profess to answer: the problem of death. Similarly, when an individual adopts a naturalistic ethic, he is apt to become a hedonist because a naturalistic ethic gives apparent sanction to the gratification of his senses, since these are natural by-products of his chemical make-up. The adoption of this hedonistic view, in turn, offers some serious problems, particularly on the nature of the universe.[1]

Although Dreiser was concerned with some of the problems that attend a hedonistic life,[2] it was his inability to solve the problem of death that ultimately led him to abandon his philosophy of naturalism in favor of a theistic solution. In *The "Genius"* (1915), and *An American Tragedy* (1925), Dreiser has his protagonists investigate religion while under

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[1]For an excellent discussion of the philosophical problems that attend hedonism, see Yvor Winter's chapter on Wallace Stevens in his book, *In Defense of Reason* (Denver: The University of Denver Press, 1943).

[2]For example, in *The Financier* Dreiser predicts that Cowperwood will find great fame, but "sorrow, sorrow, sorrow . . . for in the glory was also the ashes of Dead Sea fruit—an understanding that could neither be inflamed by desire nor satisfied by luxury; a heart that was long since wearied by experience; a soul that was bereft of illusion as a windless moon." Again, in *The Titan* he has Cowperwood comment that beyond beauty there is nothing save "crumbling age, darkness, silence." And in *The "Genius"* Eugene's "hedonistic tendencies" lead to the view that "life was nothing save dark forces moving aimlessly." In pursuing beauty, also, the problem of death becomes magnified, for life and happiness depend on health and success; disease and weakness bring death, and death is nothingness: "The abyss of death! When he looked into that after all of life and hope, how it shocked him, how it hurt! Here was life and happiness and love in health—there was death and nothingness—aeons and aeons of nothingness."

severe pressures, but they find that it fails to offer them a satisfactory solution. Eugene, in *The "Genius,"* abandons his search of Christian Science, and the book closes with a ringing quotation from Spencer's *First Principles,* Dreiser's bible of naturalism. Clyde, in *An American Tragedy,* accepts religious conversion while in the death house awaiting execution, but it is a desperate conversion by a man who still has some doubts. In these two novels Dreiser has specialized in bringing forth the questions that torture a man in search of a faith, but while noting the attraction that a religion offers when the problem of death is raised, he has refused to accept the commitment of a faith. This changed, however, with the publication of his next novel, *The Bulwark,* in 1946.

In *The Bulwark,* Dreiser is no longer discussing death as an intellectual question, but he is now facing it as a man in his seventies who realizes that he has not much longer to live. The setting of the story is meant to be timeless and the problem universal: it is the story of a religious man and the difficulties that he meets in life as he matures. The story is really a vehicle for a philosophical presentation of the price and rewards of a religious faith. We know that Dreiser was writing with an active faith at this time, not only from the tone of the novel, but also from people who were acquainted with him. His wife commented that

> I knew he was putting a lot of himself into this story of the Quaker, and I saw in his eyes the realization that his own life might end at any time and that he felt he might have done differently at times in the past. Often he quoted: '. . . this night thy soul shall be required of thee.'[3]

Robert Elias, in his biography of Dreiser, states that from long conversations with him he learned that the book was intended as a gesture of atonement on Dreiser's part for his earlier attacks on God. " 'It's funny,' he remarked on one occasion after he had completed the [illegible] along for years and not get it. [illegible] 'how a fellow can go time.' "[4]

[3]Helen Dreiser, *My Life with D*[illegible] New York: The World Publishing Co., 1951), pp. 71-72.

[4]Robert H. Elias, *Theodore Dreiser: Apostle of Nature* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1949), p. 304.

Dreiser was a realist and recognized fully what a religious commitment meant. In the introduction to the novel, which is a short discussion of the wedding of Solon and Benecia with an outline of the Quaker faith as promulgated by George Fox, he states the terms of the ultimate religious commitment with a quotation from Job: "Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him." Until now, Dreiser has chastised religion in the final judgment because it has not offered worldly success to the supplicants, but here we have a statement that indicates the degree of faith that a man must accept in religious maturity. The remainder of the book is devoted to showing what pressures the acceptance of this proposition might entail in a man's life.

The very first scene of the book, when Solon is a child, involves the discussions of the effect of accidental evil on a religious temperament. Solon has borrowed a slingshot from another boy and fired a chance shot at a distant bird. Although the odds are heavily against it, he hits the bird and kills it only to discover that it was the mother of four baby chicks. His friend takes them home and feeds them to his cat because they will die without a mother. Solon's mother discovers that he is very upset about something and learns, upon questioning him, what has happened. Through her speculation, Dreiser makes his point:

> Hence, while she found herself loving and forgiving her own son . . . she found herself not a little religiously and intellectually troubled by the fact that so much ill could come about accidentally when plainly no cruelty or evil was intended.[5]

The next problem that is taken up as the story progresses is the difficulty of effecting religious principles in actual life. Solon starts to become quite successful in commercial ventures and suddenly is puzzled as to the rightness of his path:

> And yet, pleased as he was over these ventures, he was becoming more and more mentally disturbed as to where lay the dividing line between ambition and an irreligious greed, between the desire for power and wealth and a due regard for Quaker precepts.[6]

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[5]Theodore Dreiser, *The Bulwark* (New York: Doubleday and Co., 1946), p. 18.

[6]*Ibid.*, p. 113.

The next incident that Dreiser raises is to illuminate the conflict between religious mercy and the laws of justice. Solon obtains a position in the bank for a Quaker neighbor's son who turns out to be a thief, and Solon has difficulty in resolving the conflict of whether he should intervene on the boy's behalf or let justice take its course. The latter course of action will be easier because he is personally involved in the case, and this is the one that he chooses. After the boy is sentenced to four years in the state reformatory, however, he changes his mind and decides that he has committed a great spiritual offense:

> In the light of his religion, he should have assisted him—and he had not. This weighed on him. It was the first and most serious offense against his religious principles that Solon Barnes had ever committed.[7]

Until now, Dreiser has been raising intellectual problems that are not easily solved, but he now starts introducing personal tragedies into the life of Solon which are "calculated to bring him face to face with reality."[8] First his father dies, and then he discovers that his oldest daughter, who is rather plain in appearance, is being hurt socially by her looks. She is so hurt that she shocks her mother by stating, "I wish sometimes I were dead!"[9] Solon looks for the religious significance of this but has a hard time settling the question:

> It was sacrilegious, he was compelled to admit, to question the divine order in anything. But still so many queer and unfortunate and terrible things happened in so many walks of life . . . why did an all-wise and all-merciful Providence allow them to happen?[10]

From these introductory personal tragedies, Dreiser increases the misfortunes of Solon's family until his life seems to be surrounded by a solid mass of tragedy. Under the influence of a girl friend from school, his youngest daughter refuses to attend the college her parents have chosen for her, and by stealing some of her mother's jewels, she finances a trip to the University of Wisconsin to study. Solon follows her out there but is unable to persuade her to return home. She later migrates

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[7] *Ibid.*, p. 120.
[8] *Ibid.*, p. 121.
[9] *Ibid.*, p. 127.
[10] *Ibid.*, p. 128.

to Greenwich Village with this same girl friend and becomes the paramour of an artist. During this latter period, one of her brothers, who is developing into a playboy, becomes involved in a manslaughter charge when he and some of his male friends administer a drug to a young girl to ease her inhibitions, and she dies because of a weak heart. He is so ashamed at what he has done and how he has disgraced his family that he kills himself in prison while awaiting trial. To make matters worse during this period, Solon learns that the board of trustees of the bank at which he is the treasurer are overextending the use of the bank's funds in unsound personal speculation. He corrects this matter by personally informing the Treasury Department bank investigators of what is transpiring, and then he resigns from the bank. Shortly after this, his wife's health declines, and she dies from a series of strokes.

After all this tension and difficulty, Dreiser trains his sympathy on the character of Solon as, broken in health and slowly dying of cancer, he tries to hold his world together. The crisis is reached in a scene from nature that represents the conscious renunciation of Dreiser's naturalism. Solon is pictured as wandering around the grounds of his home and speculating on the various forms and beauty that the "Creative Force" has fashioned. He spies a beautiful green fly perched on, and eating the bud of a beautiful flower. This is a remarkable opportunity for Dreiser to inject a discussion of the impersonality and cruelty of nature and to have Solon's eyes opened to the purposeless nature of a Godless universe. The personal tragedy in Solon's life has all but killed him, and he will be receptive to such a view at this time if he ever is to be. Indeed, Dreiser even has him wonder at the meaning of this apparent tragedy:

> Was this beautiful creature, whose design so delighted him, compelled to feed upon another living creature, a beautiful flower? For obviously, as it ate, it was destroying the bud of this plant, and in so far as he could see or know, the plant had no way of defending itself.[11]

Solon then wanders around the garden and looks closely for the first time at all the forms of nature spread before him.

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[11]*Ibid.*, p. 317.

His final decision, however, is one of trust and belief as Dreiser reaffirms the earlier motto, "Though He slay me, yet will I trust in Him." Solon, "then, after bending down and examining a blade of grass here, a climbing vine there. . ." turns in "a kind of religious awe and wonder" and decides:

> Surely there must be a Creative Divinity, and so a purpose, behind all of this variety and beauty and tragedy of life. For see how tragedy had descended upon him, and still he had faith, and would have.[12]

A more specific description of Solon's, and Dreiser's, final understanding of this Creative Force and his view of what God would have man do in his life is given in a description of a second walk in the garden. Solon meets a puff adder which puffs up and threatens to strike. Solon, realizing the harmless nature of the snake, talks to it gently and tells it that he knows it is harmless and that it may go its way without harm. At this, the snake relaxes and starts to go on its way. Solon steps forward to see how long it is and inadvertently frightens it again, but after talking to it and calming it once again, he backs away to observe its departure. Then the snake turns towards him and glides right over his shoe as he leaves. In relating this incident to his oldest daughter, Solon comments:

> Good intent is of itself a universal language, and if our intention is good, all creatures in their particular way understand, and so it was that this puff adder understood me just as I understood it. . . . And now I thank God for this revelation of His universal presence and His good intent toward all things—all of His created world. For otherwise how would it understand me, and I it, if we were not both a part of Himself?[13]

In the end, Etta, his wayward daughter, returns from Greenwich Village. And it is in her growth and understanding of what her father has gained from his religion during his life that Dreiser offers his final message. Her understanding is interesting because it is the first time that Dreiser has acknowledged the efficacy of following a religion for mental contentment. Through her service to her father she

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[12]*Ibid.*

[13]*Ibid.*, pp. 318-319.

could see what it might mean to serve others, not only for reasons of family bonds or personal desires, but to answer human need. . . . In this love and unity with all nature, as she now sensed, there was nothing fitful or changing or disappointing—nothing that glowed one minute and was gone the next. This love was rather as constant as nature itself, everywhere the same. . . . It was an intimate relation to the very heart of being.[14]

Thus we find in *The Bulwark* that Dreiser has concentrated on the eschatological question raised by his own impending death, a question that he showed a great deal of interest in before, but one that he never fully resolved. From a realistic statement of the terms of a religious commitment, "Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him," Dreiser systematically traces the problems that a man might meet in retaining his faith. He never wavers; he states the conditions for the religious contract, carefully develops the difficulties which may undermine this ideal, and concludes still retaining his belief in the ideal.

Shortly after finishing *The Bulwark,* Dreiser started to complete the third volume of his financial trilogy which included *The Financier* (1912) and *The Titan* (1914). Of this third volume, entitled *The Stoic,* he finished all but his last chapter before he died. He had, however, discussed this last chapter with his wife and left a projected outline, so the volume contains an appendix which informs the reader of his intended conclusion.

In this final volume, Dreiser maintains the same interest in religion as his previous novel. Because of the characterization of his protagonist from the first two volumes of the trilogy, however, Dreiser is faced with a problem of how to develop his religious theme in this third volume without obviously changing the character of his naturalistic business tycoon. He solves this problem by having the businessman, Cowperwood, under the pressure of impending death, question at various times the efficacy of his previous path in life. This questioning is as far as he dares go, however, so to get on with his real interest, Dreiser has his protagonist die and then transfers the protagonist's role to his companion, Bevy. And in her depres-

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[14]*Ibid.,* p. 331.

sion at the finality of Cowperwood's death, Dreiser finds the means to begin his active religious speculation through her search for spiritual growth. In the end, she comes to find the same values in religion as Etta did in *The Bulwark*: that religion is not an escape, or the formal worship of an inscrutable God, but something that one should live both for his own needs and those of others:

> But now she knew that one must live for something outside of one's self, something that would tend to answer the needs of the many as opposed to the vanities and comforts of the few, of which she herself was one.[15]

The tone of Dreiser's final two novels suggests that a careful study would have value in discovering whether this strong spiritual stand is a sudden conversion away from his earlier works, or a natural consequence of them. Such a study,[16] in fact, indicates that Dreiser was not a naturalist who adopted a last-minute theistic solution, but a theist who, for a period, was a naturalist of varying degrees prior to his final acceptance of the theistic terms, "Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him."

Dreiser was first a theist: he was raised in a deeply religious household by a fanatical Catholic father, and although he later repudiated this earlier heritage for a naturalistic position, the earlier influence remained in his life and works.[17] The attempted naturalistic solution was never completely satis-

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[15]Theodore Dreiser, *The Stoic* (New York: The World Publishing Co., 1947), p. 306.

[16]The size of this article naturally precludes any lengthy proof of this point; however, there is a wealth of evidence awaiting the reader who goes back over Dreiser's early works in search of this theistic influence. My master's thesis at Stanford University was devoted to such a search, and my main problem lay not in finding the material, but in screening the overabundance of examples. Even in his two most deliberately naturalistic novels, *The Financier* and *The Titan,* in which God has been carefully ignored except for occasional jibes, Dreiser closes the novels with epilogues that rail against God, as if the object of a deliberate snub must be made cognizant of the dimensions of the snub. As T.S. Eliot says, "It is only the irreligious who are shocked by blasphemy. Blasphemy is a sign of Faith." (See his "Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry" in his *Selected Essays,* New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1950.)

[17]H. L. Mencken, for example, was a close friend of Dreiser's and wrote as far back as 1917 in *The Seven Arts* that Dreiser should not be classified as a naturalist or realist, for "he is really something quite different, and, in his moments, something far more stately." Mencken, however, deplored the obviously "believing attitude of mind" that Dreiser displayed and considered it a "heritage of the Indiana hinterland."

factory to him, and as some of the perceptive critics have pointetd out, such as Charles Child Walcutt,[18] his naturalism was constantly changing. Finally, though, as I have pointed out, the problem of death forced him back into an acknowledged theistic position after this unsuccessful sortie into naturalism. And now that all the evidence is in, it appears that we should reverse the current critical emphasis which shackles him with being simply a "naturalist," and say that his life and works may be more profitably studied in terms of a theological struggle and resolution.

[18]See Charles Child Walcutt, *American Literary Naturalism, A Divided Stream* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1956).

# *Ingratitude*

KLEA EVANS WORSLEY

The giant with silver raiment
Strides on distant lands scattering manna.
Then from his height he pulls the strings;
Twisted, tangled strings.
The small disheveled creatures eat the manna
But spit at the giant.
He turns away,
Tears falling from cardboard eyes.