

WOMEN IN THEODORE DREISER'S LIFE AND WORKS

by Junichi Nakamura

Theodore Dreiser believed that men and women pursued each other and said as follows:

All normal men crave women—and particularly beautiful women. All married men and priests are supposed, by the mere sacrament of matrimony or holy orders, thereafter to feel no interest in any but one (or in the case of the priest none) of the other sex—or if they do, to rigidly suppress such desires. But men are men! And the women—many married and unmarried ones—don't want them to be otherwise. Life is a dizzy, glittering game of trapping and fishing and evading, slaying and pursuing, despite all the religious and so-called moral details by which we surround it. Nature itself has an intense love of the chase.¹

As a boy Dreiser was "girl-shy." He said, "Owing to a very retiring and nervous disposition I could never keep my countenance or find my tongue in the presence of the fair. If a girl was pretty and in the least coquettish or self conscious, I was at once stricken as if with the palsy, or left rigid and played over by chills and fever."² But later he demanded much of girls and women. To Helen Dreiser it seemed that Dreiser "only knew how to live to the fullest, love to the fullest, and change or move on."³ As a result "a real triangle" developed sometimes. As she lived with Dreiser and came to know more about his creative mood and method, Helen learned the value of and even the necessity for his association with the various women in his life. He did not believe in keeping only one woman. He said that the establishment of monogamy at once shuts out "the fact that it is the death of affectional and social experience—that it is absolutely inimical to

¹Theodore Dreiser, *A Hoosier Holiday* (New York and London, 1916), p. 377.

²*Ibid.*, pp. 490-491.

³Helen Dreiser, *My Life with Dreiser* (Cleveland and New York [1951]), p. 62.

the roving and free soul which must comb the world for understanding, and that the spectacles which entertain the sober and stationary in art, literature, science, indeed every phase of life, would never be if all maintained the order and quiet which monogamy suggests."⁴ For some time he thought free love was indispensable for creating art.

I WOMEN IN THEODORE DREISER'S LIFE

Theodore Dreiser recalled her mother as a happy, hopeful, animal mother, with a desire to live, and not much constructive ability wherewith to make real her dreams. When she faced her father's opposition against her marrying a Catholic, she eloped with John Paul Dreiser at sixteen. Again her nature was opposed to her husband's in being basically unmoral. She took the view that human beings had trouble enough maintaining themselves without being harried further by social or religious opinion. She was also recollected by Theodore as being "beyond or behind so-called good and evil. Neither moral nor immoral, she was non-moral, intellectually, emotionally, temperamentally. A strange, sweet, dreamy

⁴*A Hoosier Holiday*, p. 367. Dreiser also said: "We hear much of one life, one love, but how many actually attain to that ideal—if it is one. Personally I have found it not only possible, but by a curious and entirely fortuitous combination of circumstances almost affectionately unavoidable, to hold three, four—even as many as five and six—women in regard or the emotional compass of myself, at one and the same time, not all to the same degree, perhaps, or in the same way, but each for certain qualities which the others do not possess. I will not attempt to dignify this by the name of love. I do not assume for a moment that it is love, but that it is a related state is scarcely to be questioned. Whether it is a weakness or a strength remains to be tested by results in individual cases. To some it might prove fatal, to others not. Witness the Mormons! As for myself I do not think it is. Some of my most dramatic experiences and sufferings, as well as my keenest mental illuminations, have resulted from intimate, affectionate contact with women. I have learned most from those strange, affectionately dependent and yet artistic souls who somehow crave physical and spiritual sympathy in the great dark or light in which we find ourselves..." (*A Hoosier Holiday*, p. 366.)

woman, who did not know how life was organized;..."⁵ She allowed a man who had taken an interest in one of her daughters to give aid to her family.

Dreiser is said to have shared in his mother's emotional warmth and openness to life. He was a "mother child" and was so closely tied to his mother that he could not recall a single one of his youthful plans for the future in which his mother was not included.⁶ His mother's death which happened in 1890 was the most profound psychologic shake-up for Theodore.

The older girls of the family stirred up comment when they strolled the streets, made up with "spit curls" and rouge. One of them had already been seduced by a prominent lawyer and officeholder in Terre Haute. Later in Chicago one of the two most wayward daughters let herself be supported by an architect for whom she had little affection, and afterwards eloped with a married man, manager of an eating and drinking establishment of some standing. Those two went to New York and supported themselves in part by renting rooms to girls of questionable virtue. The other sister later went to this couple, pregnant with the child of a wealthy scion who had deserted her.

Important encouragement in training himself to read and write came to Dreiser from May Calvert, his seventh-grade teacher, who "told him he read 'beautifully' and wrote 'good English' even if he could not master formal grammar, suggested he take certain good books out of the high school library during the summer."⁷ Another teacher, Mildred Fielding, spent many afternoons assisting him in various subjects, and gave him confidence.⁸

⁵Theodore Dreiser, *A History of Myself: Dawn* (New York [1931]), p. 10. This book will be hereinafter referred to as *Dawn*.

⁶*Dawn*, p. 157.

⁷Robert H. Elias, *Theodore Dreiser: Apostle of Nature* (New York, 1949), p. 20.

⁸She never forgot Dreiser, for she came to visit him in Chicago in 1888 when he was struggling to survive, with the proposal that he spend the following year at Indiana University at her expense.

Theodore was attracted by various girls. Once he was struck dumb with delight by a girl who lived on his block. But when a dandy, whom this girl favored, walked up to him and with silent contempt punched him in the mouth, the latter felt weak, inferior, and ashamed, and simply stepped away to protect himself from a second blow.

The hot fire of sex nature had lighted in Theodore's body was driving him to almost frantic efforts at self-satiation. The mysteries which he had thitherto dared only to dream about were shown him by a baker's daughter who led him into a packing-case one evening.⁹

"He adored one girl for a few months before he dared hand her a note; and enticed by another into more intimate relations, he became so fearful of his probable inadequacy that his fears were realized and he felt even more inadequate than ever."¹⁰ It was of youth and beauty of almost unrivalled perfection that he was really thinking and dreaming.¹¹

On his rounds among the run-down districts of Chicago Dreiser "was frequently faced with some woman or girl of mood and inclination like his own, but inevitably the moment that he so often idealized produced the repulsion of its facts—unclean bodies, dirty beds, and unintellectual minds—and he would leave somewhat

⁹The girl left him mainly dissatisfied. "The moment had not lived up to his dream of it; moreover, the girl must be a "common" girl and, he had been educated to suspect, might have some disease; and besides she was not really so attractive as others he had longed to know. Eventually, desiring and unable to yield to desire, he could achieve a satisfactory union only in his dreaming mind, and in autoerotic stimulation found for many years a sexual nirvana where all dreams were true.

... He brooded morbidly about his practice, suffered dizzy spells, and then dreaded that he had harmed himself for life. But desire continued to overwhelm dream and periodically led him to liberating reveries in which fancy could shape the facts." (Elias, *op. cit.*, pp. 22-23.)

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 27.

¹¹Dreiser said at this time, "Beautiful girls will yet be interested in me, and society, too!" (*Dawn*, p. 465.)

nauseated.”¹² When he beheld beauty, he was stirred by sex; but when faced with sex alone, he yearned for the beauty that was lacking.¹³ He emerged from his fantasies long enough to recall his engagement with Sara White and was married to her on Dec. 28, 1898.

However, Dreiser and Sara White were fundamentally incompatible from the very beginning. Dreiser became tired of his wife and claimed the freedom to wander and do as he pleased, and when he attempted to establish a liaison with the daughter of a woman in the Butterick organization, produced a crisis both at Butterick's and at home.

In Chicago Dreiser found a woman “whose youth, beauty, and artistic sympathies represented a realization of his youthful aspirations. and as he and Miss Markham became drawn to each other, he felt the surge of the adventure and accomplishment that shaped the career of his financier [Yerkes].

Sara's death in 1942 finally set him free to marry Helen Richardson with whom he had been in love for some years.

II A GALLERY OF WOMEN

The fifteen women, whose portraits are shown in the gallery, were women of Dreiser's choice and whom he knew personally. As may be expected, they were described with minor alterations necessary to avoid identification. Only few of the portraits are good but they show the kind of women who attracted Dreiser's attention at the time.

Most of the women were “new women,” who disregarded convention and tried to emancipate themselves from the traditional view of sex. Olive Brand, one of the fifteen women, identified sensuality with “romantic play and happiness and thought,” anything “to bring about greater freedom for the mind—a social whirl

¹²Elias, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

¹³*Ibid.*, pp. 60-61.

in which men and women would be happy and in which, at the same time, they would think and reach worthwhile conclusions.”¹⁴

Four of the women either tried to be artists or married an artist. Two of them were interested in radicals and labor leaders. Ernita even went to Kuzbas Colony in Central Siberia. She was enthusiastic about communism, as is seen in the following:

The glory of Trotzky and Lenin! The theories of Marx! To free the world from capitalistic oppression! To lift the yoke from the neck of the common man! Soviet Russia seemed then to her the beacon light of liberty; the exemplar of a new and saving social faith. Her eyes turned to Moscow—to Lenin and Trotzky and their giant labors.¹⁵

Four of the women died comparatively young and another committed suicide. The conclusions that troubled this last woman most, and finally “decided her upon her eventual step, were, first that she had in some way mismanaged the opportunities that had been hers, and next, that life itself was a confusing gamble in which the cards were frequently marked and the dice weighted.”¹⁶

None of the women were happy. Except Giff, who was a semi-demented old maid, and Bridget Mullanphy, an illiterate, contentious, middle-aged woman who lived in a slum, all the remaining thirteen women were married or had connections of sorts with men; none of them lived happily with their husbands. Most of them were married more than once or had relations with other men after marriage. Lucia thought that marriage was “ridiculous” and that it was “the death of freedom unless an enormous love repaid one for its limitations.”¹⁷

Some were fatalistic in their view of life. Regina C— thought that apparently each of us—certainly the most of us—seemed to draw a certain kind of success or disaster, about as plants drew a

¹⁴Theodore Dreiser, *A Gallery of Women*, 2 vols. (New York, 1929), p. 79.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, p. 320.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, p. 529.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, p. 212.

certain kind of insect or a given type of tree the lightning and that we had, or were, a fate in ourselves. Albertine's philosophy was that we can't fight fate, for what is to be, will be. Rella exclaimed: "What a thin veneer is the seeming of anything, I thought! How indifferent, and therefore merciless, are the forces that despite our notions and moods and dreams drive us all!"

Emanuela, who wrote conventional stories, was young and pretty but she showed no visible emotional interest in any one. Her father became insane; sex inhibition on his wife's part had something to do with it. Two years later her mother died. She had aged considerably and said, "Oh, what's the use of life, anyhow? I used to think I understood what it was about, but now I know I don't. And I'm indifferent or not suited to it any more, I guess. I should have married or given myself to you. I know that now, but just knowing what life is really like now doesn't help me. It's too late, I guess."¹⁹

Regina C—, "the coldest and meanest of girls in some ways," was of a good Virginia family but hardly experienced any family life. As a superintendent of nurses in a hospital she fell in love with a young surgeon but was deserted; her view of life and men changed and hardened. After another disillusionment in an affair, she even tried to kill herself. Then she had another affair with the chief doctor of the hospital; her addiction to morphine became worse and worse. She used all kinds of tricks. She stayed in France for seven months, as a war nurse. When urged to take treatment for her vice and undertake sane active employment, she refused, saying that life was "no longer worth it."

Rona Martha, directress of a typing office, was twenty-four or twenty-five years old and a woman of fair means. She fell in love

¹⁸*Ibid.*, p. 525.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, p. 721.

with a man who was married and had a child. She spent much money for him and arranged to marry him. She had become like a slave to him and come to dislike business. When her husband's business turned better, he was attracted by a rich young widow. Rona was divorced and broken-hearted. Ten years later she did the same work in stenography; a poor loser.

The focus was not always on women. Here is a poet in despair. His wife's chief social desire was to know whether the men and women of her circle were morally sound and pure. He fell in love with Rella, his niece, fourteen years younger than he, a fresh and pretty girl still in school. He was disappointed that he had to follow the way of duty and convention. He lamented that those in love could not be together. Those who dared were not happy, either. So, the poet's inference was that men were blind, short-lived, not knowing how.