

Theodore Dreiser

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Theodore Dreiser, photographed by Carl Van Vechten, 1933

Born August 17, 1871
Terre Haute, Indiana

Died December 28, 1945

Occupation American naturalist author

Spouse Sara White

Parents Sarah and John Paul Dreiser

Theodore Herman Albert Dreiser (August 27, 1871 – December 28, 1945) was an American naturalist author known for dealing with the gritty reality of life. He was born in Terre Haute, Indiana, to Sarah and John Paul Dreiser, a strict Catholic. John, his father, was a German immigrant and Sarah was from the Mennonite farming community near Dayton, Ohio; she was disowned for marrying John and converting to Catholicism. Theodore was the twelfth of thirteen children (the ninth of the ten surviving). The popular songwriter Paul Dresser (1859–1906) was his older brother. From 1889–1890, Theodore attended Indiana University before flunking out. Within several years, he was writing for the *Chicago Globe* newspaper and then the *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*. After proposing in 1893, he married Sara White on December 28, 1898. They ultimately separated in 1909, but were never formally divorced.

His first novel, *Sister Carrie* (1900), tells the story of a woman who flees her country life for the city (Chicago, Illinois) and falls into a wayward life of sin. The publisher did little to promote the book, and it sold poorly. Dreiser took a job editing women's magazines until he was forced to resign in 1910 because of an intraoffice



Dreiser in 1918

romance. His second novel, *Jennie Gerhardt*, was published the following year. Many of Dreiser's subsequent novels dealt with social inequality.

His first commercial success was *An American Tragedy* (1925), which was

made into a film in 1931 and again in 1951.

Other works include *The "Genius,"* and the *Trilogy of Desire* about Frank Cowperwood, a fictionalized version of Charles Yerkes: *The Financier* (1912), *The Titan* (1914), and *The Stoic* (published posthumously in 1947).

In 1935 the library trustees of Warsaw, Indiana ordered the burning of all the library's works by Dreiser.

Dreiser's style is marked by long sentences and intense attention to detail. Since his works deal

with social status and the pursuit of material goods and pleasures, this level of realism and description services his theme; on the other hand, it can make many of his works, particularly *Sister Carrie*, difficult for some. It should be noted that Dreiser is not well-regarded for his style, but for the realism of his work, character development, and his points-of-view on American life. Still, he is known to have had an enormous influence on the generation that followed his. In his tribute "Dreiser" from *Horses and Men* (1923), Sherwood Anderson writes:

Heavy, heavy, the feet of Theodore. How easy to pick some of his books to pieces, to laugh at him for so much of his heavy prose... The fellows of the ink-pots, the prose writers in America who follow Dreiser, will have much to do that he has never done. Their road is long but, because of him, those who follow will never have to face the road through the wilderness of Puritan denial, the road that Dreiser faced alone.

Humorist Corey Ford (writing as "John Riddell") quipped that Dreiser had only one plot: Boy meets Girl = Tragedy. F. R. Leavis remarked that Dreiser

wrote as if he did not have a native language.

Renowned mid-century literary critic Irving Howe spoke of Dreiser as "among the American giants, one of the very few American giants we have had."

Politically, Dreiser was involved in several campaigns against social injustice. This included the lynching of Frank Little, one of the leaders of the Industrial Workers of the World, the Sacco and Vanzetti case, the deportation of Emma Goldman, and the conviction of the trade union leader Tom Mooney.

Dreiser, a committed socialist or rather communist, wrote several non-fiction books on political issues. This included *Dreiser Looks at Russia* (1928), the result of his 1927 trip to the Soviet Union, *Tragic America* (1931) and *America is Worth Saving* (1941). Theodore Dreiser joined the American Communist Party in August 1945; on December 28th he died of heart failure. He praised the Soviet Union under Stalin during the Great Terror and alliance with Hitler.

He died in Hollywood at the age of 74.

One famous quote: "All of us are more or less

pawns. We're moved about like chess pieces by circumstances over which we have no control"

Published as

- *Sister Carrie, Jennie Gerhardt, Twelve Men* (Richard Lehan, ed.) (Library of America, 1987) ISBN 978-0-94045041-7.
- *An American Tragedy* (Thomas P. Riggio, ed.) (Library of America, 2003) ISBN 978-1-93108231-0.

References

- Cassuto, Leonard and Clare Virginia Eby, eds. *The Cambridge Companion to Theodore Dreiser*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004.
- Loving, Jerome. *The Last Titan: A Life of Theodore Dreiser*. Berkeley: U of California P, 2005.

External links

- The International Theodore Dreiser Society
- Review-Essay: Dreiser on the Web
- DreiserWebSource at University of

Pennsylvania Library, Philadelphia,
Pennsylvania

- Works by Theodore Dreiser at Project Gutenberg
- See eclectic.htm for an English viewpoint of Dreiser and comparisons between the book and the film.
- Cyber USSR

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