

# A TENTATIVE RE-EVALUATION OF THEODORE DREISER

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----Through the completion of "The Bulwark"----

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## RESUMEN:

El Naturalismo Literario se originó con los escritos de Honoré de Balzac y Emile Zola, especialmente su "Le Roman Experimental". Cuando esta corriente literaria llegó a Inglaterra, aparecieron escritores tales como George More, autor de "Esther Waters", y Thomas Hardy, cuyos trabajos son muy numerosos para listarse aquí.

Esta corriente ingresó a América y produjo como sus pioneros a Stephen Crane y a Frank Norris, seguidos de Hamlin Garland.

Cuando Theodore Dreiser escribió su obra maestra, "Una Tragedia Americana" en 1925, ésta alcanzó su cumbre y luego comenzó a desaparecer. Por lo tanto, el "Naturalismo Literario" como una corriente literaria no duró mucho.

Sin embargo, algo "Naturalista" influenció a escritores modernos posteriores tales como Hemingway y Faulkner, y fue sucedida por escritores más recientes como Truman Capote y otros.

Este artículo trata de señalar cierto "Cambio Interno" que tuvo lugar hacia final de la vida de Dreiser, dando así vida a su obra póstuma "The Bulwark" (La Vanguardia) de 1946. El enfoque de este artículo se da a dicho libro para probar este cambio a través de su análisis, con el fin de discutir a Dreiser como un escritor confundido y contradictorio.

## A TENTATIVE RE-EVALUATION OF THEODORE DREISER

*-Through the completion of "The Bulwark"-*

After writing "Sister Carrie" in 1900, Dreiser became the leading writer of the Literary Naturalism in America. He produced more novels showing the spirit that falls before the materialism which prevailed in that epoch in the American society. His literary production reached its peak when he published "An American Tragedy" in 1925.

However, if we come to read "The Bulwark" published posthumously in 1946, we feel perplexed due to the difference of the themes which used to appear with no exception in his previous works such as "Cowperwood Trilogy", "The Genius", "Jennie Gerhardt", "etc. It is as if Dreiser is asking us his "re-evaluation" as a naturalistic writer, as Charles Shapiro points out. (1)

Undoubtedly, if the attention is paid to the "Inner Change" which took place in Dreiser, together with the process through which "The Bulwark" was completed, it might be possible to envision Dreiser from a different angle, not as a naturalistic writer, but as a writer full of "spiritualism."

In writing "The Bulwark", Dreiser was much influenced by Mr. Rufus M. Jones, the President of the American Friends Association. (2) Actually, the name of the father of the main character, Solon Barnes, in "The Bulwark" is "Rufus Barnes" and it is clear that this was taken after the above-mentioned Rufus M. Jones. The interest Solon shows in his favorite book, "The Journal of Jone Woolman" derives from his friendship with Rufus Jones.

After 1938, Dreiser read with special interest and concentration, Rufus Jones' "Finding the Trail of Life, N.Y., 1916" and two others. On December 10, 1938, Dreiser sent a letter to Mr. Jones to the effect that his fourth book "The Trail of Life in College, N.Y., 1929" was out of print and showed his eager desire to have a copy in his hand. (3) Their friendship lasted from 1938 to 1945, the year of Dreiser's death.

In fact, Dreiser's original interest started with his encounter with a lady who was brought up in a family quite similar to that of "The Barns" in "The Bulwark". This is clearly pointed out by his wife Helen Dreiser and his life-long secretary Marguerite T. Harris and both agree, though on the basis of a certain supposition, that this happened somewhere between 1910 and 1915. (4)

In 1912, Dreiser had a talk with Edgar Lee Masters on the content of "The Bulwark" and in 1914 he implicitly told H.L. Mencken the plan of writing a story called "The Bulwark". In September, 1932, he manifested openly to the Journal, "The Bookman", the writing of "The Bulwark", giving the title of the story clearly. Before this time, he simply mentioned in his letters to his friends the coming out of "a new and different version" or "a dandy story" without giving the definite title of this novel.

During these years, the publishers changed from one to another. Horace Liveright insistently urged the manuscript with frequency in vain. Finally in 1945, the novel was completed. Dreiser wrote to James T. Farrell on the fifth of May of the same year saying: "The Bulwark is a story I have carried in my mind for many, many years----- all of thirty." (5)

This undoubtedly shows that even while he was strenuously writing purely naturalistic novels like "Jennie Gerhardt, 1911", "The Financier, 1912", "The Titan, 1914", "The Genius, 1915", the idea of "The Bulwark" was already firmly set and the bud of the novel was being seeded. What lies in the passing of these thirty years with the silence of Dreiser seems to be important in tracing his inclination from Dreiser as a naturalistic and materialistic writer to the later change toward Dreiser's spiritualism and his fusion with the Quakerism.

In Dreiser, we can point out a very strong antagonism and hatred toward his father who was a stubborn but devout Lutheran. This hatred was nourished as he grew older in him over-lapped by the biological view on human-beings and was also spurred by persisting and recurring belief, which gave birth to "Sister Carrie" and to "An American Tragedy". Among the works of Dreiser, we can detect the existence of this antagonism very easily. For example, the life of Mr. Gerhardt, who had brought up his children, sticking to his stubborn faith, could not save them. The son, Sebastian, who was much attracted toward materialism, abandons the house and the family is completely disintegrated.

In his later years, facing the death to come in a short while, Mr. Gerhardt finds the peace and joy in Esther, his grand daughter, the personification of Jennie's sin. The most suitable word to this situation is Dreiser's "cynicism" and the life of the old man is a symbol of a "failure".

*"I've been harsh and cross, but I'm an old man. You forgive me, don't you? (6)*

This is, needless to say, Mr. Gerhardt's self-approval of his failure and, clearly enough, the approval of his defeat.

In "An American Tragedy", Dreiser presents Clyde's father Asa Griffith, as another symbol of his failure.

*"To begin with, Asa Griffiths, the father, was one of those poorly integrated and correlated organism, the product of an environment and a religious theory, but with no guiding or mental insight of his own, . . . ,Asa and his wife remained as optimistic as ever, or they insisted to themselves that they were, and had unwavering faith in the Lord and His intention to provide. (7)*

Asa can not save Griffith by his faith, who feels distressed in the jail. Here we can show exactly the same mistake we find in Old Gerhardt of "Jennie".

However, Dreiser's hatred toward his own father, Asa and Gerhardt begins to disappear after the completion of "An American Tragedy".

Dreiser published no novels from 1925 to the year of the completion of "The Bulwark", 1945. At the same time, it might be supposed that from 1937 to 1940, a certain inner change took place in Dreiser if we take into account some of his experiences he had during these years. In 1937, Dreiser visited a biological research center in Cold Spring Harbor and told Marguerite T. Harris as follows:

You know that summer I was at Cold Spring Harbor-----one afternoon, after I'd been working all day in the laboratory, I came out in the sunshine and saw a little bunch of yellow flowers growing along the border of the park. I stooped over them.

*Here was the same beautiful design and the lavish, exquisite detail that I had seen all day through the microscope. Suddenly it was plain to me that there must be a divine, creative Intelligence behind all this. It was after that, that I began to feel differently about the universe. I saw not only the intelligence, but the love and care that goes into all created things. (8)*

If we find out that this experience is used in "The Bulwark" as that of Solon's as exactly as it is, we can understand the strong impact this experience gave to Dreiser. Solon, seeing a beautiful and seemingly harmless insect eating a bud of a rose, thinks:

*Surely there must be a Creative Divinity, and so a purpose, behind all of this variety and beauty and tragedy of Life. (9)*

If we remember that, in "The Financier", the fight between a lobster and a squid gave Cowperwood only the vision of Life of "The Survival of the Fittest", and the fact that twenty years ago, he used to say:

*I catch no meaning from all I have seen, and pass quite as I came, all confused and dismayed. (10)*

Here in Cold Spring Harbor Dreiser saw a meaning from what he had seen, in other words, he began to be conscious of a "Creative Force" behind what he had observed. This leads us to consider that a certain inclination toward Spiritualism commenced there. Furthermore, in the same year, 1938, he encountered with a poisonous serpent in a suburb of New York. However, when he told the serpent he had no intention of hurting it, the animal calmly left the place without doing any harm to him. This anecdote is also mentioned in "The Bulwark". Solon experiences the same incident and recognizes the existence of an amazing mutual understanding between the serpent and him and says, "Good intent is of itself a universal language. (11)

And precisely the beginning of Dreiser's inclination toward Spiritualism coincided with his acquaintance with Rufus M. Jones. Later Dreiser got in his hands thirteen books on Quakerism and told Marguerite T. Harris,

*Those Quakers, they have something-----look at these books, how beautiful they are. (12)*

Here we can point out Dreiser's not only a simple interest in Quakerism but a more active sympathy toward this religious belief. Also in 1938, he wrote a letter to John Dos Passos in which he says:

The kind of community I want in America will have something like the Quaker conception of "Spiritual Relationship." (13)

Nevertheless, it is questionable that to what extent Dreiser understood Quakerism systematically. He is always intuitive. In his works, we can easily see characters who act not by a logical thinking and reason but by intuition. On the publication of "Tragic America" in 1931, he was attacked severely by the leftists about the lack of precise grabbing of communism. When "The Bulwark" came out in 1946 posthumously, the author was sternly criticized for the lack of a full understanding of Quakerism.

At any rate, it might safely be said that this inner change of Dreiser caused a change in his appreciation of his own father. In the letter to Dorothy Payne Davis in 1940, he says,

*“ , , , , My father, truthful man and a devout Catholic, , , , ” (14)*

Here, the antagonism toward Old Gerhardt and Asa Griffith is absent. Helen Dreiser, pointing out her husband's change in the evaluation of his father, says:

*“ , , , , honesty, his austere German way of living----and then grew in his mind the desire to build a story around him. ” (15)*

Philip Gerber remarks, "Dreiser's hatred turned into a pity, then to understanding and finally to a sympathy." (16), and agrees with Helen's statement and this is backed up by the following words we find in Dreiser's "A Book About Myself",

*“ Now I felt sorry for him, , , Now, after a year out in the world, with a broadening knowledge of very different things, I saw him (the father) in an entirely different light. ” (17)*

In this disappearance of hatred toward his father, the above- mentioned experience of 1937 is functioning to a great extent and it became a driving force for the completion of "The Bulwark" as F.O. Matthiessen observes. In addition, he says that Dreiser said he wanted to dedicate the book to the memory of his father. (18)

With this kind of inner change in Dreiser as mentioned before as a background, "The Bulwark" presents quite a new character, Solon Barnes, a character completely different from those who appear in his early or previous novels.

In this novel, Dreiser tells us a soul that confronts a change of Time and the value. The huge current of Time which the main character will face in the novel is clearly shown from the very beginning:

*The older men were beardless, and most of them retained the simple dress of their predecessors, , , the women of the older group wore the traditional plain Quaker bonnet,,,, On the other hand, the younger of both sexes, in many instances, had gone so far in their concession to the enormous spirit of change and modernity that had overwhelmed Quakerism as to lay aside almost entirely those outward signs of an inward and spiritual grace,,,, Along with this had continued in the minds of some*

*of them a certain earnestness and thrift in well-being and social position, a marked practicality paralleling the very powerful ideal which they, or at least their forebears, had sought to realize. (19)*

As seen here, Solon is presented as a man who, standing in a big storm of the change of Time, is in charge of maintaining the old value which his ancestors held, a man whose responsibility is to realize the idea which the older generation embraced.

The first chapter deals with the description of the Barns' family which never takes meals without praying before, including some anecdotes such as Solon's going to the hill to cut trees and is seriously hurt but is healed by the fervent prayer of his mother, Hanna, or another one that tells us Solon's delicate and innocent personality concerning the event of the day when he kills a bird by mistake and cannot have the supper because of the remorse. All this comes from the biography of Rufus Jones and it enriches the description of the formation of Solon and his pure faith in God.

Here we already feel sympathy with the faith of Solon and his parents. However, in the second and third chapters that old method of Dreiser returns, showing its face as a naturalistic writer.

The five children who were born between Solon and his wife, Bennethia, who also sticks to the Quakerish faith, begin to be influenced and overwhelmed by the value of the New Age and create a gap between their parents and them.

The eldest son, Orville, and the second daughter, Dorothy, get married normally with rich spouses, but what they have deep inside their mind is that of the materialistic view of Cowperwood.

Their faith in Quakerism is now a simple decoration and turns to be a question of "appearance" in the society and that true "Inner Light" loses its original characteristics. The third child, Etta, is a dreamer and disappoints Solon, reading "Sapho" of Daudet, yearning only for beautiful attires and a luxurious life and finally elopes with a man like Eugene Witla of "The Genius". The youngest one, Stuart, obsessed by the secular pleasure and the materialistic vision of Life, kills a girl accidentally and commits suicide in the jail. The young employee of the bank, Walter Briscoe, who is considered as an eager Quaker, betrays Solon's confidence and trust by the embezzlement. All this leads Solon to a crisis of his Faith and makes him think, "Why does God give me this kind of compensation when I heartily dedicate myself to Him?" (20) However, he goes back to "The Journal of John Woolman" and "The Book of Discipline", and these two books make him return to the stubborn faith of "Though He slays me, yet will I trust Him." (21) We find this very significant when we come to the last chapter.

As is the case, since Dreiser emphasizes so much the outer inevitability of the degradation of Etta and Stuart, we can not help sympathizing with them as we felt it with Carrie and Clyde. Our criteria begin to incline from the spiritualism to materialistic vision of Life, but we also have to be conscious that this is Dreiser's intentional method of high-lighting the victory of spiritualism as an overtone at the end of the novel. Solon reports the misdeed of the bank to the authority and says a farewell to those executives with the strong conviction that people's deposit is "their sacred trust". (22) His view of regarding a businessman as a servant of God is entirely different from that of Cowperwood.

The final chapter is a climax of the novel describing Solon's death. The word Etta utters to Solon in his dying bed, "I am not worthy of thee, but I see it, now" (23) is the ultimate evaluation of Dreiser of a figure like Solon.

As Matthiessen remarks, what Etta saw in her father is "The Weight of Spiritual Beauty" (24) and this is exactly what Dreiser himself saw in his father. The dignity formed by a man who lived sincerely in accordance with his Faith makes Etta, who was a leading fighter to break the old value, realize the defeat of herself.

In Solon, there is no defeat of old Gerhardt or Asa Griffith. Solon was the "Bulwark" who stood firmly against the changing world sticking to his unchangeable Faith and an old value. In Solon Dreiser recognizes the victory of human spirit and this is unmistakably what he intended to demonstrate in this novel.

Randall Stewart once said, discussing Dreiser, "One of the errors of the so-called naturalistic writers is that they underestimated a human-being and placed him at an undeservedly low level, as low as a beast." (25) Stewart points out the error in the sense that they efface the line which separate a human-being from a beast and advocate the amorality and consequently innocence of man. In the Naturalistic view of man, he is a puppet manipulated by some Physical Force that runs around the Universe over which he has no control. If he is such an existence, he is free from the responsibility for what he does and also free from the consequence of his behavior due to the lack of "Free Will". He is simply a product of biological heredity and the social environment he lives in. If seen this way, amorality and the absence of responsibility are inevitable characteristics of human existence. Therefore it naturally follows that he is as low as a beast that behaves only according to his instincts. Witla of "The Genius" and Clyde of "An American Tragedy" are apodises of this vision of man. They are rather being pulled than pulling.

However, in "The Bulwark", though we understand that the lives of Witla and Clyde are described as victims of this Force and Dreiser shows that "Their Free-Will is not sufficiently developed to replace this instinct", (26) it does not mean that the author is accepting those people as creatures who fail in front of materialism against their Will. This vision is supported by the humanitarianism that man is a tragic existence in the world being controlled by some super-natural and super-human factors which determine their course of Life.

Dreiser's idealistic attitude can be seen even in his first novel, "Sister Carrie". (1900)

*He will not forever balance thus between good and evil. When this jangle of free-will and instinct shall have been adjusted, when perfect understanding has given the former the power to replace the latter entirely, man will no longer vary. The needle of understanding will yet point steadfast and unwavering to the distant pole of truth. (27)*

In his letter to Robert Elias, he says, "The hope is that all ---or at least a majority---- will reach that mental level at which planned inequity by few will no longer be tolerated or possible." (28)

This shows that Dreiser's inclination toward spiritualism is getting stronger. In addition, if we find that this letter was sent a year before his visit to Cold Spring Harbor in 1936 and his encounter with Rufus Jones in 1937, we understand that this incident functioned as a driving force to the completion of "The Bulwark".

Dreiser's idealism was sublimated and concreted and the question of how to save human spirit became increasingly notable. We find this line of inclination toward humanitarianism even in Ames of "Sister Carrie" who points out and tries to correct the error of the materialistic view of Carrie and the reverend McMillan of "An American Tragedy" who intends to lead Clyde in jail to a religious peace and tranquility in mind. The minister Gridley in the short story, "The Country Doctor" is another case in point. When seen thus, we can say that the theme of "The Bulwark" did not flourish suddenly, but that it had been kept in the mind of Dreiser for a long time.

Moreover, even if the responsibility of a naturalistic writer is to describe and disclose the facts of Life by applying his principle of "La vérité toute la vérité" (Emile Zola's "Le Roman Experimental", *passim*), in the selection and choice of the material for his novels, his selective eyes are functioning. In this sense, a total objectivity is lamentably impossible. Here submerge a writer's ideal and his subjective vision of Life. The judgment of a value also derives from these eyes.

Dreiser's lifelong concern was to make his humanitarianism more concrete and to bring about the real happiness to human Life. Although, since young, he was much influenced by "Determinism", his positive, incessant and enduring search of spiritualism existed in him since his youth as well. What happens is that as we are irresistibly overwhelmed by the characters presented by materialistic Dreiser in his early novels, we tend to overlook another spiritual Dreiser. This stigmatizes us to regard him as a purely naturalistic writer.

Needless to say, Dreiser looked for the solution in the outer change, that is to say, to change the social system through the communistic principles in order to realize human happiness.

In 1927, he visited Russia and wrote "Dreiser Looks at Russia" in 1928, followed by his visit to the coal mine strike in the State of Kentucky, the result of which is "Tragic America" of 1930, but the salvation of human soul through the materialistic stability based on communism did not convince him. We can see the good examples in Carrie and Cowperwood who become materialistically stable, but spiritually remain dissatisfied. Granville Hicks points out that it is clear Dreiser chose the solution first dealing with spiritual discontent. (29)

Some people who were close to Dreiser in his late years say he came to hold a religious Faith, but it seems too hasty to conclude that a clear "conversion" took place in him. In the year of the completion of "The Bulwark", he joined "The American Communist Party", which Granville Hicks called "a farce". (30)

Here we notice Dreiser's confusion. This comes from the fact that he was not a man of reason but a man of intuition. At any rate, it appears reasonable to consider that toward



the end of his life, his confusion began to take the form of “fusion” and as a result of this change, “*The Bulwark*” was completed.

Randall Stewart gives another comment on Dreiser as follows:

There is no hero in the world of Dreiser since a hero must behave according to a moral responsibility. He has to overcome an opposing force applying his moral rules. Just like no conflict occurs in the one-dimensional world of Emerson, no tragedy takes place in Dreiser’s world because a tragedy requires a protagonist who must face a decision-making between the morality and the immorality according to his moral code and responsibility. There is no subjecthood in the tragedy of Clyde. (31) However, Solon had to make a decision applying his moral codes facing the choices of the good and the evil. In this sense, he is the first Dreiserian hero. “*The Bulwark*” in this sense was a knell to his naturalistic vision of Life and here lies the true figure of Dreiser as a confused and contradictory naturalistic writer.

### NOTES

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- (18) Matthiessen, op.cit. p. 248
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- (20) *ibid.*, p. 127
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- (22) *ibid.*, p. 38
- (23) *ibid.*, p. 334
- (24) Matthiesen, *op.cit.* p. 248
- (25) *Americana*, July, 1958, p. 55
- (26) *Sister Carrie*, Houghton Mifflin, p. 67
- (27) *ibid.*, p. 67-68
- (28) Elias, *op.cit.* p. 220
- (29) Kazin and Shapiro, *op.cit.* p. 220
- (30) *ibid.*, p. 221
- (31) *Americana*, July, 1958, p. 66