

Best Piece

as the exponent of realism, Theodore Dreiser originally exhibited his ideas. The origins of naturalism did not begin with Dreiser, but also such literary great had the non-realistic interpretation of society period believed it had defined nature better than any other period. Theodore Dreiser was unique from his contemporaries as he offered something different. Dreiser's type of realistic naturalism had never been before. Authors who imitate Dreiser have often been composed to his writings. To **THEODORE DREISER'S USE OF NATURALISM**, life was built on truth. The world worked through truth according to Dreiser. Dreiser's naturalism has been described as dead, boring, flat, dry, dreary, dreary, PAUL ELLING

## **THEODORE DREISER'S USE OF NATURALISM**

# AP ENGLISH LITERATURE AND COMPOSITION

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As the exponent of realism, Theodore Dreiser originally exhibited its ideas. The telling of naturalism did not begin with Dreiser, because each literary period had its own realistic interpretations. Every period believed it had defined nature better than any other period. Theodore Dreiser was unique from previous writers. He offered something different. Dreiser's type of realism or naturalism had never been seen before. Writers who imitate Dreiser look like imposters compared to his writings. To Dreiser truth had to be accepted, because life was built on truth. The world worked through truth according to Dreiser. Dreiser's naturalism has been described as dead, boring, plain, gray, dreressing, and unrelenting. It was also thought of as upfront, personal, and subjective. Many of Dreiser's works were failures but artistic classics. All qualities in Dreiser's writing centered around naturalism. Critics said Dreiser was confused in his themes sometimes. Critics claimed that Dreiser had no scope, because his scope was broad. Dreiser was a realist. Dreiser demonstrated his naturalism through reality, society, and his characters.

Dreiser, for his reality, deserves recognition. Seeing life clearly, Dreiser belongs to a class including Ernest Hemingway, Mark Twain, Herman Melville, and others. With an overall strong and clear sense, Dreiser made truth and reality into his own personal theory. He was the original artist of truth and power

in literature, being marked as a consistent pursuer of truth. Only three areas of law exist in Dreiser's novels. They are biological, physical, and chemical.<sup>1</sup> Dreiser was so clever that he wasn't trying to create a new style, because his work already had a class. People claimed business was America's only care, but for Dreiser, business was art.<sup>2</sup> This art was built on reality, not imagination. Reminding readers that his books contained historical significance, Dreiser urged fiction to become a biography.<sup>3</sup> The realistic part of Dreiser's novels were labeled failures for weaknesses in style, immorality, and length. Moreover, much of the analyzations, criticisms, and evaluations of Dreiser's works describe his works as showing illusions. Dreiser's works don't just show illusions, but unveil illusions. To Dreiser all life is full of tragedy, because all drives and desires are nothing but illusions.<sup>4</sup> Everything people strive to achieve results in misery. Dreiser pointed out that the fight for success and recognition was nothing but dispiriting illusions. "Dreiser gives full weight to such realistic motives..."<sup>5</sup>

Sex was one of the most powerful illusions in Dreiser's novels. Talking about sex in his books was no problem for Dreiser, because sex was a part of realistic life. Only one other author was daring enough to talk about sex during his times and that was Walt Whitman. He and Dreiser wrote truthfully about

sex. Love, lust, and sex were nothing but illusions to feel socially gratified about. Dreiser implied throughout his novels that sex does not guarantee eternal happiness. When it came down to the end of life, people would have nothing but illusions from sex.

Power was another illusion that critics pointed out about Dreiser's works. The search for power resulted in nothing at the end of one's life. It was nothing but self-aggrandizement. Power was only meant to achieve the approval of others, but in reality, power was meaningless. It does not take intelligence or money to reach ultimate power. To Dreiser, power over others was the illusion. The real power lied in wisdom or ultimate wisdom, where one understands the importance of illusions.

Dreiser showed the hypocrises of life and illusions. People always strove to achieve happiness and satisfaction, but ironically many people were satisfied with material success. True happiness, according to Dreiser, lied beyond materials and status. A hidden reality exists underneath illusions, which is the search for meaning.

Part of Dreiser's reality involved time. When it came down to it, time was irrelevant to Dreiser. Novels going on in chronological order were of no interest to Dreiser. Time in periodic order had no place in Dreiser's novels . What made up the time in Drieser's books was key events, because

realistically, people keep track of time in their heads by events. This, Dreiser realized, was common sense for people to follow a naturalistic story according to the events that make up people's lives not by periodic time. Dreiser explained to a reporter one time that: "The mere living of your daily life is drastic drama." Writing a periodically timed novel would have produced a novel with boring parts. A novel written, like Dreiser has done, according to key events expresses the "drastic drama" he seeks to expose.

Dreiser also wrote about the day-to-day existence of his characters. His quote applies here, because he liked the natural part of people's lives. The lives of all citizens was exciting, whether it be just going to work in the morning. The city was the setting for this day-to-day existence. Dreiser organized his novels according to the important times or this day-to-day existence of citizens. Even the day-to-day existence of mediocre characters was of interest to Dreiser, because many of his characters were mired in mediocrity.<sup>6</sup>

A final part of Dreiser's reality involved the ideas of fact as fiction. This ideas presented fiction as a story of the facts and truth of lives. Fiction was not supposed to be some fairy tale, according to Dreiser. Fiction should be storied fact.

Dreiser's contribution to this idea was his trilogy of

novels. The Titan, The Financier, and The Stoic are the three novels that depict fiction as fact. One character, Charles Yerkes, was the model for Dreiser's character Cowperwood. There was only a sprinkling of fiction. In actuality, the characters reflected real life counterparts. Altercations and the course of lives derive themselves from real life. One occasion from The Titan was an fictional event from a factual event. That particular occasion appeared in the New York Tribune not too far apart from the book's occasion. To make this instance fiction, Dreiser added his own blood to the facts, and they become fiction. This is how his trilogy reflects real life. This is a philosophy of Dreiser, where fiction should reflect factual stories.

Dreiser's fiction was fact told as a fictitious story. As a part of naturalism, this was Dreiser's own philosophy. Dreiser didn't waver from this philosophy. He put it into effect for his novels. This type of writing was not received well by critics. Dreiser was not out to please the critics though. He was writing to establish this philosophy.

Dreiser cannot expect approval from his critics. They accused him of dark, depressing writing. Dreiser's standpoint was one of reflecting the world as its natural self.<sup>7</sup> This standpoint does not necessarily prove Dreiser to be untalented. Dreiser wrote fiction as though he sat looking through a window

at America. His novels presented the most clear representation of America. Through his window, Dreiser sought to show the hard times of American life while revealing the upswing of his naturalism. Dreiser wasn't seeking to dress his fiction up in a fairy tale setting. His realistic novels lacked any physical beauty about them.

While Dreiser claimed historical significance in his novels, his critics discredited anything having to do with history. They claimed that Dreiser didn't write historical novels. His novels were naturalism, and they exposed naturalism. While downplaying the historical uniqueness of Dreiser's works, critics also condemned him for using false grammar. Modern readers didn't pay so much attention to Dreiser's grammar. They focused on and respected Dreiser's fictional realities. His philosophy of writing fact as a fictional story was adored by modern readers.

Additionally, society was another illustration of Theodore Dreiser's naturalism. A quote exists that supports Dreiser's novels very well. "Civilization is at bottom an economic fact."<sup>8</sup> This quote reveals Dreiser's opinion of society. Society or civilization is all natural or even economical, which is mathematical. Dreiser based his novels on naturalism. Many critics felt that Dreiser saved the artistic quality of society from fanciful ruin with his novels.<sup>9</sup> Fairy tales exaggerated society too much. Dreiser's novels brought readers back down to

bunch of promiscuous girls and allowed herself to be seduced. The young girl's heart wasn't up to this treatment. She died from a drug that Stewart gave her. Stewart and his friends got arrested, and Stewart felt extreme guilt. In prison, Stewart killed himself. The results of promiscuity brought immorality into the story. It also caused one character guilt, and it caused death to Stewart. Then promiscuity nearly destroyed the family. Critics point out that "Christianity could not fit into American life. It was compromise or perish." (Theodore Dreiser, 76)

Another detail of Dreiser's immorality involved lust. Promiscuity actually led to lust in Dreiser's novels. Sex or lust represented much in life. To Dreiser, sex was everything in life. It dominated Dreiser's life. It also controlled Dreiser's characters, as it controlled people in real life.<sup>11</sup> Lust was a contradiction to American Society. Nevertheless, it dominated American society, so it had to dominate Dreiser's novels.

The next important idea to Dreiser's society of naturalism was values. Dreiser's idea wasn't necessarily moral values. Moral value didn't exist in Dreiser's novels, because characters and society in Dreiser's books were governed by natural laws and other values. All values were considered illusions. They just covered up what was really underneath the values. One value was "soul-dignity" and will-power. Dreiser's

character, to attain soul-dignity, had to invent their own values. The invention of values or the "creation of values is the creation of self", which results in soul-dignity. The idea of soul-dignity is just an illusion though. Man realized eventually that the use of will-power meant nothing in the total scheme of things.

Another value of society that Dreiser made use of was knowledge and wisdom. Values were nothing but illusions, according to Dreiser, and illusions were false cover-ups. Dreiser advocated the need for values only when a hero understood what his wisdom was all about.<sup>12</sup> When a man recognized his place in the universe, then values could be placed in front of him. Man needed also to understand and learn the nature of things in order to use values. Dreiser urged on the idea that man's wisdom and knowledge of the nature of things could only allow him to use illusions.

The final association that society had with naturalism was through social status. Theodore Dreiser showed people as always being in the search for status measured by other people. It was natural for people to want status. In reality though, status was nothing in the end. Status has never guaranteed eternal happiness, according to Dreiser. Another reason why Dreiser focused his novels on the city and its society was that in the city, people were always searching for social status more than

any other area.

The search for status was a totally symbolic activity, according to Dreiser. Everyone was in the search for status. Since Everyone was in this search, Dreiser described America as a conformist society. He was the first novelist to depict America as this conformist society, where everyone tries to fit into the status quo.<sup>13</sup> Again, Dreiser was criticized for his honest assessment in fiction of what was actually going on in society.

Social status also involved the idea of social gratification. Many of Dreiser's novels tried to break people into the city.<sup>14</sup> Once immersed into the lifestyle of the city, the characters wanted what everyone else in the city wanted. They wanted to achieve power, to establish themselves as a main figure in the city. Gaining power or money would gain gratification for many of Dreiser's characters. This gratification was only an illusion though. When the characters reached the end of their lives, this illusion would mean nothing to them.

Futhermore, the final demonstration of Theodore Dreiser's naturalism was through his use of characters. Dreiser's characters always illustrated something. For example, The Fincancier had characters who represented some underlying idea. Whether it be business, success, failure, power or sex, the characters had meanings. Dreiser's characters also reflected

real life, because many of them measured themselves by success and failure. Some characters also recognized themselves became self-aware of themselves. Theodore Dreiser took his characters seriously, because they came from a personal level. Some of the characters represented actual people in Dreiser's life. This is why Dreiser holds compassion for everyone, because he thought of everyone on a personal level.<sup>15</sup> It was as though Theodore Dreiser had his own personal stake in their lives. Dreiser did, however, have a personal stake in his characters' lives.

Part of Dreiser's naturalism involved characters embodying certain meanings in human society. Dreiser carefully chose his characters so that who they clearly represented some meaning. Each character was separate, because each character represented their own individual meanings. The two most clear character meanings in all of Dreiser's novels was business and power.

The characters that represented business were Theodore Dreiser's most prominent characters. Business representations embodied power, prestige, and pride. They also represented corruption, hard work, and, of course, industry. One example was the character Cowperwood in The Financier, and The Titan.

Cowperwood was the classic business type.<sup>16</sup> He was supposed to represent Yerkes, but he could've been a representation of Carnegie, Rockefeller, or Vanderbilt just as well. Cowperwood also embodied social status and social gratification. He had

satisfied those needs. He had satisfied his illusions of being wealthy and powerful. Cowperwood, while being a representation of business, was also a fine depiction of power in a character.

Cowperwood was the reflection of wealth and power in the trilogy of books written by Dreiser. He had it all. Fame, fortune, women, and homes were in the hands of Cowperwood. His funeral was to be done with grandeur. Like many tycoons in real life, Cowperwood's legend was torn apart after his death. An auction was held to sell his art collection. His one acquaintance tried to prevent his majestic funeral. Finally, Cowperwood was wealth and power through the effect he had on people after his death. Despite quarrels during his life, people realized what a great man he was after his death. They devoted their time to his causes, because they realized their love for him after all.

A true measure of reality is through Dreiser's depiction of success and failure. In reality, many people judge their lives on whether it was a success or a miserable failure. Applying his theory of naturalism, Theodore Dreiser created his characters to measure themselves by success and failure. Dreiser is strong in his character meanings and self-definitions.

Every character in Dreiser's novels had a self-definition of themselves. Some characters defined themselves by their work. Others defined themselves by their position or social status.

Then there were the characters who defined themselves by who their spouse was. Their self-definitions determined how they would go about their lives. If they had a positive self-definition, then they would lead happy lives. If a character was dissatisfied with the definition of themself, then their whole attitude towards life would be negative. Self-definition had much to do with how characters looked at life.

Many characters' self-definition changed through the course of their lives, much as people in real life change their self-definition. When their self-defintions changed dramatically, it would usually result in a rise or fall in their lives. People with high self-definition or self-esteem rose to heights they never dreamed of. Low self-definition caused characters to fall. Dreiser was concerned with the extremes in people's lives, like rags to riches stories or vice versa.<sup>17</sup> Self-definition had a big part in determining whether people would rise or fall in Dreiser's novels.

Theodore Dreiser examined the self-awareness of his characters much throughout his novels. Those characters aware of their place in the world sometimes rose above the monotony of the search for social status and above illusions. They were the characters who dominated Dreiser's novels. No bad guys existed in Dreiser's novels, because men were guided by nature.<sup>18</sup>

Nature, according to Dreiser, determined how characters turned out.

Dreiser developed a predator-as-philosopher idea to go along with the self-awareness of characters.<sup>19</sup> The predator-as-philosopher could evaluate and determine his own role in society. The predator-as-philosopher understood his place in the world. When the character realized his place, he would determine his own stature. The character would have his own level to judge himself on his own standards. When a character realized his own stature, Dreiser saved him from moral criticism.

Theodore Dreiser gave his characters the ability to realize their part in the universe. Dreiser developed naturalism especially for the man of knowledge to understand his place in the universe. Through knowledge and understanding of place, characters developed their values. The natural laws of the universe actually affect man. It is for the man of knowledge to understand this.

Dreiser used reality, society, and characters to show his theory of naturalism. Until the publishing of his massive An American Tragedy, Theodore Dreiser hadn't written much for a while. An American Tragedy, although considered boring, grammatically incorrect, and poorly written was a long step from Dreiser's past novels, such as The Genius. The rule to naturalism was if you couldn't face its truth, then stay away

from it. According to Dreiser, it took boldness to face the truth. Dreiser was the cold and unrelenting pursuer of truth. According to many, Dreiser should be revered and as an artist. Recent writers were not true to the idea of naturalism, so they are on a lesser plane than Dreiser. Critics may have hated Dreiser, but younger writers looked at Dreiser as the "grand old man of realism." (Studies in Anm American Tragedy, 17) Long after his death, Theodore Dreiser's reputation has risen. While Dreiser's writing was always full of much pessimism, it made people think.<sup>20</sup>