



# Theodore Dreiser

“On thinking back over the books I have written, I can only say this has been my vision of life—life with its romance and cruelty, its pity and terror, its joys and anxiety, its peace and conflict. You may not like my vision but it is the only one that I have seen and felt, therefore, it is the only one I can give you.” -Theodore Dreiser (1871–1945)

**T**HE LAST DECADE OF THE 19TH CENTURY LAY THE FOUNDATION for mass communication and culture in the United States: Pulitzer’s and Hearst’s tabloid newspapers challenged upper-class journals; mass circulation magazines like the *Ladies Home Journal* eclipsed the readership of gentle, intellectual periodicals like the *Atlantic Monthly* and *Harper’s*; and Edison projected his first motion picture in 1896. Literature, too, was no longer the main purview of the New England upper crust and Harvard faculty, and the genteel tradition—the philosophy that fiction should be aspirational and portray our better selves—was about to end. At the age of 29, Theodore Dreiser, the ninth of ten children from an impoverished German immigrant family, helped lead that change.

With the publication of *Sister Carrie* in 1900, Dreiser—one of America’s great literary naturalists—rejected the moral sensibilities of the Victorian era and adopted a shocking new form of realism that espoused a bleak, deterministic, Darwinian vision of human nature and society. “Our civilization is still in a middle stage, scarcely beast, in that it is no longer wholly guided by instinct; scarcely human, in that it is not yet wholly guided by reason,” he wrote in *Sister Carrie*, about a woman who, lacking few moral signposts, falls into a wayward life. The novel, followed by *Jennie Gerhardt* (1911) and *An American Tragedy* (1925), among others, irrevocably altered the path of American

literature by portraying characters who follow their basest instincts in search of elusive happiness and material success. A pioneer of the naturalist style in early 20th-century American fiction, Dreiser cast his subjects in a harsh, realistic light without judging them; cogs in the wheels of a new industrial society and often guided blindly by fate, they struggle with the tremendous tensions that arise from desire and ambition. Although Dreiser constantly battled censorship for novels deemed “amoral” (Dreiser himself carried on affairs, and few of his characters suffer the consequences of infidelity), he was nonetheless promoted as one of America’s greatest novelists during his lifetime. Today, he remains one of America’s most important writers.

Dreiser set the majority of his works in America’s early 20th-century cities, where the temptations of consumer culture, the pressures of accruing status, and growing social inequalities often overshadowed conventional moral behavior. In Dreiser’s Chicago, the setting for *Sister Carrie*, opportunity—and its flip side, disappointment—ruins as many lives as it elevates. It is perhaps not surprising that Dreiser chose to depict in his fiction, as realistically as he could, the harshness of urban life and the moral compromises it forced. Born in Terre Haute, Dreiser was schooled erratically. He moved to Chicago and obtained work with the *Chicago Globe* and then the *St. Louis-Democrat*, where he reported on sensational crimes, disasters, and police



activity, along with theater and other cultural events. But the brutal dog-eat-dog world that Dreiser witnessed left a lasting imprint on his outlook and influenced his deep commitment to social reform. He expressed strong support for the working class in the United States and Europe, and, in the last year of his life, he joined the Communist Party.

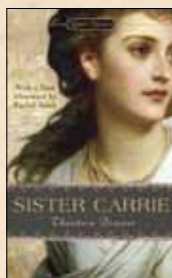
Dreiser wrote scathingly about the capitalist system and the social injustices it engendered in both his fiction and nonfiction. He wrote several nonfiction books on political issues, including *Dreiser Looks at Russia* (1928) and two critiques of capitalist America, *Tragic America* (1931) and *America Is Worth Saving* (1941). Yet it is Dreiser's novels (despite their somewhat cumbersome prose) that greatly influenced American literature during his time and remain the focus of critical inquiry today. As one of his friends and champions, H. L. Mencken, put it, "No other American of his generation left so wide and handsome a mark upon the national letters. American writing, before and after his time, differed almost as much as biology before and after Darwin. He was a man of large originality, of profound feeling, and of unshakable courage. All of us who write are better off because he lived, worked, and hoped."

## SELECTED MAJOR WORKS

### **Sister Carrie** (1900)

Many consider *Sister Carrie*, Dreiser's debut novel and a major work of literary realism, to be the first great urban novel in America. It offers a grim portrait of city life while depicting the exuberance of a new industrial society and posing philosophical inquiries about capitalism. The work was inspired, in part, by Dreiser's sister Emma, who made Chicago headlines when she ran off with a married man. Because of a publishing controversy (some editors considered the book immoral for its fallen heroine, who engages in illicit sexual relationships without suffering either moral degeneration or material loss). *Sister Carrie* initially sold poorly, though it was later republished to international acclaim.

**THE STORY:** In 1889, 18-year-old Carrie Meeber, "bright, timid, and full of the illusions of ignorance and youth," takes the train from small-town Wisconsin to the big city of Chicago with nothing but a few dollars and her good looks. Urban life dazzles the materialistic young woman, who soon finds factory work. When Carrie loses her job, she becomes a traveling salesman's mistress, only to be seduced by the wealthier but married George Hurstwood. As Carrie navigates between the two men, she discovers her talent for the stage. Becoming more independent, she rises as a famous actress in New York City, only to enjoy the high life as the increasingly desperate Hurstwood suffers a terrible downfall.

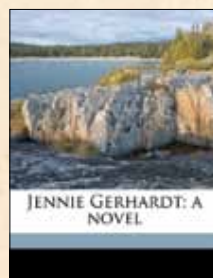


**"One hundred years later the story of the girl from Columbia City, Wisconsin, who went to the city remains as fresh and alive as the day it was written."** RICHARD LINGEMAN, INTRODUCTION TO *SISTER CARRIE* (PENGUIN, 2000).

**"Carrie's relationship with her two lovers gives the book a moral daring but its lasting impact comes from Dreiser's depiction of the hard-nosed exchanges of city life, financial and emotional. The atmosphere of 'hard contract' at the shoe factory where Carrie first works; her sister's grim domesticity; the beggars and shopgirls on Chicago's streets: Dreiser deftly records the steely realities of modern urban living."** GUARDIAN (UK), 1/21/2009

### **Jennie Gerhardt** (1911)

Dreiser's second novel, like *Sister Carrie*, was seen as scandalous for its portrayal of a woman who battles poverty and the conventional prejudices of society. Although not autobiographical, *Jennie Gerhardt* contains memories of Dreiser's family in Indiana—the isolated mother and the foreign-born father who clashes with his children's American ways and rebellion against Old World traditions. A heart-wrenching saga, the novel is still one of Dreiser's most popular works.



**THE STORY:** While working in a hotel in Columbus, Ohio, Jennie Gerhardt, a German American young woman from a poor family, meets a prosperous senator who desires to marry her and help her family. But before they can marry, the senator dies, and Jennie bears his daughter out of wedlock. She and her daughter move to Cleveland, where she finds work as a maid; Jennie then falls for Lester Kane, the son of a wealthy Cincinnati manufacturer. Because of her financial circumstances, Lester decides that Jennie would be more fitting as a mistress than as a wife. Although they live together in Chicago, when his father dies, Lester discovers that unless he leaves Jennie, he will not inherit his father's business. Jennie must then decide whether to sacrifice her own needs to save her lover's fortune and social status.

**"[Dreiser] succeeds in presenting two lives down through their days wholly and without false drama, life as it is lived, without contrived denouements or imposed moral judgments. ... [Jennie Gerhardt] is also a great novel."** RICHARD LINGEMAN, NEW YORK TIMES, 11/7/1993

### **The Financier** (1912)

*The Financier*, the first volume of the Trilogy of Desire (followed by *The Titan* [1914] and *The Stoic* [1947]), casts a critical eye on American social and economic institutions. Dreiser modeled the character of Frank Cowperwood on railway tycoon Charles Yerkes, who experienced a spectacu-



lar rise—and an even more spectacular fall. In its portrayal of a financial system run amuck, *The Financier* is particularly relevant to today. Critics have described the Trilogy of Desire as some of American literature's finest historical fiction. In this particular volume, references to Abraham Lincoln, John Brown, the Battle of Gettysburg, and, of course, robber barons such as Cornelius Vanderbilt, Jay Gould, and Collis P. Huntington abound.

**THE STORY:** In Philadelphia around the time of the Civil War, Frank Cowperwood, the son of a banker, has grandiose ambitions but starts out small: he purchases cheap soaps on the market and sells them, at profit, to a grocer. He then dreams bigger dreams, and he gets his big break by helping the government's issuing of bonds to finance Civil War military campaigns and by scheming his way into a loveless marriage with a wealthy widow. But his ruthless ambition leads to embezzlement and prison; compounded with his love for a beautiful, bright, and amoral woman, Cowperwood falls hard, without remorse and without an ability to satiate his desires despite his catchphrase, "I satisfy myself."



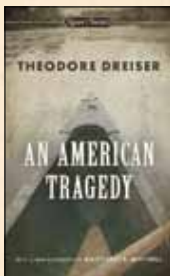
**"Dreiser's Trilogy of Desire ... is the *Iliad* of American capitalism, a war of the bourses that contains much beauty, and occasional justice, along with the carnage. Dreiser's command of the facts of commercial life—streetcar franchises, for example—is as complete as Homer's of war, and his characters as large. ... With the exception of Balzac, no other writer saw so far or so deeply into the mechanics of money-making."** WARD JUST, WALL STREET JOURNAL, 9/16/2006

**"Again, realism carries the day, as *The Financier* updates Silas Lapham's rise-and-fall paradigm with Dreiser's depiction of the moral relativity of commercial life and the supremacy of the individual's self-interest. ... With time to reflect upon Gilded Age excess, literature demanded someone with an advocating heart, savouring in expose and social awareness."**

JOSHUA FERRIS, GUARDIAN (UK), 4/21/2007

## An American Tragedy (1925)

Since his days as a journalist, Dreiser had observed "a certain type of crime in the United States that proved very common. It seemed to spring from the fact that almost every young person was possessed of an ingrown ambition to be somebody financially and socially." He noted "many forms of murder for money ... the young ambitious lover of some poorer girl ... for a more attractive girl with money or position." Dreiser based *An American Tragedy*, a work of extreme naturalism that brought him the greatest critical and commercial success he had yet seen, on a celebrated murder



case. In 1906, the body of 20-year-old Grace Brown was discovered at Big Moose Lake in upstate New York. Chester Gillette was put on trial and convicted of killing her, though he claimed the death was an accident. In 1908, Gillette was executed. Overall, this heralded Great American Novel, which criticizes the American legal system, made Dreiser the champion of social reform.

**THE STORY:** Clyde Griffiths, a Midwestern bellboy with upwardly mobile aspirations who hopes to leave behind his sordid upbringing, sets out to gain fame and success. After a car accident in which a young child is killed, Clyde flees Kansas City and goes to work in his uncle's collar factory in Lycurgus, New York, where he seduces the naive, lower-class Roberta Alden. But Clyde, who deems Roberta an inappropriate social match, pursues Sondra Finchley, a local aristocrat's daughter. His relationship with Sondra looks promising—until Roberta reveals she is pregnant and threatens to expose their affair unless he marries her. Clyde then hatches a plan for Roberta's "accidental" murder—and there begins his sensational downfall.

**"With the possible exception of *Sister Carrie*, this is Dreiser's masterpiece."** OBSERVER (UK), 1/18/2009

**"The prose is frequently awkward, melodramatic and coy. Yet this 934-page novel is profoundly moving and revelatory. ... Clyde is such an inchoate personality, such a seething congeries of inexpressible longings that he lights up the novel's pages with a tortured glow."** FREDRIC KOEPEL, THE COMMERCIAL APPEAL (MEMPHIS), 5/25/2003

## Selected Other Works

### Fiction

*Old Rogaum and His Theresa* (1901)  
*The Titan* (1914)  
*The "Genius"* (1915)  
*Free and Other Stories* (1918)  
*Twelve Men* (1919)  
*Chains: Lesser Novels and Stories* (1927)  
*A Gallery of Women* (1929)  
*The Bulwark* (1946)  
*The Stoic* (1947)

### Nonfiction

*A Traveler at Forty* (1913)  
*A Hoosier Holiday* (1916)  
*Hey Rub-a-Dub-Dub: A Book of the Mystery and Wonder and Terror of Life* (1920)  
*A Book About Myself* (1922); republished (unexpurgated) as *Newspaper Days* (1931)  
*The Color of a Great City* (1923)  
*Dreiser Looks at Russia* (1928)  
*My City* (1929)  
*Tragic America* (1931)  
*Dawn* (1931)  
*America Is Worth Saving* (1941) ■