

Theodore Dreiser

Indiana University's Only Literary Genius

By WILLIAMS M. TONER.

HE was one of the three hundred and ninety students of Indiana University at the beginning of the last decade of the Nineteenth Century. The school has progressed—no, I should have said grown—in the intermediate thirty-five years. The undergraduates then could not boast of the gigantism of the University. There were thirty instructors as matched against our several hundred. The grounds of the institution were no larger than twenty-four acres, and the buildings that housed the various departments were few in number. Library Hall, now the Administration Building, was under construction and was not only to house the volumes of knowledge, but also the class rooms of the Law School as well as recitation halls for the English, History, Political Science, and Pedagogic departments! There were other buildings—Wylie, Owen and Maxwell Halls as well as a “small frame building that has been fitted up for the use of students in Astronomy.” You may have seen this last some fifty yards southeast of the gymnasium. It is quite a contrast from our present Observatory, just as our institution is an enormous development from the small college of yesterday. But has the intellectual productiveness developed in like proportion? But this is beside the subject, he was a student here then.

He was a student here when David Starr Jordan, one of the nation's foremost educators, held the chair of president. Dr. Bryan guided the department of Philosophy and had, at that time, gained a reputation as a philosopher of note, as well as being an innovator in the field of psychology. His protegee, Ernest Lindley, studied with the great psychologists of Europe and brought back to Indiana a knowledge that founded probably the finest department of Psychology the nation had. Dr. Lindley is now Chancellor of Kansas University. There was Dr. Woodburn in History, and Daniel

Kirkwood, the world famed astronomer, and there were others—. But this is all beside the subject.

He was a student here then, but he was not known through scholarly ability or athletic prowess. He plodded through his first year, then left, conscious only of an acute inapprehension concerning the polite usages of education in our factory of knowledge. His particular fire of intellectual power could only grow brilliant under the bellows of personal tutelage. As it was, this fire only smouldered under the cramping exigencies of the class room in the pursuit of a particular formula. There was no place for Theodore Dreiser in the scheme of the University. To every one who knew him then, he was an intellectual misfit. He would wander aimlessly through the fields or sit in a chair at his rooming house tying and untying knots in his handkerchief. The University and life in general held for him nothing but bewilderment. He could find no philosophy that eased his mind towards the prosaic tragedies that surrounded and engulfed him. He has never found an answer to his inexplicable question, nor shall he, but in this probably lies his secret of realistic art. Before him is a picture of life. He portrays it as he sees it without attempting to unravel its intricacies or embellish his product with fallacious suppositions. This was his connection with Indiana University; this is one of our chief claims to distinction, and yet there are scarce a hundred here who have heard of him, and not twenty-five who have read his novels.

Dreiser was born of Germanic parentage in 1876 in the outlying, rickety settlements of Terre Haute. His father, beaten by the wages of poverty, but yet pious, had little to offer him; but his mother, through her sympathetic understanding, gave him the impetus to strive for higher attainments. His first twenty years were virtually unimportant, chuck-full of drab, meaningless incidents that served to point only to a grey existence. There was school at Warsaw, then at Indiana, and afterwards the uncharted wanderings that carried him from one place to another, from one state of dissatisfaction to still another.

In his first years out of college, he worked with various newspapers in Chicago, St. Louis, Toledo, Cleveland, Buffalo, Pittsburgh, and finally New York; but these were not fruitful

years, for there were many times when he lived on a loaf of bread and a few glasses of milk. Once when he was seeking employment in New York, he had left his meal of bread and cheese in the waiting room while he was being interviewed. When he returned, he found that the morsels were gone. They had been put in the waste basket by the janitor. Such was his early life—the life that unquestionably augmented the ironic existence of his characters, and colored them with the indelible mark of his misfortunes.

It was an old friend from Toledo, Arthur Henry, who finally turned him from his aimless wanderings and spurred him to write stories. They had met while Henry was the City Editor of the *Toledo Blade* and Dreiser a reporter looking for a job. Henry recognized the ability of Dreiser in the articles the latter submitted, and urged him to attempt a short story. The result was a story submitted to *Ainslee's* magazine and the outcome a check for seventy-five dollars. Four more stories followed, after which Henry pleaded with Dreiser to try a novel. Dreiser was distrustful of himself and held back but finally started. Through many months the novel progressed, hindered by pauses when Dreiser wanted to cease the laborious task because he still held no confidence in his ability, but yet spurred on again by Henry's enthusiasm. The result was "Sister Carrie," published by Doubleday, Page & Co. in 1900. The editors, fearful of the venture because of the supposed immorality of the work, only published a thousand copies in unstamped covers. These were scarcely distributed, but still a few copies fell into the hands of intelligent critics who recognized the worth of the book. Because of this and because of partial suppression "Sister Carrie" enjoyed an esoteric existence until "Jennie Gerhardt" was placed on sale eleven years later. When it came out and proved a literary as well as financial success, "Sister Carrie" was reprinted and sold exceptionally well.

The period of Dreiser was established. His name was made synonymous with realism. He was hailed as the literary offspring of Walt Whitman while later, when realism grew to enormous proportions, he was dubbed literary father of Sinclair Lewis, Sherwood Anderson, Waldo Frank, and a host of young artists who aspired to picture life without adornment.

Forth-coming were "The Financier" and "The Titan" in 1914, members of a trio of which the third has not been written. Naturally others followed, "The Genius" in 1915 and "A Hoosier Holiday" in 1916. Since then he has written nothing but pamphlets and articles, but a new novel "The American Tragedy" is to be released this winter.

II.

But what is this genius of Dreiser? Those who know of Dreiser associate this mystic term with him; critics treat him as they would red hot iron or five carat diamonds. Unmistakably the man has extraordinary power, but how it is to be defined or limited?

His style is superficially inexpressive if there is a style at all. He makes no attempt to grope for the inevitable word, but quite blindly writes just what comes at the moment. He plunges through his stories with brute strength. There is no architectural plan in his works, no thought of continuity. For instance in "The Genius" he stumbles through several hundreds of thousands of words and through this written struggle, finally develops a semblance of plot, only to put it aside in order to describe the inner workings of Christian Science and what the apartment home of the healer Mrs. Althea Jones is like. And it is so unimportant and banal. Yet to him this is entirely necessary for the novel, in fact everything that happens is of equal importance to him. And here in his weakness we virtually find his strength, for he is no more than a sensitive mirror which portrays just what is brought before him. Others array themselves on one side or another of a question to affect irony or drama. They muster all of their artistry to this cause, yet Dreiser neither attacks nor defends. In a word his is a picture of life, and what is more dramatic than life itself? He attempts no explanation of the fate of the characters. Why? Because he does not understand, yet since he does not propound an explanation of that unstemmable tide that hurls his characters on to the inevitable destiny; he casts a certain air of mysticism through his works we cannot understand. Yet we know it is there and that is the genius of Dreiser.

His characters are all victims of great tragedy. Hurstwood turns on the gas to exchange old troubles for new.

Jennie Gerhardt and Sister Carrie are lifted by their merit, then pressed down by tragedy. Copperwood, with his love for beauty and power, unmistakably fails to gain either in entirety. Eugene Witla simpers into failure never choosing his path. Dreiser is terrifically cruel in depicting these characters, but if Dreiser is only the mirror who or what is cruel? In just such manner certain circumstances of his books arouse in us a feeling that the work smacks of genius. Yet if he is the mirror, is he the genius or is the genius this particular composite life? Dreiser would say that if his work is poignant tense realism it is because he has reported well. Yet out of his maelstrom of banalities rises an artistry entirely foreign to any save himself. He is alone in his interpretation; his confined babblings and clumsy expostulations become strangely articulate,—articulate in an unconsciously perfect scheme. Schubert was no better than the ordinary music teacher in strict formative composition yet his music reaches divine heights through a poetic sense of what is right. Dreiser could probably get a grade of D in our composition classes because his rudiments of form and context are nil, yet this same sleepy unfathomable man, at once mysterious, yet blandly real, will be read centuries on. Intelligent scholars will ask the question, "What was his motive? What sustained him through the centuries?" Those learned men can answer these questions when they have unravelled the enigmas of life itself.