

EVOLUTION OF SPIRITUAL THOUGHT IN THE NOVELS OF THEODORE DREISER.

S.SUBRAMANIAN

Classifying Dreiser as a pioneer of naturalism and an "irredeemable naturalist", most critics were reluctant to accept the sincerity and validity of his affirmation. Even as late as 1944, Chauncy B. Tinker described him as "an acknowledged leader of the naturalistic school in America" (Quoted in Mookerjee 34). A close study of his novels shows that, though Dreiser shared many features common to naturalism, he also exhibited characteristics, which are totally different from those of naturalism and even opposed to it.

Professor Lars Ahnebrink has made an elaborate study of the naturalistic movement both in America and Europe. As he defines it:

Naturalism is a manner and method of composition by which the author portrays life as it is in accordance with the philosophic theory of determinism (exemplified in Zola's *L'Assommoir*). In contrast to a realist, a naturalist believes that man is fundamentally an animal without free will. To a naturalist man can be explained in terms of forces, usually heredity and environment, which operate upon him (VI).

Though Dreiser's novels conform partly to this definition, they are not strictly in accordance with the theory of determinism. Determinism is a vital principle in naturalism. The naturalists believe that man's action is controlled and determined by external forces such as physical, social and environmental factors. They do not believe in the exercise of free will. Dreiser partly accepts the principle of determinism, but differs from them in their view of free will.

Dreiser's acceptance of the existence of free will is clearly seen even in his first novel, *Sister Carrie*. He also believes that man is not completely an animal. While describing the mental state of Carrie, Dreiser says that "Our civilisation 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 reasons" (70). Man is essentially a different creature from, for example, the tiger which possesses 'no responsibility', and which is 'aligned' by natural forces and without thought or reasoning and is protected by nature. Man, on the other hand, is 'far removed from the lairs of the jungles' and has free will. However, man has not quite sufficiently developed his will to replace his instincts and afford him perfect guidance, "In this intermediate stage", Dreiser writes,

He wavers - neither drawn in harmony with nature by his instincts nor yet wisely putting himself into harmony by his own free will. He is even as a wisp in the wind, moved by every breath of passion, acting now by his will and now by his instincts, erring with one only to retrieve by the other, falling by one, only to rise by the other - a creature of incalculable variability. We have the consolation of knowing that evolution is ever in action, that the ideal is a light that cannot fail. He will not for ever balance thus between good and evil. Where this jungle 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 (70).

Dreiser's characters are not denied the exercise of their free will. Carrie is not created a helpless creature in the hands of the controlling forces. Her experiences in Chicago and later her sufferings and success reveal a depth of human consciousness and will power. Carrie is not blindly drawn to Drouet and later to Hurstwood. She is calculating, and reasons out everything. Dreiser says that, in Carrie, "instinct and reason, desire and understanding, were at war for the mastery" (71).

The description of the stealing episode shows that Hurstwood is not devoid of free will. His stealing is shown as 'accidental' but his troubled state of mind, his hesitation, his indecision, his prolonged debate whether he should steal or not, his fear of the police and the law testify that the act was not committed blindly by the compulsion of external force or chance and circumstance.

Dreiser's style also differs from that of other naturalists. It is not flat, objective and bare of imagery. There is often little distinction between Dreiser and his characters, and his view of life tends to be subjective like that of a romantic. R.L.Duffus describes him as a "romantic, a realist and a mystic all in one" (quoted in Ross 233). He often thought of himself as a romantic and had a pronounced streak of sentimentality. He was always wondering at the "mystic something of beauty that perennially transfigures the world! The freshness of dawns and evenings!" (Dreiser, Dawn 198-199). He is compassionate towards his characters. His addresses to his characters - fully in the tradition of the sentimental novelists - are very revelatory:

Oh! Carrie! Carrie! Oh, blind striving of the human heart. Onward, onward, it saith, and where beauty leads there it follows (458).

Such passages recur frequently in his novels. He thinks also like a romantic. In Jennie Gerhardt, he writes:

We may tremble, the fear of doing wretchedly may linger, but we grow. Flashes of inspiration come to guide the soul. Nature is not ungenerous. Its winds and stars are fellows with you. Let the soul be but gentle and receptive, and this vast truth will come home - not in set phase, perhaps, but as a feeling, a comfort, which after all, is the least essence of knowledge. In the universe peace is wisdom (99-100).

Quoting this passage in his book R.N.Mookerjee very perceptively remarks that "these hardly seem to be the words of a naturalist as the term is generally understood; if it is naturalism at all, it is the naturalism of Wordsworth asserting the peace and harmony that exists between man and nature (47).

Dreiser's experiences, views and ideas find expression in his novels. As Robert E.Spiller says, "all that Dreiser wrote was a single long autobiography" (171). Sister Carrie is based on the facts of his sister Emma's life. Her elopement with Hopkins, a married man, who stole money from his employers, is akin to Carrie's and Hurstwood's elopement. Jennie Gerhardt, Elvia Griffiths and Berenice are portrayals of his kind, good and noble hearted mother. William Gerhardt and Asha Griffiths have traits in common with his father. Critics have also compared Dreiser's father to Solon Barnes. "Both men" says Philip L.Gerber,"are strongly religious fathers who attempt to raise their families according to the codes they have accepted for themselves. Both see their sons and daughters seduced into a world which, being

irreligious, can only be evil"(170). The Genius is generally considered an autobiographical novel.

The most important difference between Dreiser and other naturalists is his open proclamation of faith in God. The critics who labeled him as a "barbaric naturalist" were puzzled at his affirmation. Obviously they have failed to notice the religious streak in Dreiser even during his childhood. His early writings such as "Water-work Extension" serve as a record of his faith in God. W.A.Swanberg, his biographer, has given ample evidence for his early belief in God.

His mind was always filled with the thought of God. Whenever he talked to any person, he usually wanted to ascertain his or her view of God. One day in an interview with Annie Besant, he asked her whether she did not recognize a controlling principle - a God. She replied in the negative. Mentioning this incident, Swanberg remarks: "For all of Annie Besant . . . he was not ready to dump his religion, reasoning that the world's ills might not be attributable to God but to man's inability to understand God (43).

The major influences that suppressed his early spiritual concern were the over-righteous religious background of his youth, his poverty-stricken childhood and his enthusiasm for science. But obviously, they could not suppress it for ever, for it asserts itself progressively and increasingly in the course of his work. Dreiser was driven to hate the dogmatic principles of institutionalized religion, even early in his life. Dreiser's father, John Dreiser, a blind adherent to the Catholic faith and its rituals, who believed that God would reveal Himself through the ceremonies of the Church, was the first to affect Dreiser strongly* Dreiser's description of his father as a "narrower, more hidebound religionist," a crank," "a tenth rate Saint Simon or Francis of Assisi" (A Hoosier Holiday 284), shows how strongly Dreiser had reacted against the strict code of his father which sowed seeds of bitterness and hostility. The strict discipline of the parochial school in which he was admitted added fuel to this burning hatred. The hostility against all religious ceremonies and the Church was further intensified when the priest refused to perform the funeral rites of his mother. It should be noted that Dreiser's anger was only against the crippling dogmas, creeds and customs of the Church and its priests but not against basic religious teachings or against God.

Poverty was also one of the determining influences, which shaped his thought. Dreiser's early poverty ridden life made him yearn for wealth and prosperity. He observed in life that religion and poverty go hand in hand. His father was a good example. He came to believe that the worship of God and the adoption of the religious ceremonies were in no way helpful to prosperity and a successful career. An instinctive resistance to formal religion was an understandable reaction.

Science, too, played its role in restraining his early spiritual feelings, his reading of Huxley's Science and Hebrew Tradition and Science and Christian Tradition affected him most profoundly. Huxley made him believe that Christianity was one of many dogmas, and the Bible was merely a record of the experiences of individuals and not revealed Truth. Dreiser was still more shocked, when he read Spencer's First Principles in which the author disposed of religion simply as being the concern of the "unknowable". Spencer, Dreiser said to Frank Harris, "nearly killed me, took every shred of belief away from me". As Swanberg says, the extent of his hurt shows how deeply he had cherished the belief in God" (61).

In spite of these hindrances, his spiritual predilection was never suppressed completely. His longing for ultimate satisfaction and happiness which could not be afforded by worldly success, his attraction for the virtue of charity, his belief in superstitions, his emotionalism and sentimentalism, his ceaseless quest for beauty and the ideal, and his realization of a superior power very slowly developed into a deep faith in a benign Divine Force.

The first stage in his spiritual growth is his realisation of a spiritual vacuum in material success. His personal observations and experiences in life made him realize the futility of worldly success and pleasures. The first four novels, *Sister Carrie*, *Jennie Gerhardt*, *The Financier* and *The Titan*, are reflections of his realization that material success were bound to lead to disillusionment. *Sister Carrie* is the story of a poor village girl, Carrie Meeber and her pursuit of material success. Her aim in life is money, luxury and success, but when she has her "gowns and carriage, her furniture and bank account" (486), her inner feeling is still one of longing and incompleteness. "Amid the tinsel and shine of her state" (457), she is lonely and unhappy.

Dreiser's second novel, *Jennie Gerhardt* is an illustration of his realization that material success leaves one with discontentment and dissatisfaction, by contrasting the attitude of two characters. Jennie is simple, unselfish and kindhearted. She gives no importance to money and material success; she sacrifices her life for the welfare of others. Even though conventional society does not recognize her noble heart and ill-treats her, she has no ill feeling towards people. She loves all, and is happy and contented. But, Lester, her lover, gives importance to wealth and luxury and finally expresses his dissatisfaction and unhappiness over the achievement of these aims.

Dreiser further illustrates this idea by portraying the life cycle of Cowperwood in *The Financier* and *The Titan*. These two novels reveal that even the strong are not free from disillusionment if they give importance to material success and pleasure in their life. Material success is "a mulch of darkness" and in it "are bedded the roots of endless sorrows" (*Titan* 552).

Dreiser was a great lover of beauty and he was particularly devoted to beauty in nature, art and women. It was physical beauty, which attracted him first, but it turned soon into a quest for an ideal. The individual's search for beauty which is always a quest for the ideal, for better things, is the underlying theme in his novels. Carrie in her quest for an ideal is misdirected. Cowperwood and Eugene Ulitla are relentlessly searching for beauty in women. This quest is completed only in *The Stoic* where this quest for an ideal is identified with the divine design, the face of 'Brahma' shining through.

Love is a dominant theme in all his novels. Dreiser loved human beings as a part of nature. His autobiographical works show how greatly he had loved his mother, brother, sister and others. In his essay "Confession of Faith", he declared: "I believe in the compelling power of love. I do not understand it. I believe it to be the most fragrant blossom of all this thorny existence" (quoted in Mookerjee 204). He began his novelistic career with selfish characters like Carrie and Hurstwood, who loved themselves. After identifying the selfish love, he proceeded to portray selfless love from Jennie to Solon Barnes and Berenice. He ended his career advocating universal love and the brotherhood of all men.

Dreiser's pity and sympathy for the poor and the weak turned him into a humanist. His sympathy with the striking workers, the description of the charity houses and the selfless service of the «x-soldier who believes that his service to the poor is service to God, are examples of his early humanistic concern. He made Jennie adopt two orphans, Cowperwood allot money for the construction of a hospital for the poor, and Berenice serve the orphans. Dreiser himself made provision for orphans in his Will.

Dreiser's realization of the futility of material goals led him to believe in the existence of a superior force but he was not able to decide whether the external force is well intentioned or malicious. After more conflicts and observations, he began to believe in a benevolent creative force. This belief made him still more emphatic in his view that material success would not only lead one to disillusionment but also to destruction. In *The Genius*, Eugene Wilta realises his error in pursuing pleasure in wealth and sex after his wife's death in childbirth. He begins to understand the meaning of life. He discards his view that God is malicious, and believes in the benevolence of the supreme being and regain his peace.

Dreiser's belief in the benevolent supreme being is confirmed in *An American Tragedy*. The introduction of deeply religious characters like Elvira Griffiths and McMillan the emphasis on repentance and salvation and the employment of Biblical quotations are the result of his later belief. Dreiser shows in this novel that the pursuit of wealth and pleasure is the cause of the tragedy and emphasized the need for repentance for salvation. The last few chapters are completely devoted to the task of making Clyde accept the existence of a benevolent God. Clyde's doubt and his later belief are in no way different from Dreiser's own.

The years that followed the publication of the *An American Tragedy* were the most important years in his life. He began to see order and meaning in all creation and had come to understand the limitations of science. He became tolerant even of organised religions. He saw the presence of God in each and everything. He was even ready to prove the existence of God. Dreiser's deep faith in God and his advocacy of universal love are reflected in his novels *The Bulwark* and *The Stoic*. His belief in the benign creative force is identified with the 'Inner light' of the Quakers in *The Bulwark*. Dreiser transferred his own experience to Solon in the later part of the novel. Solon's "awe and wonder", his realization of the presence of the "Creative Divinity" in all things are reflections of Dreiser's own experience, Dreiser's faith in God is confirmed in *The Stoic*.

Dreiser's use of Quaker and Hindu beliefs and ideas in his last novels is itself a reflection of his spiritual concerns and convictions at this stage of his career* As in *Woolman*, "His religion, was love. His whole existence and all of his passions were love," and this was a love that first turned toward God and thence spread out over all people and things - a love that extended to the poor, the weak, the slaves, the miners" (Dreiser, *The Bulwark* 331).

Apart from the intrinsic and the independent merit of Dreiser's novels, they trace, together in their sequence, what may be called a spiritual journey from doubt and hesitant faith to something like total conviction and commitment. From the evidence available of the author's own life, it is naturally tempting to assume that the progress of his different protagonists is really a parallel to his own. What Eliot says of the good dramatic poet is just as true of the good writer of fiction - that in his work, he is "somehow dramatizing, but in no obvious way, an action or a

struggle for harmony" in his soul. The body of Dreiser's work does record such a "struggle for harmony" in his inner life

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**Prof.S.Subramanian, Ph.D.,
PG & Research Dept. of English,
Pachaiyappa's College, Chennai,
Tamilnadu, India,**

**Editor
City Academy,
A literary Bi-annual Journal,
Chennai, Tamilnadu, India.**