A Real American

American literature is still terribly apt to excite the snobbish elements in an English critic. It is either feeble with an excess of culture, or forcible with a self-conscious virility. In either case it appears to be influenced by the desire to conciliate or flout the European standards; and such deference not only never attains its object, but, perhaps deservedly, brings its own punishment in the shape of patronage and derision. One cannot help, on such occasions, boasting of the English descent from
Shakespeare. At first sight Mr Dreiser appears to be another of those pseudo-Europeans whose productions may pass muster across the Atlantic, but somehow look over here like careful copies from the old masters. There are many stories, we should suppose, neither better nor worse and indeed much resembling 'Free' in the current magazines. But what we should expect an English writer to rattle off with some dash and self-confidence, the American writer produces slowly, languidly, with much fumbling for words and groping for subtleties which seem to escape him. The end is apparent long before it is reached, and we come to it in a listless straggling way which makes the whole expedition seem rather pointless. As there is perhaps no more fatiguing form of mental exercise than the reading of short stories told without zest, the prospect of ten more to come descended like a mist upon the horizon. The cloud lifted, however, against all expectation, as a dull day gets finer and finer without one's seeing exactly where the light comes from. While we were growing more and more conscious that Mr Dreiser lacked all the necessary qualities for a writer of short stories - concentration, penetration, form - unconsciously we were reading on at a great rate and enjoying the book considerably. At a certain point then it was necessary to come to terms with Mr Dreiser and to inform him that, if he would consent to drop his claim to be a writer of short stories, we for our part would renounce our privileges as the lineal descendants of Shakespeare.

And yet what did our pleasure come from? It did not come from the usual sources; it did not come from excitement or shock; it came, as if surreptitiously, from a sense of American fields and American men and women and of America herself, gross, benevolent, and prolific. For some hundreds of years, of course, the existence of America has been a well-known fact; but the lettered classes have kept their country in the background, or presented it in a form suited to European taste. Mr Dreiser, however, appears to be so much of an American that he describes it without being aware that he is doing anything of the kind. In the same way a home-bred child describes the family in which he has been brought up. There is little evidence that Mr Dreiser has been influenced by Europe. He is not perceptibly cultivated. His taste seems to be bad. When he describes an artist, we, on the other hand, see a journalist.

Davies swelled with feeling. The night, the tragedy, the grief, he saw it all. But also with the cruel instinct of the budding artist, that he already was, he was beginning to meditate on the character of story it would make - the colour, the pathos. [...] 'I'll get it all in!' he exclaimed, feelingly, if triumphantly, at last. 'I'll get it all in!'²
Mr Dreiser gets a great deal too much of it in, but, together with the
colour and the pathos, there is another quality which excuses his sins of
taste, and perhaps explains them. He has genuine vitality. His interest in
life, when not impeded by the restrictions of a definite form, bubbles and
boils over and produces *Twelve Men*, a much more interesting work
than *Free*.

Whether we are able to recognise the originals or not, these twelve
character sketches are extremely readable. And to an English reader they
are, besides, rather strange. With superficial differences, each of these
men is of a large, opulent, masterful character. Each is, as Mr Dreiser
defines it, ‘free’, with ‘the real spiritual freedom where the mind, as it
were, stands up and looks at itself, faces Nature unafraid, is aware of its
own weaknesses, its strengths ... kicks dogma out of doors, and yet
deliberately and of choice holds fast to many, many simple and human
things, and rounds out life, or would, in a natural, normal, courageous,
healthy way’.\(^3\) One of these men writes songs, another directs compa-
nies, a third builds toy engines. They are all busy and engrossed, and
in love with life. Yet with all their power they seem childish – childish in
their love of fame, in their love of mankind, in their sentimentality and
simplicity. One is certain that their songs will be bad ones, their pictures
melodramatic, their stories mere journalism. But their animal spirits are
superb. Nor are they entirely animal. The abundance of life in their veins
overflows into all kinds of fine and friendly relations with their fellows.
Mr Dreiser described them with such enthusiasm that his work has a
character of its own – an American character. He is not himself by any
means a great writer, but he may be the stuff from which, in another
hundred years or so, great writers will be born.

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\(^1\) A review in the *TLS*, 21 August 1919, (Kpc 163) of *Free and Other Stories* and of
*Twelve Men* (Boni & Liveright, 1918 and 1919) by Theodore Dreiser (1871–1945),
whose works at this date included *Sister Carrie* (1900), *The Financier* (1912) and
*The Genius* (1915). Reprinted: CW.

\(^2\) *Free and Other Stories*, ‘Nigger Jeff’, p. 111.

\(^3\) *Twelve Men*, ‘Peter’, p. 1.