IT IS now more than forty years since Theodore Dreiser made his appearance with *Sister Carrie.* Many things have changed since then. Much that was accepted and praised has sunk beyond the verge. Whole schools and periods have dwindled and died. Reputations have come and gone. Stars have risen, have fallen again. But Dreiser remains. His star burns with a more brilliant light than when first it rose, though at the beginning, and for many years thereafter, men were not lacking who said that this was not a star at all, but a mere chance flare.

Finding a man’s proper level is always a difficult task for contemporaries. How many outstanding critics of the past have been guiltless of at least one major blunder in this respect? But the effort must be made, nevertheless.

Chekhov once said that the only remark made by a critic that had impressed him was that he would die in a ditch, drunk. But the great Russian, who was bedeviled by critics, did not give the art its due. Criticism at its best still remains, as in the days of Aristotle and Dr. Johnson, a “standard of judging well,” and this is the measure of value that must be applied to it. Literary art without criticism—even the dishonest brand—would lose much of its effectiveness and power. Criticism, indeed, is the mortar that builds literature into an edifice, and the critic is, more often than not, the middleman between author and public, or between one age and another.

One approach to Dreiser is through his critics. Indeed, there is no better approach to the man—granted, of course, that his books are read first—and this is the approach that will be followed in the present study. There is not, in the whole field of American literature, a more interesting body of critical writing than that which bears upon Dreiser. And from a survey of that criticism should emerge a figure recognizable as the Dreiser of today. If that figure stands forth in outlines distinct enough to have some meaning for the reader, it will be felt that the present essay has not altogether failed in its intention.

The criticism of Dreiser falls roughly into several classes: that based on moral grounds; that based on esthetic grounds, which includes his writing technique; and other varieties based more or less on appreciation and understanding. The criticism falls, moreover, into three periods, which can be divided roughly as follows: from the publication of *Sister Carrie* in 1900 until two decades later, when the championing of H. L. Mencken gave Dreiser a more or less secure place in contemporary literature; from this period until about 1930, during which he represented, for America and the world, realism, sexual freedom, and other
things that Americans thought they believed in at the time; and from 1930 until the present, when his real significance as man and writer began to emerge. That these classes and periods overlap each other indicates a confusion that existed not only in the age itself but also in Dreiser.

The first period saw the writing of *Sister Carrie*, *Jennie Gerhardt*, *The Financier*, *The Titan*, *The "Genius,"
* Free, and Other Stories*, *The Hand of the Potter*, *Twelve Men*, *Hey Rub-a-dub-dub*, and the first two of the autobiographical books, *A Traveler at Forty* and *A Hoosier Holiday*. During the next period Dreiser published *A Book about Myself*, *The Color of a Great City*, *An American Tragedy*, *Moods Cadenced and Declaimed*, *Chains*, *Dreiser Looks at Russia*, *A Gallery of Women*, and *Dawn*. The final period has seen little actual published work other than the polemical books *Tragic America* and *America is Worth Saving*.

If we are familiar with his work, these titles show us three things: that he was preoccupied with the American scene in its most fundamental aspects, and endeavored to portray it in a series of masterpieces; that he was preoccupied with the problem of self, and dealt with it in a series of confessional books; and that his preoccupation with America and its impact on the individual led him to politics and economics, the position he now occupies.

From the beginning, most of the criticism was adverse in nature. Though Dreiser knew little about realism and naturalism as such, he did have an honest, mature view of the world (He was nearly thirty when *Sister Carrie* was written.) and he didn't know how to write other than honestly and plainly. He came on the scene at a time when there was little precedent in America for realistic writing. American society was already producing men and women with the realistic or modern point of view, but the prevailing literary school was academic and conservative. Whitman had not yet been accepted by the critics; the realistic tradition but barely begun by Frank Norris, Stephen Crane, David Graham Phillips, and H. B. Fuller had had little success in establishing itself. This was the scene upon which Dreiser stumbled with his story of a fallen woman who did not receive the usual punishment for her sins. The resulting furor has not died out to this day, and so thoroughly did Dreiser's early critics do their work that their opinions still color much that is written about him.

Thus Dreiser, whose only purpose was to give honest expression to his view of the world, found himself on the firing line as leader of the American naturalists.

The quarrel between the prevailing critical school and the moderns had much more than esthetic differences behind it. Those who objected to Dreiser belonged to the conservative school, behind which lay the strength of conservative America. Behind the realistic school, which did not yet exist but was trying to come into being in response to new
political currents in the country, lay the new liberal attitudes that had
begun to emerge in American life.

*Sister Carrie*, attacked as a monstrosity by critics and reviewers, was
withdrawn by the publishers and Dreiser found himself treated as a
pariah. Honest handling of sex, he discovered, meant ruin for an
author. Forced out of the creative field, he turned to other pursuits and
acquired wealth as a journalist and as editor of successful commercial
magazines.

England, however, appreciated Dreiser from the beginning. In 1903,
when he was banned and ostracized in the United States, Arnold Bennett
wrote that Dreiser and Frank Norris were to be the forerunners of a new
American literature.

Having had their fling, the critics learned to ignore him. When, in
succeeding years, men like William Lyon Phelps, W. C. Brownell, Henry
S. Pancoast, H. W. Boynton, Fred Lewis Pattee, and Reuben P. Halleck
wrote on American literature, they could devote considerable space to
writers like Marietta Holley, Will N. Harben, Charles D. Stewart and
Henry Sydnor Harrison (Are the names familiar to the reader?) but
could find no room for Dreiser. When they spoke of him, it was in the
tradition of the hue and cry already established: Dreiser had been
damned and they continued to damn him.

Unfortunately, the critical faculty is rare, and again unfortunately,
much critical writing is based on a reading of previous criticism rather
than on a reading of original sources. This was true in the case of Dreiser,
as Burton Rascoe has pointed out in one or two places in his excellent
study of Dreiser in the *Modern American Writers* series. Much critical
writing is a hue and cry instead of a “standard of judging well.” And
victims like Dreiser illustrate the need, if they illustrate nothing else, of
higher critical standards. Where weaker men were destroyed, Dreiser
won through by dint of genius—which means that he established him-
self in spite of his critics. But is this the true function of criticism?

The moral criticism of Dreiser is summed up well in Professor Stuart
P. Sherman’s book *On Contemporary Literature*. Although this volume
was published in 1923, the study of Dreiser contains most of the con-
servative arguments against him, and Professor Sherman has come to
stand as the chief exponent of this school where Dreiser is concerned.
For example: “By eliminating distinctively human motives and making
animal instincts the supreme factors in human life, Mr. Dreiser reduces
the problem of the novelist to the lowest possible terms. . . . He has
evaded the enterprise of representing human conduct; he has confined
himself to a representation of animal behavior.”

For an outstanding example of the second brand of criticism, that
based on esthetic grounds, let us turn to Professor T. K. Whipple’s essay
on Dreiser in his *Spokesmen: Modern Writers and American Life*.
“Surely he could not write as he does if there were not in his mind some-
thing correspondingly muddled, commonplace, undiscerning, cheap, and shoddy. . . . Indeed, that is what all his writing shows. Its lack of any sort of beauty—beauty of form, of imagery, of rhythm—indicates not only that Dreiser himself is devoid of aesthetic sense, but also—what is even more serious—that he has no natural knack for writing.”

Against these judgments, however, we can place that of Professor Vernon Louis Parrington, author of *Main Currents in American Thought*: “The most intelligent estimates of Dreiser are in Randolph Bourne, *History of a Literary Radical*; H. L. Mencken, *Prefaces*; and Carl Van Doren, *Contemporary American Novelists*. All other commentators are stupid.”

One might not agree with this altogether, but it is certainly a mighty stroke for the Dreiser side. Whipple’s acute study of Edwin Arlington Robinson is one of the best in the language, and strangely enough, Professor Sherman was perhaps the first to praise Dreiser for the reformist tendencies which he discerned in *An American Tragedy*. Dreiser didn’t appreciate this praise, because he didn’t know what Sherman was driving at, but Dreiser’s final trends, those which led inevitably from *An American Tragedy* to *Tragic America*, show that Sherman was hitting close to the mark when he spoke as he did. So these commentators were probably not stupid but they could have shown more understanding.

A penetrating comment on Dreiser was the one made by Floyd Dell in 1916: “Life at its best and most heroic is rebellion. All artists, big and little, are in their degree rebels. . . . Why do you not write the American novel of rebellion?”

It has remained for other writers to pen the American novel of rebellion, but Dell, in praising Dreiser’s work, pointed out the path that he was to follow. Dreiser did not see himself in this rôle, however. We find him saying of Sherwood Anderson: “He glorifies day laborers and mechanics to the exclusion of all other classes. I can’t see it that way. There must be something to the intellect, to the upper classes. If not, we’re done for.” And, to a reporter in Los Angeles who interviewed him while he was writing *An American Tragedy*, the book that was to reveal him to Sherman as a social reformer, Dreiser said, “I don’t care a damn about the masses. It is the individual that concerns me.”

Dreiser, like all of America, was badly confused in those post-war years. Clarity was to come later, as it comes generally to a man who has no axes to grind, no personal causes to defend, and who is honest.

In looking back on his career, however, we cannot fail to be impressed by things that showed whither he was tending. In 1917 he tried to form a society to defend writers from such things as the vice societies that had caused *The “Genius”* to be banned. And in 1919 he tried to organize another society to prevent the loss or prostitution of genius in the United States. Nothing came of these efforts. In the words of Dreiser, “Everybody was out for himself.” He frequently had his hand in such
enterprises. Social consciousness was implicit in his work if not in his mind. The reader who goes back now to trace his beginnings becomes aware far sooner than he did that his whole attitude was colored with social criticism.

Mencken did not sense this; otherwise, because of his bias where anything smacking of liberalism was concerned, he might not have been so eager to help Dreiser become established as a leading novelist. But to Mencken must go the credit for accomplishing this, because more than any other man he brought Dreiser into his own. "A critic makes himself immortal when he does for a novelist of magnitude who is neglected or maligned what Mencken did for Dreiser," says Bernard Smith in his *Forces in American Criticism*.

But Mencken, while getting Dreiser established, repeated many of the current misconceptions concerning him. For example: "The writing in... The "Genius"... is flaccid, elephantine, doltish, coarse, dismal, flatulent, sophomoric, ignorant, unconvincing, wearisome." This is an example of poor literary style—in this case, Mencken's. How this passage reminds us of the twenties, when everybody was a fool but Mencken and his literati!

Mencken's view of Dreiser's social content is revealed by the following passage: "One half of the man's brain, so to speak, wars with the other half. He is intelligent, he is thoughtful, he is a sound artist—but there come moments when a dead hand falls upon him, and he is once more the Indiana peasant, snuffling absurdly over imbecile sentimentalities, giving a grave ear to quackeries, snorting and eye-rolling with the best of them."

Mencken was interested in seeing realism established in America, and he wanted to see sex taboos broken down entirely. But he did not foresee that the destruction of these things would lead to attacks on things in which he strongly believed, and for this reason it can be said that Mencken's conservative opponent Paul Elmer More and the leaders of the neo-humanists were shrewder than he. They saw that sexual repression was merely a shield for other forms of repression, and that its removal had political implications. Defenders of a conservative society, they saw the danger inherent in change and opposed it; Mencken, as conservative as they in his way, for a moment and by mistake fought the battles of freedom.

Since the issue of sex has been raised so frequently with respect to Dreiser, it will not be amiss to make some mention of it here. It is undoubtedly true that poverty and social inferiority in childhood breed exaggerated views of sex. Sexual freedom comes to stand as a symbol for economic freedom. When the individual is denied many things that he needs, he sets greater store by those within reach—sex, for instance. Dreiser himself is extremely conscious of this. The tragedy of Clyde Griffiths and Roberta Alden in *An American Tragedy* is a development
DREISER TODAY

of this theme. A reading of Dreiser’s autobiographical books reveals that this point of view is based on his own experience. These books seem to show that the environment that could produce a Dreiser could also produce a John Dillinger. How much difference is there between the “women and money” complex of the gangster and the “women and money” complex of Dreiser’s hero Cowperwood? It is not Dreiser’s fault that the tragedy of American society should often find expression through the symbols of sex. He wrote of what he knew and of what he saw, and to him sex was just one of the sad, dark phenomena of human life, one which had infinite power to bring ruin to its victims. He had seen these things happen in his own family; he saw them happening to the America he knew. What he wanted was sexual sanity, and this was what the conservatives who were his foes did not want. There is no more reality to the sex question as it concerns Dreiser than that. He viewed the matter in the light of its social implications as he viewed, even though unconsciously, most other things.

The society that accepted Dreiser in the twenties found much that it liked in the superficial aspects of his philosophy. It liked its seeming hardness, its amorality, its sexual freedom, its worship of strength and force. But it did not see that this philosophy was merely a groping toward, not a finding; that what he portrayed he did not believe in; that in revealing the hypocrisy of men he did not admire it and did not approve it.

Dreiser’s masterpiece is An American Tragedy. The total effect of the book—which is the story of an average American youth without educational advantages or background who murders his pregnant millhand sweetheart when he thinks he sees a chance of capturing a girl of wealth—is gray and somber. It is a picture of a world, but a world that we do not like. Nevertheless, it is a picture of America. The reader cannot deny the truth of the presentation, nor the efficacy of the treatment. The pages describing the murder and the trial rank with the best in world literature. Where are the critics who said that Dreiser could not write, that he harped on sex to the exclusion of all other subjects?

When an author’s point of view is integrated in a literary production with the basic social reality of his time, the result is great art. And when this integration is merged with universal realities, the art is greater still. It is Dreiser’s accomplishment to have done just that in An American Tragedy.

In his book Creating the Modern American Novel Harlan Hatcher says of An American Tragedy: “The best of Theodore Dreiser is in this book. It is an epic of one important aspect of American life, its crass materialism, its indifference to all that is not glitter and show, its irresponsibility for the youth, its condemnations instead of understanding, its thirst for punishment instead of prevention, its hypocrisy, its ruthless
savagery, and the ferocity of its mobs and courts of prosecution. . . . By any standard, it is the greatest and most powerful novel yet written by an American, and it stands beside *Buddenbrooks*, *The Forsyte Saga*, and *Of Human Bondage* as among the best in world fiction in our time."

H. G. Wells had this to say about the *Tragedy*: "Dreiser is in the extreme sense of the word a genius. . . . His *American Tragedy* is, I agree with Bennett, one of the very greatest novels of this century. It is a far more than life-size rendering of a poor little representative corner of American existence, lighted up by a flash of miserable tragedy. . . . But I would disagree with Bennett’s condemnation of its style. It is raw, full of barbaric locutions, but it never fatigues . . . it gets the large, harsh superficial truth that it has to tell with a force that no grammatical precision and no correctitude could attain. . . ."

Much has been said about Dreiser’s style. We can’t go into the matter here, but it should be said that we live in an age that produces much writing that is as hard to read as it is to write. Ease of reading still remains a good criterion, and when Wells says that Dreiser’s style never fatigues, he is probably putting his finger on one of those secrets of power that have enabled the novelist to outlive, in a critical sense, most of his critics. Burton Rascoe praised Dreiser’s style, and other sound critics have done the same. It is not everyone who says, as did Ludwig Lewisohn: “What counts against him is, once more, the heavy amorphous verbiage, which will seem duller as time goes on, the unrestrained meticulousness in the delineation of the trivial. . . .”

One entire phase of American life came to an end in 1920. American writers came down to earth and began to write of their country in the light of its social problems. During the thirties social realism and proletarian literature came into being. It is significant that Dreiser, America’s greatest novelist, should have been one of the first to tackle the social question in his book *Tragic America*, which is just as unflattering a picture of America as one can find in the *Tragedy*. From this time on he began to move progressively toward the left, taking up a position comparable in some ways to that of George Bernard Shaw in England. Other men began to write the books that he would have written had he been born in 1900 instead of 1871. John Steinbeck wrote *Grapes of Wrath*. Richard Wright wrote *Native Son*. These books did not have the power of the *Tragedy* but they fulfilled its promise—as glimpsed by Sherman—by dealing with the problem of evil on a more than hypothetical plane.

Is it not true that the outstanding meaning of our time is that man now grapples with the problem of evil on the physical rather than the metaphysical plane, and that the whole struggle for realism, naturalism, and sexual freedom as expressed in our literature has been but a preparation for this development?

It has been Dreiser’s function as a writer to bring America’s social consciousness to the surface. He not only heralds America’s growth into
DREISER TODAY

moral maturity, but during the past ten years has developed into a social
prophet with a supreme concern for moral values. Parrington sensed this
morality: "... in frankly revealing the hypocrisy of men Dreiser is no
cynic. There is in him a profound morality—the morality of truth and
pity and mercy."

How far astray goes Regis Michaud when, not foreseeing Dreiser's
possible development along social lines, he says: "When all is said,
Dreiser the philosopher and Dreiser the artist go hand in hand. He
accepts the world as it is. Let it be good or evil, a means toward an end
or an end in itself. ... What do evolution, melioration and progress
matter?"

Dreiser has lately decided that they matter very much.

The most ambitious study of Dreiser that we have is the Forgotten
Frontiers of Dorothy Dudley. It is an honest, careful and conscientious
piece of work, and though marred somewhat by the impressionism of
the period (it was published in 1932), gives a full-length likeness of a
Dreiser that we must recognize as the real one. The chief merit of the
book, other than its sympathetic and understanding treatment, lies in
its almost encyclopedic amassment of names, dates, quotations, and facts
hitherto unknown about the writer. The source is Dreiser himself, since
he gave the author access to his private files as well as to his own
recollections of the past.

In many respects Forgotten Frontiers is a product of the sex-mad
twenties—the period that brought bewilderment to Dreiser as well as to
others. For example, in summing up what she has wanted to say, the
author strikes a philosophic note at the beginning of the last chapter:
"The strongest desire known to human life is to continue living. The
next strongest is to use the instrument by which life is generated for its
own rewards, not for the sake of generation."

This absurdity has been quoted because it sums up so well a pre-
vailing attitude of the twenties—the point of view of many followers
of Dreiser who looked upon him as a champion of sex, when as a matter
of fact no man has written less glamorously of that question than he.
To quote Parrington: "In his sex passages there is no glamor of romance.
They are direct and brutal—but more moral than glamorous."

Books inevitably—witness Dreiser himself—are colored by their age,
and statements like the foregoing can be excused. Miss Dudley followed
Dreiser as far as she could, and it is fitting that her book should end on
the note just quoted. Unfortunately, the Dreiser of today does not
emerge from her book, though there is some suggestion of him in the
last quoted passage between her and the novelist: "I can't see it that
way," said Dreiser. (She had just told him that in her opinion the
country needed intellect more than it needed social change.) "It has
gone so far that there can be no change except a violent one from the
outside. People have forgotten how to read. Besides how can a man
write or read with thousands of people starving both mentally and physically?"

Dreiser could not. For ten years he has left the literary field to younger men.

Dreiser the man began at last to emerge from the critical underbrush in which he had wandered so long. Critics who took their calling seriously began to accept him as the leading American novelist. With the gradual acceptance of this point of view came the understanding that his work had always needed—understanding that had been lacking in the past because he was too far ahead of his time.

Dreiser has this distinction, that more than any other contemporary writer he has developed and grown with his age. In 1900 he was ahead of his time, and except for a period in the twenties, when he seems to have been as badly confused as the rest, he has remained ahead of it. This fact explains the loneliness of his career; he has had generally to endure the fate of leaving behind his best friends and champions. Mencken has been left; those who looked upon him as a fighter for sexual freedom have been left; even those who looked upon him as the great realist have, to a great extent, been left behind.

The criticism of Dreiser on purely esthetic grounds seems to be following into oblivion that based on moral issues. And as the American public becomes more mature, it becomes more able to appreciate that maturity which is Dreiser’s main characteristic. No one would accuse Dreiser of having a “boy’s” point of view as Van Wyck Brooks, with some justice, recently accused Hemingway, Wolfe, Faulkner, and others.

Many commentators have mentioned the lack of maturity in modern American writers. Is it possible, then, that much of the unpopularity suffered by Dreiser among critics has been due to the maturity that made him stand out like a strange, incomprehensible phenomenon among his contemporaries?

Sherwood Anderson revealed a rare clairvoyance when he had this to say about Dreiser: “Theodore Dreiser is old. . . . I do not know how many years he has lived, perhaps forty, perhaps fifty, but he is very old. Something grey and bleak and hurtful, that has been in the world perhaps forever, is personified in him.”

This thing that is “grey and bleak and hurtful” is the same thing that we find in Isaiah, Jeremiah, Micah. It is the eternal questing spirit of man; it is man’s eternal hunger for truth and righteousness. It is the thing that men like Mencken and most of the earlier critics of Dreiser could not understand, but it is also the thing that time will treasure as it has treasured the words of Isaiah and others like him.

Dreiser, in the truest sense of the word, has been a great folk writer, a great poet of the people, and his literary style, which sometimes might seem to lack the refinements of the salon, is always as varied, as rich,
DREISER TODAY

as strange, as poignantly beautiful and filled with passion as the world of which he writes.

Dreiser's career seems to prove, if it proves anything, that man will continue always to strive toward a moral universe, that no other way of life is possible, that there always will be men who choose to fight on the side of life, that the attainment of moral grandeur will continue to be the highest desire of man.

Those who have followed Dreiser as realist, as naturalist, as pessimist, as biochemist, as philosophical nihilist, as determinist, as Darwinian, as fatalist, as cynic, as skeptic, as pagan, have seen him grow into something that includes all these but goes far beyond them. In A Hoosier Holiday Dreiser says: "Life is greater than anything we know. . . . We need not stop and think we have found a solution. We have not even found a beginning. . . ."

Dreiser was not satisfied with small solutions. The amoral universe he discovered filled him with repugnance; he went in search of things nearer the heart's desire. In short stories like The Lost Phoebe and McEwen of the Shining Slave-Makers he cries out to the silence and darkness of the worlds. He is hungry for truth, for the thing that men call God, for the lack that is in every human life, and no one in our time has beaten louder or longer on those ultimate portals of knowledge than he. He belongs with the great prophets and poets, with the great moral leaders of mankind, and his place in American literature is secure.