
Review

Reviewed Work(s): *An American Tragedy* by Theodore Dreiser

Review by: E. M. K.

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ment is emphasized by the farm laborer Willie Campbell's reproving Burns for neglecting the farm just before Mr. Fenton arrives to bring the poet the congratulations of his London friends; and, saddest of all, the emigrants pass the house of Burns and sing his songs, while within, he, disappointed, is almost at the point of death. The reader of this play will feel the truth of Holmes's lines on "The Lark of Scotia's Morning Sky:"

He left his land her sweetest song
And earth her saddest story.

THOMAS N. CARRUTHERS.

AN AMERICAN TRAGEDY. By Theodore Dreiser. New York: Boni & Live-right. In two volumes. 1926.

After ten years of silence, Dreiser has returned from themes of high finance to populated towns and streets he loved to explore in the earlier days of *Sister Carrie* or *Jennie Gerhardt*. His new novel, *An American Tragedy*, is the bulkiest among his bulky works, and it has all the familiar defects of size, formlessness, and clumsiness of style. And one hears again the echoes of familiar but thoughtless complaining that he is so unbeautiful. We do not like the springless wagon-ride behind oxen on rutted country roads. There is no speed, no glamor, no humor, no cadence, no crushed perfume, and no cool refuge for the heart's refinement in Dreiser's style. But as for me, he holds me steadfast to the end, fascinated, this steadfast ox-cart driver with his story so authentic and inevitable, so complete of integrity with itself and the materials, so tragic in its nerveless gestures. It is not a story of smiling cultivated fields and of trim secluded garden-plots, nor of a land with tamed, channeled rivers sparkling in the springtime sun. His is primitive prairie; a dark continent; a muddy, sprawling, untameable Mississippi, carrying the life of farm and forest on its vast expanse, unmoving if one watches it at one point, yet majestic, rude in its passion, and steady in its power and magnitude if one looks at it, Father of Waters, from the north to the Gulf. Then it seems no longer still and muddy; then it has color, persuasiveness, ease of force.

A dark continent. A brutish, planless life of cities, grand hotels, factories, clubs. The inheritance of lawless traditions of getting on in the blood. Predatory man, with murder in his heart, unassimilating the symmetry and beautiful ordering of his delicate

machinery, and so breaking and ravishing the root-ends and the root-needs of life. Passionate, personal success. Mawkish sentiment. Optimism. And the human wolf-cub fed on hypocrisy, squalid ambitions, and the vulgar pap of evangelism, avid for ready cash and the things cash buys. Clyde Griffith—one of millions spawned of a vast industrialism, trivial bits of humanity living extinguished lives before the sun is at mid-day, left with nothing save the ambition to get on and to possess, dreaming of the beauty of girls and money, money which will buy position and beauty and meaning of life perhaps. Clyde is legion—wolf-weaklings entangled in little sins and desirings, committing murder in their hearts every day; wolf-weaklings who can neither wholly will nor act, whom passion finds defenceless and unprepared, but leading them on just the same and just as inevitably to kill the dead unstruggling prey. A lawless order, strong in possessions. A lost, bewildered man-cub. Murder. . . . Who is the murderer?

Millions murdered of spirit, and millions murdering at heart, this is the American tragedy, the universal tragedy of a sweating, on-getting, incoherent, moralistic industrialism, the muddy current of our untamed and chaotic existence. The claws of the beast are in our souls. And Dreiser is touched by the tragic failure of our being in its innermost relationships, moved by the strangeness of life, and the sanctities of our human contacts floundering in the brutal mass of matter. He loves life, insatiably, in all its significances and irrelevancies, the whole wealth of life he cherishes, the mighty current surging around and under all the agitated particles of mankind carried resistlessly on, massive, always terrible. Whither? There is no answer. We move darkly on the boundless current of life—victims, victims all: Clyde, his mother, Roberta, Sondra, doctor, factory hands, foremen, bellhops, the powerful collar-magnate, the frail and the competent, all unimportant, without the strength to put meaning in life, and so without the truth of life by which man lives. Occasionally a gleam of beauty and tenderness—O Clyde and O Roberta in the brief moment of love under the dark-blue sky—and then swallowed by darkness and driven to inevitable doom; again unmeaningness, again helplessness. And humbly, kindly, helplessly, the genius of Dreiser is looking on, touching every one with his pity, condemning no one, ridiculing nothing. And what he sees he tells honestly, brokenly, as a man reeling and befuddled by the terror of things seen. Mur-

der, in fact, and greater murdering of the human spirit. Here one goes puzzled to die in the electric chair; one will return to preaching on street-corners; one to the manufacturing of more collars, more collars. . . . And the heart trembles in the unrelenting grasp of some ancient god. . . .

E. M. K.

REFLECTIONS ON THE DEATH OF A PORCUPINE AND OTHER ESSAYS. By D. H. Lawrence. Philadelphia: The Centaur Press. 1925. pp. 240.

Lawrence is the skylark among contemporary writers of prose, but a skylark scornful of the earth below. He knows no nest. We like his voice, or do not like his voice, or fear to say we like it, and none can recollect in tranquillity his song leaping somewhere in the empyrean as a flame. I remember reading confused and wondering his *Women in Love*, and am sure that I shall be wondering long about this collection of essays. "The Crown" is the title of the longest, filling nearly half of the glittering throne, of which the other members are, "Him With His Tail In His Mouth," "Blessed Are the Powerful," "Love Was Once a Little Boy," "Reflections on the Death of a Porcupine." A report or an estimate of these would be unavailing. I catch his leaping, thrilling notes, but not the burden of a song. I see his phosphorescent dartings leaving traces of glowing moments, but they but brokenly indicate the course of his flying thought. I cannot measure him with the dimensions and logic of the earth. Mark this: "The providing of *life* belongs to the aristocrat. If a man, whether by thought or action, makes *life*, he is an aristocrat." And close by is this: "The providing of food, money, and amusement belongs, truly, to the servant class." Vaguely I understand that *life* (italics always by Lawrence) and human arrangements, such as food and matings and nests, are incommensurable, that *life* means the flame, the enlarging of the boundaries of thought and feeling. Fie on all nests and broods below! Thus the blithesome premeditated song of the flaming essayist.

If one is careless, young, lusty and dreamful by turns, and from the start refuses to look for a philosophic thesis here, one may enjoy these rhapsodies, the poetry, the bright emotion, the exuberant mysticism, and the witchery of words, words, words. The soul of Lawrence cries one message to the world: Burn! Burn! Burn! Be vivid! Life is a flame! His is the power and glow of oratory,