

Theodore Dreiser and George Eliot: Contrast & Coincidence

by Michael Lydon

Here is the immovable cornerstone of realism: writing can tell the truth of life. From the first grade sentences that opened the art to us as children:

"Look, Jane," said Dick, "see Spot run."

—to the pregnant sentences that still baffle us as adults:

To be or not to be, that is the question.

—these little black marks on paper can make us see a boy and girl playing with their dog, give us food for thought to last a lifetime.

Realism comes in many flavors and suits many tastes, but whoever the writer and whatever the subject, all realism has a core similarity: the writer sees the world and describes it in words; readers read the words and see the world the writer saw. If we look for similarities and differences between two fine realists, George Eliot and Theodore Dreiser, we'll find contrasts strong and subtle; the two immortals make a revealing example of how alike and how different great realists can be.

In *Adam Bede* George Eliot paints—

an old woman bending over her flowerpot, or eating her solitary dinner, while the noonday light softened perhaps by a screen of leaves, falls on her mob cap, and just touches the rim of her spinning wheel, and her stone jug, and all those cheap common things which are the precious necessities of life to her...

In *The "Genius"* Theodore Dreiser paints—

Long converging lines of telephone poles;
thousands upon thousands of sentinel cottages,

factory plants, towering smoke stacks, and here and there a lone shabby church steeple, sitting out pathetically on vacant land...the tracks of railroads, ten, fifteen, twenty, thirty, laid side by side and strung with thousands upon thousands of shabby cars like beads on a string.

The two passages reveal both the differences in what Eliot and Dreiser describe—a 19th century cottage and a 20th century railroad yard—and the similarity of their descriptive method: they look at the world and paint it in plain words.

The heart of their likeness is a common earnest tone. Eliot and Dreiser are serious writers. Writing for both results from searching philosophic inquiry into art, science, religion, and all experience. Eliot and Dreiser are as like each other as both are like Rembrandt and Beethoven. They toll like two bells, deep-voiced, reverberant, and wise. Like Eliot, Dreiser creates this earnest tone with homey touches that ring true:

Gerhardt, who had unscrewed a door lock and was trying to mend it, looked up sharply from his work.

“What do you mean?” he asked.

Mrs. Gerhardt had her apron in her hands at the time, her nervous tendency to roll it coming upon her. She tried to summon up sufficient courage to explain, but fear mastered her completely; she lifted the apron to her eyes and began to cry.

Jennie Gerhardt

The tone that Eliot and Dreiser both strike contains echoes of Emerson, another kindred spirit. Their novels present again and again Emerson’s theme that truths of self cannot be concealed—here a passage from his “Spiritual Laws”:

What [a man] engraves itself on his face, on his form, on his fortunes, in letters of light. Concealment avails him nothing, boasting nothing. There is confession in the glances of our eyes, in our smiles, in salutations, and in the grasp of hands.....—all blab.

Spiritual Laws

—here a passage from *The “Genius”*:

We think that our actions when unseen of mortal eyes resolve themselves into nothingness, but this is not true.

They are woven indefinably into our being, and shine forth ultimately as the real self, in spite of all our pretenses.

—and here a passage from Eliot's *Romola*:

Tito was experiencing that inexorable law of human souls, that we prepare ourselves for sudden deeds by the reiterated choice of good or evil which gradually determines character.

In these passages we can see George Hurstwood face-to-face with \$10,000 in an open safe:

He came back to the end of the counter as if to rest his arms and think. Then he went in and locked his little office door and turned on the light. He also opened his desk, sitting down before it, only to think strange thoughts.

“The safe is open,” said a voice. “There is just the least little crack in it. The lock has not been sprung.”

[Hurstwood] floundered among a jumble of thoughts....the thought that here was a solution. The money would do it. If he had that and Carrie. He rose up and stood stock still, looking at the floor.

Sister Carrie

For Dreiser, as for Eliot, such germ kernel moments reveal how their characters grow and their plots develop. Hurstwood does take the \$10,000 and flees with Carrie to New York, where, twenty pages after the theft, Dreiser shows the first shoots of weakness springing from Hurstwood's unseen act:

He looked around and hailed a cab, but he did so in a changed way.

For the first time in years the thought that he must count these little expenses flashed through his mind. It was a disagreeable thing.

He decided he would lose no time living in hotels but would rent a flat.

Like many scholarly colleagues, Eliot and Dreiser differ as often as they agree. Eliot's ideal man is craftsman like Adam Bede, whose closeness to nature makes him society's stoutest pillar. Her metaphors come from a farmer's commonsense biology and give nature a human face. Maggie, the robins, and the sparkling Floss are all children of a God who is like Adam Bede multiplied into infinity.

Dreiser, in contrast, finds his metaphors in chemistry and astronomy and presents nature as faceless power. “Among the forces which sweep and play throughout the universe, untutored man is but a wisp in the wind,” he writes in *Sister Carrie*. From his cell in a Philadelphia prison *The Financier*’s Frank Cowperwood studies the night sky:

The nebulous conglomerations of the suns in Pleiades suggested a soundless depth of space, and he thought of the earth floating like a little ball in immeasurable reaches of ether. His own life appeared very trivial in view of these things, and he found himself asking whether it was all really of any significance or importance.

The Financier

In *The “Genius”* painter Eugene Witla admires the farming family of his fiancée Angela Blue as American yeomen in the Eliot tradition. Yet Eugene believes that human virtue depends not on abstract goodness, but on “the chemistry of one’s being”:

[Being] honest and moral did not matter at all in the ultimate substance and composition of the universe. Any form or order of society that hoped to endure must have individuals like Mrs. Blue...but they meant nothing in the shifting subtle forces of nature. They were just accidental harmonies blossoming out of something that meant everything to this order, nothing to the universe at large.

This bleak cosmology blows like a cold wind on Eliot’s cozy hearth, chilling Dreiser’s bond with his characters and readers. Eliot likes her characters and describes them with humor and understanding. Dreiser’s feeling for his characters is harder to define. Sometimes he is sympathetic—he clearly loves Jennie Gerhardt—but when he finds a character to be a poor specimen, he doesn’t mince words: politician George W. Stener is “a puppet in the hands of other men...you would never hear a new idea emanating from Stener. He never had one in his life.”

Most often Dreiser’s dogged neutrality precludes sympathy or dislike. Does Dreiser admire capitalist Frank Cowperwood? Having read *Trilogy of Desire* several times, the most I could say is that the magnate’s “raw, glittering force” attracts Dreiser as it attracts others, but he observes Cowperwood from the same cool distance from which Cowperwood sees himself. This man of action did not “pretend to understand, explain, or moralize about” his life; “he lived it as it came to him.” According to H. L. Mencken, Dreiser was “the most matter-

of-fact novelist ever known on earth.” When a censor asked him to change details in an erotic scene of *The “Genius”*, Dreiser refused, saying, “That is simply something I can’t consent to. It *really happened*.”

This reliance on fact-based neutrality began in Dreiser’s newspaper days, and he put his reportorial training to work when he began writing novels. He nearly always gives the street name where his characters live and often the street number. The details of *Sister Carrie* “create what is virtually a complete map of Chicago in the 1880s,” note the editors of the 1981 University of Pennsylvania edition. This unforgettable picture of people watching Bowery bums lined up by a leader who begs for them:

A few spectators came near...then more and more, and quickly their was a pushing, gaping crowd....

“Silence!” exclaimed the Captain. “Now, then, gentlemen, these men are without beds. They have to have someplace to sleep tonight. They can’t lie out in the streets. I need twelve cents to put one of them to bed. Who will give it to me?”

No reply.

“Well, we’ll have to wait here, boys, until someone does. Twelve cents isn’t so much for one man.”

“Here’s fifteen,” exclaimed a young man, peering forward with strained eyes. “It’s all I can afford.”

Sister Carrie

—Dreiser takes nearly word-for-word from a non-fiction magazine article he wrote a year before he started the novel.

Dreiser uses his reporter’s perspective to make his readers cool reporters too, placing us time and again at his side among the “pushing, gaping crowd.” We stand shoulder-to-shoulder with Dreiser and his characters, yet we don’t embrace them as we do Eliot and her characters. We and he observe the characters as an accidental grouping of people in a place, each alone, each watching.

One illuminating example of the contrast between our two great realists comes in the strikingly similar opening pages of *An American Tragedy* and *Adam Bede*. Whether Dreiser purposely modeled his scene on Eliot’s I do not know. If anyone finds proof of such purpose, I’d be delighted to hear it, but to my knowledge, it is pure coincidence.

An American Tragedy opens at “Dusk—of a summer night.” The Griffiths family—father, mother, and four children—walk to a busy corner in downtown Kansas City to sing hymns and pray. As they set up, Dreiser writes, “various homeward-bound individuals of divers grades and walks of life” stop to watch. The father begins to speak:

“Let us all sing twenty-seven, then—
’How Sweet the Balm of Jesus’ Love.”

At this the young girl began to interpret the melody upon the organ, at the same time joining her rather high soprano with that of her mother, together with the rather dubious baritone of the father. The other children piped weakly along....As they sang, this nondescript and indifferent street audience gazed, held by the peculiarity of such an unimportant-looking family raising its collective voice against the vast skepticism and apathy of life.

Contrast this with *Adam Bede*’s second chapter. There too Eliot paints people gathering at summer twilight around evangelical preaching, but what a difference! Reading Eliot we are in Hayslope, a lovely country village. The tranquil evening has drawn the inhabitants from their houses, and Eliot introduces us to a dozen or more: the innkeeper Mr. Casson, Joshua Rann the shoemaker, blacksmith Chad Crannage and his buxom daughter Bessy.

Reading Dreiser we’re not in a rustic village but in the stony canyons of a great city; the Griffiths sing by an alley “bare of life of any kind.” The spectators are a “vagrom and unstable street throng;” Dreiser names none and sketches only three: “a young clerk who had just met his girl,” “an idler and loafer of about forty,” and “a pausing and seemingly amiable stranger.”

Eliot describes her preacher, Dinah Morris, in glowing terms. Dinah’s eyes seem “to be shedding love,” her face makes “one think of white flowers,” and her voice is like “a fine instrument touched with the unconscious skill of musical instinct.” Dinah succeeds: her preaching “thoroughly arrested her hearers,” and when she reaches her climax, “tears came into some of the hardest eyes.”

The Griffiths are far less impressive. The father has “weak blue eyes” and a “flabby” figure. The eldest girl looks “pale, emaculate,” the twelve-year-old boy (Clyde) moves “restlessly from one foot to the other,” and the two little children are “too small to really understand much of what it was all about.”

Only the mother could be an Eliot character. A woman “solid of frame and vigorous, very plain in face and dress,” she stands “with an ignorant, yet somehow respectable air of conviction.” Describing her, Dreiser finally brings the reader explicitly into the scene:

If you had watched her, her hymn book dropped to her side, her glance directed straight before her into space, you would have said: "Well, here is one who, whatever her defects, probably does what she believes as nearly as possible." A kind of hard, fighting faith in the wisdom and mercy of that definite over-ruling and watchful power which she proclaimed, was written in her every feature and gesture.

Here for a moment, between the city's "towering walls," Dreiser brings writer, reader, and character close as Eliot so often does. Yet the moment is brief. Unlike Dinah, Dreiser's "little band of six" makes no dent on their anonymous watchers. After a final hymn and a paltry collection, they repack the organ and go home to their mission through an evening as sweet as Eliot's:

"They seemed a little more attentive than usual tonight, I thought," commented Griffiths to his wife as they walked along, the seductive quality of the summer evening air softening him into a more generous interpretation of the customary indifferent spirit of the passers-by.

"Yes; twenty-seven took tracts tonight as against eighteen on Thursday."

"The love of Christ must eventually prevail," comforted the father, as much to hearten himself as his wife....

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