



# It Seems to Me by HEYWOOD BROUN

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I SEE where Theodore Dreiser has been the butt of a rather heated controversy in F. P. A's "Conning Tower" in the Herald Tribune. My colleague Frank Adams seems to have expressed the opinion in an earlier column that Dreiser's failure to conform to certain set standards of writing shows a lack of good taste. Many of his readers, on the other hand, have the feeling that a split infinitive here and there has nothing to do with the case so long as the writer pens the truth as he sees it.

## A Referee Needed.

THERE is much to be said for both sides. If a story is absorbing to such a degree that I am projected into the book and my own physical surroundings melt into a wraithlike background its construction becomes less than secondary. I am for the moment unaware of grammatical errors, faulty punctuation and the like. Or if I do notice some glaring mistake I might say to myself:—"Oh, well, that is pretty bad, but what's the difference? The story is good, and this man knows what he's talking about."

I imagine that this is so with most people who read for pleasure. And, to be sure, except in the case of required reading for students or savants, reading should be classed as an amusement—much the same as the theatre, night clubs or dancing. I was never in sympathy with the theory that we should read books only for the knowledge to be gleaned or the moral lesson to be learned.

There are many who feel that way about shows. A musical comedy or a revue is considered a scandalous waste of time and money. It must be that we have not yet lived down that old Puritanical prejudice against the lighter things in life. Evidently to live righteously is to groan and sweat during our youth. And when we are old enough to reap the rewards of unfemitting toll we will have lost our taste for the glitter and froth and laughter.

## A Word for the Elite.

BUT getting back to our literary discussion, I want to say a word for the stylists. I have read many books that had very little to offer in the way of a plot. As a matter of fact, in some cases they might just as well have remained unwritten in so far as the stories themselves were concerned. Yet I have found them absorbing in a different way. There is an almost sensuous pleasure to be had from the music of cadenced words and the rhythm and sweep of perfectly constructed sentences.

You can close your eyes and imagine you are listening to Rimsky-Korsakoff's "Scheherazade" or a Chopin waltz. One gets the effect of floating on a sea of beautiful sound. And at the end there is no problem to puzzle over—just a fleeting memory of rhythmic and scintillating beauty. I imagine that a gourmet gets much the same effect from a perfect meal.

## Blundering but Sincere.

MR. DREISER, of course, does not fit into this category. But he does, or did, belong in that class that knows how to tell a story. Contrary to popular conviction, he attained his peak at the beginning of his writing career. As I have said before, "Sister Carrie" and "Jennie Gerhardt" were for me the best things he ever did.

Even his "Genius," though much too long and rambling, was saved from utter mediocrity through the fact that it told a story—a good story. But his later books lack sufficient interest to hold the reader's attention through thousands of words, awkwardly set down, and a lamentable lack of humor and lightness.

It is too bad that Dreiser did not achieve fame at an earlier age, before the drab monotony of poverty had a chance to seep into his bones. In the days when he was considered shocking and his books were barred from respectable homes and libraries it was considered quite smart by the sophisticates to like him. Now, such is the fleeting quality of fame, people of discernment refuse to recognize him as one of our great writers.

## Food for the Soul.

HIS social life has suffered accordingly. Evidently an ego starved too long cannot freely adjust itself to new ways. In his effort to keep himself before the public he has done little more than make himself slightly ridiculous. In taking up the cudgels for the downtrodden he has fallen into that class known as "parlor Bolsheviks." And as "parlor Socialists" were once the butt of bitter and ironic spoofing, so now is the "parlor Bolshevik" in a similar position.

He is too radical for the respectable citizenry and too conservative for the Reds. He belongs nowhere and walks alone most of the time. It is a lamentable position for any man to be in, especially one with no sense of humor. If you can laugh at yourself it is easy to laugh at your critics. But just as soon as a man in the limelight starts to take himself seriously he becomes just another joke around town.

The role of rebel fitted Dreiser well. I think he was happy in the days when the bulk of readers ignored him and only a few critics sang his praises. But now he has become a sort of municipal monument. He is a Grant's Tomb among living novelists. No man is allowed freely to raise a hand against him.

Dreiser, much against his wishes, has fallen into that class of writers who may not be slapped. I think he liked it better when he could stand toe to toe and slug and take his chances.