RICE UNIVERSITY

THE UN-NATURAL WOMAN:
A STUDY OF DREISER'S MAJOR WOMEN CHARACTERS

by

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The purpose of this study is the exploration of Dreiser's use of naturalism through the various women characters whom he created. Two novels (The Genius and The Bulwark) are eliminated. In the remaining six novels, the principal women characters are analyzed and compared with the essential aspects of naturalistic treatment of character, particularly feminine character. Secondarily noted are possible influences on Dreiser other than naturalism and the general trend of his literary and philosophic thought.

A close analysis of characterization shows that for his earliest novels (Sister Carrie and Jennie Gerhardt), Dreiser was dependent on intuition and experience. His orientation is somewhat naturally "naturalistic," but his characters are rather sentimentalized. Later works (such as An American Tragedy) suggest that Dreiser deliberately attempted a naturalistic characterization; to some degree he succeeded. Final portraits (in his "Trilogy of Desire") indicate a turn to the mystic or spiritual emphasis in characterization.

On the basis of such a progression of women characters, one finds some difficulty in endorsing whole-heartedly the view that Dreiser is a naturalistic novelist. One must admit with Dreiser himself that he is to a great degree "romantic." This paradox of two philosophic and literary points of view is quite apparent in the seven women characters under study.
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INTRODUCTION

One dealing with Theodore Dreiser's career is not faced with the problem of a lack of critical commentary about Dreiser and his novels. Rather he may be overwhelmed by the volume of commentary which does surround the work of a man whose career ceased less than twenty years ago. When one plunges headlong into the material, however, he finds that he has taken a plunge into confusion. Whether one reads the critics with a knowledge of Dreiser's novels, and thus some preconceived notion as to who Dreiser was or what he was trying to do, or without any foreknowledge of Dreiser at all, he cannot avoid emerging confused.

To an undergraduate with a vague concept of literary schools and their followers, Dreiser is a naturalist. It's an open and shut case. With some critics, particularly Dreiser's contemporaries who intensely disliked what he wrote, he was a blatant naturalist and therefore subject to their most vitriolic attacks. Except for the essentially
unthinking and the antagonistic, however, the picture is far less clearcut. The more Dreiser wrote and the more thoroughly readers examined what he wrote, the more confused the picture became. Now a would-be scholar may take his choice of a wide range of theories regarding Dreiser's philosophic and literary orientation. The picture looks something like this:

Stewart P. Sherman is the primary representative of the "naturalistic therefore accursed" approach to Dreiser. He accuses Dreiser of distorting reality due to his thoroughly naturalistic approach: Dreiser substitutes animal instincts for human motives and thus simplifies and disparages American life.¹

Next to those like Sherman, Mrs. Frank Doubleday, and others who consider Dreiser a naturalist and therefore bad, come those who consider Dreiser a naturalist with no moral stigma attached to the labeling. Then there are those who begin to qualify Dreiser's naturalism -- Burton Rascoe who calls Dreiser a "romantic naturalist,"² Malcolm Cowley who terms him an "unpremeditated naturalist."³ Next we have those who see in Dreiser a (probably saving) trend away from naturalism toward anything from mysticism to atheism. There are those who like H. L. Mencken see him as clearly not a naturalist nor even a realist -- but as one who seeks to translate or understand in the tradition of Greek literature and Oedipus Rex.⁴ Finally there are those who like Leslie Fiedler find Dreiser not at all a prophet of naturalism but
the last and greatest of the nineteenth century sentimentalists who was successful because of his appeal to a lower middlebrow female audience.5

This is then the critical gamut. How can such confusions or downright contradictions exist? Principally they exist for two reasons: first, the critic approaches Dreiser and the novels with a preconceived bias; or second, he fails to make specific observations about the novels and is content to generalize about Dreiser and his work. Actually, despite the wide range of comment available, very little of it draws upon a close analysis of the novels or a facet of them. If the critic does consider the works, he frequently does so in a vacuum, apart from a philosophic standard. Our task now becomes apparent: to decide the suitability of the term "naturalist" for Dreiser and to do so on a close analysis of his novels or a facet thereof.

If we are attempting to relate Dreiser to the term "naturalism," either positively or negatively, we must first lay some groundwork or limitations for the use of this term. In the widest view, anyone who holds philosophic views in some manner consistent with the tenets of naturalism is a naturalist and all his writings are "naturalistic." For our purposes, however, we will use a more inductive approach. A philosophic naturalist need not be a literary naturalist as well. In this study of Dreiser, we are first concerned with the novels and what we find therein; only secondarily are we concerned with what the novels imply about Dreiser
himself as a philosopher or a literary scholar. Naturalism, then, is considered that manner of writing which developed in France in the mid-nineteenth century in the work of Flaubert and the Goncourts. As adapted from these -- and from the more scientific Taine and Bernard -- and to a large extent popularized by Zola, it is both a literary and a philosophic term. A naturalist is one who sees the universe controlled by certain superhuman (but rationally demonstrable) forces, chiefly nature (including society) or the forces of evolution and survival of the fittest. Thus a naturalist asserts that lives can not be controlled or directed by the individual will. Such a deterministic view inevitably forces interest on external reality. Further, a naturalist in this tradition places a unique interpretation on character. Taine reduced human psychology to physiology and character study to temperament study; Zola reduced character study further to a study of heredity and milieu. With evolutionary doctrine, man was placed in a closer affinity with the animal and vegetable kingdoms and rendered more a part of natural landscape and less a higher individual.

It is not difficult to predict what such a philosophy implied for its literary application. Literature was raised, or reduced, to the level of a science. It must be, as Zola stated "...la reproduction exacte de la vie." There is then an increasing trend toward "realism" -- the fidelity to reality and observed fact, a methodic and objective study of milieu. Character portrayal becomes more physical and tends
toward superficial typing. Man is closely identified with the natural world and its instincts, with the brute. Thus most naturalistic novels show or imply a process of dissolution and degeneration. Naturalism must be coldly objective—the naturalistic author must abstain from comment, never show his own personality, and never turn to the reader for sympathy. All conclusions must be implicit within the material of the novel itself: "The naturalist must be as cold as a vivisectionist at a lecture."\(^8\) Such objectivity does not preclude a moral point of view in the author (who then is an author and not a naturalist himself); Zola was a moral reformer, temperamentally at odds with naturalistic tenets, whereas Flaubert was a misanthrope. Naturalism itself is morally neutral and an objective naturalistic novel should not reveal the moral viewpoint of its author. Of course such objectivity must be more theoretical than actual. Zola found he could not always completely abide by the standards which he outlined in *Le Roman Experimental*. Those works which are considered naturalistic to some degree must be ranged on a rather relative scale; Zola's *Nana*, for example, holds more closely to purely naturalistic literary tenets than does his *Germinal*.

Against this skeleton of naturalism, I have chosen to place Dreiser's major women characters. My reasons for choosing the women of the novels are three: first, Dreiser had an essentially feminine point of view; second, several of the novels have women as their protagonists and there are
several distinct "types" of women portrayed in all the novels; and third, there is a strong tradition of women characters in naturalistic novels.

H. L. Mencken notes that Dreiser's talent was essentially feminine: that is Dreiser was more intuitive than intellectual — He got ideas from living them rather than from abstract thought processes. His ideas were deduced from feelings rather than induced from thoughts. Reasons for this tendency may be deep and psychologically complicated. We can, however, readily see several important influences which affected Dreiser's concern with the feminine. Most important of these is his relationship with his mother, a warm-hearted quasi-mystic whom he adored. ("I must have been an emotional and sentimental child... I was always a 'mother child'." His mother served as the economic and emotional head of the Dreiser household during Dreiser's youth as his father was physically and psychologically unable to do much besides harangue his children on their duties to the Catholic Church. After his mother's death (a mystic experience for Dreiser), he "suffered a profound emotional and philosophic shake-up" and years later he wrote to Mencken:

...when my own mother died...
the earth seemed truly black
and rent. The earth shook
under me. I dreamed sad,
racking dreams for years.

Dreiser's autobiographical works indicate his obsession with
women per se throughout his adolescence and young manhood.

For the second, third, and fourth decades of my life -- or from fifteen to thirty-five -- there appeared to be a toxic something in form itself -- that of the female species where beautiful -- that could effect veritable paroxysms of emotion and desire in me, and that over distances of time and space. 13

His letters indicate his constant need to be the center of interest for women -- he had to feel loved by several women at once. Typically, many of his confidantes and critics were women: Margaret Tjader Harris, Louise Campbell, Harriet Bissell, and Helen Richardson (whom he married shortly before his death). Perhaps Dreiser's position as editor-in-chief for three women's magazines also brought him closer to what he felt was the feminine point of view. For years he was orienting himself to the feminine interest with such articles as "A Woman As Seen by Others," "The Woman Patient by Her Physician," and "When The Baby Has Mumps."

At any rate, it is quite clear from Dreiser's fiction and non-fiction that he was both consciously and unconsciously sympathetic with and attracted to women to an unusual degree.

Dreiser's first two novels, Sister Carrie and Jennie Gerhardt, have women as their protagonists. Subsequent novels all include fully developed portraits of women characters. As we shall see, these are of several distinct types and have rather distinct origins. Through their
omnipresence and multiplicity they provide a broad, fair, and yet manageable proving ground for our study of Dreiser's use of naturalism.

Finally, and possibly most importantly, a study of women characters is quite in harmony with the naturalistic tradition of Flaubert, Zola, and in America, of Crane and Norris. Women, we find, play a major (and usually well-defined) role in the works of these novelists. On further study, we find that they usually are portrayed in a particular manner which we can describe or classify rather simply. Citing as examples Flaubert's Madame Bovary, Zola's Gervaise and Nana, and Norris' Trina, Lars Annetrink typifies the "naturalistic woman" as "weak, passive, neurotic, hysterical, dominated by heredity and environment, ruled by passions and instincts, lacking in will power and brains."¹⁵ Not all the adjectives can be applied with equal success to each character, of course, but the trend is clear. If we wish to sub-divide, we might put the canny, frequently calculating Nana in a somewhat different class from the completely weak and neurotic Madame Bovary or Trina. Crane's Maggie and Zola's Gervaise are a third type -- the naive, brainless woman dominated by her social and familial condition. A final type -- exemplified by Zola's Flore, Norris' Blix and Moran, and abundant in the works of Ibsen and Garland -- is the strong, self-reliant, almost masculine appearing woman who lives primarily by instinct. Within the tenets of naturalism, these are the sorts of women who usually
emerge in the works of a naturalistic novelist. Further characteristics, such as relationship to family, religious interests, and concern with the material, can be examined in connection with particular Dreiser characters.

Now that we have at least a general picture of naturalism and the naturalistic woman, we can state our thesis rather explicitly. The purpose of this study shall be to explore Dreiser's use of naturalism through the various women characters whom he created. In doing so, two novels will be eliminated from the eight which Dreiser wrote — The Genius, which is so autobiographical as to be quite non-objective and therefore almost automatically non-naturalistic, and The Bulwark, Dreiser's curiously skeletal final novel which no one claims to be naturalistic in any aspect. In the remaining six novels we shall analyze the principal women characters and compare them with the essential aspects of naturalistic treatment of character, particularly feminine character. Secondarily we shall note possible influences on Dreiser other than naturalism and suggest, through his succession of women characters, the general trend of his literary and philosophical thought. The conclusion of the thesis hopefully should be a simple yes or no answer to the following question: On the basis of his artistic and literary treatment of women characters, is one justified in terming Theodore Dreiser a naturalist?
CHAPTER I

Theodore Dreiser's portrait gallery of women began with his first novel *Sister Carrie*. Carrie Meeber, the Wisconsin small town girl who turned to the city to seek wealth and happiness, remains not only Dreiser's most widely known heroine but also one of the most controversial women in American fiction. Leaving notoriety and controversy aside for the moment, let us observe the character Carrie, as Dreiser created her.

The lack of actual physical description of Carrie comes as a surprise to one who approaches the book as a naturalistic novel. Rather than describing the girl herself, Dreiser spends the opening paragraph of his first novel enumerating her possessions, the "cheap imitation alligator-skin satchel" (*SC*, p. 1), the belongings which she transports from her past into the new life in Chicago. The reader is given her age, the initial catalogue of her possessions, and scant knowledge of her background and her destination. These
suffice to convey a now-standard fictional type. With this realistic (in the direct tradition of Balzac) rather than strictly naturalistic approach the novel begins.

Later, Dreiser drops a few more details of Carrie's appearance. These never quite add up to a complete photograph, however. We know that her feet are small, her hands "almost ineffectual." (SC, p. 2) Drouet's mental or verbal descriptions, usually fragmentary, account for much of the detail. "Carrie was really very pretty," he muses, and Dreiser comments, "Even then, in her commonplace garb, her figure was evidently not bad, and her eyes were large and gentle." (SC, p. 52) Elsewhere, we learn that Carrie has masses of thick hair which she usually wears piled high on her head. The new Carrie, transformed by clothes and toilettries provided by the generous Drouet, begins to recognize her own beauty:

The mirror convinced her of a few things which she had long believed. She was pretty, yes indeed. How nice her hat set, and weren't her eyes pretty. She caught her little red lip with her teeth and felt her first thrill of power. (SC, p. 67)

Significantly, Carrie's feeling of power comes with her acquisition of new clothes. From this point forward, Carrie, and those people whom she meets, are inevitably described in terms of their accoutrements, rather than their inherent physical attributes. Carrie admits she is pretty only after
her beauty has been refined by the stylish fashions of the
city: stylishness gives her a sense of personal power. Here
the trend is obviously romantic in the best peasant-to-prin-
cess tradition. Dreiser develops Carrie's physical beauty
for this purpose -- as he allows Carrie to become more beau-
tiful in her own eyes, she automatically exerts more influence
on her immediate world and becomes more ambitious. Accord-
ingly she chooses as her companions those people whose
stylish clothes set them above the average.

Dreiser does not draw Carrie as a strong woman. As a
passive, imitative creature, she resembles the French natu-
realistic feminine character. Evidences of her intelligence
are frequently asserted, but Dreiser rarely allows Carrie to
display the sparks of intelligence which he claims for her.
As Carrie surveys her sister's meagre surroundings, Dreiser
notes:

She had some slight gift of
observation and that sense, so
rich in every woman -- intuition.

(SC, p. 10)

Again:

Carrie was an apt student of
fortune's ways -- of fortune's
superficialities. When one of
her mind sees many things empha-
sized and re-emphasized and
admired, she gathers the logic
of it and applies accordingly.

(SC, pp. 87-88)

In the same vein he reiterates:
...Carrie was naturally imitative. She began to get the hang of those little things which the pretty woman who has vanity invariably adopts...She became a girl of considerable taste.

(SC, p. 91)

That Carrie's natural strength was imitation rather than intuition is emphasized again when Dreiser remarks (at the onset of her affair with Hurstwood):

She had some power of initiative, latent before, which now began to exert itself. She looked more practically upon her state and began to see glimmerings of a way out.

(SC, p. 114)

Such initiative, though, comes in infrequent flashes. Carrie's decision to leave her sister is strangely passive -- Drouet makes all the arrangements and Carrie merely obeys. She flees with Hurstwood under a ruse, not of her own will; she leaves Hurstwood only after literally years of despairing her situation.

Carrie's sense of ambition is likewise confused. She comes to the city to better herself. How to do so is clear neither to her nor to her sister:

She would get in one of the great shops and do well enough until -- well, until something happened. Neither of them knew exactly what. They did not exactly count on marriage. Things would go on, though, in a dim kind of way until the better thing would eventuate, and Carrie
would be rewarded for coming and toiling in the city.

(Sc, p. 12)

Carrie's own goals in the city are a bit nebulous:

She realized in a dim way how much the city held — wealth, fashions, ease — adornment for women, and she longed for dress and beauty with a whole heart.

(Sc, p. 19)

These vague hopes of dress and beauty, then, start Carrie to Chicago. Once she has arrived and has begun to look for work, her ambition wanes. After the discouraging job hunt — during which she exhibits a typical lack of initiative — and after her brief and unhappy employment in the shoe factory, she is ready to return to Wisconsin. Of course success breeds a certain desire for further acclaim, and once Carrie has been literally forced to find employment on the stage, each new success gives her some self-confidence and ambition to rise higher. "Adulation, being new in any form, pleased her." (Sc, p. 389) Her self-confidence still seems a bit premature, however, when Carrie makes the small ad lib which leads to her stardom. Dreiser explains:

Carrie, whose experience and belief in herself gave her daring, courted sweetly again and answered — "I am yours truly." (Sc, p. 366)

The "experience" and "belief in herself" seem the rather doubtful result of one amateur performance in the past and
several months of chorus line employment. Even after her acknowledged stardom, true to her passive nature, Carrie is little moved to seek new heights:

Doing her simple part, Carrie gradually realized the meaning of the applause which was for her, and it was sweet. She felt mildly guilty of something -- perhaps unworthiness. When her associates addressed her in the wings she only smiled weakly. The pride and daring of place were not for her. It never once crossed her mind to be reserved or haughty -- to be other than she had been. (SC, p. 383)

She enjoys being petted and admired, but she does not aspire to greater artistic achievement. Here Dreiser definitely (if perhaps unconsciously) works within the naturalistic tradition. Carrie is essentially passive -- her goals are described in terms of physical comfort rather than a preconceived ideal.

Dreiser claims, however, that Carrie is extraordinarily sensitive even though evidence in her speech and actions seems slim. Carrie's only artistic sensitivity, other than her actually slight gifts as an actress, is to music. Music, a mournful tune played on a neighbor's piano, makes her "wistful," causes her to long for things she does not have. The insensitive Drouet cannot understand her resultant moodiness. Dreiser hints that this becomes a partial reason for their eventual separation. Later Carrie recognizes a "pathetic strain" in music only when the intellectual Ames
has called it to her attention. Although Carrie is supposedly sensitive, she does not exhibit much concern for her family, with whom she never corresponds. Seeing a man toiling in inclement weather, Carrie recalls momentarily her poor father who worked long hours in a flour mill. Dreiser comments:

Though Hurstwood did not know it, he was dealing with one whose feelings were as tender and sensitive as this.

(Sc, p. 125)

Hurstwood may well be excused for "not knowing it" as even the omniscient reader can discover no further evidence of such sensitivity. Even if we cannot accept Carrie's sensitivity as witnessed in her actions, however, we cannot discount the importance of this concept to Dreiser. Although in the narrative he portrays Carrie as essentially non-sensitive, non-spiritual, his intention (or at least a subjective concern) appears contradictory in the chapter titles. For example we find such captions as:

"The lure of the spirit"
"A spirit in travail"
"The spirit detained"
"The spirit awakens"

Which clearly indicate Dreiser's conception of Carrie as being beyond realism or materialistically-oriented external detail. Dreiser himself would probably be surprised if one pointed out how "naturalistic" Carrie frequently appears
despite his claims to the contrary.

The only character in the novel who supposedly arouses Carrie's intellectual sensitivity is Ames. On his advice Carrie changes her reading habits and considers the possibility of changing her dramatic form from the musical to the comedy-drama, a more serious form of art. However, she does not take a more dramatic role, and we are left with some doubts concerning the impression the new reading program makes in her life:

In her comfortable chambers at the Waldorf, Carrie was reading at this time *Pere Goriot*, which Ames had recommended to her. It was so strong, and Ames' mere suggestion had so aroused her interest, that she caught nearly the full sympathetic significance of it. For the first time, it was being borne in upon her how silly and worthless had been her earlier reading, as a whole. Becoming wearied, however, she yawned and came to the window... *(SC, p. 422)*

Ames' advice leads not to Carrie's intellectual stimulation, but instead to a vague discontent:

Still, she did nothing -- grieving. It was a long way to this better thing -- or seemed so -- and comfort was about her; hence the inactivity and longing. *(SC, p. 415)*

Inactivity seems a key word in Carrie's existence. Emotionally, as well as physically, she remains passive. Her attraction
to Drouet and Hurstwood is primarily one of response, rather than initiative. As Dreiser explains the phenomenon:

She [Carrie] might have been said to be imagining herself in love, when she was not. Women frequently do this. It flows from the fact that in each exists a bias toward affection, a craving for the pleasures of being loved. The longing to be shielded, bettered, sympathized with is one of the attributes of the sex. This, coupled with sentiment and a natural tendency to emotion [questionable in Carrie], often makes refusing difficult. It persuades them that they are in love. (SC, p. 189)

Toward Drouet, Carrie feels no real attachment:

She was not really enamored of Drouet...She was not exactly sure what she thought of him. (SC, p. 83)

Carrie has thought she felt some emotional tie to Hurstwood, but when she finds herself en route to New York with him, whatever passion formerly existed has passed:

There was no great passion in her, but the drift of things and this man's proximity created a semblance of affection...True love she had never felt for him. (SC, p. 248)

Only once is she aroused to any great emotional pitch. Having been apprised of Carrie's interest in Hurstwood, Drouet reacts in true anger; Carrie responds:
She was alive with feeling, her eyes snapping, her lips quivering, her whole body sensible of the injury she felt, and partaking of her wrath. (SC, p. 192)

If Drouet feels this behavior out of character, so does the reader who has become accustomed to a meek, compromising figure. Although the lack of any "spiritual" or even "emotional" realization of love may be considered naturalistic, Dreiser does not emphasize the physical or naturalistic, either. Rather than an emphasis on love as animalistic, there is a complete de-emphasis of love as either spiritual or physical.

The question of Carrie's conscience is, of course, central to the novel. Dreiser dwells on Carrie's weakness, her dim perception of wrong and her lack of power to act. This is clearly an indication of Dreiser's realization of the insufficiency of human will or conscience in the face of larger forces. When she first meets Drouet on the train, Dreiser comments:

She could not realize that she was drifting until he secured her address. (SC, p. 7)

When Drouet sets out to establish a room for Carrie, she realizes her error, but seems once again struck dumb:

Carrie saw the drift, but could not express her thoughts. She felt more than ever the helplessness of her case. (SC, p. 61)
Carrie is not amoral. She does have a conscience. Her problem, as we have previously noted, comes in taking some form of action in the direction her conscience dictates. Of her conscience Dreiser says:

It was not a just and sapient counsellor, in its last analysis. It was only an average little conscience, a thing which represented the world, her past environment, habit, convention in a confused way. With it, the voice of the people was truly the voice of God...It was somewhat clear in utterance at first, but never wholly convincing.

(SC, p. 81)

Carrie soon finds rationalization a good salve for troubled conscience. She clings to Drouet's somewhat vague promise of marriage in a desperate attempt to justify her lack of action and the circumstances in which she finds herself. She can never quite escape the reality of her situation, however. Still she procrastinates, refuses to act.

The deeper she sank into the entanglement, the more she imagined that the thing hung upon the few remaining things she had not done. Since she had not done these, there was a way out. (SC, p. 62)

The ambiguity of her situation puzzles her. In some respects she is very comfortable, yet she feels herself weak in the eyes of "the good girls."

She looked into her glass and
saw a prettier Carrie than she had ever seen before; she looked into her mind, a mirror prepared of her own and the world's opinions, and saw a worse. Between these two images she wavered, hesitating which to believe. (SC, p. 81)

Dreiser refuses to allow Carrie to "suffer" in a conventional manner for her moral weakness. He defends her situation first by portraying her as a naturally passive, imitative person with normal desires for beauty and comfort. Secondly, he expresses the inevitability of her fate. On the first page of the novel he states:

When a girl leaves home at eighteen, she does one of two things. Either she falls into saving hands and becomes better, or she rapidly assumes the cosmopolitan standard of virtue and becomes worse. Of an intermediate balance, under the circumstances, there is no possibility... Half the undoing of the unsophisticated and natural mind is accomplished by forces wholly superhuman. (SC, pp. 1-2)

Carrie thus cannot be held at fault because her sister and husband take no great interest in her, refuse to be her "saving hands," and leave her fate to the less scrupulous and more appealing Drouet. There are two initial possibilities, argues Dreiser, over which Carrie has no control. He continually hammers in this theme, the naturalistic view of "superhuman forces." As Carrie enjoys an after-theater
lunch at an indecent hour, Dreiser defends:

...There was no household hour to govern her now. If any habits ever had time to fix upon her, they would have operated here...[but] Carrie had no excellent home principles, fixed upon her. If she had, she would have been more consciously distressed. (SC, p. 69)

Not only, he continues, did she lack the firm moral background of a household law, but she was affected by another force beyond her control:

She was again the victim of the city's hypnotic influence. (SC, p. 69)

Carrie is always portrayed as an innocent, unaware of the dangers surrounding her, or aware of them (to use one of Dreiser's favorite words) in only a "dim" way. Even when she is conscious of the latent danger of a situation, she is powerless to act because of her passive nature, her lack of experience, and, of course, because the forces at hand are often more than human.

For these reasons (indicative of a naturalistic point of view) Dreiser defends his character. Because she does not pay for her sins in a conventional manner, the novel has been proclaimed immoral. Any observant reader, however, will notice that Dreiser may have defended his heroine, but he does not allow her to triumph. She is pathetic throughout, despite her social and material success. Dreiser
portrays her as one who is sensitive enough to be lonely, without cleverness enough to see her way out of despair. Neither Drouet nor Hurstwood has been able to satisfy her vague longings.

They were the personal representatives of a state most blessed to attain — the titled ambassadors of comfort and peace, aglow with their credentials. It is but natural that when the world which they represented no longer allured her, its ambassadors should be discredited. (SC, p. 429)

 Likewise the theater did not satisfy her:

Unconsciously her idle hands were beginning to weary. (SC, p. 391)

Finally we see a Carrie essentially no different from the Carrie who arrived in Chicago years before:

And now Carrie had attained that which in the beginning seemed life's object, or, at least, such a fraction of it as human beings ever attain of their original desires... and yet she was lonely. In her rocking chair she sat when not otherwise engaged — singing and dreaming. (SC, p. 427)

Carrie is, then, portrayed naturalistically in relation to the city and superhuman forces; Dreiser's conception of her as a woman, however, is more sentimental or sympathetic than strict tenets of naturalism would allow.
Jennie Gerhardt, second of Dreiser's woman protagonists, resembles her earlier "sister" Carrie in several important ways. Many of the portions of Carrie's character which Dreiser left undeveloped he has delineated more fully in Jennie. These further details of characterization, rather than strengthening a naturalistic portrait, serve instead to remove Jennie further than Carrie from the established realm of naturalistic women. A close analysis of Jennie Gerhardt, as Dreiser himself presented her, should modify the belief that she belongs in the tradition of Madame Bovary, Nana, and Trina McTeague.

Admittedly Dreiser employs some facets of naturalistic philosophy in his character portrayal. Jennie is shown as being controlled by exterior forces rather than her own will. As Lester tells her:

I don't know whether you know what I'm driving at, but all of us are more or less pawns. We're moved about like chess-men by circumstances over which we have no control.  

(JG, p. 401)

She is of low birth, daughter of struggling German immigrants, and becomes, in the strictest sense, a "loose woman." However she is not a "typical naturalistic woman" such as Norris' Trina or Crane's Maggie. Our question then is what is Jennie, or more specifically, who is Jennie? What sort of a character did Dreiser create; and ultimately, why does she appear to deviate so widely from the accepted pattern of
naturalism?

Jennie's warm, sympathetic relationship with her family illustrates one of Dreiser's deviations from typical naturalistic portrayal. As we noted earlier, Carrie Meeber had essentially no ties with her family, either physical or emotional. When she left home neither she nor her thoughts returned. To the other extreme, Dreiser develops his first portrait of Jennie Gerhardt within the context of her family. Not only does the reader meet Jennie in the opening chapter, but he becomes intimately acquainted with her parents and siblings as well. The opening pages contain a description of Jennie with her mother working as scrubwomen in a Columbus, Ohio, hotel. This picture of Jennie as an integral part of a family dominates the first third of the novel. Dreiser presents the family members not in isolation but in relationship to each other. Thus we find Jennie sympathizing with her family, expressing great understanding toward them and their problems. She is dedicated to strengthening the economic status of the little group and in this respect, she shares sentiments with her mother. Dreiser explains:

Jennie, of all the children, fully understood her mother, she alone strove, with fulness of a perfect affection, to ease her burden. (JG, p. 113)

Likewise, Jennie can understand her father and be devoted to him despite his cranky disposition and his insistence on old world religious and moral strictures. At his funeral,
years after the family had been separated, Dreiser notes:

Only Jennie wept sympathetically.  
(JG, p. 346)

Not only is Jennie understanding and sympathetic to her family, but she also demonstrates her concern in an active way. When her father becomes incapacitated, she realizes that she must use whatever methods she can to hold the family together.

She realized, as she sat there, that fate had shifted the burden of the situation to her. She must sacrifice herself; there was no other way. (JG, p. 156)

A more tenuous example of Jennie's non-naturalistic active sympathy may be found in her relationship to her child. Although motherhood is definitely "natural;" Jennie's relationship runs counter to the mother-child relationships one finds in Madame Bovary, Nana, or Maggie for example. While keeping the child's existence a secret from Kane for several years, she worries about her baby continually, brings it to her apartment whenever possible, and provides for it as well as she can:

She was crazy about her baby.  
The heaviest cross she had to bear was the constant separation and the silence she was obliged to maintain about Vesta's very existence. It did seem unfair to the child, and yet Jennie did not see clearly how she could have acted otherwise. (JG, p. 196)
Jennie's love and concern for the child lead her to risk entire self-sacrifice:

Jennie's mind had been made up. She had sinned and sinned grievously, against her daughter, but now she would make amends so far as possible. Lester was dear to her, but she would no longer attempt to deceive him in anything, even if he left her -- she felt an agonized stab, a pain at the thought -- she must still do the right thing. (JG, p. 208)

In risking so much for the sake of her child, Jennie stands a far distance from Zola's Nana who enjoys her estranged child only as a bauble, an occasional and quite temporary amusement. Although Jennie's baby as such may be considered a naturalistic element that was lacking in Sister Carrie, the effect that the baby has on Jennie transcends the typically naturalistic mother-child relationship.

Dreiser endows Jennie with a well-developed moral sense, another trait foreign to the naturalistic female protagonist. Although in some instances Jennie's reactions ("She yielded, feeling all the time that she should not" [p. 138]) recall Carrie's, they never reach the total moral passivity of a Nana or Madame Bovary. Although Jennie yields to Lester Kane, she mulls over the possible consequences, both detrimental and beneficial to herself and others before doing so.

There was really no alternative, she thought. Her own life was a failure. Why go on fighting? If she could make her family happy,
if she could give Vesta a good education, if she could conceal the true nature of the older story and keep Vesta in the background -- perhaps, perhaps -- well, rich men had married poor girls before this, and Lester was very kind, he certainly liked her. (JG, p. 159)

When she is finally ready to go with Kane, some doubts still nag her:

She looked down, for she was nervous and distraught. The whole process of planning, lying, nerving herself to carry out her part had been hard on her. She looked tired and worried. (JG, p. 170)

Throughout the novel Jennie exhibits a great deal of pride. Senator Brander first notices this in her, and it causes him to be even more interested --

Everytime she came he found an excuse to detain her, and soon discovered that, for all her soft girlishness, there lay deepseated in her a conscious depreciation of poverty and a shame of having to own any need. (JG, p. 24)

When Brander sees Jennie gathering up coals from the rail-road yard, signs of her pride become even more evident -- she runs. Dreiser explains:

The desire to flee which Jennie experienced upon seeing the Senator again was attributable to
what she considered the disgrace of her position. She was ashamed to think that he, who thought so well of her, should discover her doing so common a thing. (JG, p. 32)

This element of pride continues in Jennie's later years and gradually takes the form of a desire for self-respect and a craving for the respect of others. Dreiser presents Jennie's household relationship with Kane in such a manner that the reader is hard-pressed to be affronted by it. The cozy domesticity so lulls both Jennie and Dreiser's audience that the fateful appearance of Lester's disapproving family, in the form of his sister Lousie, shocks the reader as much as the castigated Jennie.

Meanwhile Jennie, moving about her duties, also found food for reflection. So this was her real position in another woman's eyes. Now she could see what the world thought. This family was aloof from her as if she lived on another planet. To his sisters and brothers, his father and mother, she was a bad woman, a creature far beneath him mentally and morally, a creature of the streets. And she had hoped somehow to rehabilitate herself in the eyes of the world...how could it be otherwise? She went about numb and still, but the ache of defeat and disgrace was under it all. (JG, p. 230)

As the preceding discussion illustrates, Jennie is a warm, loving, thinking being -- in short, a creature with a soul. Dreiser makes this fact very clear -- at times almost
painfully clear -- through every phase of the novel. Naturalism, with its concern with physical reality, hardly embraces any concept of a soul or spirit at all. Dreiser raves about Jennie's "spirit," in unashamed interruptions into the narrative; Jennie's two lovers "notice" her spirit and extol it above any other consideration; even physical descriptions of Jennie are colored by the kindly light of her spirit.

Dreiser's first attempt to describe Jennie's soul, couched in very sentimental (almost poetic) terms, reveals that he views Jennie as set apart from the purely physical world. This passage, perhaps more than any other, shows Dreiser's non-naturalistic view of Jennie:

The spirit of Jennie -- who shall express it? This daughter of poverty, who was now to fetch and carry the laundry of this distinguished citizen of Columbus, was a creature of a mellowness of temperament which words can but vaguely suggest... There are natures born to the inheritance of flesh that come without understanding, and that go again without seeming to have wondered why. Life, so long as they endure it, is a true wonderland, a thing of infinite beauty which could they but wander into it wonderedly, would be heaven enough. Opening their eyes, they see a conformable and perfect world. Trees, flowers, the world of sound and the world of color. These are the valued inheritance of their state. If no one said to them "mine," they would wander radiantly forth, singing the song which all the earth may some day hope to hear. It is the song of goodness.
Caged in the world of the material, however, such a nature is almost invariably an anomaly. That other world of flesh into which has been woven pride and greed looks askance at the idealist, the dreamer. If one says it is sweet to look at the clouds, the answer is a warning against idleness. If one seeks to give ear to the winds, it shall be well with his soul, but they will seize upon his possessions. If all the world of the so-called inanimate delay one, calling with tenderness in sounds that seem to be too perfect to be less than understanding, it shall be ill with the body. The hands of the actual are forever reaching toward such as these -- forever seizing greedily upon them...

In the world of the actual, Jennie was such a spirit.

(JG, pp. 15-16)

Dreiser describes Jennie at the close of day, overcome with emotion at its beauty:

"Oh," she said, clenching her fingers in an agony of poetic feeling. There were crystal tears overflowing in her eyes. The wondrous sea of feeling in her had stormed its banks. Of such was the spirit of Jennie.

(JG, p. 18)

Senator Brander recognizes this unique emotional compound and links it with his desire for her:

She was a significant type emotionally, that he knew.
There was something there --
artistically, temperamentally, which was far and beyond the keenest suspicion of the herd...
He felt a largeness of feeling not altogether squared with intellect, or perhaps better yet, experience, which was worthy of any man's desire. 

(JG, p. 76)

Lester describes Jennie to Letty, his legal wife:

She's a woman of curious temperament. She possesses a world of feeling and emotions. She's not educated in the sense in which we understand that word, but she has natural refinement and tact. She's a good housekeeper. She's an ideal mother. She's the most affectionate creature under the sun. Her devotion to her mother and father was beyond words. Her love for her daughter...is perfect. She hasn't any of the graces of the smart society woman. She isn't quick at repartee. She can't join in any rapid fire conversation, she thinks rather slowly, I imagine. Some of her big thoughts never come to the surface at all, but you can feel that she is thinking and that she is feeling. (JG; p. 338)

Again, Lester mentally compares Jennie to his wife and decides that Jennie is the superior woman, possessed of a:

...feeling for the beauty of life and the lovely things in human relationship which made her beyond any question an exceptional woman. (JG, p. 381)
Even Dreiser's physical descriptions of Jennie are affected by the idea of her spirit:

There was developing in her that perfection of womanhood, the full mold of form, which would not help but attract any man... Her eyes were wondrously clear and bright, her skin fair, her teeth white and even. She was clever, too, in a sensible way, and by no means deficient in observation. (JG, p. 34)

At the time she meets Lester, this appearance has intensified:

...He was attracted by the particular softness of her disposition and her pre-eminent femininity. There was that about her which suggested the luxury of love... She did not bear any outward marks of her previous experience. There were no evidences of coquetry about her... (JG, p. 128)

The final portrait of Jennie comes near the end of the novel. Adjectives here have the same connotations of sweetness and femininity as the earlier, entirely youthful descriptions. Unlike naturalistic women, Jennie has retained her charms and has not hardened or faded completely with the passage of time:

She was of matronly proportions in these days -- not disagreeably large, but full-bodied, shapely and smooth faced in spite of her cares.
Her eyes were gray and appealing. Her hair was still a rich brown, but there were traces of gray in it. Her neighbors spoke of her as sweet-tempered, kindly, and hospitable. (JC, p. 405)

In all of these preceding descriptions, we have seen Dreiser's repeated fusion of the spiritual with the physical. Herein is one of his most obvious deviations from naturalistic practice -- he frequently de-emphasizes the physical characteristics of characters in favor of their material or so-called "spiritual" characteristics.

Dreiser has created in Jennie a character who is pre-eminently a normal woman, endowed with a human soul which encompasses both love and understanding. She has a well-developed moral sense, pride, and some sense of self-sacrifice. The words self-sacrifice and consecration appear innumerable in the course of the novel. Such a character is not consistent with strict tenets of naturalism, but such a character is Dreiser's "naturalistic" Jennie Gerhardt.

The reader finds further evidence of Dreiser's "non-naturalistic" treatment of Jennie in his marked personal sympathy for his character. In violation of naturalistic tenets of objectivity and restraint, Dreiser repeatedly comments upon situation and character. The previously quoted "spirit of Jennie" passage is the first example. A second example comes with the equally "poetic" and disruptive quotation from Jeffries and its accompanying commentary which seem to beg the readers' forgiveness for Jennie as
she yields to Senator Brander. (JG, p. 77)

Again Dreiser shows his sympathy for Jennie when her irate father forces her from her home. At this juncture, Dreiser speaks of nature as not "ungenerous" and contrasts this nature to the more ruthless society. Dreiser prefers to relate Jennie to nature in a purely beautiful or sympathetic sense rather than to nature (including society) in a larger and more unsympathetic sense. He becomes more specific in his defense of Jennie in a later chapter dealing with the birth of her illegitimate child:

Jennie was now to witness that unjust interpretation of that wonder of nature, which, but for Brander's death, might have been consecrated and hallowed as one of the ideal functions of life. Although herself unable to distinguish the separateness of this from every other normal process of life, yet she was made to feel, by the actions of all about her, that degradation was her portion and sin the foundation as well as the condition of her state. (JG, p. 99)

By direct statement or innuendo, Dreiser continually pushes through the narrative in defense of Jennie.

If we look at Sister Carrie and Jennie Gerhardt together, several similarities and differences appear. As Dreiser's earliest novels, and as the only novels centered about female protagonists, they are suitable companions for
this initial evaluation of the state of Dreiser's method and philosophy as evidenced in his women characters.

As we have previously noted, Carrie and Jennie have similar backgrounds, are equivalent fictional types. Their common background is no puzzle to anyone familiar with Dreiser's biography -- both are modeled after Dreiser's own sisters. Details have been fairly well established. The sister who serves as the model for Carrie Meeber had been the mistress of a Chicago architect (a less debonair Drouet) when she was attracted by the manager of Hannah and Hogg's, a well-known bar and restaurant. At first she did not know he was married but even after she did discover this she eloped to Toronto with him. There he confessed that he had embezzled fifteen thousand dollars from Hannah and Hogg's. Eventually the couple settled into a less-than-ideal home situated in New York City. Jennie Gerhardt derives from another of Dreiser's sisters who became pregnant by a wealthy young gentleman whose mother explained he could do nothing about it as he had more important social ties. Dreiser, in creating his young feminine protagonists was using the material he knew best -- his own family's experiences in Chicago.

Although on the surface, Dreiser's earliest novels resemble those of Zola or Crane, we must be especially wary of placing Dreiser in the naturalistic tradition this early. It is impossible to consider Sister Carrie anything but the exceptionally fortunate product of an entirely unconscious
artist. When Dreiser began to write *Sister Carrie*, actually on a bet, he had little knowledge of literary traditions. His reading had been limited in scope and completely self-directed. He had never read Zola and had no precise concept of philosophic or literary naturalism. He set out to write a novel without any forethought of what sort of novel he was writing. Undoubtedly because he had read (and venerated) Balzac, his title and particularly his early descriptions in *Sister Carrie* are reminiscent of that realist. This is probably as far as literary tradition can be carried in his first novel.

Carrie is the character she is because she was a type Dreiser knew intimately — and to a certain extent, Carrie is Dreiser himself. Carrie, like Dreiser and his family, came to Chicago seeking a higher standard of living and encountered there all the diverse forces and temptations of that rapidly growing society. Dreiser attempted to endow Carrie with some of his own artistic temperament, but as we have seen, what he said about Carrie and what Carrie herself did and said never quite correspond. He made claims for sensitivity in Carrie which he did not develop in the course of the novel's action.

Because Dreiser felt a close kinship with his character he was unable to look at her objectively. His conception of her is tinged with platitudes and sentimentality — egregious flaws for a "naturalist." What is naturalistic in the novel, of course, is the gigantic force of the city,
of society, and of circumstance upon individuals. Here Dreiser is very close to the tradition of Zola, and in America, Crane. But Dreiser's is unpremeditated, unsystematic naturalism. In *Sister Carrie* he is a literary naturalist by default, that is, by actual experience rather than literary heritage or philosophic orientation. Carrie represents Dreiser's own feelings of awe, fear, and despair in the city. Thus Dreiser says Carrie is neither good nor bad—but he does like her enormously.\textsuperscript{18}

In *Jennie Gerhardt* the emphasis shifts slightly. Dreiser is little more conscious of himself as a naturalist, but his perspective toward the experiences on which both *Sister Carrie* and *Jennie Gerhardt* are based has changed. Although the outline of Jennie's story may be found in the experience of Dreiser's sister, Jennie's character is based more closely on Dreiser's mother. Here Dreiser is working not only with what he knew best, but also with what he loved most.\textsuperscript{19} Dreiser's mother serves as the archetypal portrait for Jennie's selflessness and love, the ability to endure, and to sacrifice.\textsuperscript{20} Now it is impossible for Dreiser to keep outside the novel. He has an obvious affection for Jennie, "his favorite heroine,"\textsuperscript{21} and he shows this affection continually. Here Nature, which he could control as the brute force of the city in *Sister Carrie*, also slips into the subjective, sentimental, and quasi-romantic. Dreiser keeps asserting the beauty of nature as well as portraying it as a cold force. This tendency, common among
American naturalists, undoubtedly has its roots in Emersonian transcendentalism. Nature as a version of man's spirit cannot be identified completely with nature as a dazzling, but alien, force. Dreiser "drinks from both branches" of this divided stream, but he here seems to favor the spiritual branch.

Dreiser's unpremeditated naturalism now has two flaws -- a definite sympathy for and defense of a character and an ambivalent view toward nature. We can actually conclude, by contrasting Dreiser's portraits of the two women and their relation to their environments, that Dreiser is farther from "naturalism" in his second novel than in his first. This obviously cannot be a conscious rejection of a philosophy on the part of Dreiser as his ideas are still rooted in experience. He is not yet concerned with a particular tradition although critics have begun to tag him as a naturalist. Perhaps we should call this phase of Dreiser's career "Dreiser -- raw" or "Dreiser -- natural."

After Sister Carrie and Jennie Gerhardt, the chronology of Dreiser's novels becomes rather complicated. Dreiser had a habit of working on several novels simultaneously, and some manuscripts were in a state of flux for many years. The "Trilogy of Desire," encompassing The Financier, The Titan, and The Stoic, was published between 1912 and 1946. Its conception occupied Dreiser longer and later than any other of his novels, most of which were written in a much shorter space of time. Because of its extended position in his
career, I have chosen to study it last. For this reason, we shall turn next to *An American Tragedy* (1925), more indicative of Dreiser's "middle-aged" art.
CHAPTER II

Roberta Alden, the "forsaken sweet-heart" of An American Tragedy, is undoubtedly the most naturalistic (in the strict, Zola-esque sense) of Dreiser's women. Dreiser views her rather objectively and does not sentimentalize her portrait as he does Carrie's or idealize her character as he does Jennie's. Without the various deviations which we have been accustomed to finding as blocks to naturalistic characterizations, Roberta stands rather apart from her predecessors.

Although Roberta's background corresponds in some respects to Jennie Gerhardt's, her family and her relationship to it is not as completely developed here as in the earlier novel. As in the Gerhardt family, the father is a financial failure and consequently relinquishes his position as emotional and psychological center of the family to the mother. Roberta evidently confided in her mother with absolute freedom at one point, but by the time the reader...
sees them together, Roberta's relationship with Clyde has forced an attitude of secrecy.

Something in her mother's voice which epitomized the long years of affectionate understanding between them -- an understanding based, not only on a mutual desire for each other's happiness, but a complete frankness in regard to all emotions and moods which had hitherto dominated both -- touched her almost to the point of tears....She longed to tell her everything. (AT, p. 370)

Roberta does not tell her mother everything, however, and from this point forward she is forced to alienate her family as she cannot divulge her secret to them. She continues to hold her family in her affection, however, as we see in her letter to Clyde shortly before her death:

But I was truly glad to see Mother again, Clyde. She's so loving and patient and helpful. The sweetest, dearest Mother that ever was. And I just hate to hurt her in any way. (AT, pp. 465-66)

Roberta's shift away from her family is paralleled by her shift in moral point of view. Her family and her conservative religious background exert an influence on her thinking at first. She is willing to meet Clyde secretly, but she will not meet him Sunday morning on the pretext of attending another church. She objects to dancing from a moral standpoint, but her reluctance on this point is soon battered down. There is, however, some sense of her
attempting to "use" church for social contacts, neglecting her attendance only after she fails in this.

Dreiser's descriptions of Roberta are one clue to his more naturalistic treatment of her. Whereas he described Carrie almost exclusively in the abstract, mentioning only her clothes with any detail, and idealized Jennie's appearance to conform with her perfect feminine nature, he describes Roberta in more natural, physical terms. This first portrait of Roberta includes both elements of dress and physical attributes; it is Dreiser's most complete physical portrait of a woman which we have yet encountered.

She had on a small brown hat that did not look any too new, and was pulled low over a face that was small and regular and pretty and that was haloed by bright light brown hair. Her little suit was commonplace, and her shoes were not so very new looking and quite solidly soled. She looked practical and serious and yet so bright and clean and willing and possessed of so much hope and vigor that... he was at once taken with her. (AT, p. 264)

Clyde's more subjective analysis follows this fairly thorough description by Dreiser. Henceforth we see Roberta chiefly through Clyde's eyes, but Clyde's view begins to conform with Dreiser's. Therefore Roberta is repeatedly described in physical rather than "spiritual" terms. Clyde notes Roberta about to begin work:
Then presently he saw her returning, a fluff of light hair about her forehead, her cheeks slightly flushed, her eyes very intent and serious. And as advised by Miss Todd, he saw her turn back her sleeves, revealing a pretty pair of forearms. (AT, p. 265)

When Roberta mingles with the socially-taboo foreign girls at work, she is not shocked by their earthy humor as a "little country girl" properly should be. Instead:

   Even Roberta laughed loudly, a fact which Clyde noted with pleasure, for he liked all this rough humor, considering it mere innocent play....

   Her blue eyes were twinkling and her lips, which were most temptingly modeled, were parted in a broad smile. (AT, p. 275)

So Clyde concludes that:

   She was human and gay and tolerant and good natured. There was decidedly a very liberal measure of play in her. And in spite of the fact that her clothes were poor, the same little round brown hat and blue cloth dress that she had worn on first coming to work here, she was prettier than anyone else. And she never needed to paint her lips and cheeks like the foreign girls....And how pretty were her arms and neck -- plump and gracefully designed! And there was a certain grace and abandon about her as she threw herself
into her work as though she really enjoyed it. As she worked fast during the hottest portions of the day, there would gather on her upper lip and chin and forehead little beads of perspiration which she was always pausing in her work to touch with her handkerchief.... (AT, p. 275)

These "little beads of perspiration" seem the most naturalistic (as opposed to hitherto realistic) detail Dreiser has used in connection with any of his women to this time. Although this is a pathetically small observation in light of descriptions employed by Flaubert, Zola, or Hardy, it is nevertheless indicative of Dreiser's intent, his concern to present an unvarnished portrait of his character.

When Clyde dreams of Roberta, his dreams include physical detail:

He could see her now as she worked with her swift graceful movements at her machine. Her shapely arms and hands, her smooth skin and bright eyes as she smiled at him. (AT, p. 281)

Then as he unexpectedly sees her:

She had her hat off and one hand to her eyes for she was facing the sun and was looking down in the water. Her lips were parted in careless inquiry. She was very pretty, he thought, as he paused in his paddling to look at her. The sleeves of a pale
blue waist came only to her elbows. And a darker blue skirt of flannel reconveyed to him the trimness of her figure. (AT, p. 282)

At their first clandestine meeting Dreiser describes Roberta's approach in the following manner:

She looked trim and brisk and yet nervous, and paused at the street end and looked about like a frightened and cautious animal. (AT, p. 297)

Clearly Dreiser is portraying a different sort of woman from Carrie or Jennie. Although we know that these two earlier characters were attractive to men, the details of their appearance were never given in the same manner as Roberta's. Moreover, Roberta is aware of her own attractiveness in a way that Dreiser's earlier women were not. Although Carrie, dressed in fine clothes for the first time, was conscious of a certain rather nebulous sense of power, neither she nor Jennie seemed to realize when a man became interested in them. Certainly they never pondered and calculated as Roberta does. More important, perhaps, they were never really physically attracted to the men in their lives. Compare Roberta's reactions to Clyde's actually slight (at this point) attentions:

What would these people here in Lycurgus think of her and him now if they should see her... (AT, p. 286)
And although the peculiarly exposed nature of the work at the factory made it impossible for him to demonstrate his feelings... she knew he was as enthusiastic, if not more so, as the night before.... (AT, p. 288)

Roberta turned, conscious that now was the time to decide whether she would encourage or discourage any attention on his part.... At the same time she was almost faintingly eager to accept his attentions regardless of the problem in connection with them. His eyes! His hair! His hands! (AT, p. 288)

Many, many thoughts -- vague, dreadful, colorful, came to her -- how and where they might go -- be -- do -- from now on, if only she could arrange to be friends with him, without harm to her or him. (AT, p. 295)

This element of consciousness coupled with a growing notion of scheming, of actual planning for their relationship, sets Roberta apart from the earlier women.

Dreiser shows his hand, his personal feelings in connection with Roberta in a more subtle way than he does with Carrie and Jennie. In the former cases he pleaded naïveté or stressed the superhuman forces which controlled them. They were both essentially passive. He portrays Roberta as active, and more importantly, as increasingly conniving. Despite her sweet winsomeness, she is a designer. Roberta's first indication of this element in her character has been revealed in her awareness of Clyde's interest in her and her consequent decisions. Her next active steps are involved
with her keeping the relationship with Clyde a secret.
She denies Clyde's interest in her to her former confidante, Grace Marr.

"Oh, what nonsense!" Roberta replied shrewdly, and a bit 
alarmed. "Why he wouldn't 
look at me... besides, there's 
a rule of the company that 
doesn't allow him to as long 
as I work there." (AT, p. 300)

Roberta soon discovers that in order to hold Clyde's attentions, in order to see him at all outside of the factory, she must play the aggressor.

But the great thing, apart from their love for each other and its immediate expression in kisses and embraces was the how and where of further contacts. They must find some way, only, really, as Roberta saw it, she must be the one to find the way, and that soon.
For while Clyde was obviously very impatient and eager to be with her as much as possible, still he did not appear to be very ready with suggestions -- available ones. (AT, p. 306)

The first major step which Roberta takes to alleviate the problem of seeing Clyde only at work is moving to another room. On the surface the excuse for changing rooms seems very just and not at all questionable. Subconsciously, however, Roberta realizes her real reason for choosing a room with a private entrance. Something within her and yet stronger than her own will seems to be guiding her:
For although consciously at this time she was scarcely willing to face the fact that this room -- its geometric position in relation to the rest of the house -- had been of the greatest import to her at the time she first saw it, yet subconsciously, she knew it well enough. The course she was pursuing was dangerous -- that she knew. And yet how, as she now so often asked herself at moments when she was confronted by some desire which ran counter to her sense of practicability and social morality, was she to do? (AT, p. 342)

When the moment comes to take full advantage of the privacy of her new quarters, Roberta balks, terrified:

There was something sinful, low, dreadful about it. She would not... At the same time within her was that overmastering urge of repressed and feared desire now knocking loudly for recognition. (AT, p. 314)

As in the examples cited earlier, however, Roberta weakens under pressure. Fear of losing Clyde proves the stronger force. The balance between the force of conventional training and the force of her desire for love, understanding, and companionship has been only momentary. At the next opportunity, she yields to Clyde's wishes although both feel that they are committing mortal sin. After Roberta has yielded and Clyde's attentions begin to wane, she becomes more conniving and demanding than ever in an attempt to retain his interest. She realizes the awkward state in which she has placed herself in conjunction with conventional society.
The dark state to which her incurable passion for him had brought her now pained her terribly. For without him and marriage and a home and children, and a reasonable place in such a local world as she was accustomed to, what was there for a girl like her in the world? (AT, p. 377)

Not only does she yearn for conventionality, but she fears the opinion of others:

For the opinion of society in general and what other people might say, Roberta stood in extreme terror. (AT, p. 398)

Roberta must calculate her every move in terms of Clyde. She fears to leave him even temporarily lest her absence provide him with an excuse to devote himself entirely to "these others."

Of course, shortly after Roberta senses Clyde's emotional distance, her dependence on him becomes desperate as she discovers that she is pregnant. Now she is forced to use every wile she knows, to change her mood and tone constantly as she attempts to cajole Clyde into marrying her. Dreiser's portrait of Roberta here is particularly well written. Because he is not in sympathy with her cause, he can portray her impartially as a "cornered animal."

The constant shift from bold defiance to pleading appeal reinforces the image of the cornered animal constantly pacing and feinting in desperate attempts to effect his escape. Several examples of Roberta's reactions during her
long discussions with Clyde should elucidate this point:

Her manner as she said this was a mixture of outward courage born out of her conviction that she was in the right and an inward uncertainty about Clyde's attitude.... (AT, p. 443)

She felt like a cornered animal fight for its life with all odds against it.... (AT, p. 440)

...her eyes turned appealingly and yet savagely toward him. (AT, p. 447)

Dreiser here indulges himself freely in the (somewhat trite) animal imagery characteristic of naturalism. It would be overstating the case, however, to claim that Roberta turns from the sweet country innocent to a desperate, fighting animal. Although Dreiser uses both the images connected with a naturalistic, physiological approach to character, and the power of superhuman forces -- pressures of society on both Roberta and Clyde -- he does not allow Roberta in any significant way to be the fighting animal. Roberta feels like a "cornered animal," but she never actually fights. She compromises with Clyde continually, but despite attempts at both bravado and rational appeal, she never becomes vicious, she never turns on Clyde despite her threats. Instead, in the last analysis, she becomes very sentimental. The letters which she writes to Clyde from her parents' farm (which later become prize tear-jerking testimony at Clyde's trial) are those of a discouraged, disillusioned young girl. They evidence little attempt at
conniving or struggling but are wistfully romantic:

In the first place I didn't want to come much (alone) as you know. I feel too upset and uncertain about everything although I try not to feel so now that we have our plan and you are going to come for me as you said.

But it's very nice here now. The trees are so beautifully green and the flowers in bloom. I can hear the bees in the orchard whenever I go near the south windows....

Please write me Clyde, a long, cheery, letter, even though you don't want to, and tell me all about how you have not thought of me once since I've been away or missed me at all....

Oh, dear, I don't mean the horrid thing I write, but I'm so blue and tired and lonely that I can't help it at times....

I promise to do better next time....And you will come, of course. I'll be so happy and grateful and try not to bother you too much in any way.

Your lonely
Bert
(AT, pp. 465-67)

The last that we see of Roberta, on the fateful boating excursion, she is in a similar mood. No longer a "fighting animal" in any sense, she instead extols the beauties of nature:
Isn't it still and peaceful here?...It seems to be so restful here. I think it's beautiful, truly so much more beautiful than that other lake. These trees are so tall, aren't they? And these mountains.... (AT, p. 518)

Dreiser has presented in Roberta a more complex portrait than he has previously attempted. He has presented the psychological and sociological forces operating within her; he has shown her as ambitious, and he has presented her as a more physical woman. His own sympathies do not mar his conception of her. Yet much of the detail we have about Roberta does not conform to a naturalistic portrait in the strictest sense:— the genuine affection for her family, the compromising spirit with Clyde, the sentimentalism in place of action or stoicism.

Sondra Finchely, the "other woman" of An American Tragedy to whose attentions Clyde constantly aspires, introduces a third type in Dreiser's gallery of women. Dreiser's portrait of her would seem to be a rather general caricature in comparison with his former women subjects. The reasons he is forced to treat Sondra in this manner become apparent when one examines his presentation of her in detail: Dreiser is working beyond his ken, and he presents her only in the cliché terms of the fabled "carefree young heiress."

When Dreiser describes the difference which Clyde notices between Sondra and the other girls he has known
(especially Roberta), he himself seems to share in Clyde's awe or stupefaction. He has no adequate words to delineate this difference:

Sondra Finchley as smart and vain and sweet a girl as Clyde had ever laid his eyes upon -- so different to any he had known and so superior ....to Clyde's eyes she was the most adorable feminine thing he had seen in all his days. (AT, p. 241)

Other than these banal adjectives, Dreiser can differentiate only in terms of the "haves" and the "have nots."

He was thinking how such girls as she had everything, as contrasted with girls like Roberta, who had nothing. (AT, p. 353)

In order to set Sondra apart, then, Dreiser carefully connects her with her material possessions. Clyde meets her unexpectedly in her chauffeured car; she chatters of her belongings -- a stable full of horses, speed boats, and the like. Indeed Sondra appears very anxious to show off her possessions before the impressionable Clyde. For example, she has invited Clyde to join her in the kitchen for a midnight snack. Realizing that Clyde seems amazed by the size of the room and its equipment, Sondra takes every opportunity to overawe him:

Having prepared the chocolate in a commonplace aluminum pan, to further impress him she sought out a heavily chased
silver service which was in another room. (AT, p. 392)

Dreiser invariably describes Sondra's clothes, overt symbols of her desire for "social show." When Clyde first meets Sondra in his uncle's home, the only description of her is in terms of dress:

She was dressed in a close-fitting tailored suit which followed her form exactly and which was enhanced by a small dark leather hat, pulled fetchingly low over her eyes. A leather belt of the same color encircled her neck. By a leather leash she led a French bull and over one arm carried a most striking coat of black and gray checks -- not too pronounced and yet having the effect of a man's modish overcoat. (AT, p. 241)

Whatever the occasion, from this initial meeting forward, Dreiser always notices and romanticizes Sondra's attire:

And lastly there was Sondra again, dancing down in a smart green knitted sports costume. (AT, p. 571)

Again lastly there was Sondra herself....Draped most alluringly in a deep red Spanish shawl. (AT, p. 539)

Clothes, because of their ability to attract attention to her, were of the utmost importance to Sondra herself. They are connected with whatever "power" she exerts over her associates. Here she recalls Carrie who was completely passive until transformed by stylish clothes. Both are
probably examples of Dreiser's natural assumption of the materialistic tradition. With Sondra, however, the concern with clothes tends to romanticize the character by lifting her above the realm of the ordinary. Clyde notices Sondra's connection of clothes with power:

At once Clyde realized that he had hit upon the one subject that not only fascinated, but even excited her. For not only did it involve outdoor exercise, in which she obviously reveled, but also the power to triumph and so achieve laurels in such phases of sport as most interested those with whom she was connected. And lastly, although this was something he did not realize until later, she was fairly dizzied by the opportunity all this provided for frequent changes of costume and hence social show, which was the one thing above all others that did interest her. (AT, p. 354)

The desire for social show further asserts itself in the careful posings which Sondra affects. The reader's impression of Sondra is one of a completely false personality. Sondra is entirely self-conscious:

"Oh that's all right. Don't mention it," replied Sondra archly with a kind of sticky sweetness in her voice....She smiled, having completely recovered from her momentary embarrassment, and now leaned back after the very best princess fashion... (AT, p. 332)

This art of being an appealing woman -- or at least the
art of attracting Clyde's attention -- seems to be Sondra's chief forte. She never merely enters a room or speaks to Clyde. Rather:

Hence she was keen, first to see if he were present, next to be sure that he gained no hint that she had seen him first, and lastly to act as grandly as possible for his benefit -- a ...procedure and type of thought that was exactly the thing best calculated to impress him...and having exchanged a dozen or more "hello's" and references with one and another to this, that, and the other local event, she at last condescended to evince awareness of his proximity.  

(At, p. 347)

Very closely allied to these physical posings on Sondra's part is her extremely affected speech to Clyde. After their relationship has somehow arrived on a mutual footing, Sondra frequently indulges in baby-talk both in her actual speech and in letters. This device, employed earlier by Dreiser in The Genius to characterize Suzanne Dale, is unfortunately no more convincingly handled here. On most occasions the speech sounds extremely false; it actually does not glamorize Sondra as much as it further removes her from reality.

"What come over de sweet phling!" (When Clyde appeared to be the least reduced in mind she most affected this banter with him, since it had an almost electric if sweetly tormenting effect on him.
"His baby-talking girl," he
sometimes called her.)
"Facey all dark now. Little while ago facey all smiles. Come make facey all nice again. Smile at Sondra. Squeeze Sondra's arm like a good boy, Clyde." (AT, p. 458)

"And Sondra won't give her Clydie up, either."
"Sondra so glad Clydie here. Misses him so much." (AT, p. 478)

Such a fanciful conception of the *femme fatale* leads entirely toward romanticism. Indeed, the relationship between Clyde and Sondra, the myth of the beautiful, rich, almost-attainable princess and the footman is presented by Dreiser in a romantic half-light. Just as Sondra is "romance itself:"

...the country fair at Sharon, at which, in a gypsy costume, the essence of romance itself, she would superintend a booth...

(AT, p. 451)

so is all that surrounds her relationship with Clyde. She sees only the delightful possibilities:

None of the compulsion of the practical...Just love and summer, the idyllic and happy progress toward an eventual secure and unopposed union which should give him to her forever.

(AT, p. 452)

The idea of elopement excites Sondra both because of the romance inherent in the action itself and because of the
"social show" it is bound to create.

The excitement her elopement
would create here and else¬
where....The talk and feeling
in her own family! And Gilbert
would be related to her in
spite of him.... (AT, p. 480)

Sondra manages to impart this idea of extreme romantic
sensibility to Clyde, so that even when she is dancing with
someone else, he is completely enamoured.

...He was almost dizzied by
passing contempt of Son¬
dra. She swayed so droopily
and dreamily in the embrace of
Grant Cranston, the while with¬
out seeming to, permitting him
to sense how graceful and
poetic was her attitude toward
all things'-- what a flower of
life she really was. (AT, p. 352)

Not only does Clyde become dizzied by Sondra's ultra-
romanticism, but Dreiser himself is working "over his head"
and loses control of his creation. As he cannot describe
Sondra in any but cliché terms, neither can he describe the
Sondra-Clyde romance accurately. Of course Clyde's infatu-
ation with the romantic Sondra could be presented natural-
istically, but it is not. Rather Dreiser finally reaches the
point at which he is forced to connect their relationship
with fantasy -- the ultimate in romanticism.

Indeed in addition to hand-
clasps, kisses, and looks of
intense admiration always be-
stowed when presumably no one
was looking, there were those
nebulous and yet strengthening
and lengthening fantasies con-
cerning a future which in some
way or other, but not clear to
either as yet, was still always
to include each other. (AT, p. 451)

With the shallowness of description provided by Dreiser, the
complete emphasis on clothes and phony mannerisms, and
finally, the elements of "nebulous fantasy" surrounding her
and her romance with Clyde, Sondra can hardly be viewed by
the reader as the creation of a naturalist. Indeed, as
Robertas is probably the closest to a naturalistic woman of
any of Dreiser's "gallery" so is Sondra the farthest removed.
She appears more as a glittering mannequin or a naively
"sophisticated" school girl than any other woman Dreiser
created. In her is less of the flesh and blood of natural-
ism, but also less of the idealization or sentimentalization
which surrounded Jennie and consequently less of the author's
sympathy. She remains for the reader the elusive fantasy
which Dreiser himself could not ever grasp.

In An American Tragedy, then, we have reached a second
step in Dreiser's career as a novelist. He is no longer a
"raw" novelist dependent on personal experiences and
acquaintances for his material and thus sympathetically in-
volved with all he writes. He is conscious of himself as
a naturalist and the novel as a whole conforms basically to
naturalistic tenets. The two portraits, Sondra and Roberta,
differ both from each other and from Carrie and Jennie.
Roberta, whose country background, ambition, and shrewish tenacity remind one of Dreiser's first wife, is the more successful portrait. Dreiser envisions her as an inherent part of his naturalistic novel, and within the limits suggested previously, she is a fitting character for Dreiser's conception of *An American Tragedy*. One cannot carry Dreiser's vision of her as a "cornered animal" too far, but she is definitely the victim of forces within and without. Dreiser neither condones her actions nor sympathizes with her. He manages to be objective in his view. With Sondra, as we have seen, Dreiser was writing over his head. The exotic *femme fatale* could be a legitimate portrait in such a novel, but Dreiser cannot control his creation carefully enough. He wanders into the stereotyped or the nauseatingly "cute." Sondra never becomes more than a type or a peculiarly non-physical symbol of the carefree wealthy.

Obviously, then, we have a different situation than in *Sister Carrie* and *Jennie Gerhardt*. Dreiser is now working toward a definite goal; he has developed a personal philosophy and attempts to reveal it through character and situation. Each part of his effort does not entirely resemble the whole. Sondra is technically and artistically a failure. Roberta is Dreiser's most consistent character portrait to date. On the evidence of the two women in *An American Tragedy*, then, we might call this stage of Dreiser's career, "Dreiser -- deliberate," or "Dreiser -- experimental."
CHAPTER III

The "Trilogy of Desire" begins slightly before the "deliberate or experimental" stage we have just suggested for An American Tragedy, encompasses it, and goes a step beyond it. By the time that Theodore Dreiser began to write his trilogy he knew in at least a vague way that he was a naturalist; that is, his writing exhibited some deliberately naturalistic tendencies. By the time that he finished the trilogy, his career was literally ended. The examination of his women characters here, then, should provide a panoramic perspective of his career. To examine all the women who figured in Cowperwood's finance-and-woman centered career would be an exhausting task. By examining rather closely Cowperwood's first wife (Lillian Semple), his second wife (Aileen Butler), and his final devotee and mistress (Berenice Fleming), we can continue the practice of studying Dreiser's major woman characters. In this trilogy, consisting of The Financier (1912), The Titan (1914), and The Stoic (1946),
the chronological development of the women becomes extremely important in a total consideration of Dreiser's treatment of women. Accordingly, we shall turn first to Lillian Semple Cowperwood.

Dreiser takes more pains to describe Lillian's physical appearance than he has taken to describe any earlier characters. An important aspect of these descriptive passages is the manner in which Dreiser attempts to show Lillian's gradual "fading" and aging. Unlike Carrie Meeber, and to a lesser extent, Jennie Gerhardt, Lillian does change physically, become less and less appealing, throughout the course of The Financier. Dreiser's first description of Lillian is done with unusual wealth of detail. Unlike earlier women, Lillian is first described not by the clothes she wears but in categorical physical detail:

Mrs. Semple was an interesting type in her way -- not as young as Frank Cowperwood, for he was but nineteen, while she was twenty-four, but still young enough in her thought and looks to appear of his own age. She was slightly taller than he was...and despite her height, shapely, artistic in form and feature, and with a certain unconscious placidity of soul, which came more from lack of understanding than from force of character. Her hair was the color of a dried English walnut, rich and plentiful, and her complexion waxen-cream -- with lips of faint pink, and eyes that varied from gray to blue and from gray to brown, according to the light in which
you saw them. Her hands were thin and shapely, her nose straight, her face artistically narrow. She was not brilliant, not active, but rather peaceful and statuesque without knowing it. (F, p. 67)

From this initial description, then, one has a rather good impression of Mrs. Cowperwood. Certainly Dreiser's approach has changed from the scant details of Carrie which he measured out over a number of chapters. Consistent with his new thoroughness, Dreiser continually reminds us of Lillian's appearance, of her gradual physical decline.

She was no longer as softly pleasing for all her height, but more angular...her health was not quite so good, she was a little run down nervously. (F, p. 148)

Again:

Her beauty of figure still was a notable thing, though her face was not so smoothly sweet as it had been years before when Cowperwood had first met her. (F, p. 214)

By the time Cowperwood can contrast Lillian to the dashing young Aileen, Dreiser is writing the harshest physical description of a woman which he had ever attempted:

She was not so plump for her size as she originally had been -- more noticeably angular. If you could have looked under her chin you would have
noticed now that a little net-
work of wrinkles had come,
which is to the life-loving
woman such a discouraging fore-
runner of approaching age. Her
eyes at the edges, her lips at
the corners, her nose at its
clear juncture with her face,
had those faint, suspicious
depressions which women dread
so much. (F, p. 415)

Although such a description quickly could be ascribed to
Dreiser's new role as a conscious "naturalist," the infre-
quency of such descriptions and their definite function as
a direct contrast to Aileen would tend to counter any empha-
sis on such an approach. Dreiser is concerned with making
Lillian physically old so that he may provide Cowperwood
with his younger alternative. As we shall see, in all her
attributes, social and psychological as well as physical,
Lillian seems to have been conceived as the opposite to the
stronger character, Aileen. Indeed, so all-inclusive is
her "oppositeness" that one is tempted to believe that she
was purposely designed as Aileen's negative.

A word which constantly comes into any consideration of
Lillian is "passivity." The initial description of her im-
plied this character trait -- the waxen features, pale lips,
and Dreiser's accompanying comment that she had a "certain
placidity of the soul." Her relationship to Cowperwood
is that of the yielding to a dominating force. Mr. Semple,
hers first husband, left little impression upon her; she
instinctively, not actively, realizes something larger and
shrewder in Cowperwood.
She was really not of a very impressionable nature, but there was a tang or string to the personality of young Cowperwood which could not be indifferently passed over by anyone. (F, p. 95)

Recognized a strong force did not involve a corresponding strength in Lillian, however. Although:

Her pale uncertain, lymphatic body excited a form of dynamic energy from him... (F, p. 99)

she responded rather indifferently:

She met his eagerness with that beautiful smiling passivity which he had so much admired... (F, p. 109)

When Lillian does yield to Cowperwood's caresses she experiences both a new "force of feeling" (F, p. 107) and a sense of fear and shame. The fear and shame seem the stronger reactions; we see them again in the following scene:

One night, when she was going to bed, she stopped in front of her dressing table and looked at her face and neck and arms, which were bare. They were pretty and shapely. A subtle something came over her as she surveyed her long, peculiarly shaded hair. She thought of young Cowperwood; and then, the vision of the late Mr. Semple returning and the force and quality of public opinion. She was chilled and
was ashamed. It frightened her, this thought, as being something antic, evil, impossible. (F, p. 96)

Here, at the first indication of a strong emotion or sexual desire, Lillian quakes at the thought of morals or of public opinion. The fear of what others think haunts her role much as Roberta's similar fears haunted hers. Indeed, Dreiser later tells rather explicitly of Lillian's position on morals in regard to her second marriage:

Mrs. Cowperwood, although she had yielded to the strong magnetic attraction of Cowperwood at twenty-one -- it could not be called "fiery impetuosity" -- might well be described as a natural conservator of public morals. (F, p. 233)

Dreiser presents the first Mrs. Cowperwood as being entrenched in convention and the humdrum trivia of life. She is never challenged intellectually. Details of her existence occupy her mind, and she is content to accept the decisions of others. Before their marriage, she and Cowperwood are not at all intellectually involved:

She talked to him about commonplace things; he helped her set the table one night in the absence of the maid, and brought her at other times a lace mantilla from some nearby dressing-case when she was cold. (F, p. 96)

After their marriage Cowperwood attempts to interest her in art but to no avail.
Mrs. Cowperwood cared not a whit one way or another; but she accompanied him, thinking all the while that Frank was a little peculiar...he tried...to interest her in these things intelligently; but while she pretended slightly, she could not really see or care, and it was very plain that she could not. (F, p. 120)

She:

...read a little, not much. She had a habit of sitting and apparently brooding reflectively at times, but it was not based on any deep thought....She interested herself in charitable and church work to a certain extent, called on her husband's friends and many of the church families who were of her faith, and went to market and to the shops for herself and her husband with methodic regularity. (F, p. 71)

Although we are told that Lillian is a staunch Presbyterian, her faith is a matter of passive acceptance or convention as well. After the crash, imprisonment, and second meteoric financial ascendency of her husband, Mrs. Cowperwood muses over the "mystery of life:"

There must be a God. The Bible said so. Her husband, evil though he was, could not be utterly bad, for he had made ample provision for her and the children liked him. (T, p. 30)

She blames Aileen, but feels that:
God would punish her, no doubt. He must. So she went to church on Sundays and tried to believe, come what might, that all was for the best. (T, p. 30)

Dreiser's comment that "Mrs. Cowperwood was not an intellectual leader... she wanted to live nicely -- to be significant in her circle" (F, p. 113), becomes an understatement. Convention encompasses Lillian's world -- it is both her motivation and her goal. The actual act of marriage with Cowperwood upsets her for this reason.

His bride-to-be was nervous, fearsome of public opinions, disturbed as to what her closest friends might be thinking. Frank was so young -- five years younger -- she was a widow. (F, p. 108)

Once married, she attempts to forget the possible questioning of her action as soon as possible.

...she settled into a quiet home life, which she wanted to make ideally conservative and respectable for his sake.... She took her second marriage quite as she had taken her first -- a solemn fact which contained no possibility of mental alteration or change. (F, p. 121)

We see her here enmeshed in the conventionality which Roberta wanted so desperately; she and Roberta both reflect Dreiser's first wife in making conventionality their highest standard.
With the nearly simultaneous exposure of Cowperwood's affair with Aileen and his financial collapse, Mrs. Cowperwood is shocked at least temporarily out of her normal calm. Although she realizes almost immediately that she does not truly love Frank, she feels forced to pretend to do so in order to react conventionally.

She saw now, by the very state of mind she was in, that she did not love him as some women loved their husbands. She was not wild about him. (F, p. 417)

...She really felt very sorry for him, but she did not love him as she once had....She felt a little reproachful, a little depressed and sad. (F, p. 733)

Her decision to "stick by her husband" is not an active one, but rather a recognition of the conventional approach:

She had gone, wondering more than ever what and where was the line of her duty. To stick by her husband, convention told her; and so she decided. Yes, religion dictated that, also custom. (F, p. 425)

The result of the convention-based decision is more pretense:

Her smile was something like a hat or belt or ornament of one kind or another which one puts on or off at will. (F, p. 642)

Her concern is always with what ought to be done in the given, difficult situation. When Cowperwood suggests the idea of divorce, Mrs. Cowperwood's thought "was that she
ought to make some demonstration of astonishment or wrath." (E, p. 736)

Passive, placid, conventional, aging -- these are the words which best describe Lillian Cowperwood. Dreiser seems to portray her objectively, if to a slight degree bitterly. One cannot, however, help wondering how much of Lillian's character was conceived as the negative to Cowperwood himself, or more importantly, to Aileen. The descriptions of the two women's appearance and actions are in constant juxtaposition. As one falls, the other rises. The effect is perhaps a bit too neat, the differences in the women too obvious to lend an air of complete reality to either. Lillian, as the character less developed in the total context of the trilogy, suffers more. Nevertheless, one can say fairly that Lillian is portrayed consistently by Dreiser and is handled objectively by him. As a passive character, buffeted by forces without her, she fits more closely than many of Dreiser's women the naturalistic tradition.

Aileen Butler Cowperwood, second of Frank Cowperwood's major alliances, under close study becomes the most enigmatic, and therefore perhaps the most interesting, of Dreiser's major women characters. Since she does figure throughout the entire trilogy, Dreiser says more about her than any other of his women; perhaps the very volume of detail that we do have concerning Aileen contributes in part to the
inconsistencies which we find in Dreiser's presentation of her.

Dreiser's basic conception of Aileen as a victim of her temperamental and social heredity is as thoroughly naturalistic as Dreiser ever allows himself to be. As the daughter of the headstrong Irishman Edward Butler, Aileen is herself blindly stubborn, self-willed, and inclined to be proud and showy. As the daughter of Edward Butler, an uneducated and newly wealthy businessman, Aileen is adversely affected by her environment:

At first Aileen...had not noticed, being so young; but now these idiosyncrasies and homely variations had begun to irritate. She was beginning to see what the difference between good taste and bad taste was. (F, p. 202)

Therefore:

...her nature was, in a way, a protest against the clumsy conditions by which she found herself surrounded. (F, p. 288)

Ironically, of course, Aileen's heredity makes it impossible for her to react successfully against the clumsy conditions of her parents. Her failures as a wife and as a society matron both relate directly to this handicap.

Unfortunately, Dreiser does not make the conflict as simple as it appears here. First he presents Aileen as confused by her own role, her own strengths and weaknesses. Secondly, Dreiser himself is confused about the character
of Aileen. He constantly beclouds the issue by his conception of Aileen herself. We have already indicated that Aileen stands in direct contrast to Lillian Semple Cowperwood. The initial scenes which introduce us to Aileen are juxtaposed with scenes which illustrate the fading charms of the "passive" first wife. Obviously, then, Aileen must be portrayed as an active young beauty. This involves Dreiser in some imagistic descriptions which place him very far afield from his newly adopted naturalistic habitat:

Cowperwood went out, and Butler accompanied him to the door. As he did so a young girl bounded in from the street, red-cheeked, blue-eyed wearing a scarlet cape with the peaked hood thrown over her red-gold hair....She gave her father, and incidentally Cowperwood, a gleaming, radiant, inclusive smile. Her teeth were bright and small, and her lips bud red. (F, p. 135)

Here in Dreiser's first description of Aileen we find all the elements of a romantic, fairy-tale heroine. The actual wording calls to mind a particular fairy-tale character, Little Red Riding-Hood, as Aileen "bounds" into the room with a red-hooded cape. Stereotyped romantic images dominate: "red-gold hair" and "lips bud red." Further we see the beginning of a major romantic image with which Dreiser frequently embues Aileen: light. Not only is her hair "red-gold," but her smile is "gleaming and radiant," her teeth "bright." Within ten pages Dreiser uses the image even
more openly:

She was like a bright luminary,
radiating health and enthusiasm --
a reminder of youth in general.  
(F, p. 149)

Here the image has become almost Wordsworthian in its quality.

Cowperwood's first reflections about Aileen retain this idea, also. He recalls her as:

...the gay spirit of youth...
what a bright, healthy, bounding, girl!  
(F, p. 136)

On the other hand, Dreiser describes Aileen in typically naturalistic terms:

She was not reprehensible in any way -- just a full-blooded animal glowing with a love of life.  
(T, p. 108)

She kissed his hair and eyes and cheeks and ears....She loved him desperately, agonizingly, with a strong effusion of vital, animal temperament.  
(F, p. 730)

Usually the animalistic image appears only when Dreiser is most self-consciously attempting what we might call a "naturalistic incident," such as Aileen's attack on Rita Sohlberg.

Aileen stayed to see her go first, then followed upstairs swiftly, surely, entered after Rita, and closed the door. With a courage and rage born of a purely animal despair, she turned and locked it; then she wheeled swiftly, her eyes lit with a
savage fire, her cheeks pale,
but later aflame, her hands,
her fingers, working in a
strange unconscious way.

(T, p. 147)

...Aileen descended upon her in
a whirlwind, animal fashion,
striking, scratching, choking...

(T, p. 147)

In this incident everyone becomes an animal: Rita, her husband, Cowperwood. In the context of the entire trilogy, however, Aileen does not become an animal in a consistently physical, Zola-esque sense. Frequently the animal images connected with her are instead domestic, rather than wild or primitive:

Her eyes gleamed almost pleadingly for all her hauteur like a spirited collie's... (F, p. 218)

In the warm glow of the guttered gas jets she looked particularly brilliant here, pampered, idle, jaunty -- the well-kept, stall-fed pet of the world. (T, p. 68)

Physical descriptions of Aileen tend, as with most Dreiser women, to be non-physical. Instead, Dreiser concentrates on depicting a character in terms of clothes. This seems to be true especially when he portrays the wealthy -- as Sondra Finchley and Aileen. We have such passages as this:

As he looked at her quickly now -- her very shapely young body robust and powerful, clothed in a full
skirt of large, bright, black and white check below a smooth fitting pelisse of green velvet, her little feet smoothly encased in jaunty balmoral boots of patent leather, her hands pulled tight in bright lemon-colored gloves and tucked into a tiny ermine muff just large enough to hold them — he had the sense of seeing the best that Nature can do when she attempts to produce physical perfection. Her throat was encircled with a stiff linen collar, her pocket decorated with a small gold watch and her red-gold hair surmounted by a "jockey hat" with a rolling brim and a long metallic-green rooster feather. This girl was alive, he thought, fiery. (F, p. 141)

Dreiser identifies the clothed person with the physical reality of the person. This proves particularly confusing when the identification is a complete as it is in the passage above. What "Nature" can do is actually what money can do. Dreiser confuses (or at least blends) the two forces completely. Here, as with Sondra Finchley, his point of view is obviously more that of the materialist than the naturalist.

When Dreiser does attempt to describe Aileen in a purely physical manner, his descriptions again tend toward the romantic:

She had such lovely smooth arms, a full, luxuriously tapering throat and neck; her golden-red hair floated like an aureole about her head and her large eyes sparkled. The wondrous vigor of a full
womanhood was hers -- errant, ill-balanced, romantic, but exquisite. (F, p. 510)

Here again Dreiser falls back on the fuzzy-edged light image rather than specific physical detail.

When Dreiser places himself at a distance in describing Aileen he becomes less romantic in image but only slightly more precise. He describes her portrait:

...a blue-and-white banded straw hat, wide-brimmed, airy, shading her lusty, animal eyes. The artist had caught her spirit quite accurately, the dash, the assumption, the bravado based on the courage of inexperience, or lack of true subtlety.... (T, p. 68)

Of particular importance in the above quotation is the phrase "lusty, animal eyes." Although the description is not entirely typical of Dreiser's handling of Aileen, it does accurately describe an important facet of her make-up. All powers of observation and intelligence which she possessed were directed toward an understanding of the sensual aspects of life. Dreiser builds upon this throughout the trilogy.

As a young girl, Aileen equated the church in its beauty and grandeur with the sensuous or with sex. Dreiser explains:

Let us say there was always lurking in her a sense of grandeur coupled with a love of color and a love of love.
From the first she was somewhat sex-conscious. She had no desire for accuracy -- those so organized rarely do -- no desire for precise information. Innate sensuousness rarely has. It basks in sunshine, bathes in color, swells in a sense of the impressive and the gorgeous and rests there. Activity is not necessary except in the case of aggressive, acquisitive natures when it manifests itself as a desire to seize. (F, p. 222)

The subjects she liked most at school were music and painting; she loathed grammar and spelling and liked, but "could not get," novels. (F, p. 224)

And so, pampered, and petted, and spoiled, she surrounded herself with the sensuous ornaments she liked best. Her room at her father's home is described as a profusion of perfumes and cosmetics, jewelry, and lavishness of display -- gorgeous curtains, hangings, table ornaments, and pictures. Her clothes incline to the showy:

Her clothes... seemed to suggest undue luxury. They hinted at the bangles, anklets, ear-rings, and breast-plate of the odalisque, and yet, of course, these were not there. She confessed to him years afterward that she would love to have stained her nails and painted the center of her palms of her hands with madder red. (F, p. 159)

Such a quotation suggests Aileen's extreme self-consciousness, a recognition of her own sensuality. She is capable of analyzing, at least to a degree, her own charms,
her own strengths and weaknesses. In this she is a slightly more intelligent Sondra Finchley. At the outset of her affair with Cowperwood, Dreiser tells us:

She seemed quite aware that she was at the zenith of her beauty. She was quite capable in a slightly crude way of telling what it meant to him and to her. (F, p. 415)

Cowperwood admired her strength -- her sensuality -- and her frank awareness of her femininity:

She went at her beloved in that direct, forceful way which only she could attempt with him, a sort of mannered impetuosity which he both enjoyed and admired...

He couldn't help admiring her tremendously, now more than ever, because literally, in spite of all his intellectual strength, he really could not rule her...

She would talk to him always, and particularly when she was excited, as if he were just a baby, her pet; and sometimes he felt as though she would really overcome him, mentally, make him subservient to her, she was so individual, so sure of her importance as a woman. (F, p. 650)

Here the sensual, the physical, is identified once again with Aileen's command over him:

...it was these psychological touches, this occasional
brilliant flash of raw, almost brutal understanding, that fascinated him. He knew how she was figuring -- on a physical basis purely. (F, p. 415)

Aileen (and here she does resemble Lillian) is never an intellectual in any sense of the term; Dreiser presents Cowperwood as a man possessed both of a great intelligence and a large portion of sensuality. Aileen's appeal to him is on one level only, and unfortunately, Aileen can only emphasize rather than subdue her sensuous nature and appearance:

It was only the intense vigor of her personality which seemed to emphasize, and in a way, over emphasize the significance of all her lines and features... art for her should have meant subduing her physical and spiritual significance. Life for her meant emphasizing them. (F, p. 217)

At this point Dreiser has the essential conflict of Aileen's life well in hand -- the dictates of art versus the forces of life.

Aileen's vanity is a direct result of her sensuousness:

The principal difficulty with Aileen under these circumstances, of course, was her intense vanity and self-consciousness. Never was there a vainer or more sex-troubled woman. (F, p. 277)

She understands only her sensuousness and cannot realize her
lack of intellect. Of course Cowperwood's rejection of her is beyond her comprehension.

Why should he not love her? She studied her beauty in the mirror from time to time and raged. Why was her body not sufficient for him.... See her hair! See her eyes! See her smooth resplendent arms! Why should Cowperwood not love her? Why indeed? (T, p. 246)

In his portrayal of Aileen's sensuous nature, her vanity, and her lack of rational understanding, Dreiser enforces the naturalistic conflict of Aileen against the forces of society and heredity. He is inconsistent, however, in his portrayal of her spirit. He is not content to view her spirit only as a part of her psychological make-up. Instead he hints at a portion of her temperament which is almost mystic:

In the content of Aileen's nature was a portion that was purely histrionic, a portion that was childish -- petted and spoiled -- a portion that was sheer unreason, and a portion that was splendid emotion -- deep, dark, involved. (T, p. 507)

This is something akin to the obsession with the idea of spirit or soul in the descriptions of Aileen which we have encountered previously. Dreiser cannot divorce this idea from his otherwise naturalistically-oriented portrait. As with Carrie and Jennie, Dreiser here tends to see something
in a person beyond the force of his heredity and environment. This transcendental spirit becomes part of his conception of Aileen.

Another recognizable flaw in Dreiser's treatment of Aileen at this stage, however, comes in her rejection of Skeet, with whom she has become intimate in hopes of forgetting Cowperwood.

As usual, she can not escape her notion of Cowperwood. The "driving standard within" proves too great an influence. Here, indeed, Dreiser tips the balance against a naturalistic portrayal. Earlier he has said:

In spite of herself the old grip of Cowperwood was over her -- the conviction that he was such a tremendous figure in the world -- and this made her strangely disturbed, nebulous, and meditative....She could not quite forget the early vows and promises exchanged between them, nor conquer the oft-fractured illusion that he might behave himself. (T, p. 308)

By the time the moment for Aileen to choose arrives, she is completely enmeshed by the character which is largely a figment of her own imagination. Cowperwood himself does not
control her -- the emotional and sentimental image she has of him, the "driving standard within," dictates her decision.

Even the final scenes of Aileen in the trilogy negate a naturalistic conception of her. After performing in a seemingly cold, inhuman (but actually highly emotional) manner during Cowperwood's final illness (which gives Dreiser an opportunity to present the raging animal Aileen once again), she is quite mollified at the presence of his corpse in their home. First she is portrayed as "a mental storm center, a cyclone roaring with clashing waves of rage." (S, p. 257), but we are told that after Cowperwood's death:

Being extremely sentimental about his last wishes and desires, she focussed her first attention upon the hospital. (S, p. 278)

This, then, is Dreiser's and Cowperwood's Aileen. She is alternately a high-spirited animal and a fairy-tale character. In both action and image she is clearly a divided portrait. In Aileen, as in his earlier characters, Dreiser could not hold himself to the naturalistic principles which he wished to exemplify. Much of the raw material is there, but the finished product is a curious mixture of conscious artistry and personal sentiment -- another Dreiserian woman.

The final important woman in Frank Cowperwood's life is perhaps the most clearcut of the three central women. The
progression of these women in Cowperwood's career is of the utmost importance. From Aileen, a character about whom Dreiser himself was somewhat confused, we move to Berenice, a more unified portrait. She is, however, the least "naturalistic" in terms of Dreiser's treatment of her of all his women characters. Dreiser here gives us an almost transcendental -- certainly a mystic -- sort of individual who exemplifies no laws of naturalism at all. Because she is consistently non-naturalistic, a brief sampling of Dreiser's descriptions of her should suffice.

Although Dreiser introduces Cowperwood and the reader to Berenice at an early (grammar school) age, she is a peculiarly mature and self-aware personality even then.

A strange maiden, decidedly! Even at this age, when she was, as one might suppose, a mere slip of a girl, she was deeply conscious of herself, her sex, her significance, her possible social import. Armed with a fair skin, a few freckles, an almost too high color at times, strange, deep, night-blue cat-like eyes, a long nose, a rather pleasant mouth, perfect teeth, and a really good chin, she moved always with a feline grace that was careless, superior, sinuous, and yet the acme of harmony and a rhythmic flow of lines. (T, p. 351)

The imagery of this initial description leaves room for a more naturalistic portrayal but this never materializes. Instead Berenice is connected with various other traditions --
esthetic, exotic, pastoral, mystic, mythic, and romantic.

She was so carefree, living in a high and solitary world, at times apparently enwrapped in thoughts serene, at other times sharing vividly in the current interests of the social world of which she was a part, and which she dignified as much as it dignified her. (T, p. 392)

...as charming a figure as one would wish to see -- in a strange flash this young American saw the isle of Greece, Cytherea, the lost Atlantis, Cyprus, and its Paphian shrine. (T, p. 457)

So often her love of nature appeared to be genuine, and even affecting -- a bird, a tree, a flower, a butterfly -- she was ecstatic....when he arrived she was out with the shepherd, who had assembled the sheep and lambs for her inspection. (S, p. 133)

But occasional glimpses of Berenice, poised attentively over a cross or religious inscription, were enough to restore him. There was about her at such moments a seemingly non-material as well as mentally contemplative grace which brushed aside the tang of that pagan modernity which at other times gave her the force and glare of a red flower in a gray rock. (S, p. 137)

Circe might have chosen this twisted silver snake. And Helen, this green bronze circlet of flowers, perhaps. I think Aphrodite might have liked this curled arm and hand encircling the stone. But I will not choose for beauty
alone. For myself I will take this tarnished silver band. It has strength as well as beauty.

(S, p. 6)

Now...here...in this place...perfumed with memories and moonlight...something was at her elbow and in her heart...something that whispered of quiet and peace...solitude...fulfillment...a desire to create something utterly beautiful, so that her life would be complete and significant.

(S, p. 138)

Obviously the only true consistency here derives from the fact that the character in question is portrayed in a consistently non-naturalistic manner. Even in scenes dealing with physical love when Dreiser could easily employ the trappings of naturalism, as he did with other characters, he chooses to use a more mystic tone:

Indeed, as he thought after the most shaking and reducing transports with her, hers was never a mere gross and savage lust, but a glorified and intense awareness and evaluation of her own beauty, enforcing its claims by the art of suggestion and thereby producing an effect that was different from any he had ever known. For it was not Berenice but himself who was most ravaged mentally and sensually, indeed all but submerged in her own exotic consciousness of what this relationship implied. (S, p. 59)

The most startling about-face of philosophy in Berenice comes after Cowperwood's death. The last chapters of The
Stoic show her in India, making the spiritual leap to Brahma and the realization of divine love. From this experience she is "called" to charity work in New York:

And was not the All in All God speaking and directing her thus to assist, aid, change, until this earthly phase of Himself would be altered or transmuted into the exchange of evil for good? (S, p. 301)

Not only is this portrait of Berenice interesting for its own sake, but because she represents Cowperwood's final and most satisfying liaison, one must evaluate Cowperwood and his wives in the light of what she represents. By ending his trilogy on such a non-naturalistic note, Dreiser helps to confuse any illusion of naturalism which he had previously achieved. The undercurrent of a sentimental mysticism becomes much clearer when one studies Berenice. Although *The Stoic* was written much later than the first two books of the trilogy and is the work of a dying and less dynamic Dreiser, the exotic descriptions of Berenice begin in *The Titan* which was published in 1914. If one wishes to defend Dreiser as a thorough-going naturalist, he has not only to contend with a character such as Sondra Finchley, or a sentimentalized portrait of Jennie Gerhardt, or the enigmatic romantic streak in Aileen Butler; he must explain Berenice Fleming and her climactic position in Dreiser's "Trilogy of Desire."
CONCLUSION

In the various women characters whom Dreiser has created we can find several distinct types. For his earliest characters we find that Dreiser was dependent on experience and intuition — and the characters may exemplify naturalistic traits in a somewhat haphazard fashion. Just as prominent, however, are sentiment and romanticism. A book such as An American Tragedy shows us a Dreiser who deliberately tried to create characters consistent with naturalistic tenets; to a degree he succeeded, but the characterization may not be complete or may seem forced. The "Trilogy of Desire" reinforces our discoveries of the first two stages by presenting a "naturalistic" character, a confused or "split" character, and finally a definitely non-naturalistic character.

On the basis of such a progression of women characters, then, we find difficulty in endorsing whole-heartedly the view that Dreiser was a naturalistic novelist. Certainly
naturalistic strains run strong in some portions of his work; as we have seen, several women are quite naturalistically conceived and objectively portrayed. Much of Dreiser's early experience probably shaped his ideas into a somewhat natural "naturalistic" orientation. But we can never discount the counter-trend; we must admit, with Dreiser himself, the presence of a more powerful inclination:

...I have since thought that for all my modest repute as a realist, I seem, to my self-analyzing eyes, somewhat more of a romanticist than a realist.  

Probably nowhere in Dreiser's work is the paradox of two philosophic and literary points of view more apparent than in the characterizations of the seven women we have just viewed.
FOOTNOTES

1 Stuart P. Sherman, "The Barbaric Naturalism of Theodore Dreiser," The Nation, CI (December 2, 1915), 649.


6 For this analysis of naturalism I am indebted to Lars Ahnebrink's The Beginnings of Naturalism in American Fiction (Uppsala, 1950), Chapter II.

7 Emile Zola, quoted in Ahnebrink, p. 24.


11 Ibid., p. 516.


18 Harrison Rhodes, "Mr. Dreiser's Sister Carrie," *The Bookman*, XXV (May, 1907), 298.

19 Mattheissen, p. 114.


21 Mattheissen, p. 113.


23 -----, "New Novels," *Athenaeum*, No. 3854 (September 7, 1901), 313.

A LIST OF WORKS CONSULTED

I. PRIMARY SOURCES


Other Novels:


Autobiographical Material:


II. SECONDARY SOURCES

Books:


Articles:


Cooper, Frederic T. "The Fetich of Form and Some Recent Novels," The Bookman, XXV (May, 1907).


