The Antithetic Pattern of Theodore Dreiser's Art

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In the Dreiser Collection at the University of Pennsylvania there is a vast bulk of material known as *Notes on Life*, which contains the philosophical notes that Dreiser collected from 1920 to his death. The material consists on the one hand of clippings, reading references, and memos, and on the other of an unfinished manuscript, which was intended to become Dreiser's final expression of his philosophy of life. Just a superficial glance at the table of contents of this manuscript will be enough to suggest that elements of thesis and antithesis form a basic characteristic of these notes. In eight of the chapter titles, Dreiser explicitly puts before us the dichotomies of Old and New, Scarcity and Plenty, Strength and Weakness, Courage and Fear, Mercy and Cruelty, Beauty and Ugliness, Order and Disorder, Good and Evil. The captions of many other chapters also carry the implication of an antithetic balance, like "The Necessity for Contrast" and nine chapters dealing with illusion and myth, which necessarily are to be compared with underlying reality. A close study of the manuscript, therefore, makes it clear that the antithetic pattern forms an undercurrent through all the chapters of *Notes on Life*. The thesis-antithesis structure constitutes such a prominent feature that it can hardly be overlooked.

Life to Dreiser is an equation in which, e.g., heat, order, strength, and love are put in the scales against cold, disorder, weakness, and hatred. The one is checked and limited by the other as well as being the cause of the other's existence. Without cold we would not know heat, without poverty there would be no wealth. There is a necessity for contrast emanating from the omnipotent Life Force, and this balance can never be influenced or done away with by man. All the components of the equations are mechanistic expressions of the fixed, inscrutable laws of the Creator, and man is neither inferior nor superior to any of the other constituents.

This dialectical pattern may be divided into a three-level structure. The opposing forces in nature, like order and disorder, or scarcity and plenty, are paralleled in society and within man, and on every level the warring elements merge into a synthesis. In this close relationship, society becomes a reflection of nature and is as such reduced to an ant-hill or a beehive. Even though men try to make their own laws, they are at bottom ruled by the natural laws, over which they have no power. Man, in his turn, is a reflection of both nature and the society he is living in, and as such he is no more than a highly evolved animal, an ant in the ant-hill, without a free will, indifferently guided by the fixed laws of the Life Force.

In nature, antagonistic forces like order and disorder, strength and weakness, attraction and repulsion, strike a rough balance. In society, representatives of antithetic powers form a similar equation. The good balance the evil, the strong the weak, the disorderly the orderly. But not only that. There is also an equation in society between man's moral codes and the laws of nature. Our self-imposed conventions and dogmas, which we often ascribe to the will of a benevolent God, have actually nothing to do with any Divine mandate or impulse at all. They are only established by the disinterested Life Force to constitute a balancing power to our instincts and desires. And this leads us to the third level: man. He is not allowed to be guided solely by his instincts, nor solely by his reason. Good and evil, order and disorder, courage and fear constantly battle for supremacy in his mind.

However, even though these forces seem to oppose each other, they ultimately create a synthesis. Dreiser says that antithetic elements not only form an equilibrium, but they are nuances of the same thing. The Life Force is neither benevolent nor malignant; it is non-moral. And if we look at life with the same disinterested eyes, we will find that the opposition between order and disorder, between good and evil disappears. Disorder becomes only a more complex form of order. There is no longer a sharp dividing line between good and evil.

But what purpose may the Life Force have with this pattern of various equations? Why couldn't the world be orderly? Why couldn't all people be good, strong, and courageous? Why couldn't we all live in plenty? Well, if we took away all the balancing elements, the result would be a Nirvana-like existence, an non-life. There is in life a need for contrast, and if we take away inharmony, we would not know harmony. If unhappiness would be obliterated, happiness would also cease to exist. So, the equations are there to make life as exciting, dramatic, and beautiful as it is. And, fortunately enough for mankind, there is no way of changing this antithetic pattern, even though many strenuously try to do so.

We have seen now that there is inherent in life a desire for equation and a form of stability, but there is also an equally strong necessity for change. The Life Force arranges reality so that no values remain the same. All old things die and are replaced by the new. This is true of religion, art, and philosophy as well as animals, races, and individuals. The balance that is struck is always renewing itself. There may be a period of time when one of the dichotomies has the upper hand, for instance a period of order, but this period is necessarily followed by its opposite. Dreiser likens this to the movement of a seesaw in which one extreme is replaced by another. Both the Law of Equation and the Law of Change exist for the same purpose: to give life a maximum amount of variety and drama.

But Dreiser not only regards existence as a pattern of contrasts in constant change. He also expresses a desire that life should contain as many antithetic pairs as possible. The more variety there is, the greater the number of opposites. It is consequently not only a matter of variation in quality, of probing the problems as deeply as possible, but also a matter of quantity, of presenting the whole range of different elements.

From his early youth, Dreiser was very inquisitive, and from around 1920 this inquisitiveness grew into an obsession. He was captivated by anything or anyone who showed the slightest promise of leading him closer to the ultimate questions and their solution. He beleaguered such divergent, potential holders of the truth as chemists, religionists, physicists, psyhoanalysts, and mystics. He read extensively in Spencer, Huxley, Tyndall, and Haeckel. He studied Christian Science, Quakerism, and Oriental mysticism as well as biology, electro-chemistry, neurology, and geology. He visited scientists in their laboratories and observatories to ask them questions not only of how the world was structured, but also of why it was structured the way it was. And all this to comprehend the variety of existence, to make his own picture of life as complete as possible. Dreiser felt that no side of the drama we are experiencing should be left alone; every phase and facet of every aspect of existence should be scrutinized, analyzed, and delineated.

Dreiser's quest for completeness, if not perfection, immediately strikes the reader of *Notes on Life*. Here he gives vent to all his thoughts on the laws of the Universe; on the limiting powers of form, time, chance, weight, and measure; on the human mind and man's emotions. He deals with the antithetic expressions of the universal laws; the aesthetic problems of art and beauty; man's fear of death and the possibility of a life to come. Nothing is consciously left untouched.

This quest for completeness also underscores Dreiser's view of life as a pattern of antitheses. The greater the variety, the greater the possibility for contrast. The more shades of good and evil we detect, the greater the divergence between the extremes. And the greater the divergence, the more drama and beauty. Life as a spectacle becomes worth while in proportion to the variety it holds.

But as equation is balanced against change, so is variety balanced against unity. What seems to be heterogeneous, motley, and diversified is actually kept in the unalterable fetters of a homogeneous unity. We are all just links in a chain, mechanistic expressions of a Supreme Force. All elements have the same origin, and they are all dependent upon each other. The Law of Equation depends upon change, progress upon limitation, and this, together with the assumption that there are fixed laws, creates a sense of unity and uniformaty, which comprises the variety so essential to life.

I am deeply convinced that this philosophy of antithesis can be traced back, not only to 1920 and *Hey, Rub-A-Dub-Dub!*, where most scholars seem to think that these ideas started, but as far back as Dreiser's pre-fiction period in the nineties. Quite naturally one cannot expect to find it as elaborate then as it was to become in *Notes on Life*, but it is nevertheless discernible in embryonic form.

Hey, Rub-A-Dub-Dub! is *Notes on Life* diminished and simplified.

Some of the essays published in 1920 have been included in the *Notes* with very few alterations, e.g., "Change," "The Essential Tragedy of Life," and "Equation Inevitable." Others were rewritten while the basic structure was kept, as in "Secrecy — Its Value" and "Personality." Many of these essays deal with the pattern of contraries, the changing equation, the synthesis of life, variety in unity. One can consequently assume that from 1918, when the first of the *Hey, Rub-A-Dub-Dub!* essays was published, until Dreiser's death in 1945 there was little basic change in this aspect of his philosophy. It is true that the superstructure changes, especially in that Dreiser became more concerned with social amelioration, but the foundation remains the same.

Going further back in time, one finds that examples of the antithetic pattern become increasingly sparse, but there are enough of them to show that the Law of Contrast was a lodestar to Dreiser at a very early stage. His nostalgic description of his return to Indiana, *A Hoosier Holiday*, published in 1916, is interlarded with numerous philosophical thoughts of an antithetic character, saying that existence is an equilibrium "with a healthy swinging to and fro between the rich and the poor,"[1] and that there is a necessity for contrast to make life interesting.

In the concluding words of *The Titan* of 1914, Dreiser sums up the book in the following words:

> In the meantime there have sprung up social words and phrases expressing a need of balance — of equation. These are right, justice, truth, morality, an honest mind, a pure heart — all words meaning: A balance must be struck. The strong must not be too strong; the weak not too weak. But without variation how could the balance be maintained. Nirvana! Nirvana! The ultimate, still, equation.[2]

This is in essence no different from what Dreiser wrote twenty years later.

Another earlier example, dating from 1913, is Dreiser's *A Traveler at Forty*, a work similar to *A Hoosier Holiday*, since it too is a travelogue interspersed with philosophical comments. In these comments the antithetic pattern is still a predominant feature. The following passage is a good example:

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[1] Theodore Dreiser, *A Hoosier Holiday,* New York, 1916, p. 379.

[2] Dreiser, *The Titan,* Signet Classic, 1964, p. 500.

> I cannot view life or human nature save as an expression of contraries — in fact I think that is what life is. I know there can be no sense of heat without cold; no fullness without emptiness; no force without resistance; no anything, in short, without its contrary. Consequently, I cannot see how there can be great men without little ones; wealth without poverty; social movement without willing social assistance. No high without a low is my idea . . .[3]

In the Dreiser collection at the University of Pennsylvania there are two unpublished manuscripts from the years immediately after the turn of the century which are of interest here. One of them, "The Force of a Great Religion," can, by means of its Brooklyn address, be dated to 1903, and the other, "The Ultimate Justice of Life," seems by evidence of handwriting to belong to the same period. The more interesting of them is the latter, "The Ultimate Justice of Life," since it contains all the main characteristics of Dreiser's antithetic ideas in *Notes of Life.* Here he says that life is built upon contentiousness, which can be noticed both in nature and society. Out of this contentiousness come the variety and beauty of life. Poverty adds to the concept of wealth, and vice versa, and from an artistic point of view poverty is a charming spectacle which enhances the drama of existence. He also says that life is like the see-saw where fortunes go up and down, where a period of poverty is succeeded by one of wealth. Nature strives to strike a balance, an equation.

But we can go even further back in time. In the "Prophet" editorials of *Ev'ry Month* in 1896—97 similar ideas crop up at regular intervals. Here Dreiser maintains that we must have misery, so we can have wealth, and that this balance can never be done away with. He uses the image of a tree to illustrate this:

> . . . the vine must have roots else how are its leaves to grow high into the world of sunlight and air. Some must enact the role of the leaves, others the role of roots, and as no one has the making of his own brain in embryo, he must take the result as it comes.[4]

In these editorials, Dreiser also touches upon the dichotomies of strength and weakness, justice and injustice, good and evil.

I have shown that the pattern of contraries dates back this far to be able to say with certainty that this way of thinking influenced Dreiser's works of art as well. The concept that life is an equation of opposite elements is developed well enough before the turn of the century to be of basic impact on Dreiser's novels, short stories, poetry, and dramatic works from *Sister Carrie* to *The Stoic.* But before I try my hand at an analysis of Dreiser's literary motives, I would like to dwell for a while on the origin of these ideas and how they may have influenced his technique.

Nothing had such momentous impact on Dreiser's mind, philosophically and artistically, as the reading of Herbert Spencer and Honoré de Balzac. Over and over again, in letters, interviews, and autobiographies, he acknowledged his indebtedness to these two men. He was "torn up root and branch" by the chapter on the Unknowable in Spencer's *First Principles*, and Balzac's novels were a "knockout" and a "literary revolution" to him.

The most interesting of Spencer's thoughts in this context is that he saw existence as an equilibrium between rival forces, and, as a consequence of this, that all knowledge and morals are relative and as such non-existent. In Dreiser's profusely annotated copy of Spencer's *First Principles*, he has marked and underlined passages which probably fitted into his own pattern of thought. Many of these passages deal with matters such as life being founded upon forces of attraction and repulsion, and that the Unknowable constitutes a balancing element to the Knowable. In the margin, Dreiser has frequently scribbled abbreviations of the captions he used in Notes of Life, like "N for C" meaning "Necessity for Contrast," and this either means that these classifications were already thought up when he first read *First Principles* in 1894, or, and this is certainly more likely, that he reread the book when he started to compose *Notes of Life* in the thirties. However this may be, Dreiser's indebtedness to Spencer is so obvious that further comment is unnecessary.

If Spencer's antithetic ideas had great impact on Dreiser's philosophy, Balzac had an equally great influence on the literary execution of these ideas. Balzac's contribution to Dreiser's artistic use of contrast was twofold. First, Dreiser was charmed by the universality Balzac was trying to accomplish in *La Comédie Humaine*:

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[3] Dreiser, *A Traveler at Forty,* New York, 1913, p. 34.
[4] *Ev'ry Month,* October, 1896.

> I saw for the first time how a book should be written. I saw how, if I ever wrote one, I should write it. I did not expect to write like Balzac, but to use his method of giving a complete picture of life from beginning to end.[5]

And in his books, Dreiser certainly tries to give us a complete picture of existence, to show, as he terms it, "not only the concentrated filth at the bottom but the wonder and mystery of the ideals at the top."[6] The Balzacian variety is apparent in each separate book, since each book comprehends people of different characteristics and temperament, people of different milieu and age, people of different social status, like Carrie, Drouet, and Hurstwood in *Sister Carrie,* Clyde, Roberta, Sondra, and Clyde's uncle in *An American Tragedy.* By embracing as much as possible within the covers of his books, Dreiser simultaneously creates unavoidable opportunities for contention and contrast. By linking lower-class country girls to prosperous men like Senator Brander, Hurstwood, and Lester Kane, by contrasting Clyde to his uncle's family and Sondra Finchley, Dreiser tries to achieve a tension of dramatic variety.

If we look at Dreiser's works as a whole, we are even more struck by the completeness of his picture of life. It covers the whole range from the poor to the rich, from the weak to the strong, from the extremely conventional to their opposites, from old people to young, from the country doctor to the city bum, from the tenement worker to the Nietzschean superman. We are introduced into life situations of very different character, the artist's world in *The "Genius"*, the business world in *A Trilogy of Desire* and *The Bulwark,* the world of newspaper again in *The "Genius,"* the world of religion in *The Bulwark,* and the world of the theater in *Sister Carrie.* Dreiser takes us to the city as well as the country, to the railroad workshop, the Cowperwood palace and art gallery, the Bowery, Fitzgerald and Moy's restaurant, Roberta Alden's dilapidated home, and showy holiday resorts.

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[5] Interview in the Cleveland, Ohio *Leader,* November 12, 1911.

[6] The New York *Evening Sun,* September 28, 1912.

Beside this quest for totality and variety, so necessary for Dreiser's philosophy of antithesis, Balzac also contributed to Dreiser's art by making him more aware of the contrasting elements in life and how these were to be carried over into a literary form. One of the prominent features of Balzac's technique is his use of contrast, a fact that has been noted by many scholars. And Dreiser also uses this device frequently. To take one example: In *Sister Carrie* most of the chapters are divided into halves, the first part often in direct opposition to the second. This structure is even made explicit in some ten chapter titles, in which the contrasting concepts are divided by a colon. Examples of this are "What Poverty Threatened: Of Granite and Brass," "The Spendings of Fancy: Facts Answer with Sneers," "The Irk of the Old Ties: The Magic of Youth." The colon here acts the role of the axis of a seesaw, where for example Carrie's poverty, expressed in "What Poverty Threatened," is balanced against the display of wealth around her, expressed in "Of Granite and Brass."

But I think that, in addition to Spencer and Balzac, there is a third main source for Dreiser's antithetic outlook on life, and that is the decade itself during which he read these two men — the nineties. These were the molding years of his life, and he was certainly greatly influenced by the turbulent forces he saw around in society. During the nineties he encountered clashes between opposed powers, which began to make him think about the structure of existence. In the United States at that time, city interests were at open war with a rural way of life. The chasm between the rich and the poor widened and attracted greater attention. Individualism was opposed by socialism, traditional optimism by deterministic pessimism. Religion was challanged by science. Realistic writers and artists had a battle going against their colleagues of the genteel tradition. And Dreiser, working as a newspaperman, was aware of the disruptions that grew out of these antagonistic elements in society. To try to evaluate the exact impact of each of these sources, Spencer, Balzac, and the atmosphere of contention and contrast in the nineties, is both unnecessary and impossible. It is enough to say that they together constituted the foundation on which Dreiser built his philosophy of antithesis, the starting-point for what would eventually be expressed in *Notes of Life.*

We have seen so far that the dialectical pattern is not only predominant in *Notes of Life*, but also that it constitutes an essential part of Dreiser's thought for the greater part of his life, from the nineties to his death. We have also established some of the basic sources for this aspect of his philosophy of life. But how do these ideas express themselves in his novels? The simplest way to find out is probably to extricate one antithetic pair after another and study it in relationship to the three-level structure of nature, society, and man.

There are five dichotomies which I consider predominant enough to cover the greater part of Dreiser's artistic message: Illusion and Reality, Order and Disorder, Good and Evil, Scarcity and Plenty, Strength and Weakness, but since the pattern is similar in each of these pairs, it will suffice to deal with the two first.

On the first of the three levels, that of nature, or the universal level, the relationship between illusion and reality is very much a matter of man being misinformed about the true conditions of nature and his own position in the universe. The essential tragedy of life is that man imagines himself what he is not. He believes that he has a free will; that the universe is created for his benefit; that he is strong and forceful. There is the apparent reality of individual creative power and thought, but if man would examine this so-called reality more deeply, he would find that he is nothing but a mechanism, conditioned by inscrutable laws. We merely react to exterior impulses or stimuli, like tradition, education, social environment, the conditions of the present moment. Leaves are driven by gusts of wind in different directions, and man is not much more than a leaf. He does not decide his own course, but is the victim of his own limitations in strength, intelligence, swiftness, etc.

But although Dreiser regards existence as an illusion and uses this word in a pejorative sense, he is at the same time well aware of its equational value. By making man as limited as he is, the Life Force is also responsible for the existence of illusion as a balancing power. Man needs it to be able to endure cold reality. Without illusion, what would drive us forward? what would make our world worth while?

On the second level, Dreiser's society is an urban society, and the city comes to be an embodiment of the war that takes place between illusion and reality. The city in Dreiser's novels is much more than just a setting for human drama, it is a participating element, a siren that sings charming songs leading to disaster. Dreiser experienced time and time again the seductive forces of the city, and how his dreams were crushed by its underlying cruelty and indifference. And, as we would expect, these experiences are also found in the acts and moods of most of his protagonists.

In *Sister Carrie*, Carrie boards the train for Chicago "full of the illusions of ignorance and youth," and the city is from the first pages depicted as a living force of illusion. She meets Drouet on the train and is thoroughly impressed by the ease and comparative luxury of this ambassador of the city. Her mood becomes increasingly more expectant the closer she comes to Chicago. But this spell is broken, as it will be so many times before the book ends, when she meets her sister on the platform. From her airy position on the seesaw she hastily lowered down onto the ground:

> Carrie realized the change of affectional atmosphere at once. Amid all the maze, uproar, and novelty she felt cold reality taking her by the hand. No world of light and merriment. No round of amusement. Her sister carried with her most of the grimness of shift and toil.[7]

From this point on, illusion and reality are substantial powers acting upon Carrie's sensitive mind. The city is her playmate on the seesaw, pushing her up to the highest point of expectations only to let her down again on the hard ground of reality. She dreams of an attractive job, but is disillusioned time after time. She meets Drouet again, and he gives her new reasons to dream. "She was again the victim of the city's hypnotic influence."[8] However, her relationship to the drummer soon becomes monotonous, and she starts dreaming of the city's second ambassador, Hurstwood. The world he represents is fascinating for a while, but again the grimness of the city strikes a balance, and they end up destitute and dismayed. But up she goes on the seesaw, again yearning for another stratum of urban society, the theater, just to become disillusioned by its emptiness and superficiality.

The city plays the same dualistic role to Eugene Witla in *The*

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[7] Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*, Signet Classic, 1961, p. 15.
[8] *Ibid.*, p. 79.

”*Genius*”. He falls in love with this ”world of hope and opportunity,” which makes ”the beginner dream dreams,” but, again like Carrie, he realizes that ”underneath, of course, was struggle.”[9] His yearnings are turned into disappointments only to be followed by new expectations. Eugene even makes this ever-changing equation the theme of his art. He depicts the charm of the city as well as its destructive spirit, the beauty as well as the ugliness. He sees the drama and the tension between the dreams and hopes of the individual, and the indifference of the city in fulfilling them.

There are many other aspects of illusion and reality in society, but I will just mention one more, which was of great concern to Dreiser. In Dreiser's world, deception is another vital expression of the battle between illusion and reality, and the largest organized deception of mankind is religion, particularly the Christian dogmas. Dreiser means that religionists are responsible for the illusion that we are living in a good world, when it actually is based upon murder, war, and the survival of the fittest. Religious doctrines incapacitate men from dealing with reality. They are a ”salve” or a ”bandage that man has invented to protect a soul made bloody by circumstance; an envelope to pocket him from the unescapable and unstable illimitable.”[10]

Three characters in Dreiser's fiction stand out as representatives of the ”bandage” called religion: William Gerhardt, Asa Griffiths, and Solon Barnes. And each is balanced against his children, who in their revolt become forces of reality. William Gerhardt's tragedy is that his fanatical faith renders him incapable of dealing with the misfortunes of his children. His religious world view is so deeply rooted in him that he, in his selfish concern about his reputation, becomes blind to the natural laws and the instincts of man. His son Bass steals coal for the benefit of the family, and is locked up in jail; Jennie gives herself to Senator Brander as an act of gratitude because he has supplied the bail. But Gerhardt's reaction is just one of confusion and rage with little regard for their motives. Dreiser creates a dramatic tension between Gerhardt's narrow-minded ideals and the instincts that guide his children. It is around these antagonistic forces that much of the story evolves.

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[9] Dreiser, *The ”Genius”,* Signet Classic, 1967, p. 39.
[10] *Ibid.,* p. 714.

This antithesis is repeated with some variation in the relationship between Asa Griffiths and his children Clyde and Esta and between Solon Barnes and his children. The fathers have been chosen by the Life Force to be expressions of man's illusions, whereas their sons and daughters are made to pursue courses that are in opposition to the creed of their fathers. They all become balancing elements in the social pattern, one opposing the other but existing in mutual dependence.

Religion makes use of man's innate desire for what is out of reach, the unattainable, and it voices, as Dreiser says, ”the plaint that all is not well here and that only elsewhere can there be satisfaction or compensation . . . for the ills endured here.”[11] And now we have come down to the third level, the battle within man. There is in the human soul an unquenchable dream that life is always better around the corner, a dream which drives man forward, but which also makes him misinformed about life. Whenever man reaches one of his goals, he is disillusioned, and instinctively he chooses a new goal further ahead. We have in our minds two forces in constant fight over the sovereignty: dreaminess, idealization, and illusion on the one hand; practicality, clear-sightedness, and reality on the other. There is an ever-changing seesaw movement going on within us, where our dreams are crushed only to be replaced by new dreams. We are never satisfied; we never realize how futile our quest is. The goals we are striving for are different depending upon our needs — fame, strength, money, beauty, youth — but our most fundamental yearning is for togetherness, a sense of belonging.

All his life Dreiser suffered from loneliness. He drifted from one woman to another, from one friend to another, and he complained: ”I am the loneliest man in the world.” It is consequently not surprising that the majority of Dreiser's protagonists also suffer from a continuous loneliness, now and then interrupted by short intervals of the illusive feeling of togetherness. They are all harassed by a tortured feeling of dissociation, and all are dreaming pathetically that one day this suffering will be replaced by requited love and true friendship.

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[11] ”What I Belive”, *Forum,* LXXXII, November 1929, pp. 18—19.

From the very first, Carrie is depicted as "a lone figure in a tossing, thoughtless sea," and the picture that develops out of this is of one who strikes up one relationship after another only to be disillusioned and thrown back into her loneliness. She ecapes to Drouet, not because she loves him, but because he is a way out of her loneliness in her sister's flat. But her affair with Drouet proves a sham; he cannot alleviate her growing sense of displacement, and she becomes an easy prey for Hurstwood's assurances that they need each other. But not even with Hurstwood does Carrie overcome her sense of dislocation, and they both become lonelier than ever. Hurstwood withdraws to his rocking chair, seeking consolation in his newspapers. Carrie takes the opposite direction and tries to find new friendship. She finds a trecherous sense of belonging in the sparkling world of theater, but this feeling is soon succeeded by one of superficiality and insincerity. The seesaw goes up and down; dreams of togetherness are always succeeded by the reality of loneliness. But man will always continue to dream, and the concluding remarks in *Sister Carrie* depict Carrie always waiting for the unattainable: "In your rocking chair, by your window dreaming, shall you long, alone. In your rocking chair, by your window, shall you dream such happiness as you may never feel."[12]

Even the most apparently unselfish people suffer under this burden. Jennie Gerhardt, Dreiser's most altruistic protagonist, is sorely disillusioned in her quest for togetherness. She meets Brander and is confident about a future together with him, when reality arranges that Brander dies, and Jennie, being pregnant, is turned out into the lonely night. She meets Lester, and the illusion of love gets its fangs into her again, but after years of suspense he is forced to leave her. After many years of adversity she pierces her father's shield of religious dogma and establishes a form of communication between them, but it is too late. A few days later old Gerhardt is dead, and Jennie is again left alone. But she has still got her daughter Vesta as a consolation, and their relationship grows more and more intimate. But not even this affection is granted her by fate. Vesta dies of typhoid fever. All Jennie's unselfish love for the people closest to her has not been enough. Cruel reality pounds home that man is ultimately alone. She adopts two children to relieve the ache, but the final note of the book, like that of *Sister Carrie*, is one of desolation:

> Before her was stretching a vista of lonely years down which she was steadily gazing. Now what? She was not so old yet. There were those two orphan children to raise. They would marry and leave after a while, and then what? Days and days in endless reiteration, and then —?[13]

No one escapes this battle. Clyde Griffiths in *An American Tragedy*, Eugene Witla in *The "Genius,"* even Frank Cowperwood in *A Trilogy of Desire* are subject to the warring forces of the desire to belong somewhere and the sense of dislocation.

Man is chained to reality, out of which grows his need for illusion. This need for dreams and ideals is so strong that it becomes a reality without which man would perish. Because of our limited understanding of the true conditions of existence, our reality, i.e. what we see around us, becomes an illusion, and our illusions, i.e. our dreams and ideals, become a reality; the antagonistic dichotomies fuse into a synthesis. It is again a question of the need for variety within unity. Our soaring dreams of something better are replaced the next moment by disillusionment, so that life may remain as shifting and dramatic as it is. But behind it all is unity. There is no sharp dividing line between the two forces: they are just shades of one aspect of the Life Force.

The alluring charm of the city is not at war with its destructiveness, even though it may seem so. They are just necessary elements of the total concept of urban society. Similarly, society needs the deception of a Cowperwood and the religion of a Solon Barnes to be as fascinating as it is. Ultimately, religion is a necessary reality, because it gives many people a foundation for life and the nonbelievers a cause for dramatic dissent. Man's mind is a kaleidoscope, in which hopes and disappointments, dreams and disillusionments, illusions and realities form an interconnected pattern, which changes whenever our enviroment rotates the tube. Whenever our real conditions change, so do our ideals and expectations, but the multicolored, symmetrical unity always remains. One facet is dependent upon the others, and all are of equal importance.

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[12] *Sister Carrie,* p. 465.

[13] Dreiser, *Jennie Gerhardt,* World Publishing Co., Cleveland and New York, 1946 p. 431.

Discussing Order and Disorder, I will skip the universal level and go directly to the social level. Dreiser shows an open contempt for anything that smacks of conventional conduct, of petty rules which he believes confine man to a lethargic existence and which make him blind to the vitality and charm of life. As a consequence of this contempt for convention, he is fascinated by those who follow their own desires and dare break the rules of society. Nearly all of Dreiser's protagonists are accidental or wilful rebels, and as such they are instruments in the hands of a disorderly spirit. Most of them revolt against the established norm by living in unlawful sexual relationships. Some of them break the rule of honesty by stealing and scheming, like Hurstwood, Etta and Stewart Barnes, and Cowperwood. Some of them debase the sacredness of life by killing either themselves or others, like Hurstwood, Clyde, and Stewart Barnes. One of them makes an assault upon the aesthetic values of his time — Eugene Witla. What they all have in common is a sense of vitality and progress, although most of them are defeated in the end.

But Dreiser's society does not consist only of disorderly people. The Creative Force sees to it that there is a constant balance between people preserving the order and people breaking it. Each rebellious protagonist is balanced against one or more staid conformists on the other side of the scale. Carrie is balanced against the Hansons, Hurstwood against his wife. In *The "Genius"*, Angela is the conventional element at war with Eugene's disorderly way of life. In *The Bulwark*, Orville and Dorothea adhere to the rules of society, whereas Etta and Stewart break them.

In *Jennie Gerhardt*, the opposing forces of convention and instinct are illustrated mainly by two pairs of people. William Gerhardt and Robert Kane are placed in the scale of order, counterbalancing Jennie and Lester. When Jennie fails to live up to her father's strictly moralistic norm, he is not so much concerned about her future happiness or unhappiness as he is about the gossip of his neighbors and his own reputation. He becomes the mouthpiece of moralistic society, always telling Jennie how wrong she is in her involuntary revolt, always giving her a bad conscience, driving her into deception and dishonesty. Jennie, on the other hand, is a representative of the ineluctable spirit of disorder in society, which acts through people arbitrarily chosen to maintain the balance and simultaneously to give life a sense of change and progress. Jennie is forced by circumstance and her own instincts to become the mistress of both Brander and Lester Kane, but her father and the society he represents refuse to see her innocence, to see that she is just a medium for the underlying creative process.

Robert and Lester Kane constitute a parallel to William Gerhardt and his daughter. Lester is a free-floating personality, forming his own world, and he is much more conscious in his revolt than Jennie. Under constant pressure from his family and his friends to marry and settle down, he refuses to become pigeonholed and goes into even deeper revolt by establishing his illicit relationship with Jennie.

Robert is the diametrical opposite to his brother. He is "irreproachable in both his public and his private life,"[14] and he never oversteps the strict boundaries of legal righteousness. Without Robert, the moral paragon, as a balancing elements of order, we would not fully understand the immensity of Lester's disorderly conduct, and without Lester's instinctive behavior, we would not grasp the unnaturalness of Robert's conventionality. They balance as well as define each other. Robert believes that he is the prime force in making Lester return to a righteous living by inciting their father to write a will that is unfavorable to Lester if he remains with Jennie. But Robert is just the implement in the hands of a greater force. Lester has too long been a representative of disorder, and now the Creative Force finds it appropriate to let order reign for a while. It is not a matter of morality's victory over immorality, but only another mechanistic change in the antithetic pattern of society.

This battle between order and disorder does not only take place between arbitrarily chosen representatives in our society. It is also a characteristic feature within the mind of man. Although most of Dreiser's protagonists are rebels against conventional morals, they show a stimultaneously strong attraction to stability and order. They are subject to a duality of the soul, where one half contends with the other, and Dreiser consequently creates an inner tension that satisfies his demand for dramatic variety.

Carrie instinctively flies in he face of society, but at heart her ambitions are to become part of the same society, a goal which she finally reaches in the theater, even though the goal itself proves an illusion. She wants to marry, to have a nice home, to get a position where she will be accepted by society. She is not so different from Mrs. Hurstwood in that sense, although fate has another course lined up for her.

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[14] *Jennie Gerhardt,* p. 176.

Jennie is subject to the same duality. She comes to suffer because of the clash between her disorderly instincts of compassion and consideration and her wish to follow the rules and become a good girl. She wants to do all the things required by society, but the rules are too narrow for her altruistic heart. She breaks the order, but only to establish another order in her revolt. As Richard Lehan has pointed out, her years together with Lester are ironically the most conventional in her life, for here she finds the home and the family that she most desires.

This battle for supremacy goes on in all Dreiser's central characters. Even in such a gigantic rebel as Cowperwood there is a core of moralism and order. Eugene Witla's rebellious artist's soul is opposed by his keen desire to become part of the establishment. Clyde Griffiths rebels against the order of his father only to adopt another order, that reigning in the upper strata of Lycurgus.

On whatever level order and disorder are at war, the outcome is always a synthesis of the two. Nature, society, and man are indissoluble compounds of both forces, and if we had the power to eradicate one of them, the other would necessarily also cease to exist. There is no real opposition between them, no visible boundary. These elements are nothing but expressions of the same unifying power, which in the end is orderly. From a detached point of view, disorder is only a more complex form of order.

And in this process of the inevitable equation no ethical values are involved. Order, or good, is not "better" than disorder, or evil; they are just expressions of a disinterested creative force. Dreiser does not condemn his rebellious characters for their sinful conduct; nor in the end does he condemn the conformists. They all have their parts to play, regardless of man-made morals, and no role is more commendable than the other. Everyone is a puppet in the hands of a non-moral Creator, who intends, it seems, to create dramatic tension in every phase of existence.