

# Theodore Dreiser's Travel in Europe: His Overcoming Modernism and Snobbism in *A Traveler at Forty*

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## Abstract

From the late nineteenth century to the start of World War II, many Euro-American people, especially high-educated elite men who were disenchanted with their industrialized and imperialized homeland, traveled overseas to find something strange and lost. In addition, they had a modernistic viewpoint, which tended not only to struggle against political, social, and cultural authorities but also to identify themselves with the privileged.

In this respect, Theodore Dreiser was a modernist too. He was greatly disillusioned by American readers' lack of praise for his first novel, *Sister Carrie* (1900). Therefore, he accepted the plans made by his friend, Grant Richards, for a trip to Europe with him. During this travel, by a meeting a prostitute, Lily, he developed a true sympathy with the poor working-class people, and could overcome his modernist/ imperialism/ gendered viewpoints. He could then write his masterpiece, *An American Tragedy* (1925) from the poor working-class man's point of view.

## Introduction

Theodore Dreiser (1871-1945) sailed from New York to Europe on November 22, 1911. He went to England, France, Monte Carlo, Italy, and Germany, and returned to America on April 22, 1912. *A Traveler at Forty*<sup>1</sup> was written as the report of this grand tour and was published by the Century Company in 1913. This travel was originally proposed by Grant Richards, a famous publisher in England and Dreiser's friend; at first, Dreiser hesitated because of his financial difficulties, though he had been eager to get a look into the last phase of the career of Charles T. Yerkes in England, who was the model for the protagonist of *The Financier* (1912), Frank Cowperwood. Richards secured the publisher's promise to pay Dreiser for some articles about his travel over Europe, so Dreiser decided to take the trip. He describes his excitement over his anticipated voyage in this way:

Sometimes life is very generous. It walks in and says, "Here! I want you to do a certain thing," and it proceeds to arrange all your affairs for you. I felt curiously at this time as though I was on the edge of a great change. When one turns forty and faces one's first transatlantic voyage, it is a more portentous event than when it comes at twenty. (5-6)

The forty-year-old Dreiser thinks that he would extend his knowledge more at his age than he would have when he was twenty years old. However, according to *A Theodore Dreiser Encyclopedia*, disguising himself as an innocent young American, he marvels at the European scenery and is ashamed of being unable to adapt himself to the sophisticated European society. His narrative in this

book is based on binary oppositions: child vs. parent, pupil vs. teacher, author vs. publisher, American vs. English, New World vs. Old World, and so on. Since the colonial period, such oppositions have been used in many instances of travel writings by American authors like Michel Guillaume Jean de Crèvecoeur, Washington Irving, William Dean Howells, and Henry James.<sup>2</sup> Considering the threatening European situation before World War I, and that crucial era of dramatic modernization and industrialization in both America and Europe, I think that it is impossible for Dreiser to assume an optimistic attitude toward this travel.

Caren Kaplan argues against modernistic tourism this way:

All displacements are not the same. Yet the occidental ethnographer, the modernist expatriate poet, the writer of popular travel accounts, and the tourist may all participate in the mythologized narrativizations of displacement without questioning the cultural, political, and economic grounds of their different professions, privileges, means, and limitations. Immigrants, refugees, exiles, nomads, and the homeless also move in and out of these discourses as metaphors, tropes, and symbols but rarely as historically recognized producers of critical discourses themselves. Euro-American discourses of displacement tend to absorb difference and create ahistorical amalgams; thus a field of social forces becomes represented as a personal experience, its lived intensity of separation marking a link with others. (Kaplan 2)

Here, Kaplan uses “displacement” to mean “travel,” and “modernist expatriate poet” to refer not only to poets like T.S. Eliot but also to novelists and critics like Henry James and Gertrude Stein, who emigrated from America to Europe between the late 19th century and World War II. In her book, *Questions of Travel: Postmodern Discourses of Displacement* (1996), she examines how, in a large number of discourses on travel that were written between the modernist era and the post-modernist era<sup>3</sup>, the travelers had a sense of privilege; they viewed foreign countries and foreign people as “the Other” and regarded them as inferior.

Taking her argument into account, I consider Theodore Dreiser to be a modernist novelist, and will aim at verifying that he triumphed over his modernistic viewpoint in *A Traveler at Forty*.

# 1

In *A Traveler at Forty*, Dreiser sets about analyzing the reason for his first novel's<sup>4</sup> suppression by its publisher and its neglect by the American society. He makes clear his view of the meaning of literature in America and the distinguishing trait of American readers:

I fancy now, after eleven years of wonder, that it was not so much the supposed immorality, as the book's straightforward, plain-spoken discussion of American life in general. We were not used then in America to calling a spade a spade, particularly in books....Books were always to be built out of facts concerning “our better natures.” We were always to be seen as we wish to be seen. There were villains to be sure—liars, dogs, thieves, scoundrels—but they were strange creatures, hiding away in dark, unconventional places and scarcely seen save at night and peradventure; whereas we, all clean, bright, honest, well-meaning people, were living in nice homes, going our way honestly and truthfully, going to church, raising our children believing in a Father, a Son and a Holy Ghost, and never doing anything wrong at any time save as these miserable liars, dogs,

thieves, et cetera, might suddenly appear and make us. Our books largely showed us as heroes.  
(3-4)

At the beginning of this quotation, he explains why his first book had to be suppressed. In his perception of the American people as being too immature to accept the representation of reality in books around 1900, he sees himself as a victim of a culturally immature society—America.

He tried to represent the real life of lower-class people who were poor, exhausted by labor. They could be found in any of the big cities of America in the early twentieth century, but higher-class people considered as if there were no poor, forlorn, and desperate people in their society, so his works were understood as disclosing the secrets of American society, which upper-class people liked to keep to themselves. Therefore, these depictions were deleted or changed by editors repeatedly; *A Traveler at Forty* was deleted by almost half as well. He accepted reluctantly these changes by editors in order to publish his books; however, he blamed the American readers for this and always had anger in his heart.

Having self-recognition as a modernist and an intellectual, he distinguished himself from the ordinary common people and criticized them severely. According to Kiyohiko Murayama, affected by snobbism in this period, Dreiser wished he were privileged, and felt annoyed with the common people for being slaves to the “genteel tradition.” Thus, there is something common in both modernism and snobbism: a sense of privilege. Considering these arguments, I wonder whether Dreiser, who was disenchanted with the American society, found something culturally mature in the European society—something non-existent in America. In fact, in Rome, he saw historical ruins “rent and jagged by time” or buildings that left behind “the might and glory of an older day” (316). In addition, on visiting Santa Maria Maggiore, he confesses that the church was so splendid, with its “incrusted of marbles, bronzes, carvings, and gold and silver inlay,” that he “cannot withstand” it (337). He sees that the other churches in Rome “have just this and nothing more” (337) and a “hodge-podge of history, wealth, illusion and contention, to say nothing of religious and social discovery” (338). In this way, he does not entirely praise ancient European sites because of their antiquity and lack of a sense of reality, as Irving and James do. Not believing in the cultural superiority of Europe over America’s, in London Dreiser tends to look at poor laborers, prostitutes, and children, and would rather go to a small town in the suburbs than to big cities, comparing the people and the cities to those in America. A few days later, after arriving at London, he took a walk along the Thames:

I took note of the houses, the doorways, the quaint, winding passages, but for the color and charm they did not compare with the nebulous, indescribable mass of working boys and girls and men and women which moved before my gaze. The mouths of many of them were weak, their noses snub, their eyes squint, their chins undershot, their ears stub, their chests flat. Most of them had a waxy, meaty look, but for interest they were incomparable. American working crowds may be much more chipper, but not more interesting. I could not weary of looking at them. (90, emphasis added)

His stroll in London would be the same as “slumming,” which was a sightseeing tour of slums made by the wealthy leisured-class men and women around the turn of the 20th century to discover “poverty” in America.

In the earlier part of the emphasized passage, he describes the “indescribable” people in London from a eugenic point of view, which was in fashion among intellectuals in the late 19th century. In many American realism novels, especially in naturalism novels, working-class people were considered as an *inferior* mass and were described as being like animals: dogs, wolves, bears, and so on. In the same way, he describes the working class by their physical features: “their noses snub,” “their eyes squint,” “their chins undershot,” “their ears stub,” and “their chests flat.” These representations, which are far from the ideal figure of the Caucasian race, show that he flaunts his superiority as an intellectual to working-class people and he does not have enough empathy with them.

According to Kaplan’s argument, either travel or expatriation provided the modernist writers with the material for their works in the last decade of the 19th century. Furthermore, they wished to break the deadlock of high modernization or industrial development by escaping from their own countries. Remarkably, at that very time, a number of Euro-American countries became imperialistic. Hence, travel itself became an industry, and travelers to non-native lands could not help observing anything that was strange and curious to them, which included not only things but human beings. Accordingly, travel or displacement to other countries, especially “uncivilized” ones, would inevitably and unconsciously become commercialized, widen the gap between rich and poor, and strengthen gender differences as travel/displacement belonged to only white elite men. Dreiser did that too.

The glory of England began to wane after the late 19th century, so it seems that Dreiser, being an American, would have a sense of superiority over England. In the latter part of the quotation above, he praises the cheerfulness of the American working class, which is derived from the country’s youthfulness. In the chapter titled “At 6 o’clock” of *The Color of the Great City* (1923), which is a collection of his essays on New York that appeared in 1914-15 and focused on the poor in particular, he describes American laborers as follows:

You can see it in their faces. Some have a lean, pinched appearance as though they were but poorly nourished or greatly enervated. Some have a furtive, hurried look, as though the problem of rent and food and clothing were inexplicable and they were thinking about it all the time. Some are young yet and unscathed—the most are young (for the work of the world is done by the youth of the world) — and they so not see as yet to what their labor tends. Nearly all are still lightened with a sense of opportunity; for what may the world not hold in store? Are not its bells still tinkling, its lights twinkling? Are not youth and health and love the solvents of all our woes? (Dreier [1923] 82)

Using a binary opposition—that America is hopeful while England is bleak—he unconsciously shows the superiority of America and reconstructs American society, where as if there were a kind of utopia and there were no miserable laborers. Here, we can find his antinomic thought on American culture: he deplores the immaturity of culture yet praises its freshness. Thus, his understanding of the working class always displays the exact opposite: America’s primitiveness and hope as the power of nation. Certainly, he would understand the miserable situation of the working-class people, caused by the highly modernized and industrialized society; however, he could not empathize with them. Instead, his descriptions, like the quotations cited earlier, discriminate against the working class and strengthen the discourse of cultural imperialism. He had to surmount his own modernistic/imperialistic view about “the Other” — foreign countries, the working class, different races, and women, and so on.

## 2

In this section, I will argue for the possibility of Dreiser's overcoming his imperialistic/modernistic/gendered thought in his travel writing. Such growth was triggered, it seems, by his meeting with a prostitute named Lily. Interestingly, he is known to have had numerous romances with women; however, there are few writings that show that he had sexual relations with any prostitutes in his homeland, instead, he would long for sexual liberation overseas. The title of the chapter "Lily: A girl of the Streets," recalls *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*, written by Stephen Crane in 1893. H. L. Mencken, who was an influential critic in American literary world and his friend, acclaimed this chapter as Dreiser's best writing since the publication of his *Jennie Gerhardt* (1911).

Dreiser's biographer, Jerome Loving, describes the detailed process of publishing *A Traveler at Forty*. According to Loving, in the draft version of *A Traveler at Forty*, he recounts his meeting with two prostitutes, one in London and another in Berlin. However, the publisher, the Century Company, required that "the book had to be cleansed of 'woman stuff'" (Loving 229), so Grant Richards expurgated the latter part from his draft.

The entire Berlin narrative, in which his sexual relationship with a prostitute is described, was deleted.<sup>5</sup> Thus, when *A Traveler at Forty* was finally published, it "represented only half of the original manuscript" (Loving 230). Loving says, "Not the outside moralistic observer the Century editors made him in the 'Lily' episode, here Dreiser is freely enamored of both the woman's flesh and spirit"(Loving 211-12).

In the chapter of "Lily," hanging around Piccadilly alone, he sees two girls who appeared to be prostitutes passing by him. Then one of them, named Lily, smiles at him. He finds her "pretty in the fresh English way" with "too innocent eyes," and hesitates to talk to her for a second, but finally decides to. Her Welsh accent causes him to think of her as not being "hard and vulgar" (113). He gives another girl a shilling and sends her away, so that he can have dinner with Lily alone. He observes her and perceives that her clothes are "mere patchwork," "worn," and "pathetic," but her cheek is a "wonderful apple color" and her eyes are "quite a triumph of nature," and "not very self-protective" (114).

He seems to like her simplicity and naïveté, and there is a resemblance between her character and the American qualities he desires: freshness and innocence. Although he does not believe it, she lies about her origins and her business: that her father owns three grocery stores and that she has been paid six pounds by "an American gentleman" from New York. As he listens to her story, he says:

"That is n't [sic] true," I [Dreiser] said. "You [Lily] know it is n't true. You're talking for effect."

The girl's face flushed.

"It is true. As I'm alive it's true. ..."

"Yes, all Americans may have money," I smiled sardonically, "but they don't go round spending it on such as you in that way. You're not worth it."

(118, emphasis added)

Through his strong denial of her words, she is driven into a corner. His words revealed his actual stance: his hatred toward prostitution and his self-conscious view as an American and an intellectual. Here too, his words, "You're not worth it" hurt her dignity tremendously; in other words, by making her distressed, he would conquer her and England which has been falling into a decline. Taking

examples from Malcom Cowley's *Exile's Return* (1951) and Paul Fussell's *Abroad* (1980), Kaplan demonstrates that in many discourses on travel in early 20th century, the expatriate/the true traveler is "college-educated, solidly middle-class young men"(Kaplan 45), "the upper middle class," or "the British aristocracy" (Kaplan 56), so travel/displacement indicates a gendered act and reinforces "the social power and privilege of a gendered class" (Kaplan 45). Kaplan points out as the following.

Thus the flight from home included leaving behind both egalitarian impulses and bourgeois sexual norms while reinforcing the social power and privilege of a gendered class. This belief in the sexually liberating or thrilling aspects of travel is deeply encoded in the discourses of desire and distance that form the core of Euro-American modernist theories of authorship as exile. Part of the compensation for "exile" or even the goal of such displacement may be expressed in sexual metaphors of conquest and seduction. (Kaplan, 45)

To sum up her argument, in the Euro-American literary world of the early 20th century, only educated and privileged men were allowed to write about their travel. Even if it were expatriation, displacement, or exile, what they ingeniously hide—desire—is to be fulfilled in a place distant from their homeland. Furthermore, they exercise their authority while traveling, hence discourses made by them would sustain and strengthen their own social framework—their gendered, class, and racial structure.

Considering Kaplan's argument, Dreiser, a novelist who was above all a white American, must release his sexual desire and exercise his authority over Lily. When he beats her down into silence unconsciously, he must look down on prostitutes. It means that he conquers her by following his modernistic judgement.

However, his own snobbish world, though rebuilt through his encounter with Lily, collapses immediately because he regrets that he has not behaved like a gentleman; that is, it awakens him to a sense of his sin: his apathy toward those outside his world.<sup>6</sup> When she says nothing in reply to his merciless words, and only "looks at" him, he begins to intuitively feel her hidden grief over her situation. Then their conversation starts "getting friendly," and he acts "toward her as though she were a lady" (121). She begs him to teach her American slang to raise her market value, which makes him understand her eagerness for self-improvement. Because of this, he advises her to "get out" of her situation and "get a job at something" (120), although she declines to do it, because of her age and her lack of knowledge of other trades. Here, it seems that Dreiser might acquire some sympathy with the lowest-class people:

It is a poor world. I do not attempt to explain it. The man or woman of bridled passion is much better off. As for those others, how much are they themselves to blame? Circumstances have so large a part in it. I think, all in all, it is a deadly hell-hole; and yet I know that talking is not going to reform it. Life, in my judgement, does not reform. The world is old. Passion in all classes is about the same. We think this shabby world is worst because it is shabby. But is it? Is n't [sic] it merely that we are different—used to different things? I think so. (126)

In this passage, we could see his naturalistic view, his anger at and resignation to the world. The world in which he lives is old-fashioned and like a hell; people who dwell there cannot change their

lives and reform it. However, in this quotation, “But is it?” should be understood as a rhetorical question; in fact, he probably thinks the world is still worth living in. All that can be relied upon is the knowledge that the passion of all classes is the same. Here, when he feels empathy for her, it means that he empathized with people of every class. He knew that the world could hardly reform, but he believes in the power of sympathy, the possibility of changing the world.

It is natural that Dreiser should begin his book by complaining about the publisher of his first novel and expressing his frustration with American readers, who would prefer not to understand it and to be too conservative. This reveals his standpoint as both an intellectual and a modernist: resisting authority and looking down on his countrymen. He hoped for cultural maturity in Europe, whereas, in fact, he saw Europeans as just keeping a tight hold on their past glories. Unlike many other travelers, especially those in the early 20th century who went overseas hoping to find in foreign countries something to be lost, instead of industrializing their own countries, Dreiser acknowledged the English working class to be as distressed over their toil as Americans and acquired sympathy for them.

What is important is that his self-conquest of his intellectual/modernistic viewpoint was achieved due to his encounter with a prostitute; that is, it roused him to change his gendered perspective. While culturally dominant people judge the prostitute, Lily, or his protagonist, Carrie—to be immoral and unsophisticated, for him, their existence is an obvious fact and they must therefore be acknowledged as a member of society. Thus, bringing the lower class's perspective into his works, he could describe poor people's life realistically, regardless of whether he had to depict immorality, obscenity, and absurdity, in his work, *The “Genius”* (1915) and his masterpiece, *An American Tragedy*.

### Notes

An early version of this paper was orally presented at the regular meeting of the Tohoku American Literature Society on December 19, 2018.

1. In this essay I use the text of *A Traveler at Forty*, as published by Century Company, in 1913. Unless indicated otherwise, all references to *A Traveler at Forty* are to this edition.
2. Mark Twain's *The Innocents Abroad* is an exception; he criticizes Europe severely. Jerome Loving points out the similarity between Twain's and Dreiser's travel writing. I would like to compare *A Traveler at Forty* with *The Innocents Abroad* in another study.
3. It is generally agreed that modernism essentially coincided with the imperialism of the European powers which tended to struggle against literary/cultural authorities, while post-modernism began in the 1940s, and almost all the post-modernists had negative attitudes toward the various modernist art movements.
4. Dreiser himself mythologized the story around publishing his first novel, *Sister Carrie* (1900). At that time, he denounced his publisher, Doubleday, Page & Company, and its president's wife. He was sure that she judged it to be immoral, so her husband decided to publish it only a small number of copies of it.
5. According to Loving, the prostitute represented in the expurgated part, Hanscha Jower, is partly included in his characters of his works (Loving, 211).
6. Of course, the change in his feeling for Lily might have resulted from his gendered thought that women must be under the protection of men.

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