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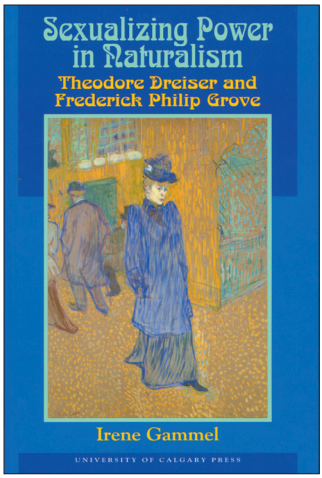

SEXUALIZING POWER IN NATURALISM: THEODORE DREISER AND FREDERICK PHILIP GROVE

by Irene Gammel

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Female Sexuality and the Naturalist Crisis: "Emanuela"

Surrounded by an aura of what Dreiser often calls a "pagan" sensuality, many of his female characters paradoxically also exude a strange sense of sexual abstinence, almost chastity. Philip Fisher has commented on Carrie Meeber's absence of sexual desires and "the lack of erotic quality" in her love relationships, at the same time that she enacts desires and eros very successfully on the theater stage.[1] Leslie Fiedler, commenting on the chastity of the "unchurched nun," Carrie Meeber, and on Jennie Gerhardt's almost asexual mothering of her two lovers, irreverently draws the conclusion that Dreiser "could never portray, for all his own later hectic career as a lover, any woman except the traditional seduced working girl of sentimental melodrama."[2] Yet, despite this penchant for the gender-stereotypical seduction theme, Dreiser has gained

1 Fisher 165–66.

2 Leslie Fiedler, "Dreiser and the Sentimental Novel," rpt. in *Dreiser: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. John Lydenberg (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1971) 47.

the stature of a literary French Marianne who, by waving the flag of sexual liberation in his battle against the bulwarks of American literary "puritanism," has firmly established sex as a discursive fact. In his works, Dreiser celebrates sexuality as the major driving force in life, holding it up as a force of progress endlessly engaged in battles against sexually repressive social conventions and institutions.

Elevated to the level of a canonized critical "fact," Dreiser's discourse of sexual frankness and liberation is, nonetheless, problematic not only because it may reinscribe old stereotypes in a new language, as Fiedler's critique implies, but also because it innocently assumes the existence of sexuality as an innate, bodily fact, a fact that is presumed to be recoverable like a *Ding an sich* underneath layers of psychological repressions and literary censorship. Dreiser's discursive scientificity, underlined by his characteristic usage of materialistic imagery such as "magnetism" and "chemism," especially in his evocation of sexuality, strengthens the impression of the body as an easily graspable, physical, or natural entity whose existence is presumed to have been hidden behind veils of conventions. The tacit assumption behind such language is that "lifting the veil" and transcending conventions with a discourse of "frankness" will make the "real thing" automatically appear "as it is" and grant it a place in literature in its own right.

Michel Foucault, to be sure, rejects, debunks, and caricatures discourses of sexual liberation, arguing that what we nowadays subsume under the term *sexuality* is by no means "innate" or "natural," but rather a complex historical construct created over the last two centuries in our discursive practices. Even more importantly, in this process of transforming sex into discourse sexuality has been policed, because talking about sexuality in regulated, "authorized" discourses helps control it. In the discursive evolution, as Foucault sees it, the female body was taken charge of through a process that Foucault calls a *"hysterization of women's bodies,"* that is, the social identification of women's bodies with their reproductive organs, or the womb. By acknowledging the force of repression and by putting sexuality in discourse through the psychoanalytic talking cure, new personages made their appearance, such as the repressed, frigid, or anesthetic woman, who became the privileged object of psychological and sexological interest in the first quarter of the twentieth century.

Just as Foucault has emphasized that discourses of truth carry with them power effects, so Luce Irigaray's theory intersects with Foucault's in her polemical feminist critique of the "truths" produced by psychoanalysis: "La psychanalyse tient sur la sexualité féminine le discours de

la vérité."[3] She accuses Freud of having theorized sexuality in exclusively masculine parameters and thus of having created a masculine rather than a feminine "truth" of sexuality: "he takes masculinity as the yardstick against which all objects and actions are assessed, constructing women as deviations from the norm."[4] The result of this bias is that psychoanalysis erases the conception of a positively defined woman's sexuality: "Son lot serait celui du 'manque,' de l'atrophie' (du sexe), et de l''envie du pénis' comme seul sexe reconnu valeureux" (*CS* 23). According to Irigaray, the ready acceptance of Freud's discourse of truth in our culture has even led women to mimic male desires: "La femme ne vivrait son désir que comme attente de posséder enfin un équivalent du sexe masculin" (*CS* 23). Female desire thus is constructed along powerful discourses of authorized male knowledge.

At the time Dreiser wrote *Sister Carrie*, Freudian psychoanalysis was not yet known to him. As Ellen Moers has pointed out, Freud's theory probably reached Dreiser after 1910, after Abraham Brill – a friend of Dreiser's from 1918 on – had translated some of Freud's major writings into English. It was mainly Freud's *Theory of Sex* (1905) that influenced Dreiser, introducing him to the concept of sexual "chemism" (*Sexualchemismus*), which he uses so obsessively in *An American Tragedy* to describe the sexual drive.[5] In *A Gallery of Women* (1929), a collection of nonfictional and semifictionalized sketches on the author's female friends and acquaintances, Dreiser presents some Freudian case studies in "Lucia," "Rella," and "Emanuela." Even his chapter titles mimic Freud and Breuer's psychoanalytic publications on female hysteria, in which the woman's first name signifies the case study that is to follow. The collection's title, "A Gallery of Women," suggests the work of an artist.[6]

Presenting a true touchstone for evaluating Dreiser's treatment of female sexuality, "Emanuela" deserves closer critical attention than it

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3 Luce Irigaray, *Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un* (Paris: Les Éditons de Minuit, 1977) 85. Further references will appear in the text abbreviated *CS*.

4 Kornelia Hauser paraphrasing Irigaray's theory, 188–89.

5 Ellen Moers, *Two Dreisers: The Man and the Novelist As Revealed in His Two Most Important Works, "Sister Carrie" and "An American Tragedy"* (New York: Viking, 1969) 262–63. See also Frederic E. Rusch, "Dreiser's Introduction to Freudianism," *Dreiser Studies* 18 (1987): 34–38.

6 In Dreiser's *Twelve Men* (New York: Boni & Liveright, 1919), the titles of twelve sketches devoted to men follow a different pattern, assigning each male a particular characteristic, such as "A Doer of the World," "My Brother Paul," "Culhane, the Solid Man," and "A True Patriarch."

has so far been granted in Dreiser scholarship. Exposing the underlying gender ideology of his naturalist fiction, "Emanuela" highlights how easily Dreiser's reading of Freudian psychoanalysis converges with his earlier emphasis on sexuality, particularly in *Sister Carrie*. While the narrative voice in *Sister Carrie* represents the author's thinly veiled editorial voice, the first-person narrator in "Emanuela" represents his autobiographical persona. "Emanuela" shows how much psychoanalytic knowledge displaces the author's earlier scientific (Spencerian, physiological) discourses of authority, so that the later sketch functions as a condensed *roman à clef* that helps to unravel the power effects inherent in Dreiser's presuppositions about the sexual nature of his earlier heroines. In more explicit ways than *Sister Carrie*, "Emanuela" exposes an awareness of the contradictions and misogynistic patterns that emerge when a naturalist narrator takes sexual and textual charge of the female body, thus controlling the female within the boundaries of a male genre. Whereas *Sister Carrie* presents a woman who mimics traditional femininity and docility, "Emanuela" presents a strong, intellectual woman, who refuses to accept male versions of truth. By pointing to his younger self's sexual crisis when dealing with Emanuela's "stubbornness," Dreiser, as the mature narrator-author who relates his own past, highlights his naturalist crisis of authority, when inscribing female sexuality in his (autobiographical) fiction.

"Emanuela" presents an account of a beautiful and gifted woman-artist, whom the thirty-year-old narrator-author meets in New York artist circles and who, according to Dreiser's first-person account, repeatedly initiates the contact with him only to retreat with an almost physical repulsion from his sexual advances. "'I don't like you this way!'," she tells him, also confessing candidly that the "muddy depths" of sex are not for her, that she in fact does not want any sex relationship.[7] The narrator, irritated at being led by the nose, excels at exposing Emanuela's duplicity, namely, the fact that she "pursues" him for years, in fact never tires of "luring" him into accepting tantalizing *tête à têtes*, but each time almost ritually thwarts what he longs for most – the sexual contact.

But as Emanuela oscillates between her attraction for Dreiser's younger self and her physical repulsion, so the narrator himself oscil-

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7 Theodore Dreiser, "Emanuela," *A Gallery of Women*, vol. 2 (New York: Horace Liveright, 1929) 683. Further references will appear in the text abbreviated *GW*. Richard Lehan has identified Emanuela as Ann Watkins, a freelance writer and literary agent, in *Theodore Dreiser: His World and His Novels* (Carbondale & Edwardsville: Southern Illinois UP, 1969) 264, n. 12.

lates between irresistible attraction and angry, frustrated retreat, an interplay that is paralleled by the oscillating discourses he adopts to describe and evaluate Emanuela. Describing his younger self as a briskly advancing Don Juan, the narrator lovingly weaves the threads of his idealizing love-romance tapestry, evoking Emanuela in terms of Minerva, Diana, Venus, and mythologizing her "white," "seraph"-like, virginal body, only to intersperse in his romance a cooler, scientific-analytical thread when it comes to dealing with her "freezing recessions." This discursive oscillation, better than anything else, illustrates the narrator's duplicity in his relationship with the young woman, whose body strikes him as "beautiful and voluptuously formed," but who refuses to fulfill what he sees as the "natural" functions of such a "perfect" body, namely: to have intercourse with a man.

"Was she not a clear illustration of some of Freud's prime contentions?" (*GW* 693), the narrator asks, taking recourse to a psychoanalytic authority – sanctioned as truthful by himself and the intellectual forerunners of his contemporary society. It matters little that Emanuela rejects this model of analysis for herself: "Oh, yes, she had read Freud, and had been impressed in part, but could not accept him fully. No. His analysis was too coarse and too domineering, left no place for anything but itself. And there was nothing that was the whole truth about anything" (*GW* 695). Despite her protests – sex cannot possibly be "the base of *all* dreams" – Dreiser imposes the Freudian discourse as truthfully revealing the secrets about her character, namely, her sexual repression, her "sex inhibition" and "the obvious pathologic fact in her case, that she was frigid – and yet not so" (*GW* 686–87).

Drawing on Freud's theory, he reads and writes her as a case of pathological frigidity, of desiring sex but having built up a "wall of reserve" against it and therefore having crossed the boundary into "abnormal" sexual behaviour – stubborn sexual resistance. Like Freud's studies on hysteria, Dreiser's description of his "case" is followed by his own interpretation, in which the narrative voice assumes the powerful authority of the unimpassioned psychoanalyst-interpreter. The narrator's different roles as analyst and lover, though, overlap and conflict with each other, exposing his duplicity and limits particularly in his frequent emotional outbursts. After having established the "fact" of Emanuela's "frigidity," he does, for instance, not abandon the chase as useless; on the contrary, despite his better judgment he continues it sporadically over a period of more than a decade, as if his realization of the woman's "frigidity" made the chase all the more intense, the sexual object all the more desirable.

Dreiser's Freudian language implies that frigidity is partly rooted in the organic and partly in childhood repressions, and he provides the proof for his theory of Emanuela's frigidity in showing her parents to be strongly conventional and puritanical characters. Freud, to be sure, recognized the roots of frigidity in psychological repressions during both childhood and puberty (as well as in anatomical factors).[8] Simone de Beauvoir, in contrast, gives a very persuasive definition of frigidity that refrains from making any biological assumptions, as it refrains from speculating about a far-away childhood. Locating the roots of frigidity in gender relationships of power, de Beauvoir writes that "resentment is the most common source of feminine frigidity; in bed the woman punishes the male for all the wrongs she feels she has endured, by offering him an insulting coldness."[9]

Just as Freud was not able to provide any firm, or ultimate, answers on the roots of female frigidity, so the sketch of "Emanuela" culminates in an epistemological crisis for Dreiser. If anything, "Emanuela" emphasizes the narrator's painful efforts to prove the truth-value of his analysis: "For what was the real truth about her?" (*GW* 702), he asks not once but repeatedly, occasionally subjecting his own conclusions to a skeptical re-questioning: "Or am I misreading you, and are you really moved by something which I cannot feel?" (*GW* 703). "Emanuela" exposes that the authority assumed by the male narrative voice in naturalism is simultaneously challenged by the narrator's hermeneutical crisis, when trying to read Emanuela's symptoms. As his hypothetical language suggests, he can only raise questions about her feelings but has no firm answers. In "Emanuela," naturalist certainty and narrative authority thus give way to a skeptical questioning of whose version of the truth is the "real" one.

Even more importantly, the text turns around against its author-narrator-analyst to expose that it is his language of truth – his usage of sanctified Freudian theory – that not only aids but makes possible the narrator's dominant position in this relationship, which culminates in

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8 "Die sexuelle Frigidität des Weibes ... ist ein erst ungenügend verstandenes Phänomen. Manchmal psychogen und dann der Beeinflussung zugänglich, legt sie in anderen Fällen die Annahme einer konstitutionellen Bedingtheit, selbst den Beitrag eines anatomischen Faktors, nahe." "Female sexual frigidity ... is an insufficiently understood phenomenon. Sometimes it is psychogenic and hence can be influenced, but in other cases it suggests a constitutional condition, even an anatomical factor" (my translation). Sigmund Freud, "Neue Folge der Vorlesungen zur Einführung in die Psychoanalyse," *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 15 (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1966) 141.

9 Beauvoir 439.

several overtly rapist scenes. But as he slips into the role of a rapist, his theory helps him to shift the desire for rape from himself onto his victim: "Unquestionably, in some errant, repressed and nervous way, she was thinking that I would assail and overcome her, cave-man fashion, and so free her once and for all of her long and possibly, – how should I know – torturing self-restraint – slay the dragon of repression that shut the Sleeping Princess from the world of her fancy" (*GW* 698). Projecting the desire for rape onto his female victim, Dreiser's younger self enacts the male part in a Freudian sex drama. Indeed, the narrator's conquering sexuality appears as the logical extension of Freud's theory of (active) male and (passive) female libido, as Freud describes it in his "Theory of Sex":

> The reenforcements of the sexual inhibitions produced in the woman by the repression of puberty produces a stimulus in the libido of the man and forces him to increase his activities. With the height of the libido there occurs a rise in the overestimation of the sexual object, which attains its full force only in that woman who hesitates and denies her sexuality.[10]

According to Freud, female frigidity (if caused by childhood repressions) can be overcome through the experience of powerful male sexual potency, "durch mächtiges sexuelles Erleben,"[11] so that the overcoming of female frigidity indirectly becomes a measuring stick for male potency. This Freudian interweaving of "normal" (hetero)sexuality with power (*mächtig* < *Macht*) provides the gender-ideological subtext for Dreiser's narrative.

Criticizing this aspect of psychoanalytic theory, Luce Irigaray has argued that the Freudian emphasis on the phallus implies a binary division between masculine activity and feminine passivity – "l'opposition activité clitoridienne 'virile' / passivité vaginale 'féminine'" (*CS* 23). The Freudian text, furthermore, entails for women a wish to be possessed by the phallus, a wish to be acted upon. Through this inscription of phallic penetration (and the phallic gaze) as the "normal" form of sexual behaviour, women's sexual pleasure is always already in danger of becoming a vicariously passive, even a "masochistic pleasure" for women, a pleasure that is not really her own: "Ne sachant pas ce qu'elle veut, prête à n'importe quoi, en redemandant même, pourvu qu'il la 'prenne' comme 'object' d'exercice de son plaisir à lui" (*CS* 25). Irigaray draws the conclusion that through normalizing cultural practices, women are

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10 Sigmund Freud, "Contributions to the Theory of Sex," Brill 613.

11 Freud, "Die kulturelle Sexualmoral und die moderne Nervosität," *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 7, Werke aus den Jahren 1906–1909 (Frankfurt: Fischer Verlag, 1941) 164.

made to love that which really subjugates them (the phallus as an icon of power), which in turn ensures the perpetuation of the "normal," hierarchically structured, gender relations.

Struggling against this "normalization" of her sexuality, Emanuela resists the narrator's framing of her sexuality within the naturalist boundaries of his sketch. Just as her female resistance, in turn, confronts the male narrator's younger self with a sexual crisis (in his role as a Don Juan lover), so it confronts the older narrator with a crisis of narrative authority (in his role as a naturalist voice of truth and reliable knowledge). Dreiser cannot really trust his psychoanalytic readings, since Freud himself had shown how cleverly the hysterical female body can mimic false symptoms. But since his sexual/textual authority (as a lover and a naturalist) can only be maintained by proving the truth of her frigidity, he becomes obsessed with demonstrating "scientifically" that Emanuela's "mental opposition" and "muscular rejection" are indeed pathological, uncontrollable bodily reactions. Unable to prove the ultimate truth of his Freudian analysis, he turns to the empirical, observable "reality" of his and her body, and finally invokes the traditional, nineteenth-century discursive authority – biology – to prove that her sexual resistance is not "natural." Throughout the sketch, he is concerned with backing up his analysis with observable, biological facts, and he goes so far as to trace what seems to him nature's inscription of Emanuela's "abnormal" psychological history on her body: "in her face was a trace of something – could it be a shadow of grossness? – her repressed emotions or desires at last gaining headway?" (*GW* 718–19). Even her physical beauty becomes a "biological" signifier that allows him to "prove" both her sexual "pathology" and the "normality" of his conquering desire. Thus, it is not so much that the asexual friendship Emanuela offers throughout the sketch does not count for much but that, according to the narrator's conception of male sexuality, a "happy camaraderie" with a beautiful woman like Emanuela is *biologically* impossible for a male:

> What nonsense! What lunacy! And I told her so. Men were not like that. I was not. She would not like me that way if I were. She was indulging in some unnatural, hopeless, futile dream. In God's name, what was all her physical beauty for? (*GW* 687).

Repeatedly, he demonstrates (with himself as the only example) that discussions about art and literary styles in the presence of her physically "perfect" body are at best boring and pointless for a male, at worst a torture. Thus, biology and psychoanalysis not only serve the narrator-author to inscribe female sexuality in terms of a compulsory heterosexuality but also to pathologize in his male naturalism a behav-

iour that is not in tune with "normalized" sexual behavior. But the fact that he can only articulate his male truth in the form of questions and in deeply emotional exclamations simultaneously reveals the self-contradictions of his naturalist fiction. The very obsessiveness of his desire (both to conquer Emanuela sexually and to impose a "normalized" sexuality in his narrative) undermines the very notion of the naturalist observer's objectivity and impartiality, so praised by Emile Zola.

"Emanuela," then, exposes the hermeneutical and gender crisis as well as the crisis of narrative authority encountered by the authorial voice in twentieth-century naturalist fiction. Finding that there is no ultimate, or single, scientific authority, the narrator obsessively multiplies different systems of knowledge in order to prove to himself that there is a coherent naturalist truth. But in this Babel of knowledges (that includes psychoanalysis, biology, empirical knowledge, and "common sense"), the reader is forced to recognize the narrator's limitations as a naturalist voice of truth. Furthermore, the narrator's incongruous blending of different roles – from amateur psycho-analyst and naturalist writer to scorned lover, friend, and rival – continually exposes his bias and unreliability: "I think you must be mad [crazy]. In fact, I'm sure you are" (*GW* 709), he finally closes his "analysis," stomping off more like the rejected and disappointed lover than impassioned psychologist. Thus exposing the narrator's limited and skewed perspective, the sketch unravels the naturalist claim to an authorized truth from within the genre. By playing so many different roles and by drawing on so many different knowledges, the narrator cannot help but deconstruct the notion of naturalistic truth itself, exposing it as a (male) construction.

What is more, "Emanuela" draws attention to the problematics and power politics of the narrator's tacit assumptions about female sexual passivity – also a striking feature of *Sister Carrie*, *Jennie Gerhardt*, and *An American Tragedy*, as it draws attention to the intense power play of Dreiser's euphoric celebration of the inner "magnetism" of the beautiful female body, which the author thematizes in the Cowperwood-*Trilogy* and *The "Genius"* (1915). Thus, the sketch shows the power effects inherent in any claim that a specific sexuality is "normal" or "natural," claims that are made in almost all of Dreiser's major works, either through overt commentary or through clever manipulation of narrative form.

To conceptualize Dreiser's inscription of a "normalized" sexuality in *Sister Carrie*, briefly recall Foucault's *History of Sexuality*:

> Thus, in the process of hysterization of women, "sex" was defined in three ways: as that which belongs in common to men and women; as that which belongs *par excellence*, to men, and hence is lacking in women; but at the

> same time, as that which by itself constitutes woman's body, ordering it wholly in terms of the functions of reproduction and keeping it in constant agitation through the effects of that very function. (*HS* 153)

Dreiser's fiction inscribes this sexualization of the female body in a variety of forms. *Jennie Gerhardt*, *An American Tragedy* and *The "Genius"* explore the problem of unwanted pregnancies, whereby women are shown to be deterministically entrapped within the biological logic of a reproductive womb. In other works, this hysterization appears in sublimated forms. Although apparently "undersexed," Emanuela's body is shown to be filled with sex, albeit with a "repressed" and thus hidden and concealed sexuality, surfacing, according to Dreiser's analysis, in her "mothering" of the author-narrator, her cooking for him, her tucking him in in his bed. Like Emanuela, all of Dreiser's major female characters are assumed to be endowed with bodies saturated with sex, so that they cannot escape a sexual destiny. But being saturated with sex does not necessarily imply sexual activity for the female but often means its contrary; the sex-filled Dreiserian heroine is a rather static target that prompts the opposite sex to move, attracting the males like a honey-pot the buzzing flies.

Not only is Carrie's sexual initiation with her first lover Charles Drouet described in terms of her "yielding" and his "victory," but so is Roberta Alden's with Clyde Griffiths in *An American Tragedy*, and so is almost every other sexual relationship in Dreiser's fiction. "She struggled, but in vain," is how the narrator describes Carrie's seduction by her second lover, George Hurstwood: "Instantly there flamed up in his body the all-compelling desire" (*SC* 307). The language surrounding the sexual act with Hurstwood is submerged in tropes of male power and dominance, at the same time that it is embedded in a discourse that supports the "normalcy" of this sexuality. Earlier in the novel, when Carrie is even more firmly resisting the middle-aged saloon manager's advances, her lack of passion for Hurstwood is explained by "a lack of power on his part, a lack of that majesty of passion that sweeps the mind from its seat" (*SC* 241). Just as Freud argued that frigidity can be overcome through "mächtiges sexuelles Erleben," so the narrator's language implies that in order to be sexually aroused, a woman has to be taken possession of completely, has to be usurped completely, has to be overwhelmed both in spirit and in body.[12] In Dreiser's works, beginning

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12 Although the unexpurgated Pennsylvania edition of *Sister Carrie* is sexually more explicit and daring (Carrie and Hurstwood, for example, make love before they are married), the gender ideology inscribed in the sexual roles is not essentially different from that of the original edition.

with *Sister Carrie* but also in *An American Tragedy* and the *Trilogy of Desire*, sex relations almost automatically create relationships of power, with the male inevitably dominating over the female body by imposing a form of sexuality that anticipates the male's conquering sexuality, from which Emanuela retreats with so much horror in the later work.

As Emanuela's stubborn sexual resistance is interpreted as an indicator for her "abnormal" psychology that provokes the narrator's irritation, puzzlement, and impotent anger, so its flipside – Carrie's passive acceptance of sexuality – is sanctified by the narrative voice as having a biological basis, hence excusing her transgressions against society's prohibition of premarital sex. Readers have commented that in crucial moments Carrie displays a striking passivity that seems to excuse her from any responsibility for her actions, a passivity that ultimately protects her "virtue."[13] This is typically Dreiserian, we might argue, characteristic of both men and women in his fiction. After all, passively wavering, Hurstwood turns into a thief, Clyde Griffiths into a "murderer." Yet the important difference is that Carrie's passivity extends mainly into the sexual realm, a realm in which Hurstwood storms ahead with the passionate single-mindedness of the enamoured lover.

From the omniscient narrator's point of view, Carrie is never a subject of the sexual act. Rather, sexuality, apart from being innate and constituting her body, is something that happens to her, a point that the narrator easily accepts as a "normal" bodily reality, in tune with biology and nature, and ultimately sanctioned by the fact that it is presumed to be pleasurable for the male. When Drouet invites Hurstwood to his newly established "house," thus signalling to his friend his recent sexual success, Carrie, as Drouet's "kept woman," is only present in the gap of the male text. "I'll introduce you" (*SC* 91), is all Drouet tells Hurstwood about her, while the object of the introduction remains suspended in a linguistic silence, not even given a name but somehow magically attached as a sexual body to Drouet and his "house."

The effect of this gap is that, in this instance, Carrie's sexuality comes into being and gains a life not by itself but detached from her own body, activated not in the sex act but in the pleasurable discourse of two males. Moreover, this conversational gambit, in which Carrie connects the two men through her very absence, takes place in a club "for men only," Chicago's Fitzgerald and Moy's. This reinforces the impression that the

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13 For a detailed discussion of Carrie's moral ambiguity, see, for example, Terence J. Matheson, "The Two Faces of Sister Carrie: The Characterization of Dreiser's First Heroine," *Ariel* 11 (1980): 71–85. Matheson emphasizes the contradictions between the strong-willed, ambitious and the innocently passive Carrie.

woman has no control over her sexuality; in this instance, female sexuality is part of a male network, easily conjured up as a gap, a hole to be filled by the male desire that it generates.

As the male narrator strongly manipulates the reader's responses, he cannot help but reveal his own gender bias in the process. Although the narrators in *Sister Carrie* and "Emanuela" profess to argue against the sexual "conventions" of their society, much of their narration, in fact, affirms the conventional – hierarchically structured – gender pattern in the realm of sexuality. Given the early heroine's involuntary slippage into sex and the notion that Emanuela's body needs not so much to act in order to be "freed," but to be acted upon by a male in order to connect with life, it should come as no surprise that most of Dreiser's women are described as sexually passive creatures. If, for Dreiser, (hetero)sexuality is an inevitable factor in the constitution of a healthy body and an inseparable part of a person's subjectivity, then his sexual economy is also ruled by a gender-based "equation inevitable," a calculation of gain and loss, of power and impotence, which shifts the credit-power balance between male and female to the male side through the fact of the sexual initiation.

Just as the autobiographical narrator is obsessed with Emanuela's virginal state, so the moment of sexual initiation (always ritually delayed and endowed with a titillating suspension in Dreiser's fiction) takes on a special significance all the more important as the sexual act itself is usually relegated into the gaps of the text and thus silenced. While the female has the power to hold the male in an awesome suspension before the sexual initiation – we need only recall the melancholic, masochistic yearnings of Clyde for Roberta, of Eugene for Angela, of Cowperwood for Berenice – the sexual initiation in Dreiser's fiction inevitably inverts the relationship of power between male and female. This pattern explains the autobiographical narrator's helpless and frustrated anger at Emanuela, who by successfully and eternally delaying the sexual contact never allows him to place her on the "debit" side of the equation. In Dreiser's naturalist world, women inevitably lose by "giving" themselves to a partner, while the man wins: "how delicious is my conquest," is Drouet's reaction, while Carrie reflects, "what is it I have lost?" (*SC* 101), after the first sexual contact has been established. Similarly, in *An American Tragedy*, Clyde Griffiths's sense of self grows as a result of his seduction of the factory worker Roberta Alden; from a "simpleton" he turns into a conquering Don Juan in his own (and her) eyes, and thus becomes capable of even grander tasks and ready for the sexual conquest of rich women, the Sondra Finchleys of this world. Roberta, in contrast, feels she has given him "everything" and as a re-

sult further belittles herself in his eyes and flatters him, since her future depends on "her ultimate rehabilitation via marriage."[14]

Thus, the first sexual contact inverts rather than introduces a gender-imbalance "always already" present in Dreiser's sexual world. Granted, the narrator in *Sister Carrie* is careful to link this phenomenon critically to society's "arbitrary" sexual conventions (*SC* 101), but the fact remains that the narrator privileges and celebrates precisely those sexual courtship patterns that grow out of society's prohibitions. In Dreiser's fiction, it is in the crucial moment of the woman's "surrender" that the man is born into "masculinity," and in which ideal "femininity" is constituted as passive, yielding, and sacrificial, based on a "biological" body that is presumed to be ruled by the "economy of the gift," the womb that accepts and nourishes. Conversely, nonsacrificial and nonyielding women are allocated negative subject positions. Such women appear in Dreiser's naturalism in the figure of the cold, status-oriented, castrating female, who is rejected by the narrative's "master" discourse as ultimately undesirable. Mrs. Hurstwood's struggle for independence, fought with superior strategy and cleverness, can hardly call forth the reader's admiration, since it is submerged in an imagery of coldness that turns her into a money-hungry "python," who devours her husband, spitting him out (metaphorically) castrated, a half-man.

And yet, like "Emanuela," Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* should not be completely identified with the ideology of its male narrator. The novel itself occasionally counters and subverts its omniscient voice, by presenting a second voice that implicitly contradicts the male narrator's comments. For example, the only passage in the novel in which Carrie is portrayed as being subject of the sexual act is, significantly, filtered through the mind of a woman, Minnie Hanson, who dreams in the night of Carrie's sexual initiation that her sister is descending into a black pit:

> There was a deep pit, into which they were looking; they could see the curious wet stones far down where the wall disappeared in vague shadows. An old basket, used for descending, was hanging there, fastened by a worn rope.
>
> "Let's get in," said Carrie.
>
> "Oh, no," said Minnie.
>
> "Yes, come on," said Carrie.
>
> She began to pull the basket over, and now, in spite of all protest, she had swung over and was going down. (*SC* 89-90)

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14 Theodore Dreiser, *An American Tragedy* (1925; New York: New American Library, 1981) 344.

This dream takes the place of the description of the sexual act itself,[15] and in her sister's eyes Carrie is not only sexually active but even invites Minnie to join her. It is interesting that the male seducer is absent, and that the scene of Carrie's "fall" foregrounds two women, with Carrie herself acting as the seductive voice.

Simultaneously "undersexed" and "oversexed," Carrie, then, is presented as an oxymoronic Victorian Vamp, as Sheldon Grebstein has observed.[16] The narrator clearly wishes to absolve Carrie of responsibility, embedding her sexuality in a deliberate language of passivity and determinism. And so does the author, who is partly complicitous with his narrator. After all, Minnie's dream is filtered through the mind of a woman who has been set up as thoroughly "conventional," a clever authorial manipulation designed to disqualify Minnie as an "unreliable" narrative "consciousness" when it comes to judging Carrie's "unconventional" sexual actions. And yet, by presenting this "second" voice as subconscious – it is the voice of Minnie's dream – and by presenting it as female, Dreiser inevitably creates a classical discourse of the Other, a discourse that not only speaks of female sexual activity but that also erupts into and thoroughly disrupts the narrative's male voice.

If in Minnie's dreams, Carrie's "fall" takes place amid "unsubtle symbols of genitalia,"[17] it also carries auto- and homoerotic connotations. After all, Carrie goes down in her own "basket" and invites another woman to join her. Granted, these (homo)sexual suggestions are never fully explored in the novel, but they are reinforced by Carrie's autoerotic attention to her own body, as well as by her continued friendship with Lola (after she becomes disillusioned with male sexuality and company). Carrie's, like Emanuela's, sexual abstinence creates a fascinating gap, particularly in light of Freud's argument that (hetero)sexual abstinence is fraught with dangers: under the guise of abstinence, a person may indulge in very seductive, "abnormal" forms of sexuality, such as mas-

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15 For a detailed discussion of Minnie's dream as a reflection of her "own frustrated desires," see Joseph Church, "Minnie's Dreams in *Sister Carrie*," *College Literature* 14 (1987): 184.

16 Sheldon N. Gerbstein, "Dreiser's Victorian Vamp," *Sister Carrie* by Theodore Dreiser (New York: Norton, 1970), 551. "Dreiser has created a Victorian Vamp: a woman who is precisely that mixture of strengths and weaknesses which the nineteenth century conceived her to be, but who is at the same time in her unrequited sexual sins the first modern heroine. Eve-like, she yields to the flesh, but in the strongest Victorian tradition she does so only out of the confusion and need engendered by woman's innate helplessness and man's predatory lustfulness."

17 Church 183.

turbation, sexual fantasies, and homosexuality. According to Freud's logic, (hetero)sexual abstinence is "unhealthy" because it can lead to frigidity in women and loss of potency in men.[18]

Though Dreiser's dominant voice confirms the Freudian notion of (hetero)sexual normality, *Sister Carrie* implicitly critiques the "normalized" standard of female sexual passivity via some of its female characters. The fact that Dreiser creates a female protagonist who moves from one sexual relationship to the next, apparently to "give up" (hetero)sexual contacts when she becomes rich, inevitably exposes the limits of those sexual practices that the narrator presents as "normal" or "natural." If anything, the narrative implicitly signals that these "normal" sexual practices are not satisfying for women, at the same time that they are claimed to be highly pleasurable for men. But the narrative's critique of "normalized" sexual practices is mainly inscribed in the gaps of the text, with a marginalized voice occasionally erupting to "poke holes" into the dominating male narrative voice.

Stretching from *Sister Carrie* to "Emanuela," Dreiser's fiction shows that the new female sexuality, which emerged in America's urban centres between the *fin de siècle* and the twenties, was simultaneously exciting and threatening for him. Elizabeth Wilson's analysis of the sexualized female city applies to Dreiser's naturalist fiction: "At the heart of the urban labyrinth lurked not the Minotaur, a bull-like male monster, but the female Sphinx, the 'strangling one', who was so called because she strangled all those who could not answer her riddle: female sexuality, womanhood out of control, lost nature, loss of identity."[19] Dreiser's naturalist fiction is a textual field in which this female, urbanite sphinx gives birth to new fantasies of male conquest, fantasies that simultaneously echo male fears (of castration, of loss of power and masculinity). While turn-of-the-century women fought for their reproductive rights and asserted a claim to women's sexual pleasures in and outside of marriage, Carrie Meeber participates in the twentieth-century dissemination of female sexuality mainly as a fetishized commodity picture: as an actress, she is the incarnation of commodified sex-at-a-distance. This concept of female power encapsulates the ideological chasm in Dreiser's naturalism: it reflects his (feminist) commitment to inscribing in naturalism women's new powers, but it also reveals his simultaneous

18 Freud, "Die kulturelle Sexualmoral," 162–64.

19 Elizabeth Wilson, *The Sphinx in the City: Urban Life, the Control of Disorder, and Women* (London: Virago, 1991) 7.

(antifeminist) attempt to contain these very powers within the boundaries of the genre.

Carrie's female powers are, significantly, embodied in her (hetero)sexual indifference, in arousing male desire without being aroused herself. Emanuela and Carrie Meeber are not attached to any man but are desired by all men and have the gift of "eternally" generating male desire. The mature Carrie, weary of men's advances, seems almost timelessly desirable in her lethargic and unreachable sexual aloofness as a famous Broadway actress. Similarly, even though the narrator-artist of "Emanuela" is no longer interested in his aging friend, her sexual elusiveness inscribes itself forever into his memory, as she continues to preoccupy him as a "temperament and a life that cannot be driven from one's mind" (*GW* 662). These sexualized fantasies fit neatly into the conventions of a predominantly male naturalist genre, reflecting the author's desire to tame and discipline the female's dangerous sexuality – and, even more importantly, her intellect and creative powers – within textual boundaries.

Grudgingly agreeing that Emanuela is a successful popular writer and, as an editor, even publishing her stories in his magazine, Dreiser uses his sketch to ridicule her writing as "conservative" and "conventional." Infuriated that she should have criticized his own naturalist novels, the mature narrator takes sadistic pleasure in convincing the reader of his aging friend's bodily disintegration, which is accompanied by her creative stagnation, again "proven" to be scientifically inevitable because she has "never functioned properly as a woman" (*GW* 719). He would like to see himself as the initiator of Emanuela into true art, but not by discussing art with her on an intellectual level: by initiating her into sexuality, thus establishing her contact with "real life" and giving birth to her capacity to reproduce life in literature. The fact that Emanuela refused to be sexually active with a man "castrates" her as an artist in his eyes. Only through the experience of sex with a man might Emanuela have "better understood life, acquired that grip on reality which would have vitalized the literary or narrative gift that she had" (*GW* 720), even though sex for her would have to involve a submission to a sexuality that she finds repulsive.

Through Emanuela, we also witness the tragic fact that it is "normalization" that triumphs by the end of Dreiser's naturalist sketch. As a mature woman, Emanuela confesses to the narrator: "I should have married or given myself to you" (*GW* 721), a confession that stands out like a sad reminder that she has "failed" to become sexually "normalized" and pays the price in human isolation, once her body has undergone its metamorphosis into mature womanhood. At the same time, however,

Dreiser's naturalist fiction unravels its own gender bias by showing that Carrie and Emanuela cannot be totally captured or defined by the naturalist narrator's sexualized fantasy of power. Not only are the reader's sympathies drawn to Emanuela, but we cannot help but admire her apparently Quixotic resistance against "normalization." It is appropriate that the narrator should end his sketch on a deliberately ambiguous note: "It may be that she is dead – although I doubt it" (*GW* 721). His hypothetical voice suggests that he does not dare close the door completely, and thus the sketch's open-endedness suggests a slim chance that Emanuela may have discovered a new life, a life that is, however, far beyond the narrator's naturalist realm and imagination, a life that he is not capable of writing and that is therefore relegated into the gaps of his text.

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