Dreiser was romantic by taste and temperament. In his autobiographical writings Dreiser often refers to his romantic temper. "For all my modest repute as a realist," he says, "I seem, to my self-analyzing eyes, somewhat more of a romanticist." He speaks of himself in his youth as "a creature of slow and uncertain response to anything practical, having an eye to color, romance, beauty. I was but a half-baked poet, romancer, dreamer."¹

For a man endowed with such mental make-up, it was quite natural to have written some fantasies along with realistic stories. In this chapter I propose to analyse the remaining three stories in the Free collection: one fantasy and two realistic stories. These are: "The Cruise of the 'Idlewild'" belonging to the first category and "A Story of Stories" and "Will You Walk Into My Parlor?" falling under the second category. In "The Cruise of the 'Idlewild'" Dreiser gives a free play to his fancy and displays his inveterate romantic temper. In the early years

¹Dreiser, Dawn, pp. 198-199.
of his career, Dreiser came into contact with the world of journalism and, through journalism, politics when he worked as a reporter. As will be seen later, these two stories—"A Story of Stories" and "Will You Walk Into My Parlor?"—emanate from this period of his life.2

The Cruise of the "Idlewild"

It is the story of a group of people engaged in humdrum tasks in a shop standing at a place on Long's Point, where the Harlem joins the Hudson. Water is on their three sides. The four or five wits among them, especially the narrator, are mortally tired of their routine life. Those wits, who are gifted with the right lightness of spirit, fantasy that their shop is a ship and call her the Idlewild—a really and truly ocean-going vessel. For a while all the men indulge in jest and fancy, thinking that they are not working, but out upon a blue and dancing ocean. The story soars into the regions of fantasy on the wings of marine imagery.

2"McEwen of the Shining Slave Makers," which has already been discussed in Chapter II, is also a fantasy. Because it happened to be one of Dreiser's early stories, it was discussed in that chapter. There are two fantasies in the Chains collection also: "Khat," and "The Prince Who Was a Thief." There is another story in Chains whose critical event is fantastic: "St. Columba and the River." However, fantasies in Chains are minor stories and so have not been discussed in this study. Of course, these stories do show that love for romance co-existed in Dreiser's psyche with the love for realism. According to Mookerjee, Dreiser had "the divided soul." See Mookerjee, Theodore Dreiser, pp. 27-77.
With the passage of time, however, indiscipline ensues and mutiny breaks out on their 'ship' and, figuratively speaking, the *Idlewild* sinks down. A kind of silent sorrow strikes everyone and without some form of humour, the routine life becomes dreadfully monotonous to them. They then decide to raise the old *Idlewild* from the depths of the sea; rechristen her the *Harmony* and start leading again the old merry life.

II

This story brings to mind Keats's Ode "To Fancy." The central thought in this narrative, as in that Ode, is the power of imagination. Most of the characters in this story realise that without imagination and poetry in one's soul and right lightness of spirit, life can become a boring affair. The life of the humble characters in the story is wearisome and monotonous. Reality, though beautiful to a naturalistic writer, does not satisfy them. They find ideal perfection in the *Harmony* their vivid imagination creates for them. Plainly they "needed some such idyllic dream."³ "The Cruise of the 'Idlewild'" is, in short, Dreiser's Ode "To Fancy." In the hands of Dreiser, the fictive "cruise" of the *Idlewild* becomes interesting and significant. A critic has well remarked: "Fiction has the power, as it constructs a microcosm in

³Dreiser, "The Cruise of the 'Idlewild'," *Free*, p.304. All future references to this story are to page numbers in this edition, cited parenthetically in the text.
which characters live and of which they form the
ingredients to endow with significance what would
otherwise be trivial. In this story the theme is
so well dramatised that it permeates its texture and
gives universality to the action.

III

The leading characters of the story are painted
with a comic brush. Old John, the engineer, is "a big,
roly-poly sort of fellow, five foot eleven, if he was
an inch, with layers of flesh showing through his thin
shirt and tight trousers, and his face and neck
constantly standing in beads of sweat" (p.300). He is
a Falstaffian character, a Paul Dresser, vast, jovial,
good-hearted. His laughter and language show his zest
for life. He speaks an English which is, to use Malcolm
Cowley's phrase, "not American but Amurrkn." He longs
to sail in ships. His longings, however, are not
expressions of his frustration, but they betoken his
lively spirit. Senior in age, he is chosen to captain
the 'ship."

With old John is juxtaposed by way of comic contrast

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4 Theodore A. Stroud, "A Critical Approach to the Short
Story" in Short Story Theories, ed. Charles E. May (Athens:
Ohio University Press, 1976), p. 120.

5 Malcolm Cowley, "Naturalism in American Literature" in
Evolutionary Thought in America, ed. Stow Persons (New
Little Ike, whose role is significant in the story, is sketched in detail. He was the blacksmith's helper, who was about as queer a little cabin boy as ever did service on an ocean-going steamer or in a blacksmith's shop—a small misshapen, dirty-faced lad, whose coat was three, and his trousers four, times too large for him—hand-me-downs from some mysterious source; immensely larger members of his family, I presume. He had a battered face, represented in bronze, and his ears were excessively large. He had big mouthful of dirty yellow teeth, two or three missing in front. His eyes were small and his hands large, but a sweeter soul never crept into a smaller or more misshapen body. (pp. 300-301)

Later in the story he is made the butt of the comic pranks of the other characters and when their mischief becomes intolerable, he deserts the Idlewild.

As the story is written in the first person point of view, the reader is rightly not told how the narrator looks, but it is clear from the story that he is a character of superior mental abilities and larger dreams and possesses a contagious zest for living. He has "an inherent desire to tease" and also has "the curious faculty of turning jest and fancy into seeming fact" (pp. 302, 319). Dreiser relies on the technique of indirection.
to draw his character.

The story deals with the above four characters who are of almost equal importance. There are, of course, other peripheral characters such as carpenters, millwrights, tinsmiths, painters and a yard foreman. They stand in the theatrical wings of this story and contribute to its dramatic texture. In Dreiser's fiction humble workers become heroes. Maxwell Geismer beautifully observes: "Dreiser can illuminate the vital center in the most obscure or mediocre souls. His work is filled with minor personages who are lifted into the light of the narrative for a brief moment and then allowed to drop back into darkness and obscurity."6

IV

The narrator reminds the reader that "the Idlewild was not a boat at all, but an idea" (p.301). He goes on to give the genesis of the idea: "Old John was always admiring the beautiful yachts that passed up and down the roadstead of the Hudson outside, and this may have something to do with it" (p.301). So one day old John and the narrator decide to have a boat of their own: their old shop becomes as good as any craft in fancy. They call her the Idlewild since the "men will furnish

the idle, and the bosses will furnish the wild" (p.304).

Inside of fifteen minutes

we had appointed the smith, bos'n, and little Ike, the smith's helper, the bos'n's mate. And we had said that the carpenters and turners and millwrights were the crew and that the "guineas" were the scullions. Mentally, we turned the enginroom into the captain's cabin, and here now was nothing but "Heave-ho-s" and "How does she blow thar, Bill-s?" and "Shiver my timber-s" and "Blast my top-light-s" for days to come. (pp.304-305)

With everything in ship-shape fashion, the narrator, who becomes the mate, describes a sailing day. "In imagination ... we found it equally easy to sail to all points of the compass in all sorts of weather ... all in the same hour" (p.305). To all the seafaring men (and the reader becomes one vicariously) "the Idlewild became more of a reality than is to be easily understood by those who have not indulged in a similar fancy" (p.305). Their 'ship' becomes an objective correlative to the emotions of these men. The narrator narrates the story so vividly that the reader is hypnotised to suspend his disbelief to believe the Idlewild to be a fact.

However, the wits of this 'ship' in an evil hour "lit upon the wretched habit of pitching upon little Ike, the butt of a thousand quips" (p.313). At last he is out of patience with them and "replied with the very cheering news that the captain could 'go to the devil'"
(p.314). The foreman also, "that raw, non-humorous person," asks them to stop this "damn nonsense" (p.316). Ike's rebellious temper lacerates their sense of dignity and order, for they think that "unless we could command him, the whole official management of this craft would go by the board" (p.313). Then another ill descends on them. The captain and the mate fall upon the question of priority and privileges. There was much rancor and discord and finally the whole affair, ship, captain, mate and all, was declared by the mate to be a creation of his brain, a phantom, no less, and that by his mere act of ignoring it the whole ship—officers, men, masts, boats, sails—could be extinguished, scuttled, sent down without a ripple to that limbo of seafaring men, the redoubtable Davy Jones's locker. (p.319)

The captain at first does not believe this and, like a good skipper, attempts to sail the craft alone. But as he lacks "the curious faculty of turning jest and fancy into seeming fact," he fails (p.319). The result is that "the Idlewild was gone, and with her, all her fine seas, winds, distant cities, fogs, storms" (p.319).

For a time they go charily by each other, struck by silent sorrow for the phantom ship. As they have to work in the same room, they find it difficult to get "rid of each other's obnoxious presence" (pp.319-320). From time to time, they think of restoring the old life in some form. Moreover, "the routine work becoming dreadfully monotonous, both mate and captain began to
think of some way in which they, at least, could agree" (p.320). So they build a new 'ship' and call it *Harmony*. The little Ike is also brought back "this time not to torment or chastise, but to coax and plead with him not to forsake the shop, or the ship, now that everything was going to be as before—only better" (p.322). The story ends with a happy note.

**V**

"The Cruise of the 'Idlewild'" is written in the first person point of view. This viewpoint makes the protagonist (or the group of protagonists) the centre of attraction. Therefore the reader can participate vicariously in the events of the action. As the first person is an internal viewpoint, the reader shares the innermost thoughts, feelings and attitudes of the protagonist(s) with a sense of recognition and identity. Moreover, this viewpoint enables the narrator to speak with the voice of conviction and gives credibility to the story. This viewpoint lends itself to humorous novels and stories. Dreiser knew, like Henry James, that a solemn first person narrative is generally a bore. As Dreiser was going to write a 'light' story, he chose for it the right point of view.

This vivid chronological story is launched with the following remark of the narrator: "It would be difficult to say just how the trouble aboard the *Idlewild*
began, or how we managed to sail without things going to smash every fifteen minutes; but these same constitute the business of this narrative" (p.300). After announcing the "business" of the narrative, the leading dramatic personae of the story are presented.

Presently the narrator creates three scenes with great concision and in a rising order of intensity (pp. 307-313). These scenes show how order and dignity of the Idlewild are established. Each of these scenes has a climax of its own. The 'stage irony' in these dramatic scenes is a source of much humour. The undercurrent of tension in these scenes, however, foreshadows the doom of the Idlewild. In between the second and third scene, a snippet of conversation between the captain and the mate follows the thrust of which is that they have succeeded in bringing about "pretty fair discipline" (p. 310). The following dialogue, however, foreshadows the conflict between the captain and the mate, though at present their intention is to badger each other:

"I don't suppose the mate'd ever condescend to take order like that, eh, mate?"
"Well, hardly, Cap."
"Still, you don't want to forget that I'm captain, mate."
"And you don't want to forget that I'm mate, Captain." (p.310)

By any standard it is an excellent piece of dialogue. There is an impression of give-and-take and a forward thrust of idea. The good-humoured collision between
the captain and the mate is quite definite. This small scene is the 'foreshortening' of the conflict which later follows between them.

Transitions in between these three scenes make them independent and yet integrated structural units. These transitions signify the passage of time also. There is the double movement of harmony and discord in these scenes. The conflict, like harmony, is in the ascending order. In the first scene, for instance, the source of conflict is the little boy Ike. He is very emphatic in his vehemence. In the second scene the conflict emanates from a young man, Joe. His conflict is muted and his pathetic life deeply moves the reader whose sympathy is with him. In the third scene the conflict is generated by more than one person, all grown ups. The movement towards harmony is from bad to good, "good to better," and "better to best," respectively. Harmony is generated by the officers by subduing the people who are the source of conflict in these three scenes. The story up to this point constitutes the first part of the narrative. In this part the reader witnesses progression towards order and harmony with an undercurrent of discord and conflict.

The second part of the story records regression towards "anarchy." Dreiser employs the technique of expository narration to show how various characters...
tease little Ike to mend him and how he puts up resistance which marks the beginning of the end of the Idlewild. The brief scene of potential conflict that follows between the foreman and the captain and the mate could have been developed into a major dramatic scene of conflict, but Dreiser does not do it intentionally because by doing so the continuity of the narrative thread of the story would have been snapped. After the conflict between the captain and the mate, the state of the 'ship' is presented in a military metaphor: "Like two rival generals, we now called upon a single army to follow us individually, but the crew, seeing that there was war in the cabin, stood off in doubt and, I fancy, indifference" (p.319). With open conflict between them, the regression towards anarchy is complete. This marks the end of the second part of the story.

How the two "rival generals" arrive at an agreement to raise the old Idlewild constitutes the third part of the narrative. This part is dramatic, full of momentum and the dialogue between Henry (the former mate) and John (the former captain) is racy and sparkling, with touches of pathos in it.

VI

The method of narration in this story is progression—regression—progression corresponding to the three parts
of the story. The structure of the story can be represented diagrammatically as follows:

Arrow 1 represents the first part of the story—the conception and materialisation of the idea of the Idlewild. Arrow 2 signifies the second part, the regression—the "disaster" the Idlewild meets with. Arrow 3 stands for the last part in which progression takes place and Harmony is born. The ending of the story clinches the 'argument' and completes the portrait of the "Cruise." The plot of this story harbours at its journey's end with precision and speed.

VII

Dreiser is generally considered a sombre writer. This story, like some parts of the "McEwen of the Shining Slave Makers," excels in comic vibrations and demonstrates that Dreiser could cast his story in the mode he wanted. The case is considerably exaggerated in order to make the intended point; and the effect
of exaggeration is comedy bordering on fantasy or fantasy bordering on comedy. The tone of the story is generally that of comedy, but it does not impair the seriousness of the author's intention. Moreover, the tone is light without being frivolous.

VIII

When Dreiser was suffering from a nervous breakdown after the 'failure' of *Sister Carrie*, he worked in the railroad as a labourer. Eugene Witle, the protagonist of *The "Genius"*—which is an autobiographical novel—suffers from a similar nervous breakdown and serves as a labourer in a carpenter shop of the railroad. The description and locale of the carpenter shop in the novel and this short story, even certain phrases, are almost alike. On the basis of this evidence it is likely that "The Cruise of the 'Idlewild'" originated from Dreiser's experience in the railroad.

IX

"The Cruise of the 'Idlewild'" was first published in the October 1909 issue of the *Bohemian* magazine.8

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8Pizer, *Dreiser...Bibliography*, p. 19.
Earlier, in 1904, it was rejected by McClure's, The Post, and Harper's Monthly. It was reprinted in Free, which was published on 16 August, 1918. The story appears also in Theodore Dreiser, edited with an introduction by James T. Farrell (New York: Dell (Laurel Reader), 1962).

A Story of Stories

"A Story of Stories" is a story of three stories. In the main it is the story of Collins and Binns—the two rival journalists, both young and ambitious, driven by a relentless spirit of competition. The other two stories concern the negro lover who kills her former flame who was a real beauty after her kind, and a robber who commits the big M.P. train robbery. The character of the two antagonists integrates and unifies these three stories. Dramatic conflict which is at the heart of this action-packed story makes it deeply absorbing. According to Voss, the story is "an entertaining account of the rivalry between two newspaper reporters."

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9 Swanberg, p. 110.
10 Pizer, Dreiser...Bibliography, p. 18.
11 Ibid., p. 164.
12 Voss, p. 179.
The thematic significance of the story lies in the dramatization of the Darwinian-Spencerian phrase, "the survival of the fittest." Like Jack London's physical brutes, Collins demonstrates that the race is to the swift and battle to the strong. The law of claw and fang is extended to the highly competitive world of journalism in the story. Certain words, such as 'wolflike,' 'brute,' 'brutal,' and 'savage' appear time and again in naturalistic fiction. In this story it is Collins's brutal force, as opposed to Binns's refined temperament, which wins. According to Geismar, "the 'gross savage desire' of the reporter in 'A Story of Stories' is the story of) natural power." The veneer of civilization is stripped away in the struggle to succeed. Dreiser believes, like Nietzsche, that life is eventually struggle.

In the opening pages of the story (pp.163-167), the character of the two adversaries is defined and sharply contrasted. Collins, who is serving on the News, and Binns, who is on the Star, are "keen to outwit

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13 Cowley, p. 318.

14 Geismar, pp.341-342.
each other” (p.163). Their personal qualities are contrasted:

Binns could write, never doubt it, and proved it. He was a vigorous reporter with a fine feeling for words and, above all, a power to visualize and emotionalize whatever he saw, a thing which was of utmost importance in this rather loose Western emotional atmosphere. He could handle any story which came to him with ease and distinction, and seemed unusually to get all or nearly all the facts. (p.165)

On the other hand,

Collins, for all his garishness, and one might almost say, brutality of spirit, was what Batsford [city editor] would have called a practical man. He knew life. He was by no means as artistic as Binns, but still—Batsford liked to know what was going on politically and criminally, and Collins could always tell him, whereas Binns never could.... The two were like oil and water, Mussulman and Christian. (pp.165-166)

Not long ago Binns worked for the News, slightly the better of the two papers, under Batsford. It is during this period that Collins and Binns develop an animus against each other. In due time, owing to a chain of accidents and baseless ill-will of Batsford, Binns leaves the News to join the Star.

IV

The story of the negro ex-lover who attacks the
negro girl whom he loved at one time brings to a sharp focus the maddening rivalry between the two journalists. As Binns is gifted with undeniable imagination and a greater skill in writing, he turns their glistening tale "into a rather striking black tragedy" (p.170). But in the News, owing to Collins's inability, "it received but a scant stick—a low dive cutting affray" (p.171). Collins realises that he has been beaten, the next day he clashes with Binns:

"You think you've pulled off sompin swell.... All you guys can do is get a few facts and then pad 'em up. You never get the real stuff, never.... Wait'll we get a real case some time, you and me, and then I'll show you sompin. Wait and see." (p.171)

Months pass. The rest of the story (pp.172-200) is concerned with "that big M.P. train robbery" (p.172). The account of this robbery was published in the papers six months ago. At that time it was believed that seven bandits looted a large treasure of money that was being carried in a train. "The newspapers laughed over the fact that the Governor and his military staff had crawled into their berths and didn't come out again until the train had started" (p.173). Binns's new editor, Waxby, one morning in September receives a telegram which says that it "was a single-handed robbery" and that "there was nothing to that seven bandit story at all" (p.173). The editor asks Binns to go and
interview Rollins, the robber, in the train itself which is bringing him to Omaha.

It so happens that both Binns and Collins meet Rollins in the train to interview him. In the face of Collins's brutal and magnetic force, Binns is undone. Collins asks the robber and the officers to go with him to the office of his paper for making the robber's picture. Even Binns accompanies them there when he suddenly awakes from his state of hypnotism and retrieves himself, meditating on "the inexplicability of the thing that had been done to him" (p.197). When the story of the bandit with his large picture appears next morning in the News, Binns suffers endless tortures. Collins has the laugh of Binns.

V

In the first nine pages of the story (pp.163-172), the character of the antagonists is defined and contrasted and the professional enmity between the two is brought to a sharp focus. The large action of this long period of six months is reduced in length by means of the devices of selection and scale. In the last twenty-nine pages of the story (pp.172-200) which concern the big M.P. train robbery, the events are detailed and dramatised for the sake of maximising the artistic effect. These pages have more unity because almost all the action takes place on a single day.
The presence of both the adversaries on the train makes the ensuing suspenseful action intense and dramatic. The mental state of the two adversaries is captured at the outset. Binns is "all alive with determination not to be outdone in any way, and yet nervous and worried to a degree" (p.177). On the other hand, Collins "seemed fairly to bristle with an angry animal rage, and he glared as though he would like to kill Binns" (p.177). This animal imagery foreshadows the outcome of the contest; Collins is depicted as a ferocious animal who will devour a lesser animal. From this point onward to the moment of locating the robber, Dreiser shows in detail each contour of the action.

In their interview with Rollins, Collins takes the lead. Appropriately, the interview is not reported by Dreiser in question-answer form as it would have taken much space, but with the sure touch of the artist, he divines the right medium and employs narration. The device of narration makes the account of the robbery racy and so the reader's interest does not flag.

Their questions finally extract the story of the robbery, the narrative account of which runs into eight pages (pp.185-192). It has a unity of its own—a beginning, a middle, and an end. The beginning (pp.185-187) is devoted to the background of the robber. The middle part of the narrative (pp.187-191) is concerned
with the causes and genesis of the idea of the robbery Rollins commits, why he commits it alone, and the manner in which he commits it. The ending of the narrative (pp.191-192) concerns itself with the "two slight errors [which] cause him to finally lose the fruit of his victory" and his ultimate arrest (p.191).

As they near Omaha, a new situation concerning the making of a picture of the robber arises. Collins wants that the picture should be made in their office because it would save time to which Binns opposes. Because of the dramatic possibilities, the conflict between them is detailed (pp.192-197). Dialogue, therefore, naturally predominates in these pages.

The last three pages of the story (pp.198-200) make an epilogue comprising three parts constructed in a rising degree of intensity. In the first part Binns tells a half true story to his editor that the superior position of the News has lured them; he does not tell that Collins's force hypnotizes him. The second part of the epilogue concerns the "absolute tortures" which Binns suffers. The third part of the epilogue shows a confrontation some weeks later between Collins and Binns. Binns

... had the immense dissatisfaction of seeing the light of triumph and contempt in his eyes... He had the hardihood to leer, sniff, and exclaim: "These swell reporters! These high-priced ink-slingers!"
Say, who got the best of the train robber story, huh?" (p. 200)

VI

In Dreiser the appeal of the eyes negates the power of the will of the victim. When Collins wants the robber to take him to the office of the News for making his picture, Binns advances certain objections. When he is quieted by Binns's objection, Collins keeps "boring Binns with his eyes, a thing which he had never attempted before" (p. 194). At once Binns begins to feel "a curious wave of warmth, ease and uncertainty creep over him in connection with all this" (p. 195). In short, Collins hypnotises him: "For the first time since knowing him, and in spite of all his opposition of this afternoon and before, Binns found himself not hating his rival as violently as he had in the past, but feeling as though he weren't such an utterly bad sort after all" (p. 195). Earlier, "the cold, revengeful glare in the eyes of Mr. Collins quite took his breath away. Then and there Mr. Collins put a strange haunting fear of himself into Mr. Binns's mind. There was something so savage about him, so like that of an angry hornet or snake that it left him all but speechless" (p. 171). When Clyde is flirting with Sondra in An American Tragedy, he does not have the courage to face Roberta's "steady, accusing, horrified, innocent
blue eyes ... about as difficult to face as anything in all the world." In The "Genius" Suzanne Dale fixes her mother "with a steady look which betokened a mastership which her mother felt nervously and wearily she might eventually be compelled to acknowledge." In Dreiser characters are often struck with the eyes of others.

VII

Dreiser had worked for various newspapers before the writing of Sister Carrie began in 1899. It was at St. Louis that he was hit with the desire to excel in the world of journalism. Dorothy Dudley, who knew Dreiser, writes: "Back in St. Louis (after returning from the Chicago World's Fair) he entered the race again—getting ahead of the other reporter when he could, desolate when he couldn't, ferreting out secrets of lives." From his long and intense stay in the world of journalism, Dreiser knew well the ruthless world depicted in "A Story of Stories." Obviously, this story originates from this period of Dreiser's


17Dudley, p. 97.
In fact, "A Story of Stories" forms parts of Chapters 44 through 46 of *A Book About Myself* in which he writes about his newspaper days. In these chapters he writes about an experience he had when he worked on the *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* in 1893. An attempt, however, is made to disguise St. Louis in the story: "Take a smoky Western city. Call it Omaha or Kansas City or Denver, only let the Mississippi flow past it" (p.163). Names of the newspapers and principal characters are changed; the *Globe-Democrat* becomes the *News*, the *Republic* the *Star*; Red Galvin, a notable St. Louis reporter, who scooped Dreiser "with distressing regularity and seemed unimpressed with his literary genius," is called Red Collins and Dreiser becomes Augustus Binns.

It is not possible to establish the precise date of the composition of Chapters 44 through 46 of *A Book About Myself* (pp.280-306), but according to Swanberg, Dreiser "was finishing [italics added] the second volume of his autobiography, *A Book About Myself*" during 1919-1920. It is probable that the said chapters were written around the same date as "A Story

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19 Swanberg, p. 244.
of Stories." If a comparison of the chapters in question is made with the story, it becomes evident that the autobiographical account influenced the story and not the other way. Such an inference is based on the fact that the characterisation of Binns is much more defined and delineated than that of Dreiser in the chapters in question of *A Book About Myself*.

VIII

"A Story of Stories" appeared for the first time in *Free*, which was published on August 16, 1918.\(^2^0\) Dreiser had, however, submitted the story for publication before the above date in 1918, but it was not accepted.\(^2^1\) As a reference has been made to *A Book About Myself* in Section VII in connection with the source of the story, it may be added that *A Book* was published four years later (1922).

*Will You Walk Into My Parlor?*

Of all the stories in *Free*, this story is the longest—seventy-one pages. The action of the story revolves around two political forces opposed to each

\(^2^0\)Pizer, Dreiser ... Bibliography, p. 18.

\(^2^1\)Swanberg, p. 226.
other. One political force is devoid of all ethics of morality and does not hesitate to employ any method to perpetuate its rule—rather misrule. The other political force represented by Ed Gregory, a crusading newspaper man, plans to oust it from power in the coming fall election. The clash between the two political forces makes the story dramatic and the reader's curiosity is whetted by one suspenseful event after the other. According to Geismar, "the best story in the volume [Free] was probably "Will You Walk Into My Parlor" [sic]—a brilliant little parable of double-dealing in politics and love."22

II

The story shows that a modern day protagonist, such as Gregory, may be a strong-willed man but he is not heroic before the combined force of sex and political scoundrels; he has a heel of Achilles, or, as Dreiser would say, is a victim of his own "chemisms"—and his political enemies understand this much. Thus, Dreiser shows modern man "caught helplessly in the grip of two forces: the forces from within, the compulsions that are experienced as temperamental drives, and the forces from without, the social influences that act upon the character as conditioning factors."23 Like Dreiser's

22 Geismar, p. 341.

other characters, Gregory is caught in the grip of two forces: his own temperamental drives and the force of sex from without. The objective of destroying or blackmailing the protagonist is achieved through sex and semblance of friendship. Out of the space of seventy-one pages the story covers, fifty pages are devoted to the 'interplay' of Gregory and Imogene (pp. 240-299). Both Gregory and Imogene try to win each other through the device of 'love.' The protagonist who wins in the scene of climax is destroyed by the same device in the scene of anti-climax. In Dreiser's world men and women become "manikins played by internal and external forces which they can never control."24

III

Gregory, the protagonist of the story, is high-minded. In the opening page of the story, the omniscient narrator focuses on the protagonist and the point at issue:

Owing to the imminence of the fall campaign ... he [Gregory] was busy ferreting out and substantiating one fact and another in regard to the mismanagement of the city, which was to be used as ammunition a little later on. The mayor and his "ring," as it was called, was to be ousted at all costs.

Mr. Gregory was certain to be rewarded if that came to pass. In spite of that he was eminently sincere as to the value and even the necessity of what he was doing. The city was being grossly mismanaged. What greater labor than to worm out the details and expose them to the gaze of an abused and irritated citizenship?25

Just after this subtle characterisation of the protagonist is juxtaposed a foreshortening of the dark nature of the antagonistic force in the second paragraph of the story (pp.229-230). Presently Gregory monologises: "The mayor would do just what his friend had said. And as for the mayor's friend, the real estate plunger (Tilney), it was plain from his whispered history that no tricks or brutalities were beneath him.... He would not stop short of murder" (p.231). Such is the character of the two opposing forces which meet on the fictional stage of this story.

IV

After Gregory has come to rest at a seaside hotel, the Triton, several things have occurred, one of which is the arrival of Mrs Skelton, "unctuous, hearty, optimistic" (p.232). Meanwhile, Mrs Skelton tries to come closer to Gregory in a circumspect manner. A day

25Dreiser, "Will You Walk Into My Parlor?" Free, p.228. All future references to this story are to page numbers in this edition, cited parenthetically in the text.
or two later she announces with a great air of secrecy about the coming visit of Imogene Carle, a great beauty endowed with the social graces and the gift of repartee. When she comes, Gregory insists to himself that he is "her intended victim" (p.241). He is puzzled how "so dark a personality as Tilney could secure such an attractive girl to do his vile work" (p.243).

In the rest of the story Imogene occupies the reader's attention as she does of Gregory. Though the focus is centred on her, the reader, like Gregory, is not certain about her precise mission. At no time does she betray her motives; in it lies her success.

After a time occur a series of "accidental prearrangements" and the appearance of some mysterious characters who, Gregory finds later, are Mrs Skelton's associates (pp.247-257). These accidental prearrangements strengthen Gregory's doubt about the complicity and duplicity of Mrs. Skelton and Imogene. He feels disgusted "to think of having to be pleasant to people who were murderers at heart and trying to destroy you!" (p.257).

From his long conversation with Imogene (pp.257-270), Gregory begins to see more clearly the glimmerings of truth about Imogene. He decides to win her over to his side so that he may come to know through her the plans or the game of his antagonists. The whole thing "began to take on the fascination of a game with the unconquerable lure of sex at the bottom of it—steeled as he was
against compromising himself in any way" (p.271).

After they arrive at the supposed understanding after their long conversation, Imogene ever tries to be alone with him, "but Rule One, as laid down by Blount [Gregory's friend], and as hitherto practised by him, was never, under any circumstances which might be misinterpreted, to be alone with her (p.271). Friendship in this story serves the interests of politics; it is a perfect protective colouring. Gregory, however, is shocked when an unexpected episode (pp.275-286) takes place one night. Though Imogene has been telling him that she has nothing to do with his political opponents, this episode reveals her in her true colours: she is "tricky, shameless, an actress, one without scruples or morals, her sole object in life, apparently, to advance herself in any way that she might, and that at the expense of everybody and everything" (p.286). She is another Sister Carrie with the difference that whereas Imogene generates the reader's apathy towards herself, Carrie arouses his sympathy.

The next morning there is a long conversation between Gregory and Imogene. By making full use of her female weaponry, she enacts before him a drama of emotion and pathos with an appeal to understand her. When he suggests to her to "write me out a confession of all that's been going on here," she readily and most unexpectedly agrees to do it (p.291). In the romantic
scene that follows, she tries to influence him in an emotional way: "I know I owe this to you, but, oh dear, I'm such a fool. Women always are where love is concerned, and I told myself I'd never let myself get in love any more, and now look at me" (pp.293-294). The story reaches its climax when "they went off to the city together ... to the district attorney's office" to write out the confession and to swear to it (p.294). For Gregory, it is a "great triumph" (p.294).

Two weeks later Gregory and Imogene meet again. "He was fond of her in a platonic way, he now told himself, quite sincerely so. 'I'm taking my career in my hands,'" he says to himself (p.295). Imogene tries to establish a claim on his emotions which it is not easy for him to overcome. However, when he tells her finally that he cannot love her and turns to go, Imogene is a picture of hot passion:

"Ed," she said, "Ed—wait! Aren't you—don't you want to—?" she put up her lips, her eyes seemingly misty with emotion.

He came back and putting his arm about her, drew her upturned lips to his. As he did so she clung to him, seeming to vent a world of feeling in this their first and last kiss, and then turned and left him, never stopping to look back, and being quickly lost in the immense mass which was swirling by. (p.298)

When he turns to go through he observes two separate moving-picture men with cameras taking the scene from
different angles. His triumph turns into defeat and, metaphorically speaking, Gregory now walks into the parlor of his political enemies. Matthiessen is critical of the story for "the unexpected trick ending."

IV

Conflict is at the heart of this story. Certain fairly clear phases of the conflict are evident in this story. At the beginning of the action, a state of equilibrium exists between the opposing parties. An inciting event, the coming fall election, upsets the stability of this preliminary situation and initiates the conflict. Through a phase of rising action the conflict is intensified until it brings the climax and turns the fortunes of the contest in favour of the protagonist. The anti-climax turns the table on the protagonist which leads to the resolution of the story. At the conclusion of the action, equilibrium is restored, but a permanent change has been wrought in the relationship of the conflicting forces.

Crane's "The Open Boat" is another instance of this contour of action. In that story the shipwreck disturbs the state of equilibrium, which brings the men into conflict with the sea. Crane builds the rising

26 Matthiessen, p. 181.
action slowly. The waning of the men's strength attenuates the crisis—the attempt to reach shore through the surf. The conflict is resolved with the success of the three of the men and the death of the fourth. With the disengagement of the conflicting forces the state of equilibrium is once again reached.

V

The nomenclature in this story is functional. The hotel, where most of the action takes place, is called the Triton. The hotel is a microcosm of the big, treacherous world of politics. Like the sea god, each political party tries to blow its own trumpet by subduing the other. Mrs Skelton sits most of the time in the hotel like a skeleton: she is one of "Tilney's stool pigeons" (p.239). But in her physical make-up she is unlike a skeleton. She welters in "what one of Gregory's friends was wont to describe as 'the sinews of war'" (p.231). The incongruity in her name and physical structure makes her a "comic character" (p.239). Gregory is gregarious, after all. The strain of gregariousness in his character becomes the cause of his ruin. Richard Lehan rightly observes that "all of Dreiser's characters carry the seed of victory or defeat within themselves." 27

Gregory's friend, Frank Blount, is frank and blunt like Frank Cowperwood, the protagonist of "The Trilogy of Desire." Imogene can imagine situations to trap her victims, so she has been appropriately christened. Diamondberg, another character, is like an iceberg; he is "dressy, crafty" (p.247), shiny and mysterious. There is something hidden about him. Castleman is a man from a castle, "the son and heir to a very wealthy family" (p.248). The hand of the artist is visible in choosing the names of his characters.

VI

However, "Will You Walk Into My Parlor?" has certain faults. As the story alternates between the omniscient point of view and the interior monologues of the protagonist, it lacks the sharp focus which can make a story compact. The diffused point of view is responsible for the lack of integration between the inner world of Gregory and the outer world of the hotel. The two worlds are not made one. Even the inner world of Gregory is not brought to a pointed focus.

Dreiser is a master in the rendering of setting because of his "solidity of specification" to use a phrase of Henry James. In this story, however, Dreiser just indicates the presence of the hotel, but does not bring it to life by capturing its essence, its mood and cadence.
These failures are attributable to the fact that Dreiser was writing a story with a trick ending. For giving an unexpected ending to a story, the body of the story has to be written in such a manner that the unexpected ending is not expected. In such a story the focus of the writer is not on the protagonist or the setting, but on the trick ending. If this is so, then Dreiser is successful.

VII

During his newspaper days, Dreiser saw from close quarters the working of politics. When he was on the Chicago Daily Globe (1892), the other reporters regarded "Dreiser's bright world of politics and society as a cesspool of sham and self-seeking.... Dreiser's Catholic belief in a firm moral order was further shaken by Maxwell's (the city editor's) insistence that all politics was corrupt, that heroes were really successful crooks."\(^28\)

Some time before Dreiser wrote "Will You Walk Into My Parlor?" Mayor Sluss of Chicago was seduced by Claudia Carlstadt. The seduction of Mayor Sluss became perhaps the germ of "Will You Walk Into My Parlor?" It is worth mentioning that in The Titan (1914) also, Dreiser uses

\(^{28}\) Swanberg, p. 38.
the sex frame-up in political life.

VIII

Because of the raging controversy surrounding The "Genius" in 1916, editors showed coolness toward most of Dreiser's fiction. This story was rejected in turn by The Saturday Evening Post, Ladies' Home Journal, Harper's, Cosmopolitan and four others. It then appeared in Free (1918). The story was republished in Theodore Dreiser, edited with an introduction by James T. Farrell (New York: Dell (Laurel Reader), 1962). The inclusion of this story by Farrell in 1962 shows the relevance of this story to our own times.

IX

The stories examined in this chapter are a mixed lot, encompassing diverse thematic preoccupations. The last two stories discussed in this chapter show that Dreiser turns his lessons from personal experience into fiction. According to Kwiat, "all three (Crane, Norris and Dreiser) focussed their attention on the city scene and the problems of the common man, the spectacle of

29 Swanberg, p.219.
30 Pizer, Dreiser...Bibliography, p.164
business and political power, war, and the hypocrisy of moral professions. All three were strengthening and sharpening their talents for their more serious creative work when they incorporated these valuable lessons from their newspaper 'apprenticeship' into their imaginative efforts as writers of fiction. And that is so. The three stories taken together show the co-existence of the romantic and realistic strains in the mental make-up of Dreiser.

^Kwait, p. 117.