

# The Saturday Review

## of LITERATURE

EDITED BY HENRY SEIDEL CANBY

VOLUME IV

NEW YORK, SATURDAY, MARCH 3, 1928

NUMBER 32

### Strange Interlude

O'NEILL'S "Strange Interlude," certainly one of the most interesting plays that New York has seen this winter, is not so strange as it seems. As drama it may be innovation, but as literature it is just one more mile-post in the race between the novel and the drama toward complete expressiveness, a race that in English has been under way at least since the days of Lyly and Marlowe.

For the last two centuries the novel has led. It was the first to loosen the bonds of technique until nothing human was alien to its powers of exposition and narrative, it was the first to become introspective, and then psychological in the modern sense, and to adapt its loose-flowing structure to new problems of human relationship more interesting than any plot.

It is many years now since the novel plunged into the secret thoughts of its characters, giving them as much space as the spoken word. At first the subjects were subtle and complex persons, with a thought life so rich as to pay large dividends of interest. Such were the characters of Henry James.

Later, the novel turned with democracy toward less heroic man, and discovered, with Joyce and his contemporaries, the piquancy of a more commonplace revelation. A scrutiny of the mind pattern behind the most ordinary actions uncovered a surprising horde of desires, contrarities, instincts, animalisms, aspirations, rushing hither and thither through the brain like leaves in a wind. The novel became double voiced and told two stories at once, one inner, one outer, both necessary for the complete explanation.



"Strange Interlude" is merely the first truly successful attempt of drama to use the double voice. It is interesting to see how rapidly the audience accepts the convention of two tones for each actor, one for his actual speech, the other for those "asides," now become full mental accompaniments, which tell what he feels and thinks. What the novelist has long done, the dramatist now readily takes over, but although this oral thinking is more vivid than the printed page, the playwright can still get at the subconscious only by indirection, if at all. There the novelist, with his permission to explain and describe at length, is still a lap ahead.

There is nothing really new for literature, then, in the technique of "Strange Interlude." But there is new power. The power of drama is the sum of all the conflicting wills or emotions which the playwright can put on his stage. To make hidden thoughts visible, to voice the qualification at the same moment as the statement, to present the lover, outside and inside, all in the same speech, is like doubling the power of a battery. The play becomes more articulate, for now it is all told.

If the audience comes away from "Strange Interlude" gorged with drama, this is the reason. They have taken down a play with all its text and all its notes in one giant swallow. No one can tell them any more about anyone in the cast than by speech, and voiced thought and reflection, has already been given them. One begins to long after a while for the highly charged line that in the great dramatists said so much and yet left so much to the imagination. The drama has lost its sinewy leanness which in the past has made the best judges prefer it to fiction.

It has lost, too, its sense of rigorous form, imposed by restrictions, some of which are now thrown overboard. The great novelists have seldom been willing to reduce their stories to classic proportions;

### Hollyhocks!

By LEW SARETT

I HAVE a garden, but, oh, dear me!  
What a ribald and hysterical company:  
Incorrigible mustard, militant corn,  
Frivolous lettuce, and celery forlorn;  
Beets apoplectic and fatuous potatoes,  
Voluptuous pumpkins and palpitant tomatoes;  
Philandering pickles trysting at the gate,  
Onions acrimonious, and peppers irate;  
And a regiment of hollyhocks marching around them,  
To curb their mischief, to discipline and bound them.

*Hollyhocks! Hollyhocks! What should I do  
Without the morale of a troop like you!*

Some lackadaisically yawn and nod;  
Others, hypochondriac, droop on the sod:  
Cabbage apathetic, parsnips sullen,  
And peas downtrodden by the lancing mullein;  
Boorish rutabagas, dill exotic,  
The wan wax-bean, bilious and neurotic;  
Dropsical melons, varicose chard,  
And cauliflowers fainting all over the yard.  
Thank heaven for the hollyhocks! Till day is done,  
They prod them to labor in the rain and the sun.

*Hollyhocks! Hollyhocks! Stiff as starch!  
Oh, fix your bayonets! Forward! March!*

### Upton Sinclair

By WALTER LIPPMAN

MR FLOYD DELL attempts at the outset of a recent book\* to explain to "bewildered American readers" why Upton Sinclair is "regarded throughout the world as his country's most distinguished literary figure," and to explain to readers abroad why at home he is not accorded "the rank to which it would seem he is entitled by his achievements." I am compelled to take Mr. Dell's word for it that Upton Sinclair is in fact so immensely esteemed. It just happens that my acquaintances abroad have had a somewhat more modest estimate of his greatness. But that, of course, means very little. Mr. Dell knows better than I do what the world thinks, and he is incurably certain that Upton Sinclair is another prophet who is insufficiently honored in his own country.

Mr. Dell's certainty would nevertheless be more persuasive to me if he had not attempted to give his reasons. For his reasons are so paradoxical that they sound fantastic. The world, he says, has found in Upton Sinclair "a realistic description and intellectual interpretation" of modern industrial America, but the inhabitants of this modern industrial America have not "as yet" outgrown their idealistic conceptions sufficiently to accept Mr. Sinclair's realism. This is a large assumption, for it amounts to saying that foreigners are better judges than Americans of what constitutes a truthful account of American civilization. Mr. Dell does not seem to think that this assumption is even arguable. He is certain that Europeans must be right and that Americans must be wrong.

I think it is an arguable point. Surely it is conceivable that Upton Sinclair's formula for interpreting America suits many Europeans because it is a European formula, and that his descriptions seem to them veracious because they confirm the prejudice of Europeans. Mr. Sinclair has described America as given over to Mammon, and has interpreted its future according to the prophecies of Karl Marx. I, for one, am not impressed when I hear that this seems realistic and intellectual to European socialists. That is exactly what one would have expected European socialists to think. They are only human and they agree with that which they wish to believe. Nor am I humbled because Americans do not agree with what Marxists in Europe think is a true interpretation of America. It is possible that Americans know more about themselves than European Marxists know about them.



I admit that if Upton Sinclair were a poet, or a philosopher, or a painter, or a novelist dealing with human character, I should be disturbed at hearing that he is more honored abroad than at home. Europeans might be better qualified to judge than we are. But they are not better qualified to judge the veracity of an interpreter of American life. That depends upon knowledge and experience which they rarely have.

Mr. Dell's uncritical certainty that Upton Sinclair is a "great realistic novelist" leads, I think, to the ruin of what started out to be a searching study of an extraordinarily interesting human being. For up to that crucial period in the story when his hero is converted to socialism, and sets out to grapple with American civilization, Mr. Dell is master of his subject. He employs the psycho-analytic apparatus shrewdly, and in my opinion convincingly, to describe the young man who without Shelley's genius

\* UPTON SINCLAIR, A STUDY IN SOCIAL PROTEST. By Floyd Dell. New York: George H. Doran. 1928. \$2.

### This Week



- "What About Advertising?"  
Reviewed by *Ernest Elmo Calkins.*
- "A Man of Learning."  
Reviewed by *Henry Noble MacCracken.*
- "The Making of a State."  
Reviewed by *Hamilton Fish Armstrong.*
- "Bad Girl."  
Reviewed by *Grace Frank.*
- "Story of Architecture in America."  
Reviewed by *Aymar Embury II.*
- "Conquistador."  
Reviewed by *Bernard De Voto.*
- "Lotus and Chrysanthemum."  
Reviewed by *Arthur Davison Ficke.*

### Next Week, or Later

- "What Then Is Art?"  
By *Charles A. Bennett.*

they would not forego the opportunities for by-play and sequel. Thackeray injects moral essays, Tolstoy philosophizes, Fielding writes criticism, Meredith tosses words about, Hardy does landscapes, Flaubert inventories Normandy, Dickens stops at every way station. They supply a context to the story which undoubtedly enriches reading and gives an illusion of full life and the satisfaction of learning as one  
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would be Shelley nevertheless. He appraises his youthful insistence upon being poor and outcast, his self-inflicted torments, his huge and abounding self-pity. But when he comes to deal with the Upton Sinclair who evolved out of all this, Mr. Dell's critical powers desert him. He suddenly asks us to believe that the young man who at twenty-one had "his imagination . . . securely barricaded against life" was transformed at twenty-five into a great realist. I am unable to believe it. I am not denying that a great change took place in Upton Sinclair. He became a socialist and he began to write powerful indictments of industrial America. What I quarrel with is Mr. Dell's theory that this change meant that Upton Sinclair had been transformed from a person with a morbid distaste for actuality into the greatest American reporter of actuality.

Mr. Dell not only believes that this was the kind of change which took place, but that he can explain it psycho-analytically. But psycho-analysis is a game at which any number of amateurs can play, and so I herewith state that I am prepared to show, using only Mr. Dell's own data, why, speaking psycho-analytically, Upton Sinclair never did become the realist Mr. Dell thinks he is. In this game it is necessary to be brutally frank about intimate matters. My only apology is that Mr. Sinclair himself has been far more extensively frank about his intimacies than I shall be, having written an immense novel on the subject, and also that his biographer, Mr. Dell, devotes two chapters to the subject.



Mr. Dell's theory is that this pseudo-Shelley became a great realist as a result of his marriage. Assuming that "Love's Pilgrimage" is an autobiographical novel, Mr. Dell concludes that Thyrsis, the young poet of the story, was afraid of life because he was afraid of women. He describes the temptations of Thyrsis and his self-mortification, his victorious resistance, his marriage to Corydon, his desire to be married and chaste, and the hell which this ideal raised for both Thyrsis and Corydon.

Parenthetically, I should like to say that in a footnote Mr. Dell prints an extract from a recent letter of Mr. Sinclair's in which it is stated that "no human male could have been more pitifully ignorant of the female critter, body, mind, and soul, than I was at the age of 21. It was a tragedy, but I was not to blame. It was the Victorian age." Still parenthetically, I should like to add that Mr. Sinclair's present determination to blame the Victorian Age, that age of wedded bliss, strikes me not only as the climax of all that is humorless, but as a dreadfully convincing symptom that he has never grown up.

Nevertheless, Mr. Dell thinks that he did grow up into a great realist, and he ascribes the transformation to the fact that the flesh was too strong for Thyrsis, and that he shortly became the father of a son. It was in this surrender to the realities of marriage that "his imaginative resistance to reality" broke down, and within a very brief time he had become a great master of reality. I should be less skeptical of Mr. Dell's psycho-analytic competence if it were more certain that Upton Sinclair did in fact become a great realist. But of course, the fact that Thyrsis consented to embrace Corydon is not evidence that Upton Sinclair writes realistically about industrial America. Mr. Dell thinks that when Thyrsis succumbed, he was prepared to understand life. But I have another theory which, I submit, is just as plausible, and is to me preferable, because it explains why Upton Sinclair, though a father and a husband, continued not to understand life.

If you look at the record set down by Mr. Dell you find that when Thyrsis ceased to rebel against woman the tempter he immediately went into violent rebellion against Mammon the tempter. He shifted from one object of rebellion to another, and I should have supposed that an experienced novelist like Mr. Dell would have paused over this coincidence and speculated. He might then have asked himself whether the conversion to socialism was, in fact, a radical transformation of his hero's character, or whether it was a translation of his character on to a new plane. Mr. Dell never seems to have asked himself that question. He regards Upton Sinclair's youthful asceticism as "morbid." But his hero's wholesale disgust with all the institutions of mankind, he regards as the wholesome disposition of a great realist. Perhaps Mr. Dell is right. But I distrust his diagnosis. I don't see why he should

feel that disgust with sex is morbid, but that disgust with almost everything else is fine, unless it is that Mr. Dell dislikes the asceticism of Mr. Sinclair because he is not himself ascetic, but that he likes his socialism because he is himself a socialist.

It seems to me fairly evident that Mr. Dell was on a good scent when he selected the sexual experiences described in "Love's Pilgrimage," as the critical period in his hero's life. But I think he has misunderstood his data. If the psycho-analytic formula is to be employed, it surely is a tenable theory that instead of becoming a realist when he accepted marriage, Thyrsis transferred his repugnance from his own family to society at large. The normal rule is that when the young radical marries and settles down he becomes conservative. But here was a young conservative of aristocratic Southern parentage who married, settled down, and then became a radical. He rebelled against marriage, was conquered, and then rebelled against the beef trust. In the light of this strange sequence of events it seems to me highly probable that when the fires of rebellion were damped down by domesticity they burst into flame in another sector of his soul.

If this is a correct explanation, it might explain why it is so hard to find anyone, not himself a Marxian socialist, who accepts Upton Sinclair as a veracious reporter of American life. I have not read his forthcoming novel about Boston, but I would wager that it will seem least realistic to experienced Bostonians, and that it will seem crushingly true when it is translated into Russian. My own experience has been that Upton Sinclair was most plausible when I was most ignorant; that the moment he dealt with something I had observed myself, his account of it seemed to me either wildly inaccurate, or at least just wrong enough to be thoroughly misleading. I am thinking particularly about "The Brass Check," his book about the prostitution of the press. The few incidents in that book of which I happen to have personal knowledge are fairly accurately stated. They are as accurate, I should say, as the work of a good second-rate reporter with no editor to check him up. Yet not one of these incidents is inwardly a true account of what happened. They are mere gossip, that is to say, the facts have the color and emphasis of an outsider who has heard of the affair at second hand, and has not understood it intuitively for himself.



I do not deny that "The Brass Check" is effective pamphleteering. Possibly it is a great pamphlet. But it is not, as Mr. Dell asserts, a work of great imaginative realism. It is not imaginative because it never penetrates the outward behavior of the villains, and it is not realistic because it is not altogether truthful of villains. All the figures in Mr. Sinclair's world are automata except the sublime and tormented hero who is at war with them. There is only one thing in Mr. Sinclair's world which he treats with that respect which is due to reality. That is his own conception of his own mission among men. Everything else is stage properties and supers. That is why it takes hundreds of pages to do justice to the tribulations of Thyrsis in dealing with Corydon, but one sentence is usually sufficient to explain why a business man, a politician, a professor, a publisher, a priest, or an editor is a god-forsaken selfish wretch.

Mr. Dell's notion that this is great realism is due, I think, to the simple error of assuming that a writer is a realist if he deals with factories and mine bosses rather than with gardens and knights in armor. Perhaps Mr. Dell and I have different ideas as to what realism is, for in one place he says that Upton Sinclair has done for modern industrial America what Fenimore Cooper did for the Indian. That may be true, but does anybody think of Cooper as a great imaginative realist? I have forgotten. I have not read Cooper since I was a boy, nor a novel of Upton Sinclair's since the first time Debs ran for President, but I should guess that if Upton Sinclair is another Fenimore Cooper, then that clinches my argument that he is not a realist. For as I understand realism it is the effort to convey a sense of actuality, to make experience of the world vicariously available to a man in an armchair. I should suppose that a novel is realistic only if it does this, and not merely because it adapts the commonplaces of our existence to the conventions of literature.

Now to my mind Upton Sinclair's writing is insulated against experience. He has erected a structure of theories in front of his eyes which is so dazzling that nothing in the outer world is clearly visible to him. These theories and his own responses

to them are his world, and he can accept only those bits of experience which illustrate and confirm his theories. The child has been father to the man. The lonely young poet, afraid of his own instincts, afraid of money, afraid of women, afraid to make friends, did not become clear-eyed and perceiving when he was converted to socialism. He simply used the socialist philosophy to barricade himself more elaborately against the world whose contamination he dreaded, and behind this barricade he has achieved a certain kind of security and self-assurance by winning fabulous victories over creatures of his own imagination. This, I think, is why his influence in American life is so negligible in comparison with the circulation of his books. He does not influence America because he does not deal with America. He merely uses American things to work out his own fantasies.



In saying that his influence is negligible I refer to his direct influence on American life. He may be, as Mr. Dell says, "one of the leaders of a significant American literary movement" because "he is one of the great pioneers in the fictional discovery and exploitation of modern America." That may be a sound estimate. Upton Sinclair may be a pioneer in fictional discovery, that is to say in the discovery that modern America can be dealt with by writers of fiction. But to say that he has discovered the fictional possibilities of modern America is quite a different thing from saying that he has discovered America. In the history of American literature Mr. Sinclair may indeed be a Columbus. But like Columbus, there were others before him; like Columbus he has never set foot on this continent; and like Columbus he has never known, and perhaps will never know, what continent he has discovered.

What Upton Sinclair has really tried all his life to discover is not America but the Messianic Kingdom. He is an apocalyptic socialist. He believes that this mundane society of ours is about to disappear and that the reign of righteousness is about to begin. In 1907 he stated quite succinctly that it would begin in 1917. In 1917 for a brief while he thought it had begun, and he wrote that "now the day is coming, the glad, new day which blinds us with the shining of its wings; it is coming so swiftly that I am afraid of it." He summoned the young people who are "the readers of my books" and announced to them that "out of the pit of ignorance and despair we emerge into the sunlight of knowledge, to take control of a world, and to make it over, not according to the will of any gods, but according to the law in our own hearts."

It was time in 1917 to prepare for the new dispensation, and so he advised his young disciples to renounce their carnal appetites. They must give up drinking "the newest red chemicals, smoking the newest brand of cigarettes, and discussing the newest form of psychopathia sexualis." We must quell "the fires of lust in our hearts" he said. We must stop "destroying our nerves with nicotine." For "whether we will it or not, we have to take charge of the world."



This apostolic conviction that our wicked world will shortly pass away, and that a new society of regenerate souls will take its place, is the heart of Upton Sinclair's socialism. Naturally, in the light of such exalted expectations the ordinary cares and responsibilities of earthly life seem trivial. The difficulties of keeping this world going must seem to him beneath his notice. They will all disappear soon. Hence his socialism is poles asunder from the socialism of men like Ramsay MacDonald or Lenin. It has no real affinity with actual socialism as a concrete political philosophy. Actual socialism is about ninety-eight per cent. concerned with the next budget and the next harvest and the next diplomatic encounter, and about two per cent. with the apocalyptic vision. But this messianic socialism is a different thing entirely. It has surmounted all practical difficulties by assuming that they are destined inexorably to be surmounted. Its devotees are a sect who have withdrawn from sin and responsibility to await the coming of the kingdom. Those who remain in the world are pagans who have not yet heard the glad tidings.

The pretentious sociological apparatus which serves this faith is a random accumulation out of pseudo-Hegel and pseudo-Darwin, the intellectual debris of certain speculations on the continent of Europe during the nineteenth century. All this is fortuitous. But the vision itself is a dream which