THE MATERIALS OF THEODORE DREISER'S AN AMERICAN TRAGEDY

THOMAS KRANIDAS

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CHAPTER ONE: DREISER'S LIFE

Theodore Dreiser has left to us an immense amount of biographical and intellectual data. We have his life in three large volumes; we have his friends and acquaintances in three volumes; we have his politics, aesthetics, and philosophy. He has left very little unsaid.

The data is often bewilderingly contradictory. But the basic "facts" of his life are set forth with such minute detail, with such extraordinary candor, and at such length that we accept them. We are thankful for this documentary background of the novels. We accept as prime factors of his life what he has presented to us: his youthful poverty, his anti-Catholicism, his love for his mother, his very active sex life.

But the danger of writing the biography of Dreiser lies in accepting candor as whole truth. We are tempted to accept the detail as evidence of validity and as frank truth. The candor, the merciless exposure of personality is accepted as truth.

Dreiser has taken a part of the critical problem out of our hands. He has shown the influences and the pressures and the goals. He has drawn his own picture of himself, a picture almost always accepted.

I think there is something suspect in this self-portrait. The mass of detailed biography serves as a defense as
well as an exposition. We are forced to evaluate a Dreiser novel in terms of a Dreiser who is presented to us like a Dreiser novel. So much is explicit that our analysis, once we accept his candor, is almost predetermined. We must struggle to free ourselves of the Dreiserian self-portrait when we approach the works.

We must recognize that the autobiographical works come relatively late in Dreiser's career and that they represent his life as the mature novelist wished to present it. With all his detail, Dreiser has ordered and emphasized as he saw fit. Much of this writing is self-conscious, much of it, misleading.

The autobiographical writings are extraordinary as sources of many of the dramatic situations in the novels, but as a description of the intellectual backgrounds of the fiction they are incomplete. They deny by their candor the factor of mature self-consciousness. They make explicit Dreiser's intellectual positions and hence challenge our right to study these intellectual positions.

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Theodore Dreiser was born in Terre Haute, Indiana, on August 27, 1871. His father, a German Catholic immigrant, had married in 1850 Sarah Schanab, the daughter of a prosperous Moravian farmer. John Paul Dreiser, a weaver by trade, had made his way west from New York working for woolen mills.
He was industrious and thrifty and in 1870 was running his own mill at Sullivan, Indiana.

John Paul refused to insure his mill on religious grounds and when it burned in 1870, he was ruined. An injury suffered while rebuilding part of the mill, payments for wool stored in the mill, and the "Yankee trickery" of strangers had combined to crush John Paul Dreiser. By the time that Theodore, the ninth child, was born, John Paul Dreiser was unable to provide a steady income for his family. Defeated and old, he tried to cling to "...his strict conception of the role played by the head of the family--a practice which, as his son noted, 'did not flourish in this looser, western social polity.'" The older Dreiser children, feeling that their contributions to the family income gave them freedom from parental authority "were no longer prepared to listen, much less to accept, his diatribes on conduct."

A struggle developed. The older children openly defied their father, whose almost fanatic piety did not touch them. Theodore grew up in an atmosphere of poverty and conflict between religious dogma and youthful revolt.

For Theodore, his father's attitude had the force of a great denial. Although at first it touched him mainly through the reactions of the rest of the family, Paul Dreiser's view assumed the shape of something disagreeable and hostile to Theodore's happiness. The other children had rebelled against their father's discipline. They would not go to church as he wished; they would not obey the laws of sobriety and virtue. Young Paul was three times in jail for petty crimes, Rome associated with idlers, gamblers and women of reprehensible virtue. The older girls...seemed more concerned with spending.
precious money in selfish, "sinful" pleasures than in practicing the virtues, and behaved "shockingly" with men.\textsuperscript{5}

I quote this passage at length because it represents the standard view of Dreiser's father and his relationship to his children. Both Dreiser and his biographers have emphasized the dogmatism of John Paul Dreiser and minimized the immorality of the children. The liberal critic has insisted on putting quotation marks around immorality, thereby making the attitude of the father the prime factor. Piety and poverty are "influences" in Dreiser's background but immorality, the breaking of the sexual code, and its effect on the family are not.

One of the Dreiser girls came home to bear the illegitimate child of a Terre Haute lawyer, another ran off with a married man to New York where she rented rooms to "girls of questionable virtue."\textsuperscript{6} Paul and Rome had been in jail; the latter died an alcoholic. John Paul Dreiser's code proved ineffectual. Theodore grew up in a very unconventional home. The piety of his father certainly could not protect the family from social censure. Despite the family's many movings from town to town and house to house, Theodore sensed social disapproval not only of poverty but of conduct.

In the background looms the large but nebulous figure of Dreiser's mother:

...a temperament to be reckoned with: strong, patient, understanding, sympathetic, creative, humor-loving and helpful...A magnetic, dreamy soul...beyond or behind so called good and evil. ...A happy hopeful, animal mother, with a desire
to live and not much constructive ability with which to make real her dreams."

Dreiser's mother emerges as almost heroic in the accounts of her. Robert H. Elias writes, "Instead of judgment, she gave her children understanding and sympathy." And Professor Matthiessen states:

...she lived richly through her many children with all their affairs and problems enfolded in her embrace. Their responding love for her was based upon her faith in and enthusiasm for them. She gave them constant encouragement out of the depths of her often "all too tired courage."

Dreiser's mother was the center of the family which despite its "peculiarly nebulous, emotional, unorganized, and traditionless character," was "genial" and "affectionate." "In each new community, they found themselves discredited for not having done well financially. And they were always being isolated by local conventional notions of propriety."

Dreiser was to draw on his family background later when he wrote so intimately and convincingly of poverty and when he wrote so purely about sex. But from the family immorality and ostracism and revolt, there came complex and often contradictory social attitudes. Compassion and snobbery, worship of the high-class and pity for the wretched, hatred of religion and a common superstition all had their place in Dreiser's intellectual life. Above all, there was an overwhelming desire to establish himself, an attempt to prove himself socially in the only way he knew, by intellectual contempt or profundity or sophistication. Dreiser was later to spend much time on the question of class, and always with an ambiguous,
personal attitude.

One of Dreiser's earliest mental attitudes, his hatred of the Catholic Church, was established not so much at home as at school. "The terrors and frustrations of the religious training his father believed proper,"12 are bitterly set forth in Dawn:

The inanity of teaching at this day and date, and as illustrated by the Holy Roman Catechism, the quite lunatic theories and pretensions of that entirely discredited organism to divine inspiration and hence leadership and of putting that unscratched tablet, the mind of a child, into its possession or care! Fie! Faugh! The alleged intelligence of a maundering world.13

Though Catholic discipline failed in the home, it governed Theodore at school; and school and teachers, he later claimed, have more influence than home and parents.14 From his seventh to his fourteenth years, he was in parochial schools in various towns, the family moving from town to town in Indiana and Illinois. After a brief stay in Chicago, they returned to Warsaw, Indiana, where Dreiser, in his fourteenth year, entered public school for the first time. After the frightening experiences of parochial school, he seized upon the encouragement of his teachers. He read books of all sorts, from The Alhambra to Samuel Smiles's Self-Help. He failed, prophetically, in grammar, but was promoted to the eighth grade, and later to the ninth. Here he met Miss Mildred Fielding, who told him that he "had a much more sensitive mind than the rest of the class, that he must go on, for she knew he would find his way."15
Out of a poverty-stricken family in which sex successfully defied religion, Theodore Dreiser emerged at the age of fifteen, an awkward, callow boy, "blazing with sex," but frightened by his first sexual experience into a feeling of inadequacy. 16 Badly educated but encouraged by his public school teachers and the flashy success of his brother Paul, he lived in a dream-world of vague and romantic ambition. In this period, just before his own independence, he remembered especially the warm, sympathetic image of his mother. "The silver tether of her affection, understanding, sweetness, sacrifice" 18 held him in Warsaw. But "a wild, flaming enthusiasm for the color of life" 19 made him quit school and go to Chicago.

Chicago, one year after the great fire, was to Dreiser, "an Aladdin view in the Arabian Nights." 20 Although two of his sisters were living in the city he remained independent. After a few miserable weeks as dishwasher, he took a position as shipping clerk in a hardware firm, at five dollars a week. Here, at his first steady job, he met the first of a long line of intellectual eccentrics who were to influence his life so significantly and take the place of a formal education. They were first and foremost unconventional. The first influence, Christian Aaberg, not so important as some later ones like Peter B. McChord and Charles Fort, impressed the youthful Dreiser:

He had read...God knows what! --everything. ...He would talk to me by the hour...But not the
silly, glossed, emasculated data of the school histories...but the harsh, jagged realities and savageries of the too real world...He also told me why Socrates had been compelled to drink the hemlock; that the cross was originally a phallic symbol. 21

Theodore was joined in Chicago by his mother and some of his brothers and sisters and "the state of our family as a collective unit was perhaps as good as it ever was..." 22 But the job he held and his desire for clothes, 23 an important factor from now on in his life, made him unhappy, even in the midst of the drama of growing Chicago.

After two years of work in Chicago, he went to Indiana University as a special student. Miss Mildred Fielding, moved by her belief in Theodore, had made the arrangements. Here is the first example of some powerful element in Dreiser's personality that later made him so magnetic for men and women. It is an element that does not come out in his autobiographical writing but that influenced and held many people.

Dreiser's year at college was not happy. It was filled with his feeling of social and sexual inferiority. He was passed over by the fraternities; he felt keenly the lack of clothes and money; his sexual life was centered on a fear of impotency. Yet, again some compelling personal force endeared him to various fashionable campus leaders.

Dreiser left Indiana with little more than a casual acquaintance with a formal education. Nor was he much impressed with the intellectual life of the university:
I could not help smiling at the starchy seriousness of most of it. It was so ultra-cultural... and so cautious. This whole business of living was taken, not with a grain of salt, but with a protective armor of propriety.\textsuperscript{24}

In \textit{Hey-Rub-A-Dub-Dub}, he was to say: "...the average American school, college, university, institution, is as much against the development of the individual, in the true sense of that word as any sect or religion..."\textsuperscript{25} Yet he called the year one of the "most vitalizing"\textsuperscript{26} in his life; it taught him what it meant to be "a free intellectual agent."\textsuperscript{27}

The academic life did not much impress Dreiser and he refused Miss Fielding's offer of another year at Indiana. Back in Chicago, he worked in a real estate office. Shortly after, his mother collapsed and died. In arguments over Sarah Dreiser's burial, Dreiser broke finally and completely with the Catholic Church.

With Mrs. Dreiser's death, the family as a unit was ended and Dreiser moved into an apartment with only two others of the family. He worked as a laundry-truck driver and later as bill collector. He travelled over all Chicago, and met people of all classes. He lost his collecting job when his bosses found he had kept twenty-five dollars to buy a stylish overcoat with satin lining. The experience terrified him even though no legal action was taken. He later considered it as marking the close of his youth.\textsuperscript{28}

It was during his collecting days that Dreiser first began "formulating my first dim notion as to what I wanted to do in life."\textsuperscript{29} Eugene Field's column, "Sharps and Flats," which
appeared daily in the Chicago Daily News, gave him more "feeling for constructive thought" than any of the novels, plays, poems, histories, he had read earlier. The spectacle of Chicago, "a world metropolis springing up under one's very eyes," thrilled him. He listened to the famous preachers of Chicago and mimicked their oratory. He began to improvise "rhythmic, vaguely formulated word-pictures or rhapsodies" which he later wrote down and sent to Eugene Field. Dreiser's first attempt to write aroused no comment from the famous columnist.

Dreiser was fascinated by the apparent glitter and energy of the great newspaper offices. After a number of disappointments, he received a temporary assignment in connection with the Democratic National Convention of 1892. His position became permanent when he got a "scoop" on the nomination of Grover Cleveland.

Dreiser describes himself at this time as "a dreamy cub of twenty-one, long, spindling, a pair of gold framed spectacles on his nose, his hair combed la pompadour, a new spring suit...new yellow shoes..." But his career as newspaper man was a successful one. Almost immediately, he was allowed to do feature stories with strong local color. "Why I could write reams upon any topic when at last I discovered that I could write at all." And Professor Matthiessen adds:

The copious, often turgid flow of words, responding to the rhythms of his feelings and struggling to reproduce them, set up what were to remain the lifelong habits of his writing.
In six months, Dreiser was a star reporter. His career, in Chicago and later in St. Louis, was encouraged by his superiors. He specialized in feature material, even humour, which he disdained. The book which tells of his newspaper experience is largely a story of success.

In St. Louis, Dreiser met Peter B. McChord, an illustrator on the Globe-Democrat. In the section "Peter" in Twelve Men, Dreiser gives us some of his feelings on McChord:

...splendid really in thought...

...emphatic and important...

...blessed with a natural understanding that was simply God-like...

...simple brilliant and varied in tastes...

--a most singular, curious and wonderful mind...

I have known many writers, many geniuses even, but not one his superior in intellect and romantic response to life. He was a poet, thinker, artist, philosopher and master of prose.36

Dreiser's friendship with McChord lasted many years. After reading "Peter," one can scarcely understand Dreiser's taking him seriously. McChord seems the clever Bohemian with a practical sense of getting along, a shallow appreciation of the arts and a selfish and cruel disposition. "Say, Dreiser... Have a kid or two or three. There's a psychic punch to it you can't get any other way."37 Dreiser's literary and artistic friends were to include Sherwood Anderson, Mencken and Masters; Dreiser places McChord above them.

By the spring of 1894, urged on by his brother Paul, Dreiser headed east for New York. He was already engaged to
Sally White, the country schoolteacher he had met on a special reporting assignment. The marriage took place in 1898 but by then "the first flare of love had thinned down to the pale flame of duty." The story of the unhappiness it caused both Dreiser and his wife is found in The "Genius" and the short story, "Free." Dreiser stopped in Toledo, Cleveland, Buffalo, and Pittsburgh on his way to New York. In Toledo he met Arthur Henry, who became his close friend and encourager. In Toledo and Cleveland he walked the fine residential streets admiring the large homes, just as Clyde Griffiths was to wander along Wykeasy Avenue in Lycurgus. In Pittsburgh Dreiser worked on the Dispatch, specializing again in "human interest." Here he became conscious for the first time of the gigantic economic problems America was facing. Here, too, he read Balzac, Spencer, and Huxley. Balzac showed him "a prospect so wide that it left me breathless." Spencer blew him "intellectually to bits." Professor Matthiessen writes:

Pondering Spencer's cool proposition that "life in its simplest form is the correspondence of certain inner physico-chemical actions with certain outer physico-chemical actions," his own emotion warped it into something far less objective: "Up to this time there had been in me a blazing and unchecked desire to get on and...now in its place was the definite conviction...that one lived and had his being because one had to...Of one's ideals, struggles, deprivations, joys, it could only be said that they were chomic compulsions...Man was a mechanism, undevised and uncreated and a badly and carelessly driven one at that."

Dreiser left his Pittsburgh position, hopeful of finding
rewarding work in New York. He finally found a position on the World but left it in despair at getting only marginal assignments. He experienced a period of real poverty; watching the tramps and unemployed in City Hall Park one day and fearing for himself, "the idea of Hurstwood was born." \(^44\)

In the fall of 1895, Dreiser became editor of a magazine started by Paul's music publishers. A little later, he was able to trust himself to free lance writing of articles varying in subject from "American Women Who Play the Harp" to "The Chicago Packing Industry." \(^45\) He did a series of articles for the magazine Succes, touching thinly on material which he would later exploit in The Financier and The Titan. By 1899, he had made Who's Who in America (its first issue) and was listed as Journalist-author.

In the summer of 1899, six months after his marriage, Dreiser and his wife visited the Arthur Henrys in Maumee, Ohio. There, at the insistence of Henry, Dreiser wrote his first fiction, "McEwen of the Shining Slave Makers." The story was accepted and in the next two years, three more were published. By the time Dreiser wrote "Nigger Jeff," he had reached the point where he could tell his story clearly, if clumsily, and with power. "I'll get it all in!" cries the reporter in "Nigger Jeff," \(^46\) and by this time, Dreiser was beginning to get it all in. On his statement, "I was swelling with an excess of sympathy, wonder, respect, even awe," \(^47\) Matthiessen comments, "The four qualities he enumerates will run like a plain song through his best fiction." \(^48\)
The circumstances surrounding the writing, publication, and suppression of *Sister Carrie* constitute one of the best known chapters of the history of naturalism. The book, written under the promptings of Arthur Henry, was enthusiastically praised by Frank Norris; then a reader for Doubleday. Doubleday published the book, but did not advertise it because of opposition from the publisher's wife. The book appeared in 1900; it was "one of the two or three most important events in American literature." In America the book received a limited and unenthusiastic critical and public reaction; in England, it established a reputation for Dreiser. Arnold Bennett soon hailed it as "perhaps the great American novel."

The years following the suppression of *Sister Carrie* were the most trying in Dreiser's life. Poverty, the indifference of publishers, and marital difficulties led him to the brink of suicide. He suffered from insomnia and hallucinations. Then with the aid of Paul and a job in the open air, he began his recovery. In the fall of 1903 he secured a position as assistant feature editor of *Munsey's Daily News*. He renewed his interrupted editorial career with amazing force and speed. By spring of 1906, he was managing editor of *The Broadway Magazine*; he raised circulation from twelve thousand to over a hundred thousand in less than a year. In 1907, he became director of the Butterick "trio"—*The Designer*, *The New Idea Woman's Magazine*, and *The Delineator*.

Professor Matthiessen titles this period in Dreiser's career, "Ten Years in the Desert." Dorothy Dudley says of
him at this time, "He was a procurer among literary prostitutes." But during this period, he met Mencken and the bolisterous and important friendship began.

In 1910, Dreiser lost his position with Butterick as the result of an affair with the daughter of a woman prominent in the organization. At that time he had a considerable reputation not only as editor but as novelist. *Sister Carrie* had been reissued in 1907 and had sold ten thousand copies. Canadian and Australian editions followed. Dreiser was now able to assume a full time literary career.

Dreiser applied himself to *Jennie Gerhardt*, a novel on which he had been working for some years. It was published by Harper and Brothers in April, 1911. In the same year, Arnold Bennett told interviewers, "Dreiser is the most significant figure among your writers." He had already written most of *The "Genius"*, a book which shows Dreiser's literary self-confidence in presenting so many of the known facts of his life. But he could still write to Mencken:

I am going to do three more books, then if there is no money in the game I ('m) going to run a weekly. I can write a book every six months I think, so I won't be long out of the editing game unless perchance I should make a living this way. Who knows?33

Dreiser did not achieve financial success with his writing until the publication of *An American Tragedy* in 1925. But since the publication of *Jennie Gerhardt* he was an important figure in America. His travel memoirs were published in 1913; his short stories, sketches, and poems were appearing in mag-
zines. He was the "Arriving Giant In American Fiction."\(^{56}\) The Financier (1912), The Titan (1914), and The "Genius" (1915) kept him in the critical eye. When The "Genius" was suppressed in 1916, dozens of writers protested; among them were Edward Arlington Robinson, Willa Cather, Amy Lowell, Robert Frost, and Ezra Pound.

During the publishing of The "Genius" and the subsequent censorship, Dreiser had published two more volumes, Plays of the Natural and the Supernatural in February of 1916, and A Hoosier Holiday later in the year. The royalties from these two books as well as from The Titan went to Lane Company to cover an advance of $1800 which Dreiser had received on The Bulwark. Sales on his three earlier novels were now trickling off and Dreiser was again in financial difficulties.

Despite his trouble with censors and money, Dreiser kept on writing. The Hand of the Potter, written in November and December of 1916, is a tribute to Dreiser's sincerity, coming as it did, at a time of financial necessity and promising no particular gains. The play, both as book and on the stage, was not popular. Furthermore, it marked a cooling of relations between Dreiser and Mencken who felt that the theme of perversion demanded "a degree of freedom that is obviously impossible....you stand in serious danger, through this play, of being definitely labeled as a mere shocker of books...."\(^{57}\)

Dreiser's answer was spirited and stubborn. In one of his best letters, he wrote:

> When you...tell me what I can or cannot put on...
the stage, what the artistic or moral limitations of the stage are and what the American people will stand for, you may well be within your critical rights but my answer is that I have more respect for my own judgment in this matter than I have for yours. In other words your limitations are not mine... What has a tragedy ever illuminated—unless it is the inscrutability of life and its forces and its accidents. 58

And in a letter a few days later, Dreiser wrote:

Tragedy is tragedy and I will go where I please for my subject. If I fail ridiculously in the execution let the public and the critics kick me out. They will anyhow. But as long as I have an adequate possession of my senses current conviction will not dictate to me where I shall look for art—in tragedy or comedy. My inner instincts and passions and pities are going to instruct me—not a numbskull mass that believes one thing and does another. 59

These two letters written in December of 1916 are indicative of more than Dreiser's changed relationship with Mencken. They show Dreiser's increasing confidence, his increasing self-consciousness, and his assumption of the role of pioneer naturalist.

In July of 1917 Dreiser was approached by Horace Liveright with a plan for the publication of all his works (then scattered among three publishers) by the new firm of Boni and Liveright. The financial arrangements were encouraging and Dreiser was assured of publication. By 1923 arrangements were concluded.

Dreiser published Twelve Men in March of 1918; it is an example of his best work; factual, detailed, honest, naive, and warm. A Book About Myself, the story of his days as a reporter (later issued as Newspaper Days) had much the same
quality but less interest and more self-consciousness. In 1923 *The Color of a Great City*, a collection of early local-color sketches, was published. In addition, he was writing poems, stories, and biographical sketches by the dozen. He was entering the social field more and more with numerous articles on censorship, Hollywood, birth control, euthanasia, public ownership of utilities, and others; he was writing introductions to books by friends. He read widely in science and philosophy, became enthusiastic over the eccentric philosophy of Charles Fort and the theory of the physico-chemical will of Jacques Loeb.

Dreiser engaged in an active intellectual life in Los Angeles where he lived from 1919 to 1922. Here he met Helen Richardson, a young Hollywood actress, with whom he lived for the rest of his life. With a considerable degree of financial and emotional security, Dreiser settled down to work on *The Stoic* and *An American Tragedy*.

The critical reception of *An American Tragedy*, published in 1925, indicated how far Dreiser and American naturalism with him, had progressed in twenty-five years in capturing public attention and esteem. An immense change had come over the thinking of critics like Stuart P. Sherman, who had, in 1917, attacked *The "Genius"* at great length. 60 Sherman now wrote:

...a long stride toward a genuine and adequate realism....I do not know where else in American fiction one can find the situation here presented dealt with so fearlessly, so intelligently, so exhaustively and therefore with such unexception-
And Joseph Wood Krutch wrote of it as "the great American novel of our generation." 

Dreiser now found himself with enough money to indulge in "Caribbean blue shirts, vanilla ice-cream socks, and pea-green bow ties." He moved into a new apartment and bought a country home near Mt. Kisco. Much of the old longing for what he thought of as "the better things" was finally indulged even to a Russian wolfhound on a leash.

Dreiser's next volume was a volume of poems or "lyrical philosophy." This volume, Moods, Cadences and Declaimed, was a collection of poetry written over a period of ten years. The mode of expression came "out of a mystic depression," according to Dreiser. They were, evidently, important to Dreiser. This volume was followed in 1926 by Chains, a collection of "lesser novels and short stories."

In 1927, Dreiser accepted the invitation of the Bureau of Cultural Relations of the Soviet Union and visited Russia. He spent three months there. Dreiser Looks at Russia, which appeared in 1928, marks the beginning of Dreiser's involvement in politics, an involvement that increased until it finally dominated the last twenty years of his life. Although the book presents Dreiser as "...an incorrigible individualist --therefore opposed to Communism," it credited the Russians with an immense accomplishment and vision. When he returned to New York, he said to reporters, "...between the free and uncontrolled grafting we face here daily and a regulated ac-
cumulation centered in the Government, I prefer the Russian system."66

A Gallery of Women, two volumes of biographical sketches written as a sort of sequel to Twelve Men appeared in 1929. Although Dreiser considered this book an important one, it met with little approval.

Tragic America, published in 1931, is a series of pamphlets. "The kind of documentation that served him well for the broad effects of fiction," Professor Matthiessen writes, "was too imprecise for detailed economic analyses, and betrayed him into many errors of fact."67 This same imprecision in thinking along economic and political lines led Dreiser into numerous contradictions. Despite his obvious alignment with the Communists in most issues, he constantly asserted that he was an individualist. A curious example of Dreiser's deviation from the "party line" was his pronounced anti-Semitism.

In 1932 Dreiser publicly supported William Z. Foster, the Communist candidate for president. In 1936 he voted for Roosevelt. He was, according to Matthiessen, "...fighting within himself, the most destructive prejudice of our time, anti-Semitism." In October, 1939, he could write to Mencken, "I begin to suspect that Hitler is correct. The president may be part Jewish..."69 America Is Worth Saving, published in 1940, upheld the American isolationist position. When Hitler invaded Russia, Dreiser's position, with that of the Communist Party, changed. In 1944, Dreiser was broadcasting for
the GWI and speaking of the "thousands upon thousands of helpless and often heroic Jews."  

But despite his political activities Dreiser's last years were inwardly serene. The Bulwark and The Stoic, published after his death, show a religious peace and affirmation. The tremendous contradiction of a communist political view and a mystical religious did not affect the last two novels.

Dreiser died on December 28, 1945. The contradictions of his life were symbolized at his funeral. A Congregational minister read the service; John Howard Lawson paid tribute to Dreiser's social conscience; and Charles Chaplin read a poem from Moods. He was buried in Forest Lawn. The minister, the Marxist, and the artist praised him. The marvelous American cemetery was his resting place.
FOOTNOTES TO CHAPTER ONE


4. Ibid., p. 6.


6. Ibid., p. 18.


11. Ibid., p. 13.


19. Ibid., p. 16.

20. Ibid., p. 19.


23. Ibid., p. 19.
27. Ibid., p. 21.
28. Ibid., p. 23.
30. Ibid., p. 1.
31. Ibid., p. 2.
32. Ibid., p. 3.
33. Ibid., p. 36.
34. Quoted in Matthiessen, op. cit., p. 24.
35. Ibid., pp. 24-25.
37. Ibid., p. 50.
41. Ibid., p. 411.
42. Quoted in Matthiessen, op. cit., p. 41.
43. Ibid., p. 41.
44. Dreiser, A Book About Myself, p. 464.
45. Matthiessen, op. cit., p. 48.
46. Ibid., p. 54.
47. Ibid., p. 54.
48. Ibid., p. 54.
49. Ludwig Lewisohn, Expression in America, New York, 1932, p. 473.
50. Matthiessen, op. cit., p. 94.
51. Ibid., p. 93.
53. Elias, op. cit., p. 149.
55. Ibid., pp. 127-128.
63. George Jean Nathan, quoted in Matthiessen, op. cit., p. 213.
64. Matthiessen, op. cit., p. 213.
66. Ibid., p. 216.
67. Ibid., pp. 221-222.
68. See below, p. 33.

70. Quoted in Matthiessen, op. cit., p. 227.

71. Matthiessen, op. cit., p. 249. Elias disagrees, claiming Dreiser's personal life was troubled at this time. See his Theodore Dreiser, p. 307.

72. Helen Dreiser, My Life with Dreiser, Cleveland, 1951, p. 321.
CHAPTER TWO: DREISER AS THINKER

Do I contradict myself?
Very well then I contradict myself.
Walt Whitman

I am neither for nor against the Marshall Plan.
On the other hand, I am neither against nor for
the Marshall Plan.
Abe Burrows

The picture of Theodore Dreiser as a cosmic philosopher,
full of brooding pity, has been present in American criticism
for many years. From early critical appraisals of the novels
to the posthumous tributes to the man, there is continual
reference to Dreiser's philosophy, Dreiser's deep thinking,
Dreiser's intelligence. In 1922 Carl Van Doren wrote:

Not the incurable awkwardness of his style nor
his occasional merciless verbosity nor his too
frequent interposition of crude argument can de-
stroy the effect which he produces at his best—
that of an eminent spirit brooding over a world
which in spite of many condemnations he deeply,
somberly loves....he gains on the whole as much
as he loses by the magnitude of his cosmic phi-
losophizing. These puny souls over which he
broods, with so little dignity in themselves,
take on a new dignity from his contemplation of
them....Though it may be difficult for a thinker
of the widest views to contract himself to the
dimensions needed for naturalistic art, and
though he may often fail when he attempts it,
when he does succeed he has the opportunity
which the mere worldling lacks, of ennobling his art
with some of the great light of the poets.¹

Joseph Warren Beach writes:

Dreiser's style is all of a piece with his gener-
al want of concern for imaginative writing as
such. As wholes his books are of extreme in-
terest because of the large spirit, the passion-
ate intelligence which informs them.²
The "philosophy" goes back to Dreiser's newspaper career. At that time it was a kind of dead-pan seriousness, incongruously appearing in feature columns, and later in the pages of the magazines he edited. In his first published fiction, "Noëwen of the Shining Slave Makers," his hero thinks: "What worlds within worlds, all apparently full of necessity, contention, binding emotions and unities--and all with sorrow...

This kind of interpolated philosophy appears in all the novels with the notable exception of An American Tragedy. It is clumsy, and often falls back on clichés, as in Sister Carrie:

Among the forces which sweep and play throughout the universe, untutored man is but a wisp in the wind...We have the consolation of knowing that evolution is ever in action, that the ideal is a light that cannot fail.

The philosophy of Sister Carrie and Jennie Gerhardt is obtrusive but still very much part of the story. In The "Genius", the philosophy becomes self-conscious--Dreiser is making his character a mouthpiece:

At this time, Eugene had quite reached the conclusion that there was no hereafter--there was nothing save blind, dark force moving aimlessly...He had already tackled Spencer's "First Principles" which had literally torn him up by the roots and set him adrift and from that had gone back to Marcus Aurelius, Epictetus, Spinoza and Schopenhauer...

Already, in The "Genius", Dreiser is beginning to document his philosophy. He cites authority as in the above passage or authority in the habits of animal life as in the passage on the protozoa

in the same book. The latter introduces a
strain of scientific pseudo-erudition. In the fiction the most famous example is in the description of the black grouper in The Financier. 8

The "Genius" presents a thinking hero, a man torn by cosmic thoughts. It is of course self-consciously philosophical because the hero is Dreiser. This book with its protozoa and Christian Science introduces us to some of Dreiser's intellectual pretentiousness. By the time that Dreiser published A Traveler at Forty, the pretentiousness had become dominant. The following passage is self-conscious, omniscient, patronizing:

For myself, I accept no creeds. I do not know what truth is, what beauty is, what love is. I do not believe any one absolutely and I do not doubt anyone absolutely. I think people are both evil and well-intentioned.

The omniscience becomes smug, the pessimism dogmatic, the tone a subdued one of false humility, the attitude becomes a pose in Hey-Rub-A-Dub-Dub:

But I am one of those curious persons who cannot make up their minds about anything. I read and read, almost everything that I can lay my hands on--history, politics, philosophy, art. But I find that one history contradicts another, one philosopher drives out another. Essayists in the main point out flaws and paradoxes in the current conception of things; novelists, dramatists and biographers spread tales of endless disasters, or silly illusions concerning life, duty, love, opportunity and the like. And I sit here and read and read, when I have time, wondering.

The final sentence, with its "when I have time," the pains taken to present Dreiser himself rather than his doubt, are keys to the false humility. Dreiser parades himself as a deep
thinker who has read everything and knows that nothing can be known.

The height of insincerity, pomposity, and semantic foolishness is found in his "Credo;"

I can make no comment on my work or my life that holds either interest or import for me. Nor can I imagine any explanation or interpretation of any life, my own included, that would be true—or important, if true. Life is to me too much a welter and play of inscrutable forces to permit, in my case at least, any significant comment. One may paint for one's own entertainment, and that of others—perhaps. As I see him the utterly infinitesimal individual weaves among the mysteries a floss-like and wholly meaningless course—if course it be. In short I catch no meaning from all I have seen, and pass quite as I came, confused and dismayed.

The infinite regress of doubt makes the statement meaningless. Dreiser's "no comment" is hardly sincere for a man who was publishing almost a volume a year.

Dreiser's more violent philosophical side is not so disturbing as his false humility. In Dawn he attacks the Catholic Church savagely as in the passage I have quoted on parochial schools. This violence of The Pioneer Naturalist appears in Epitaph:

Is this Universe ruled
By a Being who knows pity?
(I think not)
Is he ruthless,
Brutal,
Bestial
A cad?
(I think so.)
Does he know anything of love?
Justice?
Tenderness?
Beauty?
Hell!
This is late Pioneer Naturalist and rated a quite fancy edition which sold at $12.50. Dreiser's brutal materialistic message seems vividly insincere bound in Japanese silk. Dreiser described his volume of poems, Moods, Cadenced and Declaimed, as "lyrical philosophy." In the poem "Little Keys," there is an intellectual pomposity expressed through the short lines, an implication of large meaning in the very terseness of:

Little keys
Little keys
That unlock the little doors
To little visions
Little delights--
That open them
To little pleasures
And little pains
That divine so little
Reveal so little
And yet here--
Beyond
The great doors.
And the great locks;
The giant doors.
And the giant locks
That the little keys
Will not unlock.

And again there is implied weightiness in the bated breath of the short lines of "As With a Finger On Water:"

As with a chalk upon a board
Or
With a pencil upon a slate
Or
With breath upon a pane
Or mist
Or
With a stick in sand--
Or dust
The aspirations
The dreams
And the achievements
Of men.
The "lyrical philosophy" of the poems stands as testimony not only to philosophical pretensions but to artistic pretensions. The volume of one-act plays called *Plays of the Natural and the Supernatural* has a similar effect. "Laughing-Gas," which Dreiser considered his best work at the time of its publication, has the fancy quality of high-ritual Art. Massive ideas and esoteric titles cavort together. One of the characters in the play is The Rhythm of the Universe who says, "Voom. Voom. Voom." The hero, under gas, experiences the meaning of life. "The arc of his flight bisects the first of a series of astral planes." In one of these astral planes, he learns that he is "a mere machine run by forces you do not understand."

The same disregard for clarity and the same jumbling of massive symbols appears in "Phantasmagoria," a section of *Hey-Rub-A-Dub-Dub*. The characters include The Lord of the Universe, Beauty, Ambition, Love, Hate, and Six Powers of Darkness. The three scenes take place in The House of Birth, The House of Life, and The House of Death. This creation is not a parody; it is the "imaginative writing" of philosophy. Dreiser's large spirit and passionate intelligence informs it.

Dreiser's contempt for the numbskull mass is in most of his philosophy. His pretension to mental superiority shows in his cries of "Hell!", in his cool, erudite, false humility, in his terse omniscience, in his garbled, gaudy symbolism. Dreiser was always "serious;" the critics made him a "philosopher." What they recognized as breadth in his novels was
made "passionate intelligence."

The critics did not praise his philosophy. Mencken said of Hey-Rub-A-Dub-Dub, "It is not so much unintelligible as unintelligent," and Van Doren had called it the most negligible of his books. But he was still the "cosmic philosopher." Perhaps it was the sharp drawing of battle-lines that prevented the liberal critics from hitting Dreiser hard. Perhaps it was the tremendously difficult critical problem of finding what is good in Dreiser when he is moving and broad and important.

Paul Elmer More reviewed Hey-Rub-A-Dub-Dub and commented:

The remarkable thing is not that Mr. Dreiser should be in this state of unstable equilibrium, but that he should pose, or be posed by his publishers, as an original thinker.

Even Professor Matthiessen, the most conscientious of the Dreiser critics, dismisses this telling review because of its tone of "cool distaste of the new humanist."

Dreiser's champions have had a difficult time in explaining his philosophy. Robert H. Elias prefaces his "definitive" study of Dreiser with:

...He cannot be dismissed as a confused genius; he cannot be dismissed as a foggy giant; he cannot be dismissed as a man who despite a sophomoric philosophy wrote great novels.

The resulting interpretation is characterized by a fusing of contradictions into a "composite" attitude or an arbitrary labeling of the zigzag intellectual course as "development."

I have not discussed Dreiser's philosophy; I have touched
rather on his philosophical attitude. I think the key to
Dreiser's philosophical writing is pretentiousness, a pose of
intellectual superiority. I have discussed the style of the
philosophical writings rather than the content, because I find
the content trivial and repetitive. Rather than discuss
Dreiser's "inconsistent mechanism," I will quote Professor
Trilling:

When he (Dreiser) thinks like, as we say, a
philosopher, he is likely to be not only foolish
but vulgar...He thinks as the modern crowd thinks
when it decides to think: religion is nonsense,
religionists are false, tradition is a fraud,
what is man but matter and impulses, mysterious
"chemisms?" And yet there is the vulgarly sav-
ing suspicion that maybe there is Something Be-
hind It All. It is much to the point of
Dreiser's vulgarity that Dreiser's anti-Semitic
was not merely a social prejudice but an
idea, a way of dealing with things.

Dreiser's anti-Semitism which had been suggested in some of
his earlier works, exploded in the pages of The Nation when
an exchange of letters between Hutchins Hapgood and Dreiser
was printed in 1935. Dreiser's letters, dated 1933, con-
tained the stock anti-Semitic arguments: lack of "the fine
integrity" for law, clannishness, cosmopolitanism, etc.
The letters indicate a shocking ignorance, a shocking switch
of positions from letter to letter. Perhaps even more sig-
nificant, it elicited the following letter from Selden Rodman,
then editor of Common Sense:

I know nothing of the circumstances surrounding
this correspondence. Nor had I ever before
heard of the person who presumes to "expose" him.
Anyone who knows Dreiser at all knows the fol-
lowing about him. First, he is not a politician,
much less a diplomat or a theorist. In conversa-
tion or in correspondence he may say things merely because they come into his head or perhaps because at one time or another he believed them strongly or felt them. Second, he is absolutely honest and as a consequence frequently steps on people’s toes; undoubtedly he wrote as he did because he felt as he did. Third, Dreiser came from the Middle West and he is still a Middle Westerner. It would be naive to expect him to retain all of that section’s great virtues with none of its prejudices. Fourth, anyone who knows Dreiser knows that, prejudice or no prejudice, he would be among the first to rise up and protest if either fascism or Jew-baiting became widespread in this country. Fifth, Dreiser is a great and good man; for many years he has proved himself not only always on the side of the oppressed but one of the strongest and most reliable allies that the liberals and radicals have.

The letter is important because it suggests the following about Dreiser. First, he is stupid; second, he is honest; third, he is prejudiced (as is the writer of the letter); fourth, he is a fighter; fifth, he is great and good. Rodman indicts not only Dreiser but himself.

Professor Trilling writes:

Dreiser, of course, was stronger than the culture that accepted him. He meant his ideas. But we, when it came to his ideas, talked about his great brooding pity and shrugged his ideas off. We are still doing it.

The brunt of Professor Trilling’s attack falls on the liberal critics who disregarded Dreiser’s ideas but saw in him “the most detached and keenly observant of all our writers...a vast and terrifying imagination.” Dreiser’s honesty is unchallenged. Yet it is Dreiser himself who used his “philosophy,” not to present ideas, but to present himself as an intellectual aristocrat. His version of that aristocracy varied.

Sometimes it was the Bohemian one of the one-act plays and
poems where Peter B. McCord reigned; sometimes the thundering candor of Dawn where the Natural Man was the ideal; sometimes the really high-class contempt of his Credo. It was all part of his yearning for place, for class. Even his interpretation of his youth is colored by his pose as thunderer; his father suffers, his sisters and brothers are ignored. The shame he must have felt as brother to streetwalkers is covered by his hatred of Catholicism.

Dreiser's yearning for the high class led him to his incredible intellectual pretensions. Assuming as self-evident his stupidity and ignorance, we are appalled by the picture of a foggy giant, struggling to be "smart," writing volume after volume of trash, corrupting his great gifts.

One of the keys to Dreiser's social thinking and to the feelings directing his writing, is his conception of the High-class Woman. The phrase is, I think, appropriate; it implies a vulgar conception of a woman with certain qualities that set her above other women, a woman who is desirable to men as a class distinction, a woman of good family, good education, money (generally) and of a certain kind of rarefied prettiness. Rarified is perhaps the best word for her; she is fragile and needs special care by nature, yet she is independent and selfish. The High-class Woman appears again and again in the films (not often as heroine) and under the caption "Truth Announced" in the New York Times. She is always well-dressed but she is also calculatedly careless about money, friends, lovers. She is always brave but she never
holds a job.

Dreiser's foremost High-class Woman appears in the Cowperwood trilogy. Of Berenice Fleming, Dorothy Dudley writes:

The young girl...whom Dreiser himself loves, his one heroine except for his mother, but made out of dreams instead of memories, is described as with a high-bred litheness--"She had the air, the grace, the lineage, the blood—that was why..."34

Although the circumstances of her background are unusual (her mother is a madam) she is quite unperturbably fine. Cowperwood's pursuit of her is fanatical. She represents to him the utmost in desirability, not from a downright sexiness like that of Aileen Butler, but rather from her air of inviolability, of ultimate social chasteness.

In The "Genius", the High-class Woman is Suzanne Dale—young, rich, perfect. To Eugene Witla, she is worth the sacrifice of his marriage, money and career. Suzanne is described as:

...oval faced, radiantly healthy, her full lips parted in a ripe smile, her blue-gray eyes talking pleasure and satisfaction, her forehead laid about by a silver filigree band beneath her brown chestnut curls protruded. Her hands, Eugene noted were plump and fair. She stood erect, assured, with the least touch of quizzical light in her eye. A white, pink-bordered dress draped her girlish figure.35

Suzanne Dale never develops much beyond this party-dress description of her. She talks bravely to her mother, runs away with Eugene, and endures bravely, but her emotions are never convincing, and her actions never seem like much more
than undergraduate pranks—not too far, really, from proper supervision. Her talk, too, is very like girl-school talk:

"Mama," said Suzanne, with the least touch of temper, "I wish you wouldn't talk to me like that. I'm not a child any more. I'm a woman. I think like a woman—not like a girl. You forget that I have a mind of my own and some thoughts. I may not want to get married. I don't think I do. Certainly not to any of the silly creatures that are running after me now. Why shouldn't I take some man in an independent way, if I wish? Other women have before me. Even if they hadn't, it would be no reason why I shouldn't. My life is my own."36

Suzanne talks on and on in this tone of baby-sophistication. It is almost comically unreal. Since The "Genius" is so closely autobiographical this particular Suzanne probably corresponds to the girl who caused Dreiser to lose his lucrative editorial position. Elias says of the real girl, "Although the girl was cold and aloof, that fact simply made her more interesting..."37 She shows a type that attracted Dreiser in life as well as literature.

Dreiser's ideal woman is diffused throughout the poems, a figure to be set among and complimented with the conventional symbols of luxury—jewels, fountains, statues, silks, satins. In the poems, she is worshipped with a kind of chivalry.

You are like an idol
Made of ivory and pale silk
And set in a shadow...38

In A Gallery of Women,39 Dreiser presents various types of women; the high class woman is here in several sketches obviously superior, obviously set apart. In the Gallery the
High class women are called Lucia and Albertine; Emanuela comes from "one of the most comfortable if not exactly fastidious homes of northern, conservative Illinois." Ida Hauchowout and Bridget Mullany are the low-class women of the series; in An American Tragedy the low-class women are called Hortense Briggs, Doris Trine, and Laura Sipe. The names of Dreiser's upper-class women point to the shallowness and naiveté of his conception. Albertine and Lucia are in A Gallery of Women. In The "Genius" it is Suzanne (not Susan) Dale; Suzanne's friends are "—Vera Almerding; Lizette Woodworth; Cora Ten Eyck—a half dozen girls who were smart and clever and socially experienced." Berenice Fleming in the Cowperwood trilogy is in the same tradition. The names are if not downright fanciful, hyphenated, exotic, at least cool and distinctive. The climax of "distinctive" names comes in An American Tragedy. Sondra is like a childish drawing of the exotic name Sandra; and children drawl when they talk like rich people. Sondra's friends are called Bertine Granston, Arabella Stark, Bella Griffiths and Constance Wynant. And these names are not used as part of a Dickensian caricature but as part of what Dreiser considered "class."

The upper-class women of Dreiser's novels are not sexy, they have even a slight touch of frigidity like the photos of Vogue models. Aloof rather than interested, they put a social rather than sexual gauge on their young men. These women are not portrayed deeply enough to give us any feeling of real superiority. There is no real delicacy or insight that re-
fects careful training. There is rather a shallow stereotype of a pretty, vain, well-dressed young woman. Dreiser never once did justice to a young woman of the upper classes. The pathetic urgency and humanity of Angela Blue is infinitely more real than the thin aloofness of Suzanne Dale. The wild, sexy independence of Aileen Butler is convincing; the rarified air of Berenice Fleming is not. And as we shall examine later, the rude love of Roberta Alden is convincing while the baby talk of Sondra Finchley is not.

Dreiser wanted to write about the rich; he had a pitiful need to appear familiar with the "great world." But he was not familiar with it. And when he wrote about it, he wrote about the surface qualities of it, never once touching the refinement, the sense of superior knowledge and awareness through ease. Dreiser was a snob on one level, a man with exorbitant class yearnings, a man who resented his origins and was scornful of the lower classes. He looked down upon the woman who came from "one of the most comfortable if not the most fastidious homes of northern, conservative Illinois." He looked down on the men who worked with him in the railroad yard near Spuyten Duyvil. The only examples of humor in Dreiser are those in which he is heavy-handedly laughing at the working men in "The Cruise of The Idlewild," and the nasty comments on taste in Fine Furniture. Dreiser's vision was clouded many times by this snobbery. It led to certain cruelties and flippancies and to certain absurd superficialities. It drove him to portray the rich with absurd, unreal
strokes. It drove him in his non-fiction to tolerance of poverty and ugliness as the correct complement to thought and beauty. It drove him to attempt a portrait of himself to the reader as a knowing, superior being. From the early lie to Who's Who about being a published author through the ugly sarcasm of A Traveler at Forty to the repeated references to his father's mill in Dawn, Dreiser was trying to convince us that he was a "somebody."

And all this time Dreiser knew and felt and wrote that class was unimportant, that wealth was an evil thing, that the rich were not so very much after all. Through his work rages his own private battle between hate and resentment of the upper class and abject admiration and envy, and an attempt to identify with them. Wherever Dreiser's class consciousness touches his writing, the effect is false. Wherever he attempts to identify through knowingness or annihilate with scorn, he is unrealistic. Wherever he sees his character as apart from his social yearnings, as united to him, not in education and money, but in love, hate, hunger, fear, he is realistic. So Roberta is true and Sondra is not. Cowperwood reflects Dreiser's admiration, but Dreiser does not attempt to approach him; Dreiser writes of appetite in Cowperwood and he writes well. He writes of "class" in Berenice and he writes badly. Coming from a miserable background, exposed to the gaudy world of his brother and realizing that there was a higher world, he was trapped. He wanted to enter the upper class. Much of the time he knew that he could not and was
bitter. Some of the time he thought to fool himself and his readers that he could enter it at will; then he wrote badly, out of false knowledge of himself and his subject. Some of the time, he forgot his own class quandary and then he wrote powerfully and beautifully.

After rejecting Dreiser's "pyknotic scraps of learning" as ignorance and his vituperation and false humility as pretentiousness, we are still left with the novels. The novels, of course, reflect some of the false intellectual light of the non-fiction. But there is something "incredibly memorable," something of breadth in them that sets them apart. Something in the novels makes Dreiser important. Professor Matthiessen writes:

...it would be idle to speak of Dreiser as a naturalistic novelist in the sense of having a system of human behaviour that he wished to illustrate...Yet there is a wider and looser, but still authentic, sense in which he was a naturalist. From first to last he was driven to try to understand man's place in nature, to a far more profound degree than any of his American contemporaries in fiction; indeed for a parallel we should have to go back to Melville's grappling. This is what gave Dreiser's books their peculiar breadth: they are universal, not in their range of human experience, but in the sense that an only partly known universe presses upon and dominates his searching consciousness of what happens to all of his characters.

This is perhaps the best case that can be made for Dreiser as philosophical novelist, that is, his success in describing the pressure of the unknown universe on his characters. There is a sense of largeness that can be termed philosophical. It is the pressure of the unknown on the minutely known, minutely limited characters that Dreiser has given us.
One of Dreiser's great effects is of the intellectually small individual--Hurstwood, Jennie Gerhardt, Angela Blue--asking the overwhelming philosophical question. After Dreiser has built up the physical quality of his characters, after he has made their minds completely possessed by thought of materialistic gain, he can bring them to a crisis and suddenly they ask, like Hurstwood, "What's the use?" The effect is terrifying.

It is not when Dreiser's characters are intellectual that we feel the philosophical question strongly. The pessimism, the dark doubt is most dramatic, most telling when it comes to someone whose life has been filled with thoughts of the material. Clyde Griffiths is the classic example. His mind is simple, and devoted to the petty. Suddenly he is faced with death. Clyde, and the other good characters of Dreiser, will stop suddenly and ask a simple philosophical question--simple not in the sense of being answerable, but in the sense of being patently unanswerable.

Sister Carrie does not think. The book ends as she starts to think. In this novel, Dreiser realized his limitations. It is full of obsession for the material. It ends with a pathetic realization of the non-material.

When Dreiser pictures the power of the material he is on firm ground. He writes of things with love and knowledge and with immense insight into the desire for them. But when he writes of ideas, any ideas apart from the simple "Why?", he is vulgar. He does not know or correctly evaluate or love the
ideas he bandies about in his non-fiction. But he has made simple doubt dramatic.

At the end of his life, Dreiser announced the most startling contradiction of his life. A few weeks after joining the Communist Party, he stated, "The true religion is in Matthew." Shortly after his death The Bulwark was published. The question arises: Was Dreiser able to express simple faith as he had simple doubt?

Dreiser's opposition to established religion, particularly the Catholic faith of his father, had been the leading motif of his "philosophical" writing. Even the art of the sublime made him uneasy. He was a giggler in the Vatican. Yet he was eager to accept some irrational substitute for the complete, mystical response of his father. He leaped into Christian Science, eastern mysticism, "chemistic" theory with considerable joy. For a rationalist, he was curiously superstitious. It was as though he were trying to simulate the emotions and responses of his father but as far away as possible from the Catholic Church.

In The Bulwark Dreiser freed himself of his hate for his father and of the need to substitute. Quite simply, he slipped into a quiet, Quaker affirmation of God in nature. It is shocking, after the desperation of Dreiser's early search for a meaning, after the almost ashamed, half-doubting but urgent essays into various, exotic systems of irrational belief (Dreiser's belief even in rational systems was entered with an irrational heat and need) to find him writing simply,
and for the first time almost contentedly of a belief in God. In The Bulwark, Dreiser took a faith with no ritualistic excitement, with little intellectual daring, with little sense of uniqueness. And in the passage following Solon's encounter with the puff adder, Dreiser wrote his most sincere and valid religious passage:

"Daughter, until recently I have not thought as I think now. Many things which I thought I understood, I did not understand at all. God has taught me humility—and in His loving charity, awakened me to many things that I had not seen before. One is the need of love toward all created things."52

Solon's encounter with the snake is based on Dreiser's experience53 and in that context it is beautiful. Dreiser had even decided from this encounter that man could talk with animals or birds.

Professor Trilling notes in The Bulwark, "this pietistic mood in all its thinness."54 But that is assuming Dreiser as deep thinker, as a mind that grew. In this book that hovered in the back of his mind for thirty years, Dreiser recognized his limitations. Rather than being an avowal of faith, arrogant in its simplicity and deficient in its picture of the growth of belief from doubt, it is a final resignation by Dreiser of the title philosopher, a recognition of his limitations as a thinker, a statement of belief that did not grow over a period of years but that hovered in the background, humble and really above argument, but overwhelmed by the demand for new systems and complex thoughts, that Dreiser was called upon to produce or champion. Dreiser was not able,
was not competent to produce more complex systems, but his immense energy was subjected by what was "intellectually doing," and he produced volume after volume of blustering, trashy, contradictory non-fiction. A prey to the Bohemian snobs of his time, Dreiser wasted most of his non-fiction and corrupted much of his fiction by trying to do something he was simply unequipped to do—argue philosophy. As an important novelist, as the most important destroyer of certain reticences and repressions in American literature, he was tricked (and largely by himself) into thinking of himself as a great intellectual hammer, destined to smash all established beliefs. By way of vindicating his past, his family, his poverty, he took a position with the only aristocracy with which he could align himself—the Bohemian, the avant-garde intellectual, and hopelessly out of his element, wasted a great portion of his genius. Even at the end, in the last thing he ever wrote, the closing pages of The Stoic, he was still subject to that snobbery, writing of the exotic and unknown mysticism of the East. But The Bulwark did emerge and stands as a sign of his simple genius.

The affirmation of The Bulwark is on the same intellectual level as the doubt in Sister Carrie and in Clyde Griffiths' story. It is on the level that Dreiser really knows and understands. Just as Dreiser's main characters could never doubt fully enough for some minds as Solon will not believe fully enough to satisfy some. It is all a question of Dreiser's capacity. The sincerity and intensity of
Carrie, Roberta, and Solon, their pathetic recognition of mystery in the universe, and Dreiser's pathetic recognition of his own and man's limitation, of understanding so far and no further, are of more importance than the second rate intellectual juggling of terms with which Dreiser wasted his time.


7. Ibid., p. 288.


13. Ibid., see back of title page.


19. Ibid., p. 103.


21. See above, p. 17.


23. Carl Van Doren, *op. cit.*, p. 82.


27. Ibid., pp. 89-90, 91, 92 for examples.


36. Ibid., p. 599.


42. Dreiser, "The Cruise of The Idlewild," in Free and Other Stories.
43. Theodore Dreiser, Fine Furniture, New York, 1930.
47. Lionel Trilling, The Nation, CLXII, p. 470.
50. Dreiser, A Traveler at Forty, p. 351.
51. Theodore Dreiser, A Book About Myself, New York, 1922, pp. 258-269. There are many other examples.
CHAPTER THREE: THE MATERIALS OF DREISER'S
AN AMERICAN TRAGEDY

The most impressive quality of An American Tragedy is its relentlessness. None of Dreiser's other novels moves so surely to a single situation. None of the other books has such determination and single-mindedness on the part of the author. Dreiser wrote An American Tragedy more consciously than any of his other novels.

The story of the poor boy who kills the poor girl in order to marry the rich girl had fascinated Dreiser from his early writing days. As early as 1920, he had selected the story of Chester Gillette and Grace Brown as the most susceptible of a number of cases to his kind of treatment. The book therefore had a relatively long gestation period.

In addition Dreiser was writing with a sense of intellectual responsibility he had never felt before. His fame was international, his position secure. He had been damned and praised in the best magazines. A master's thesis on his philosophy had been written at Columbia. All of his books were under the imprint of one publisher. He had a drawing account of $4000 a year. He had more time for his work and fewer intellectual distractions.

The chief effect of these factors on his book was that his detail became more pertinent to plot. He had a situation of significance and he held to it. The amount of detail,
often petty detail, is immense. But it is all directed to the crisis and death of Clyde Griffiths. There is less interpolated philosophy, fewer intellectual positions taken, than in the other novels.

This novel is more consciously Art than the other novels. There is not only more emphasis on plot but also more careful manipulation of plot and thematic materials. There are more devices, clumsy in general, but artistically conscious.

It is this care for limitation and selection, this "summoning up all his resources,"3 new for Dreiser, that gives An American Tragedy its powerful motion forward, its relentlessness. Perhaps it is this relentlessness, the quality which Professor Matthiessen has called "a profoundly tragic sense of man's fate"4 that led Dreiser to change the title of his novel from Miraze to a title containing the most respected word in literature.

Within the framework of a specific plot, the play and effect of Dreiser's mind and feelings on his characters and settings is easier to follow than in the sprawling chronicles of Witla and Cowperwood. The latter demand an especially tolerant critical sense. But it cannot be said that An American Tragedy is a simple book to analyze. There are areas of complexity in it where the author's meaning is ambiguous. There are passages where conscious meaning and unconscious meaning clash. There are places where the author has the character under control, and places where the hero has the author under control. The author's attitude is not easy to determine. The
effect is often puzzling or ludicrous or moving. The explicit
is not always the real. The unconscious limitations of the
author often transform the word.

***

The story of Clyde Griffiths opens with a semi-poetical,
because verbless, description of Kansas City:

Dark--of a summer night. And the tall walls of
the commercial heart of an American city of per-
haps 400,000 inhabitants--such walls as in time
may linger in mere fable.5

Quickly, we are introduced to Clyde and his family, with
an immediate statement of Clyde's embarrassed position, his
strong mother, his weak father, the anomaly and cruelty of his
presence in a group of street-singing evangelists.

We are of course reminded of Dreiser's father6 in the
description of Asa Griffiths:

...a most unimportant-looking person...whose weak
blue eyes and rather flabby but poorly-clothed
figure bespoke more of failure than anything
else.7

And "strong, patient understanding"8 Sarah Dreiser colors the
picture of Mrs. Griffiths:

The woman alone stood out as having that force
and determination which, however blind or er-
roneous, makes for self-preservation if not suc-
cess in life. She...stood up with an ignorant,
yet somehow respectable air of conviction.9

Dreiser is heavily explicit in his treatment of Mr. and
Mrs. Griffiths, not only here, but in the two crises which
they face. When their daughter Esta runs away with an actor,
Asa seems to Clyde "weak and inadequate," "ineffectual." But such a father, as Clyde often thought, afterwards. But Mrs. Griffiths is more impressive "...more vital in this trying situation." Later, when Clyde is convicted, Asa still does not understand the situation, "because of his lack of comprehension of the actualities as well as his lack of experience of the stern and motivating forces of passion." Mrs. Griffiths is now "a figure out of the early Biblical days of her six-thousand-year-old world." And Dreiser changes the important telegram from, "Dear father--I am convicted--Chester," to "Dear mother--I am convicted--Clyde."

Too much is made of this weakness of the father and strength of the mother. Not enough of it is psychologically pertinent. It is an indication of Dreiser's involvement with his mother and of Dreiser's identification with Clyde.

Clyde is described thus:

Plainly pagan rather than religious, life interested him, although as yet he was not fully aware of this. All that could truly be said of him now was that there was no definite appeal in all this for him. He was too young, his mind much too responsive to phases of beauty and pleasure which had little, if anything, to do with the remote and cloudy romance which swayed the minds of his mother and father.

The "vagrom and unstable street throng" is bored by Asa's sermon, "one of those hackneyed descriptions of the delights of a release, via self-realization of the mercy of God and the love of Christ...." The little group folds up the portable organ and goes back to the mission. At the end of the first chapter, Dreiser sums up the group and its work in the memo-
rable description of the mission:

They...entered the door of a yellow, single-story wooden building, the large window and the two glass panes in the central door of which had been painted a gray-white. Across both windows and the smaller panels in the double door had been painted: "The Door of Hope. Bethel Independent Mission. Meetings Every Wednesday and Saturday night 8 to 10. Sundays at 11, 3, and 8. Everybody Welcome." Under this legend on each window were printed the words: "God is Love," and below this again in smaller type: "How Long Since You Wrote to Mother?" 19

This is one of the best things in the book with the quotations on the windows, ludicrous, pathetic. The contiguity of "God is Love" and "How Long Since You Wrote to Mother" sums up the ineffectual, sincere, confused, and pathetic religion of Clyde's parents, the religion on which their lives are based.

Dreiser shows evangelical life as unrelievedly drab, ineffectual and ludicrous, despite the sympathetic figure of the mother. But this view must be contrasted with his positive view of the Reverend Duncan McMillan later in the book.

In this drab, abnormal way of living, made more repugnant by the taunts of other boys his age, Clyde had one real interest—a rich uncle in the East. From the casual remarks of his parents he drew a vague picture of relatives living in luxury and ease. Constraining it with his own pinched existence, he longed to escape.

"As vain and proud as he was poor," 20 Clyde sees no way out of his present state—certainly not a manual job, although he has not had sufficient education for anything else. Sex manifests itself and the question of his attractiveness to
girls. Already he thinks of clothes as virtually the most desirable of all things. He did not want to be a laboring man and wear old clothes. He was not so bad looking—"if only he had a better collar, a nicer shirt, finer shoes, a good suit, a swell overcoat." Dreiser's listing of items is in itself pathetic.

In his fifteenth year, Clyde finds out that his sister has run away. An "inner chemism of dreams" counteracts all that her parents have had to say. Clyde does not know the details of the case but it seemed to be "one of those dreadful runaway or sexually disagreeable affairs which the boys on the streets and at school were always slyly talking about." But Esta had done what he thought of doing. Rightly or wrongly she had escaped.

Mission work was nothing. All this religious emotion and talk was not so much either. It hadn't saved Esta. Evidently like himself, she didn't believe so much in it either.

Esta's flight gives Clyde added proof of the dreariness of mission life and spurs him to find his own way out.

Clyde's first job is in a drugstore. It is next door to a theater, and

best of all, as Clyde now found to his pleasure, and yet despair at times, the place was visited, just before and after the show on matinee days, by bevies of girls...The wonder of them!

As he watches the young men and women from the theater, Clyde's desire for clothes grows: "And once he did attain it—was able to wear such clothes as these—well, then was he not well set upon the path that leads to all the blisses?"
Glyde loses his drugstore job but only to go on to better things—the great world of the Green-Davidson Hotel. Into this world, Dreiser plunges Clyde with the note of wonder, the very real and detailed awe of a poor and naive boy in a rich and sophisticated atmosphere. Dreiser describes the hotel:

...It was all so lavish. Under his feet was a checkered black-and-white marble floor. Above him a coppered and stained and gilded ceiling. And supporting this, a veritable forest of black marble columns as highly polished as the floor—glassy smooth. And between the columns which ranged away toward three separate entrances, one right, one left and one directly forward toward Dalrymple Avenue—were lamps, statuary, rugs, palms, chairs, tete-a-tete—a prodigal display. In short it was compact, of all that gauche luxury of appointment, which, as some one once sarcastically remarked, was intended to supply "exclusiveness to the masses." Indeed, for an essential hotel in a great and successful American commercial city, it was almost too luxurious. Its rooms and halls and lobbies and restaurants were entirely too richly furnished, without the saving grace of either simplicity or necessity.

Here is a common type of Dreiserian passage. It gives the reader, aside from the physical details of the place, the attitude of the hero and the attitude of the author. Clyde is thrilled by the marble, the gilt and the palms. The author labels the hotel "gauche," "entirely too richly furnished;" yet here is an example of Dreiser's famous sympathy. The excitement, the beauty of the hotel, in Clyde's eyes, is established. The author's criticism does not make Clyde's taste ludicrous. In fact, the explicitness of the criticism seems defensive. To Dreiser, the reader would not grasp the vulgarity of the place through simple description. Actually, it is all too beautiful, too overwhelming. Dreiser himself is
impressed by the Green-Davidson. But he has learned that it is not correct to be impressed and he is passing the lesson on. He must curb his natural enthusiasm for the large, the luxurious, the fully-packed. He has acquired the saving grace which requires simplicity or necessity. But the lesson at the end, learned almost by rote (even to the quotation) is hollow following the almost breathless, crammed description. There is excitement, there is wonder in Clyde and in Dreiser, underlined by the clumsy return to critical "taste" in the last sentences.

Gone are the days when Dreiser could say: "It was wonderful, the loud clothes, the bright straw hats, the diamonds, the air of security and well-being, so easily assumed..."28 He is no longer the American traveler at forty, who found a London hotel "...beautiful, spacious, cleanly, dignified and well ordered, but not astonishingly imposing."29

Professor Matthiessen accepts "Dreiser's way of conveying its (the hotel's) spell over Clyde" as:

...one of the most matured examples of his method...Dreiser's...richly stored memory can create to the full Clyde's own amazement and awe.

But the main reason why Dreiser can make us feel touched by Clyde's feelings is that he is aware of how pathetic they really are.30

I feel that the reason that we get a feeling of sympathy and reality in the description of Clyde's awe is that Dreiser's explicit, critical taste was overwhelmed by his unconscious enthusiasm for the "imposing," the rich, the gauche. The enthusiasm expressed itself after the success of An American
Tragedy in "Caribbean blue shirts, vanilla ice-cream socks, and pea-green bow ties." It is found in a recurring vision of:

Diamonds,
Odours
Bubbles in the wine--
The glory of a faded day.

In An American Tragedy Dreiser condemns the vulgarity of the Green-Davidson. But not before describing it with extraordinary relish. And not before re-experiencing it in the eyes of the bell boys who work there. The power of money, the wonder of being able to buy sex, beauty, comfort, fills this section of the book and the heavy admonitions of The National Critic do not kill the effect. In a sense they render it doubly poignant by showing us a Dreiser who finds it necessary to show us he is above it all.

Clyde finds the Green-Davidson a paradise. He lies to his mother about his salary and keeps the greatest portion of his tips. With these he buys clothes. For the sake of clothes Clyde lies and allows his family to suffer. He is shown as completely selfish. When Clyde's mother needs money for Esta, who has returned to Kansas City to bear her illegitimate child, Clyde begrudges the five extra dollars a week he is asked to contribute. Even the sight of his sister in a cheap room, pregnant, poor, alone, does not soften him. He cannot stop thinking of himself:

Now that he was here and she was as she was, he began to sense expense, trouble, distress, and to wish almost that he had not been so curious. Why need he have been? It could only mean that he
Clyde's selfishness and deceit are emphasized to an extraordinary degree. In Dreiser's tone, no criticism is implied. Clyde needs all his money for clothes, sex, and gifts to his girl friend. But Clyde is insensitive to the point of mental dullness. Perhaps it is a result of Dreiser's childhood. Perhaps it is an attempt to de-romanticize his hero. But the hero emerges actually a little feeble-minded, at least stupid. His callousness is not the result of unmorality but of lack of awareness. Clyde is too stupid to feel the needs of others. He will let his family suffer so that he might win Hortense Briggs.

Hortense is one of Dreiser's best characters. Utterly vain, unscrupulous, selfish, she uses her charms to get what she wants. She is the classic chippy--too young as yet to be compelled.

She was really a little silly, very light-headed, who was infatuated by her own charms and looked in every mirror, admiring her eyes, her hair, her neck, her hands, her figure, and practicing a peculiarly fetching smile.

.................................
...she was not unaffected by the fact that Clyde was not a little attractive to look upon, although so very green. She liked to tease such beginners. He was a bit of a fool, as she saw him. But he was connected with the Green-Davidson, and he was well-dressed, and no doubt he had all the money he said and would spend it on her.
.................................
"Lots of fellows with money would like to spend it on me." She tossed her head and flicked her eyes and repeated her coyest smile.34

When she meets Clyde for their first date:

She was smartly dressed in a black velvet jacket
with a reddish brown collar and cuffs, and a
bulgy, round tam of the same material with a red
leather buckle on the side. And her cheeks and
lips were rouged a little. And her eyes
sparkled. And as usual she gave herself all the
airs of one very well content with herself.
"Oh, hello, I'm late, ain't I? I couldn't
help it. You see, I forgot I had another ap-
pointment with a fella, a friend of mine--gee,
a peach of a boy, too...."35

Hortense is the best example of the crowd that consti-
tutes Clyde's new social life. The bell boys and their girls
and friends--"fast" teen-agers, hard-working, free spending,
sophisticated as to sex and liquor, aping with their forty a
week the atmosphere of the hotel.

For the hotel is the source of all their standards--
what to wear, what to drink, what to do after hours. And the
bell boys leave their work and the splendor and sophistication
of the Green-Davidson for the splendor and sophistication of
the famous restaurant and the brothel. Their independence,
their power, is manifested in ordering Manhattans, in being
on familiar terms with prostitutes:

"Now, me for a good old Manhattan, to begin wit,"
exclaimed Heggland avidly, looking about on the
crowd in the room and feeling that now indeed he
was a person....

........................................

And similarly, Arthur Kinsella, once he was here,
seemed to perk up and take heart of his present
glory.36

And Heggland persuading Clyde to join them in the visit
to the brothel: "You won't ever be the same Clyde. Dey never
are. But we'll be wid you in case of trouble."37

Dreiser captures the real, gay life of the group, the
youthful strutting and preening, the irresponsible enjoying of
leisure, yet all within the framework of their jobs, their poor homes.

Under the pleasures, run the personal problems, the sordid, urgent needs and dreams of the individual. Clyde's pursuit of Hortense, in the midst of parties and laughter, is sordid and wrenching. Although "she is not virtuous," Hortense will show Clyde only enough affection to keep him attentive and generous.

...she conceived the notion of being sufficiently agreeable—nothing more—to hold him, keep him attentive, if possible, while at the same time she went her own way, enjoying herself as much as possible with others and getting Clyde to buy and do such things for her as might fill gaps—when she was not sufficiently or amusingly enough engaged elsewhere.\textsuperscript{39}

Hortense is for sale; but she is a shrewd businesswoman. She is not easily had. Although Clyde showers her with small gifts, she gives him only "a few elusive and evasive endearments." But to Clyde she is "the perfect realization of all that he had previously wished for in a girl. She was so bright, vain, engaging, and so truly pretty."\textsuperscript{40}

Hortense decides to bestow her ultimate favors on Clyde only in exchange for some "quite expensive things." When she sees a wonderful fur jacket in "one of the smaller and less exclusive fur stores of the city,"\textsuperscript{41} she decides she must have it and that Clyde is the logical one to get it for her.

Dreiser describes at length the machinations of Hortense to get the coat and the worried figurings of Clyde to pay for it. His reward will be Hortense. The bargain is ruthless.
Hortense will sell her body for clothes. Only slightly influenced by affection, she will commit herself as far as necessary to get the things she wants. But she will not jeopardize her independence, really, and here is where she comes alive. She sells on the open market but with enough spirit and skill and courage to command respect. Clyde is intimidated by her and a little afraid of her sexually. He has none of Hortense’s defiance and courage. He is by far the more shameful of the two in this sordid bargain. He is cowardly, touched with just enough moral compunction to heighten his weakness. He wants to buy Hortense but is not quite willing to accept it as a sale. He does not even have self-confidence. Clyde starts the transaction however, though his mother is in desperate need of money for Esta’s forthcoming baby. He lies again and in effect refuses to help. He is completely occupied with Hortense and her bargain.

Here Dreiser breaks the story. On an excursion to the country, the bell boys and their girls run down a little girl with the car they have “borrowed.” In their flight, they smash the car and run away from the approaching police. Clyde runs away...to hide—to lose himself and so escape—if the fates were only kind—the misery and the punishment and the unending dissatisfaction and disappointment which now, most definitely, it all represented to him.

Clyde is not horrified at the probable death of the stricken child but at his position:

He must get out of this. He must not be caught
here. Think of what would happen to him if he were caught—how he would be disgraced and punished probably—all his fine world stripped from him before he could say a word really. His mother would hear—Mr. Squires—everybody.

Dreiser closes the first book of his tragedy with his hero fleeing from a hit-run accident. Clyde has been shown to us as selfish, lying, unfeeling. He is interested in clothes and girls about equally. He is ambitious, but his ambitions are vague—he is interested in the appointments of success. He is attractive but in a soft way. People do not pity him exactly nor is it quite sympathy. Something in between is the feeling we get for this hero. It is of course Dreiser's triumph that he has made a nondescript and selfish coward into an object of sympathy. Probably it is the detailing of his desires, petty as they may be, which attracts the reader. The clothes, the two-dollar dinners, the "smart" girl. Clyde is the poor boy seeking "class," the immensely class conscious child to whom the price tag is the index of value. From the gloomy mission of his parents, he goes to the brilliant, expensive, therefore beautiful world of the Green-Davidson. For Clyde, the only things worth having are the things which cost money. Even lust is a commodity, a thing to have, a measure of success bound up with the amount of money to spend.

Dreiser's greatest gamble is on the insignificance of his hero. His qualities are so negative, as I have said, as to be almost feeble-minded. His amoral hero is so callous as to be almost inhuman. And although Dreiser has given us Cowperwood, he had at least invested the financier with a
grand drive to conquer. With Clyde weakness and insensitivity are combined. A feeble attractiveness, a mild identification somehow carry the reader on.

One of Dreiser's evident miscalculations is Clyde's relation to the group of bell boys and their world. Though Clyde is superior to the other boys in appearance and refinement, he lacks the brashness, the courage, the practical sense that makes the group attractive. He is a slave to Hortense, sexually timid, and not boisterous enough to fit in convincingly with Hegglund and Ratterer. He is weaker than they are, which is Dreiser's calculation, but he is also less attractive. Dreiser's plea for Clyde is that he is weak, ignorant, but attractive enough to warrant the attention of women and our sympathy. But the attractiveness is overshadowed by the weakness. Even in the group of bell boys, Clyde is inferior. After the accident:

He felt called upon to do something—to assist Ratterer, who was reaching down and trying to lay hold of Laura Sipe without injuring her. But so confused were his thoughts that he would have stood there without helping any one had it not been for Ratterer, who called most irritably, "Give us a hand here, Clyde, will you?"

Clyde spends three years in Chicago, after his flight, working at various odd jobs under an assumed name and finally ending up as bell boy in the Union League Club. Here he meets his uncle and ingratiates himself. A change has come over Clyde between books. He now seems "bright and ambitious" and "well-mannered and intelligent." "He had about him now, ...a kind of conscious gentility of manner which pleased..."
Samuel Griffiths is pleased with his new-found nephew and after careful consideration offers him a position in his shirt and collar factory in Lycurgus, a town in Upper New York State. Clyde comes east excited at his new association with a man as wealthy and respected as his uncle.

The weak and sensual young man who, entering the factory, "had been thrilled in spite of himself" at "the whole room full of girls and women hard at work," comes into a severe business atmosphere. It is like the Union League Club of Chicago in its attitude toward sex:

...there was no faintest trace of that sex element which had characterized most of the phases of life to be seen in the Green-Davidson... here was no sex--no trace of it. No women were admitted to this club. These various distinguished individuals came and went, singly as a rule and with the noiseless vigor and reserve that characterizes the ultra successful...

Probably one could not attain to or retain one's place in so remarkable a world as this unless one were indifferent to sex, a disgraceful passion of course.50

The atmosphere of the Griffiths offices is sexless. The telephone girl was "short, fat, thirty-five and unattractive."51 Another office girl is described as "trim...very severe and reserved in a green gingham dress."52

We are reminded of Dreiser's earlier characters: Hurstwood, undone by sex; Lester Kane whose love for Jennie Gerhardt kept him from exercising the cold efficiency of his brother, Archibald; Witla whose sensuality ruined his career; and Cowperwood who pursued sex and finance intermittently. Of these only the last could mix the two successfully and even he
suffered in the end.

Clyde and his cousin Gilbert are separated now by differences in sensuality. (Dreiser has made Clyde intelligent.) The one is perfectly successful, the other with the tragic flaw of sensuality. Gilbert is cold and efficient but Clyde, who resembles him closely, "was more soft and vague and fumbling." The striking resemblance between Clyde and Gilbert is emphasized several times and the differences in background, present position and temperament. Dreiser implies that Gilbert has had the "breaks" which Clyde did not have. Clyde thinks:

How wonderful it must be to be a son who, without having had to earn all this, could still be so much, take oneself so seriously, exercise so much command and authority. It might be, as it plainly was, that this youth was very superior and indifferent in tone toward him. But think of being such a youth, having so much power at one's command.54

Gilbert is the successful version of Clyde with some of the weakness, some of the warmth trained out of him. Clyde admires his hostile cousin and tries to emulate him. He is afraid his cousin may see him with a girl who is not of society. Already, merely by being in the town where his rich relatives live, he is above his socially ambitious new friend Dillard, "just another store clerk." Already he is thinking of his job as a "career."55

Clyde terminates a budding romance with the sensuous Rita Dickerman because his relatives may object, even though Rita moves in a home atmosphere far superior to any he has
known before.

Clyde's relations with the Lycurgus Griffiths are loose to say the least. Gilbert is hostile because Clyde resembles him; the rest of the family are only mildly interested in him; their main concern is that he will not attempt to exploit them socially. Just as Clyde has shockingly little feeling for his family, so the Lycurgus Griffiths show no warmth toward Clyde. Their interest is casually curious. When Clyde visits the home of Samuel Griffiths for the first time he feels lost, "very much out of place and neglected." 57 Certainly this family will not help him out of his loneliness. And though Samuel Griffiths indicates that he is not "wholly indifferent" 58 to him, and later gives him a better position, Clyde realizes that his dreams of social splendor are not to be realized through his relatives.

But on his first visit at the Griffiths, Clyde is vouchsafed a vision of "the ultimate triumph of the female." 59 He meets Sondra Finchley:

--as smart and vain and sweet a girl as Clyde had ever laid his eyes upon--so different and so superior. She was dressed in a close-fitting tailored suit which followed her form exactly and which was enhanced by a small dark leather hat, pulled fetchingly low over her eyes. A leather belt of the same color encircled her neck. By a leather leash she led a French bull and over one arm carried a most striking coat of black and gray checks—not too pronounced and yet having the effect of a man's modish overcoat. To Clyde's eyes she was the most adorable feminine thing he had seen in all his days. Indeed her effect on him was electric--thrilling--arousing in him a curiously stinging sense of what it was to want and not to have--to wish to win and yet to feel, almost agonizingly, that he was destined
not even to win a glance from her. It tortured and flustered him.

After some weeks of manual work at the Griffiths factory, Clyde is raised to the position of foreman, by his uncle, who thinks it unbecoming for a Griffiths to be seen in shirt sleeves. Almost immediately he meets Roberta Alden, a girl who joins some twenty-five others in Clyde's department. Clyde is immediately attracted to her and she to him.

Clyde is terribly lonely. He has cut himself off from all contacts his rich relatives might deem unworthy. He cannot spend his leisure time with any persons who might affect his possible society career. So his thoughts concentrate on Roberta Alden, with whom he is in daily contact, and on Sondra Finchley who is his ideal. Roberta is near and possibly attainable in his present state, Sondra a powerful but far off vision.

Roberta too is much attracted to Clyde. She has left a dreary, poverty-stricken farm home to come to Lycurgus and make some extra money for herself and her family. In the constricted moral atmosphere of the place she lives, she cannot expand at all and she too dreams of the great world, that which she imagines is Clyde's.

...Roberta, after encountering Clyde and sensing the superior world in which she imagined he moved, and being so taken with the charm of his personality, was seized with the very virus of ambition and unrest that afflicted him.

Though both Clyde and Roberta realize that they belong to different worlds, (Clyde at least potentially), a "chemic
or temperamental pull" asserts itself and their contact in the factory is charged with repressed desire. Then, quite by accident, they meet at a lake outside the town, where they have both been driven by loneliness. Their relationship begins, as it ends, in a canoe. From the start, there is deception. Roberta must keep this friendship, already so advanced, though unspoken, from her possessive and moralistic friend, Grace Marr. Clyde cannot be seen with an ordinary factory girl for fear some word might reach his high relatives. They leave the lake separately.

Two days later, they meet on a street at the outskirts of town. Nervous and afraid of themselves and what people might see and say, they finally declare their love. In one of Dreiser's finest scenes, in the loneliness and coldness of a deserted and dark street end, Clyde kisses her. Desire asserts itself purely in this lone passage:

He kissed her again upon the cheek and mouth, and suddenly he felt her relax. She stood quite still and unresisting in his arms. He felt a wonder of something—he could not tell what. All of a sudden he felt tears upon her face, her head sunk to his shoulder, and then he heard her say: "Yes, yes, yes. I do love you. Yes, yes. I do. I do."

A number of furtive meetings follow—in amusement parks and resorts near town, and on deserted streets. Roberta, caught lying about her whereabouts by Grace Marr, moves to a room where she is not so carefully watched. Clyde's demand for full intimacy is finally underlined by his threat of leaving her. In panic, Roberta surrenders to him. Both are
full of "the wonder and delight of a new and more intimate
form of contact,"63 (Dreiser is remarkably reticent here),
but "not without a sense of evil--seduction--betrayal."64 And
Clyde gains immeasurably in self-esteem as Roberta becomes
his.

Some months of happiness follow, "--an ecstatic paradise
of sorts in the very center of a humdrum conventional and
petty and underpaid work-a-day world."65 But the vision of
Sondra Finchley and her world never fades:

At times...he had pictured to himself, even when
he was off somewhere with Roberta at some un-
heralded resort, Gilbert Griffiths racing in his
big car, Bella, Bertime, and Sondra dancing,
canoeing in the moonlight, playing tennis, riding
at some of the smart resorts where they were re-
ported to be. The thing had had a bite and an
ache for him that was almost unendurable and had
lit up for him at times and with overwhelming
clarity this connection of his with Roberta. For
after all, who was she? A factory girl!... 
whereas he--he--if fortune would but favor him a
little--! Was this to be the end of all his
dreams in connection with his perspective (sic)
superior life here?66

Roberta is, to Clyde,"exceedingly worth-while from the
point of view of beauty, pleasure, sweetness."67

Sondra takes up Clyde, first by accident and then to
spite Gilbert Griffiths whom she dislikes. Clyde is taken up
by Sondra's set and very rapidly he becomes a part of the
smart world. His relations with Roberta continue but the
governing passion of his life is Sondra and her world. Not
Sondra alone but as a representative and key to the great
world. Sondra is:

the one girl of this upper level who had most
materialized and magnified for him the meaning of that upper level itself. The beautiful Sondra Finchley! Her lovely face, smart clothes, gay and superior demeanor.

.................................
Ah to know this perfect girl more intimately! To be looked upon by her with favor—made by reason of that favor, a part of that fine world to which she belonged. Was he not a Griffiths—as good looking as Gilbert Griffiths any day? And as attractive if he only had as much money—or a part of it even...Then, you bet, a girl like this would be delighted to notice him,—mayhap—who knows, even fall in love with him.

Sondra will help him to the fine world, and the fine world will help him to Sondra. But his desire for Sondra is "strangely...without lust, just the desire to constrain and fondle a perfect object."

Glyde becomes a member of Sondra's set.

...trapped and entranced by his passion for her....it seemed to her now as though she might care for him as much as he wished. Very, very much, if she only dared...He too was wonderful, even if he were poor.....

But as Sondra becomes fond of Glyde, Roberta finds that she is pregnant and desperately turns to Glyde for help. At first Roberta does not think of marriage. Glyde's connections are too high. But when a doctor refuses to help her and Glyde can offer no other alternative, she begins to insist on marriage, pathetically and yet somewhat shrewdly.

"You can leave me after a while if you want to. After I'm out of this. I can't prevent you from doing that and I wouldn't want to if I could. But you can't leave me now. You can't."

As Glyde's relationship with Roberta becomes more and more desperate, his marriage to Sondra and her world becomes
more and more nearly possible. Sondra assures him she will
not give him up even if they must wait awhile. Clyde is faced
more vividly than ever with "The beauty of her! The completeness
of this world!"73

Clyde sends Roberta to the home of her parents with the
promise that he will marry her on her return. But his mind
cannot bear the thought of a life without the delights of
Sondra's wealth and position. The problem of choosing be-
tween murder and a chance for Sondra, and poverty, anonymity,
and Roberta. Dreiser contrasts the two worlds and choices in
the letters Clyde receives from Roberta and Sondra:

Pine Point Landing, June 10

Clydie Mydie:
How is my sheet phing? All wytie? It just
glorious up here. Lots of people already here
and more coming every day. The Casino and golf
course over at Pine Point are open and lots of
people about. I can hear Stuart and Grant with
their launches going up toward Grey's Inlet now.
You must hurry and come up, dear....74

Siltz, June 10

Dear Clyde:
I am nearly ready for bed, but I will write
you a few lines. I had such a tiresome journey
coming up that I was nearly sick. In the first
place I didn't want to come much (alone) as you
know. I feel too upset and uncertain about
everything, although I try not to feel so now
that we have our plan and you are going to come
for me as you said.75

The two worlds are contrasted again and again. Dreiser's
strokes are heavy but they give a sense of time passing quick-
ly, of the mounting urgency for decision. Clyde is over-
whelmed by the need for a way out, for a decision. He has de-
sided that murder is a way out but a difficult way, not so
much morally as legally. He does not want, for example, to strike Roberta, but more important he fears exposure:

It was all too impossible to imagine that he, Clyde Griffiths, could bring himself to execute a deed like that...
And forthwith, an uncanny feeling of wretchedness and insufficiency for so dark a crime....76

Clyde takes Roberta for a pre-marriage honeymoon trip to Big Bittern Lake, a lonely, primitive spot which he had visited earlier with Sondra. His plan to drown Roberta has formed almost subconsciously and he proceeds with the details even while undecided as to his ability to go through with it. Roberta innocently goes with Clyde, patiently enduring his demands for deception on the train and in hotels. She still endures his social pretensions. But she is determined to get married and to:

...get a copy of her marriage certificate, too, and keep it for her own as well as the baby's sake. He could get a divorce as soon as he pleased after that. She would still be Mrs. Griffiths. And Clyde's baby and hers would be a Griffiths, too. That was something.77

From the beginning of the relationship to the very end, Roberta's vision of Clyde has been colored by awe. He is superior to her socially, so very high that some sacrifices on her part seem natural. Roberta's feelings towards Clyde have some tinge of the social climbing of Clyde's feeling for Sondra.

They go to Big Bittern Lake and, according to plan, take a boat. The "still dark water" fills Clyde with the suggestion of death, but self-pity, fear, and confusion unbalance
him. Roberta, in pity for him, stands up to comfort him:

And Clyde, sensing the profoundness of his own failure, his own cowardice or inadequateness for such an occasion, as instantly yielding to a tide of submerged hate, not only for himself, but Roberta—her power—or that of life to restrain him in this way.78

He lashes out to:

...free himself of her—her touch—her pleading—consoling sympathy—her presence forever—God!79

The boat capsizes, striking Roberta on the face and head. She is unable to swim; Clyde does not go to her aid. He makes his escape according to plan.

With the murder, Dreiser ends Book II. The remaining two books, over three hundred pages, are devoted to the capture, trial and conviction, and execution of Clyde. These are the pages of Dreiser the reporter—a fast-moving, competent, detailed, and emotional accounting of Clyde's end. Only occasionally does the novelist appear and then clumsily, as in the "psychic sex scar"80 explaining the motives of the district attorney. In general, it is newspaper writing, newspaper detail. And Dreiser is more obviously in command here than in the earlier parts of the book. This is the part of the book of which Mencken says:

...he becomes the adept and persuasive reporter. The last scenes have in them all the plausibility that made Sister Carrie a memorable event in American letters.81

Certainly these pages read rapidly and fluently. There is a limited area to be covered and Dreiser covers it thoroughly—the area of criminal investigation, of legal trial, of jail,
of death house.

But the trial gives Dreiser a chance to present his immense mass of detail in the relatively succinct form of question and answer. And the detail gains importance in the framework of the murder trial. Much of it is repetition but meaningful repetition, simply because each detail is important to that jury which holds Clyde's life in its hands. The trial is an effective artistic framework that grew out of Dreiser's reporting, a sub-artistic field.

Two significant episodes appear toward the end of the book. One is the pathetic spectacle of Clyde's mother coming east to plead the cause of her son. She speaks in churches, halls, and theaters, presenting her son's case. And her tour is a monstrous commercial gimmick. Even a mother's plea for her son's life becomes cheap, commercial, finally dribbling out like an overworked attraction.

The second is the appearance of the Reverend Duncan McMillan, an intense, vaguely Protestant, minister who attempts to save Clyde's soul. This, too, ends in failure. The Reverend McMillan sadly concludes that Clyde is guilty but that Clyde's recognition of his guilt is a victory of sorts. But even this religious view is corrupted. Clyde issues a statement to the world announcing his guilt and his repentance. He confesses his sin to the world and urges the Christian outlook on American youth. He is like one of the:

...botched and helpless who...were...always testifying as to how God or Christ or Divine Grace had rescued them from this or that predicament.
Glyde’s public statement is cordial because it is insincere. He goes to the electric chair professing faith and redemption but it is:

...in a kind of psychic terror, evoked by his uncertainty of the meaning of the hereafter, his uncertainty of death, and the faith and emotions of his mother as well as Reverend McMillan, who was about every day with his interpretations of divine mercy and his exhortations as to the necessity of complete faith and reliance in it. He, himself coming at last to believe, not only must he have faith but that he had it—and peace—complete and secure. 83

Glyde leaves the world in fear and confusion. His faith is only a feeling of the necessity of faith. And the public statement is pathetic and shabby in its insincerity.

Glyde has gone from street corner testimonial to newspaper testimonial. His family has gone from Mid-west street singing to Far-west street singing. Not much has changed. Glyde has been betrayed and killed by the baubles of life. The affirmation of weak man is lost in the force of life. The evangelists can push west no farther.

***

Dreiser has covered the trial, conviction, and death of Glyde with the thoroughness, the technique of the newspaper reporter without an editor. The complicated legal aspects of the case are presented with great force. The exhaustive report of the trial is great journalism and makes us thankful for Dreiser’s first writing experience. He has set down the
excitement and form of a trial as no one else has. It is a
great documentary presentation. But was Dreiser concerned with the legal problem more than the moral problem? I think not. Rather he presents as the intellectual crisis of the book, Clyde's doubt as to his guilt. He emphasizes the moral question by presenting the Reverend Duncan McMillan, "a present hour St. Bernard, Savan-
lorola, St. Simeon, Peter the Hermit." 84 (Dreiser, surprisingly, limits himself to Catholic religionists though McMillan is Protestant.) Dreiser attempts to make McMillan a strong character. It is the first time he has attempted to present a convincing, sincere, effective religionist. In his intense attempt to make his religionist strong, Dreiser makes him stylized. McMillan speaks almost entirely in quotations from the Bible. He stands ritualistically in prayer, or folds Clyde in his arms, or kisses his hands. 85 Dreiser is on un-
known ground. He tries to make Duncan impressive by falling back on the ritualistic speech and stance. But he fails.
McMillan is not real. He is a bore. In his attempt to under-
line the moral question, Dreiser has created a stereotyped figure, lacking the reality of Clyde's mother.
Correspondingly he has weakened his moral situation.
There is much brooding on Clyde's part, on Dreiser's part over the moral question of Clyde's guilt. But the reader is not convinced that there is a question—not a moral one. The sudden fear and pity of a coward does not absolve him of the guilt of a murder which he planned and carried to its brink.
The legal question becomes paramount. Although the prejudice of the jury at the outset of the trial pre-determines Clyde's fate, the reader is held by the legal possibilities of such a trial. "Clarence Darrow told Dreiser after reading the book that on the basis of the novel it would be impossible to determine Clyde's guilt." The reader feels distaste over the outcome of the trial even though Clyde's moral guilt is obvious.

But Dreiser wanted to present still another level, a philosophical one. In an interview he said it was his purpose:

...to show that the snap judgments of juries are inadequate in those knife-edge cases...where there is a subtler distinction to be made than one between black and white....There are decisions which casually chosen juries of men, unused to judge human motives and actions, are ludicrously unfit to render. (italics mine)

It is not only this statement but also the general tone of sympathy for Clyde's actual cruelties that indicate Dreiser's feeling that he was writing the deterministic novel. Dreiser assumes an inexorable logic to Clyde's refusal to help his mother with money to Clyde's cruelty toward Roberta, to Clyde's cowardice. The reader however cannot completely grasp this logic, cannot feel this sympathy for Clyde's mistake, because there is not sufficient proof of Clyde's desire. Of all the objects of Clyde's desire, only clothes are made real. Sondra and her world are too factitious to convince us of their control over Clyde. Pique is not sufficient cause to explain Clyde's refusal to help the pregnant Roberta with her
Rather we get a feeling of weak volition. Desire, the conquering theme of the other novels is at its weakest in Clyde.

Furthermore, if Dreiser wanted to present determinism powerfully, why did he weaken it at its crucial point? Why did he not show, point by point, the "motives and actions" which would lead Clyde to strike Roberta with the full intention of murder? Instead, he allows accident to spoil the deterministic effect. As in his other crucial crime, Hurstwood's theft, accident determines the action. It would have been more terrifying to see and understand the willful murder of Roberta. This was a significant change from the files on The Chester Gillette case. Gillette was quite obviously guilty of striking Grace Brown. Clyde struck Roberta by accident. Clyde's case is more interesting in a legal sense because of this accident. But the deterministic effect, the philosophy which governed the whole story of a weak, errant coward, is vitiated at its very climax. The triumph of Dreiser's determinism should have been the showing of the willful act as will-less, as determined.

***

An American Tragedy is the most carefully constructed of all of Dreiser's novels. It is remarkable for the absence of interpolated philosophy and for the forward thrust of its story. It concentrates on one character as none of Dreiser's
other novels do. It is remarkable too for its concentration on one pressure, the pressure of class-consciousness.

Class-consciousness over-rides, in varying degrees, themes that have been paramount in Dreiser. Sex in An American Tragedy is no longer:

...a free-flowing, expanding energy, working resistlessly through all human tissue, knowing in itself neither good nor evil, habitually at war with the rules and taboos which have been devised by mankind to hold these amative impulses within convenient bounds.90

Sex is repressed throughout this book. Roberta and Clyde are happy but not without a sense of "seduction...betrayal."91 It was Clyde's threat of leaving that compelled Roberta to accept him. The seduction of Esta and the seduction of the young girl in the hotel, foreshadow Roberta's plight. There is secrecy and falsehood in them. The sexual play of Hortense and Clyde is a commercial thing. Clyde's love for Sondra has little lust in it.

Clyde, in short, is conventional in his attitude toward sex. There is none of the large and open swelling of instinct, the natural coming together that we find in Sister Carrie and Jennie Gerhardt. Sex is no longer a grand theme; it is a conditioned attitude. Clyde, far from following his instincts, accepts society's sexual attitude. He takes sex, secretly, where he can find it and pays for it. But the girl he dreams of marrying is sacred. When asked by his lawyer whether he had had relations with Sondra, Clyde answers:

Why, no, of course not. She wouldn't allow anything like that, and besides...Well you don't
want to forget who she is.\textsuperscript{92}

Clyde would not dream of seducing a Finchley, even though he might play around, like the youths of Sondra's world, "indulging in phases of libertinism—the proper wild oats of youth—..."\textsuperscript{93} It would not be part of his social dream.

His love for Sondra is more a love for her position than her body (Sondra has no mind or soul; from the first description of her, we don't even assume that she has a body; only her clothes are described and her 'tone,') Clyde's desire for her is "the desire to constrain and fondle a perfect object."\textsuperscript{94} She is the High Class Woman.

Clyde is conventional also in his response to his parents' religion. Clyde's family is poor, but more especially, it is not respectable; it is socially foolish. We are told, not of Clyde's hunger, but of Clyde's shame. The great descriptions of poverty that are found in the Hurstwood episode and in Jennie Gerhardt are missing here. Clyde is not hungry or lustful; he is embarrassed and social-climbing.

Dreiser has moved away from two basic human needs of the early novels, to the 'social' need to belong.

It is not only Clyde who is conscious of society's criteria. Dreiser's mind is working with its usual class-conscious self-consciousness. Clothes are described in immense detail as in every novel Dreiser ever wrote. They are not 'symbols;' they are what Dreiser notes, first as most important. It is not only Sondra who is described like a mannikin; Clyde himself,\textsuperscript{95} the backwoods jury,\textsuperscript{96} the 'smart set,'\textsuperscript{97}
are all described to us by what they wear, that is by class. The best example of Dreiser's class-consciousness is this unconscious and passing description of a fur store as "...one of the smaller and less exclusive fur stores of the city..." on "...Baltimore Street near its junction with Fifteenth--the smartest portion of the shopping section..." 98 This is Dreiser, not Clyde, talking.

Surely, Dreiser is conscious of the pettiness of Clyde's ambition. He has, after all, made Sondra a nouveau riche débutante99 in a town of 25,000. But even while specifically limiting Clyde's social dream to make it, in some sense, more patently unworthy, he cannot escape his class-conscious descriptions of people as yokels in "faded and nondescript clothes."100 And Sondra was really too sacred to testify at the trial. He respects her enough to believe that justice will protect the mysterious "Miss X" from a thing so vulgar as a trial. (In the Chester Gillette case, "Miss X" testified.)101

Here is Dreiser's ambiguity or rather divided feeling about class. He has made Clyde's ambition petty; at the same time he is immensely conscious of class distinction and hence puts some value on Clyde's ambition. We can chart Dreiser's respect for class distinction by listing some of the names he uses for his characters:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Low Class</th>
<th>Middle Class</th>
<th>High Class</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Doris Trine</td>
<td>Smilley</td>
<td>Sondra Finchley</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laura Sipe</td>
<td>Latch</td>
<td>Bertine Granston</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ratterer</td>
<td>Gotboy</td>
<td>Arabella Stark</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hegglund</td>
<td>Burch</td>
<td>Constance Wynant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bert Gettler</td>
<td>Zella Shuman</td>
<td>Jill Trumbull</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flora Brandt</td>
<td>Maximilian Pick</td>
<td>Scott Nicholson</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Robert Alden has fortunately escaped both the incredible name and the shallow class description. But her background is cruelly labeled; she is from Biltz and her father's name is Titus; Ephraim begat him.¹⁰³ I do not think that a conception of classes can be profound when it utilizes as real, names appropriate to an S.J. Perelman parody.¹⁰⁴ In short, Dreiser's tremendous concern with class is expressed in terms which are sufficient for parody but shallow and incomplete for tragedy. Dreiser has put a class evaluation on every character in the book, but the terms with which he describes them—the pastimes, the conversation, the décor, as well as the names—are completely unsatisfactory. He cannot therefore make tragedy out of them. He has failed to make real the object of Clyde's desire. Sondra's world is a parody of the world of cultivated leisure.

The novel is meant to show us Clyde led by society to his ruin. But there is no drama in the play of ethical forces about Clyde. There is no sense of Clyde's struggle against society's mores. His capitulation to society could only be dramatic if he struggled against it. But he is classically conventional and subdues his sexual instinct and his filial instinct to society's demand for appearances.

Basically, Clyde is not human enough. He does not have normal awareness or normal desires. If he had these, he would be convincing even with his selfishness and cowardice.
Clyde is emotionally subnormal. There is no "abnormal interest in girls" as Dreiser claims; and his only sensitivity is to clothes. There is little drama in the corruption of a boy with weak drives and weak mind. Furthermore, Clyde is corrupt to start with. There is no growth or decay in his character throughout the book. It is as plausible that he could murder on page ten as on page five hundred. The moral struggle that Clyde indulges in after he is arrested and later, while he waits for execution, is not convincing even when it breaks through his fear of exposure. It is unconvincing because he has shown no real moral compunction in his cruelty to his mother, to Esta, to Roberta. And Dreiser has implied by the emphasis on Clyde's yearning, that he is not to be blamed. The mixture of the moral and the immoral weakens the novel.

Having rejected the ideas in this novel of ideas, we are faced with the problem of finding the source of its power. The relation of human to human is unconvincing but the relation of things to the reader is not. We are acted upon by the signs on the mission window, by the black velvet of the Green-Davidson, by the clothes Hortense wears, by the:

...flight of five brown stone steps leading up to an old courthouse door. And beyond that, an inner flight of steps to a large, long, brown, high-ceilinged chamber, in which, to the right and left, and in the rear facing east, were tall, thin, round-topped windows, fitted with thin panes, admitting a flood of light...

The detail attains terrifying effect in the jail:

And at dawn, a bony aged, rheumy jailer, in a
baggy, worn, blue uniform, bearing a black, iron tray, on which was a tinful of coffee, some bread and a piece of ham with one egg. 107

In the midst of dramatic human situations, we suddenly realize that the really terrifying effect is the stark reality of things, the overwhelming pressure of the material.

Whenever the abstract or aesthetic intrudes on the description of a scene, Dreiser fails us:

The ceilings were low. Pretty lamps behind painted shades hugged dark walls. Open fires in two connecting rooms cast a rosy glow upon cushioned and comfortable furniture. There were pictures, books, objects of art... 108

The settings of Sondra's world are never more convincing than this. The 'artistic' is never 'real' in Dreiser. The Griffiths living room:

...was very impressive. To Clyde, even after the Green-Davidson and the Union League, it seemed a very beautiful room. It contained so many handsome pieces of furniture and such rich rugs and hangings. 109

Of course Dreiser is partly conscious of Clyde's superficial taste. But it seems a general rule, that Dreiser describes the rich scene with abstract nouns and adjectives while he describes the functional scene precisely. The most convincing setting for the relation of Clyde and Sondra is the Finchley kitchen. Clyde is impressed by "this culinary equipment...", the difference between a "commonplace aluminum pan" and "a heavily chased silver service." 110

And in the death cell, almost symbolically, the moralizing, the praying, the thoughts of Sondra and Roberta are overshadowed by, "That chair—that chair that he had so greatly
feared. "Ill And the sudden dimmings of lights in this room, the curtains drawn over the cells when a man passed to the execution chamber, the caps, the straps—the terrible material symbols of death dominate the last chapters.

The ideas that Dreiser put into Clyde's story are ambiguous and hence will not hold the tragic structure. But the idea that grows from the details of Clyde's story, the idea that dominates the book and makes it terrifying is the Idea of Material, the almost solid feeling of material, of its hold on man, and of its weight.
FOOTNOTES TO CHAPTER THREE


2. Ibid., p. 220.


4. Ibid., p. 207.


6. See above, p. 3.


8. See above, p. 4.


10. Ibid., I, p. 19.

11. Ibid., I, p. 22.

12. Ibid., I, p. 19.


17. Ibid., I, p. 5.

18. Ibid., I, p. 7.

19. Ibid., I, p. 9.


22. Ibid., I, p. 16.
23. Ibid., I, p. 21.
24. Ibid., I, p. 23.
25. Ibid., I, p. 25.
27. Ibid., I, p. 29.
31. See above, p. 24, footnote 63.
34. Ibid., I, pp. 76-77.
35. Ibid., I, p. 81.
36. Ibid., I, p. 57.
37. Ibid., I, p. 61.
38. Ibid., I, p. 85.
39. Ibid., I, p. 85.
40. Ibid., I, p. 100.
41. Ibid., I, p. 103.
42. Ibid., I, p. 42.
43. Ibid., I, p. 147.
44. Ibid., I, p. 146.
45. Ibid., I, p. 144.
46. Ibid., I, p. 179.
52. *Ibid.*, I, p. 188.
73. Ibid., II, p. 35.
74. Ibid., II, p. 19.
75. Ibid., II, p. 19.
76. Ibid., II, p. 47.
77. Ibid., II, p. 63.
78. Ibid., II, p. 77.
79. Ibid., II, p. 77.
80. Ibid., II, p. 92.
81. Ibid., I, p. xvi.
82. Ibid., I, p. 13.
83. Ibid., II, p. 402.
84. Ibid., II, p. 371.
85. Ibid., II, p. 403.
86. Elias, op. cit., p. 222.
87. Quoted in Elias, op. cit., p. 223.
89. Franz, New York Folklore Quarterly, p. 90.
92. Ibid., II, p. 192.
93. Ibid., I, p. 386.
94. See above, p. 71.
96. Ibid., II, p. 330.
97. Ibid., II, p. 325.
98. Ibid., I, p. 103.
99. Ibid., I, p. 313.

100. Ibid., II, p. 225.

101. Franz, New York Folklore Quarterly, p. 92

102. The low class names are found among the bell boys and their girls, and the factory workers. The middle class names are found among the factory foremen and the church-supper group. The high class names are found among Sondra's friends.


104. Dreiser, when he is writing most seriously, is very close to Ferelman's broad comic style.


106. Ibid., II, p. 225.


108. Ibid., I, p. 325.


110. Ibid., I, pp. 373-374.

111. Ibid., II, p. 365.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


