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MALE MORAL IRRESPONSIBILITY IN THEODORE DREISER'S _AN AMERICAN TRAGEDY_

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English

The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

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by

Dana B. Castle

1994

APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Dana B. Castle

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Approved, April 1994

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DEDICATION

Dedicated to my husband, Douglas B. Castle, for his encouragement and support.

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Abstract

An American Tragedy by Theodore Dreiser is a social criticism of moral irresponsibility. Though critics attribute other sources of blame for the behavior--religion, chance or determinism, the American Dream--the behavior itself deserves attention.

Principal male characters are models for morally irresponsible conduct, especially neglect, evasion, and abandonment. As Hegglund says, "All you gotta do is to watch de udders an' see how dey do, see" (AT 38). Clyde Griffiths witnesses and experiences male irresponsibility and finally becomes an abuser.

Although wealth and power perpetuate moral irresponsibility by enabling men to avoid accountability and to escape confrontation, the wealthy and powerful are not the only ones guilty. Moral irresponsibility is endemic in society, especially the medical system, the judicial system, and the church.

Because the abusive behavior extends from west to east through different socio-economic layers and generations, the conduct establishes itself as a suggested standard for masculinity while moral strength without power shapes itself into a standard for femininity.

MALE MORAL IRRESPONSIBILITY IN THEODORE DREISER'S *AN AMERICAN TRAGEDY*

"All you gotta do is to watch de udders an' see how dey do, see."

Theodore Dreiser
An American Tragedy

Sherwood Anderson, in a review of An American Tragedy, calls attention to " . . . the great human tenderness of Dreiser . . . . There is no smartness, no cleverness. There is just the man we American writers love and respect above all other writing artists here--the biggest man we've had" (qtd. in Salzman, Critical Reception 449). Anderson suggests that Dreiser, as social critic, writes not as an insensitive and cruel judge, but as a compassionate participant who observes patterns of behavior among his fellow humans that wound individuals and affect society. An American Tragedy can be read as a cautionary novel that reveals models of behavior--most notably male moral irresponsibility--which, if perpetuated, infect society and destroy lives.

Dreiser's protagonist, Clyde Griffiths, best exemplifies male moral irresponsibility. Society punishes him. A jury finds him guilty and a judge sentences him to the electric chair for the death of Roberta Alden, an innocent farmgirl who goes to work in a factory, meets Clyde, falls in love with him and becomes pregnant with his child. But Clyde is not the only male guilty of

irresponsible behavior. Hegglund, one of the older and more experienced bellhops at the Hotel Green-Davidson, where Clyde works in the first part of the novel, says to Clyde, "All you gotta do is to watch de udders an' see how dey do, see" (AT 38). Clyde learns from other male characters in the novel by watching and by experiencing their moral irresponsibility. Then he perpetuates the behavior and becomes an abuser. It is no surprise then, that Clyde, himself a victim of male irresponsibility, swims away from his drowning pregnant mistress, Roberta, and denies any relationship to her or to the incriminating circumstances when questioned about the accident.

What is surprising is that most critics stress other sources of blame for Clyde's immoral behavior, overlooking the moral irresponsibility displayed again and again by significant male characters. For instance, Dreiser makes apparent, from the novel's circular movement illustrated by the opening and closing street missionary scene, that religion is a contributing factor. The novel begins with the Asa Griffiths family conducting a missionary service on a street corner and ends with the same family, though Esta's son replaces Clyde, conducting a missionary service on a street corner. The circular movement, as it relates to Asa's religion, suggests an image of stagnancy and suffocation. Dreiser's biographer, Richard Lingeman, suggests that Dreiser criticizes a religion contaminated by

"dogma" or opposed to religion whose "virtue is natural" (Lingeman 350). Rolf Lunden sees Asa's religion as "a destructive force . . . responsible for the misfortunes of Clyde" (Lunden 110,108). Lunden further explains that Asa's religion "creates an atmosphere of narrow-minded confusion, which makes his children yearn for the temptations of the city" (108). Joseph Wood Krutch, in a review of An American Tragedy titled "Crime and Punishment" (The Nation [February 10, 1926]), writes that "He [Clyde] had, in a word, the misfortune to be born in a country which offers in a hundred thousand churches to teach how to renounce life but which considers it highly immoral to teach how to live" (qtd. in Salzman, Critical Reception 471). Ellen Moers, in Two Dreisers, suggests that the main influence on An American Tragedy is Dreiser's childhood. "An American Tragedy is baldly concerned with the issues of good and evil as Dreiser had encountered them in his earliest years, as a child in a family of Dreisers. The childhood of his murderer is that struggle between grasping youth and repressive religion which both experience and reflection made Dreiser accept as universal fable of the human state" (Moers 220-221).

Dreiser identifies chance or determinism as another cause of Clyde's behavior. His protagonist "had a soul that was not destined to grow up. He lacked decidedly that mental clarity and inner directing application that in so many permits them to sort out from the facts and avenues of

life the particular thing or things that make for their direct advancement" (AT 169). In Hey Rub-a-Dub-Dub, Dreiser writes that ". . . [man] is either an intelligently or an accidentally evoluted mechanism or minute tool in the hands of something so much more significant than himself that he is as nothing . . ." (Dreiser 116). In other words, Dreiser suggests that Clyde is like a puppet manipulated by unseen hands and so not personally responsible for his own actions. According to this view, he goes through the motions of life without any responsibility for the outcome. Lingeman writes that Dreiser's An American Tragedy tells the story of a trapped individual, making decisions "not as an act of free will, but as the product of a chain of circumstances, 'physico-chemical' compulsions, and the workings of the subconscious" (Lingeman 384). Dreiser, himself, claims in "Now Comes Author Theodore Dreiser Who Tells of 100,000 Jennie Gerhardts" that "life is not reasonable. All our actions are regulated by some previous happening" (Dreiser 184).

A third source of blame critics cite for Clyde's immoral behavior is the American Dream, which exhorts individuals to regard chance or determinism simply as obstacles to overcome. The American Dream has as its premise that anyone, in spite of his background, can achieve wealth and position through hard work. According to several critics, the blame for Clyde's immoral behavior resides in

the inflated expectations that the dream encourages and the extent to which Clyde is willing to go to achieve those expectations. Ellen Moers states, "Clyde kills a young woman he has loved, and who is pregnant with his child, because he just wants to get ahead" (Moers 210). Sybil B. Weir suggests that the American Dream is not worth such sacrifice. She criticizes the Dream as being "hollow, corrupt, measurable only in terms of money and material possessions" (Weir 70). W.A. Swanberg calls the Dream a " . . . shallow American yearning for money, success, fashion . . ." (Swanberg 254), while Donald Pizer defines it as "the irresistible pressure within American life to gain success . . . " (Pizer 204). Robert Elias suggests that Clyde's behavior results from a conflict between the American Dream impulses and religious restraints. "Hampered by religion in his youngest days, Clyde is hampered by society in his later ones. Born into a world which requires that one possess money to live and which establishes the acquisition of this money as a goal when one is without it, Clyde is unable to accept the self-denying, joy-forsaking, moneyless ways of godliness" (Elias 223).

Although most recent critics argue that the quest for the American Dream, and the influence of religion and chance or determinism, all lie behind Clyde's immoral behavior, more significant is that Clyde's behavior is influenced by behavior itself. Significant male characters in Clyde's

life are models of irresponsible behavior. He observes them as he might watch players on a baseball field, throwing a baseball back and forth. He enters the game but receives injuries from the many balls that hit him until he learns to catch correctly and throw with ease. Clyde is an observer, a victim, and a perpetuator of morally irresponsible behavior.

A cluster of traits, behavior, and values that members of a society believe a person should have suggests a standard of behavior. According to Joseph Pleck's The Myth of Masculinity, the "male sex role identity paradigm is, ultimately, a product of its culture" (Pleck 7). The standards for behavior originate from "identification-modeling and, to a lesser extent, reinforcement and cognitive learning . . . " (Pleck 4). There is no doubt that the most important examplar of male moral irresponsibility in the novel is Clyde Griffiths and that the most dramatic illustration of moral irresponsibility is his deliberate abandonment of pregnant Roberta Alden to a watery grave. But Clyde not only exemplifies moral irresponsibility; he is a victim.

The first significant male character in Clyde's life is his father, Asa Griffiths, ironically titled by Ellen Moers, a "self-appointed preacher and doer of the Word" (Moers 289). Asa neglects his family emotionally, physically, and spiritually by distancing himself from them, by being

totally unaware and unresponsive to their needs. He evades moral responsibility for his family by using religion as a noble escape. For him, religion is a smoke screen behind which he can view the world, take no active part, and take no responsibility for consequences. Street corners are his pulpits, and his wife and four children the choir. He speaks of God's provision, "care of God for him and for all" (AT 9), but the family experiences poverty. Asa works once in a while at various tasks. He canvasses for a washing machine company (AT 36); he is a salesman, now and then; he peddles clocks and rugs (AT 117). All the while, he constantly disturbs any hope of emotional stability within the family by moving them several times a year to a "larger and better religious field" (AT 14). And because they live like religious gypsies, the children never stay long enough in one school to receive an adequate education, or make enduring friendships. The children find it hard to attend school, not only because they move so often, but also because their clothes are not decent and their food is insufficient (AT 14).

Asa's behavior of "always" (AT 9) reading his Bible and ignoring his children contributes not only to their physical poverty but to their emotional and spiritual poverty. Asa preaches the Bible but avoids living it. He has trouble handling crises. When his daughter Esta runs away from home, Asa responds with inappropriate religious phrases

rather than words of comfort and reassurance (<u>AT</u> 24-26) and stands "foolishly to one side--short, gray, frizzled, inadequate" (<u>AT</u> 25). He responds to Clyde's imprisonment and subsequent trial by collapsing physically and emotionally, "saying little" (<u>AT</u> 743) and requiring constant attention from his wife.

It is evident from the portrayal of Charlie Potter in <u>Twelve Men</u> that Dreiser is not attacking religion, but rather attacking the behavior of profession without practice. Called "Doer of the Word," Charlie does not preach God's Word; he lives it. He does "missionary work . . . among the poor people . . . " (Dreiser 60). Not only is he a carpenter who uses his skill to help others, but he also works a variety of jobs wherever there is a need. Charlie is approachable, willing to listen, to talk, to help in any way he can. He, like Asa, believes in "trusting to Providence for what he needs" (Dreiser 60), but, unlike Asa, Charlie and his family experience God's provision (Dreiser 61, 63, 66, 67). The lack of God's provision for Asa's family troubles Clyde. In his judgment, Asa's method of "'praying their way out'" when "financial difficulties were greatest" is "ineffectual" (<u>AT</u> 16).

Asa's religion humiliates Clyde. When asked about his father during the interview for a job as bellhop at the Hotel Green-Davidson, Clyde is too proud and too ashamed to "admit that his parents conducted a mission and preached on

the streets. Instead he replied (which was true at times) that his father canvassed for a washing machine and wringer company--and on Sundays preached . . . " (AT 36). Clyde gets the job and Asa never takes any responsibility for investigating the type of work Clyde will be doing. Asa never once examines the moral climate in which Clyde will mature, nor does he question the amount of money Clyde will be earning.

But Asa is also a victim of male moral irresponsibility. His father, Joseph Griffiths, Clyde's grandfather, neglected Asa and then abandoned him. Asa, somehow, did not meet his father's expectations. Joseph expected Asa to be "practical" and "intelligent" (AT 173), and when Asa did not conform, Joseph determined to first "drive" Asa, then to "ignore" him, and finally to "[turn] him out" and to cut him out of his inheritance (AT 173). Joseph intentionally distanced himself from his son rather than accepting him and his differences. Joseph turned Asa out of his home instead of helping him find strengths and vocational independence.

Samuel Griffiths, Asa's brother and Clyde's uncle, even though favored by their father, Joseph, also behaves irresponsibly. His behavior illustrates evasion, neglect, and abandonment. In Chicago, Samuel, the owner of a successful collar-and-shirt factory in upstate New York, recognizes Clyde at the Union League Club where Clyde works

as a bellhop, following his escape from Kansas City and his involvement in the hit-and-run car accident that kills a little girl. Because Clyde's looks remind Samuel of his own son, Gilbert, and for the sake of Asa, Samuel encourages Clyde to come to Lycurgus to work in the family business. Until meeting Clyde, Samuel seems to have carried on Joseph's attitude toward Asa Griffiths because during the past interval of thirty years, Samuel and Asa have neither met nor communicated with each other (AT 173).

Not only does Samuel neglect his relationship with his brother, but he neglects the relationships within his own family by failing to discuss with them the addition of Clyde to the business. Perhaps explanations would be too painful or too complicated to discuss. For whatever reason, Samuel makes no attempt to reassure his own son, Gilbert, that Clyde, who is Gilbert's look-alike, will not take his place. Carelessly, Samuel sets Clyde up for a hostile relationship within the Lycurgus Griffiths family, instead of appealing to the family's sense of charity. Samuel intends good, but blunders by not involving the family in his decision, instead reinforcing their expectation that he will assume full responsibility for Clyde.

Clyde desperately needs inclusion, but what he finds in Lycurgus is family exclusion. Samuel offers no welcome, no family introductions, no contact during the first five weeks Clyde is in Lycurgus. Then the family leaves Lycurgus for

six months with no thought of Clyde and with no mention, to him, of their departure or date of return (AT 301). Samuel takes no avuncular responsibility for Clyde. He chooses not to recognize Clyde socially, and at work decides to receive information about Clyde through Gilbert. Furthermore, Samuel has no sense that the relationship between Gilbert and Clyde might be fragile and might require some direct intervention. When the family finally entertains Clyde, they do so at 6:30 on a Sunday evening after any "various local or visiting friends . . . had departed . . . . Thus Clyde as Gilbert was pleased to note would be received and entertained without the likelihood of contacts, introductions and explanations to such of their more important connections who might chance to stop in during the afternoon" (AT 210).

Gilbert illustrates moral irresponsibility by evading the reality of his relationship with Clyde. He intentionally gives Clyde a "freezing reception" (AT 181) and treats him with "condescension" (AT 181). Gilbert withholds information about his father from Clyde and about Clyde from his friends. Gilbert determines "that he could easily place and control Clyde in such a way as to make him not very important to any one in any way--his father, the family, all the people who worked here" (AT 182). The effects upon Clyde of the irresponsible behavior of others are evident early in the novel. He quickly learns to serve

his own interests by evading responsibility. While working at the Hotel Green-Davidson and living at home with his family, he figures out how he can escape any financial responsibility for his family and keep his earnings for himself. He deliberately withholds information and money from his mother by not telling her how much money he is earning at the hotel (AT 40, 54). His new male friends, fellow bellhops, are eager to introduce Clyde to a self-indulgent and expensive way of life and Clyde is eager to keep as much money as he can for himself and to spend it on whatever benefits him or his relationship with his peers. He shows no desire to share with the family or to help them. Later, his mother has to confront him with her need for money (AT 118). When he moves to Lycurgus, he evades all personal questions relating to his family and his father's work (AT 219). When evasion no longer works, he responds with lies about his father, saying that he "conduct[s] a hotel in Denver" (AT 323) rather than a store-front mission. After he meets Roberta Alden and decides to pursue a relationship with her, he allows Roberta to falsely think that he has "money" and "position" and that he belongs to a "set" of people (AT 280).

Over and over he deliberately deceives Roberta, not only about his background, but also about his relationship with her. He "reaffirmed to her . . . falsely . . . that he regarded her as first, last and most in his heart . . . "

(AT 361) while trying to figure out ways to escape from the relationship (AT 364), and inwardly declaring that he has no intention of ever marrying her (AT 296, 423). When Roberta becomes pregnant, Clyde evades her expressed desire for action. He needs time "to think . . . without being compelled to do anything" (AT 432). He deceives Roberta about his need to work longer to save more money when actually he travels to Twelfth Lake with the socialite Sondra Finchley (AT 456). When Roberta confronts him with her intuitive feelings about his deception, he responds falsely, "'But I'm not storying to you, Bert'" (AT 358). Desperate to escape his responsibilities to Roberta, he pleads with Sondra to run away and marry him (AT 448). He uses the false names Clifford Golden and Carl Graham (AT 516) when he registers with Roberta at the hotel on the "alleged wedding trip" (AT 462). After Roberta's drowning, Clyde "walk[s] briskly" (AT 494) away from the scene, escaping South. Even after his arrest and while he is being escorted to jail, Clyde fantasizes an escape (AT 664). Mason, the District Attorney, asks Clyde if he always runs away when there are accidents leading to death involving girls (AT 709).

Mason certainly picks out a behavior pattern in Clyde. By all accounts, he runs away from all responsibility in Kansas City. After the hit-and-run car accident in which a little girl is killed, he runs away from his home and

family, the law and a job. He never returns home and he does not write "for months" (AT 161). By the time Mason arrests Clyde, abandonment or desertion is part of his behavior pattern in both thought and action. He thinks of abandoning Roberta somehow so he can pursue the higher social goals that Sondra Finchley represents (AT 316). In actuality, Clyde abandons Roberta several times: when he had plans to accompany her part way home (AT 334-335); when he asks her to get an abortion on her own (AT 385); and when he walks out of several pharmacies without speaking to the druggists about drugs to abort her pregnancy when he had promised to do so (AT 376-377).

The pattern of male moral irresponsibility stretches far and wide and from generation to generation. Such behavior encompasses different socio-economic groups exemplified in the novel by Asa Griffiths in the West and Samuel Griffiths and his contemporaries in the East. The size and depth of the pattern suggests that moral irresponsibility is an accepted standard for masculinity. The novel supports Joseph Pleck's assertion, in The Myth of Masculinity, that "researchers postulate that widely shared beliefs exist prescribing how individuals holding particular roles should act and that individuals compare themselves and are compared by others to these beliefs" (Pleck 135).

For instance, Hegglund and Ratterer, Clyde's friends at the Hotel Green-Davidson in Kansas City, illustrate how male

moral irresponsibility, particularly escape and abandonment, become accepted and perpetuated. The boys share their personal stories; they share tales; they share an experience. They all share involvement in the hit-and-run car accident in Kansas City and they all try to escape. Like Clyde, Hegglund is himself a victim of moral irresponsibility. He is the "son of a Swedish journeyman baker who some years before in Jersey City had deserted his mother and left her to make her way as best she could" (AT 50). Yet instead of sympathizing with women who are deserted, Hegglund seems to admire the men who exploit them. The novel looks at marriage through eyes of men who see it as entrapment. The men see women using sex as a lure and a snare, and pregnancy as the shackles. So men excuse each other in their use of resources to escape the wrong kind of marriage, to evade or even to desert their wives after marriage. Hegglund tells, with great relish, a story to Clyde and the others, about a guest of the hotel who registers with a woman he calls his wife. They have a parlor and a bedroom with fresh flowers daily. After three days, the man leaves town without telling the woman and without paying for the rooms or the meals. He gets away free. The woman has to pay the bill, somehow (AT 58). Clyde, reflecting on Hegglund's story, remembers "how comic it had seemed to him and the other boys at the time . . ." (AT 99). Indirectly, Clyde and Hegglund and their friends

learn from "identification-modeling" that accepted masculine behavior includes not only the actual escape from the responsibility of relationships, but the thrill experienced in the successful accomplishment of the act.

Sparser, Hegglund's friend and the driver in the accident, illustrates escapism in another way. Rather than improve his situation through determination and hard work, he pretends to be someone he is not. He does not appreciate his father's job and is rather "anxious to pose as something more than the son of a superintendent of a farm" (AT 122-122). As "an occasional watchman" (AT 122), he has access to cars, and he steals "the very finest of them" (AT 122) to ride in, giving himself airs. He steals the car that carries the bellhops and their girls for a day trip and that hits the little girl and kills her. He drives with great speed away from the accident, but eventually crashes and the police catch him.

Ratterer, the son of an abusive father, runs away at age 14 to Kansas City (AT 52). Though also a victim, he is the one friend of Clyde's who assumes some responsibility. Through his work, he supports his mother and sister and through observation and experience, he links financial success with power, recognizing work as the ticket to success. The car accident interrupts his plan for achievement, however, and he feels grief-stricken for the wrong reason. The issue that monopolizes his concern is the

thought that he might be late for work which terrifies him more than the accident or the death of the little girl. Ratterer, Clyde, and Hegglund help untangle the bodies and then run "across the open fields and away from the city" (AT 144). Clyde deserts his friends at the scene of the accident just as later on in the novel he becomes a victim of desertion.

After Clyde's arrest for the murder of Roberta Alden, Samuel has no conversations with Clyde (AT 578) and still tells no one about Clyde's family. No one comes "forward to champion him" (AT 618). Samuel continues to emotionally and physically abandon Clyde during the trial by traveling "rather far from Lycurgus" (AT 579) himself, and by having "a deep objection to bringing on any member of this western branch of the family" (AT 619). When Mrs. Asa Griffiths does come east, Samuel adds to his immoral behavior by inappropriately "resenting" (AT 750) her intrusion.

Samuel financially neglects Clyde when he first comes to Lycurgus by paying him poverty-level wages. Later he financially abandons Clyde: first, by not admitting the use of Asa's inheritance to purchase his shirt and collar factory and so failing to achieve some reconciliation and make some restitution to Clyde's family, and second, by declining to finance a new trial for Clyde. Samuel fears that by financing a new trial he would lose social and commercial stability within the community. He also feels

that he has sacrificed too much already. The Griffiths, "having been consulted as to the wisdom and cost of a new trial, disclosed themselves as by no means interested, let alone convinced, that an appeal--at least at their expense--was justified. The torture and socially--if not commercially--destroying force of all this--every hour of it a Golgotha! Bella and her social future, to say nothing of Gilbert and his--completely overcast and charred by this awful public picture of the plot and crime that one of their immediate blood had conceived and executed!" (AT 745). This is the man that ironically, F.O. Matthiessen calls "tolerant and forbearing" (Salzman, Merrill Studies 62) and Lingeman sees as "honorable, commanding . . . living by an inner directed credo, the protestant ethic of hard work and postponement of gratification" (Lingeman 410).

Dreiser shows throughout the novel that wealth and power, manipulated by men, play a big part in perpetuating male moral irresponsibility. By using examples from the medical profession, the judicial system, and the church, Dreiser demonstrates that male moral irresponsibility is endemic in society. Wealth and power can buy irresponsibility and encourage it. Griffiths and Finchley purchase the service of lawyers to evade responsibility. Samuel Griffiths, it is true though more concerned for his damaged respectability than for his imprisoned nephew, experiences remorse, in a moment of reflection, when he

considers himself a "contributing cause" (AT 586) of Clyde's predicament. Samuel remembers that Clyde was "left to work in that basement at first" and was "ignored by the family" and so "left to his own devices" (AT 586). But, rather than take a personal stand for Clyde now, presume him innocent until proven guilty, and hire lawyers to properly defend him, Samuel instead hires lawyers to prejudge Clyde. "'I hope he isn't guilty. And I want every proper step taken to discover whether he is or not, and if not, to defend him to the limit of the law. But no more than that. . . . I'll do what I can to help him if he's innocent . . . '" (AT 587). If Clyde can convince the lawyers of his innocence, then Samuel will spend whatever money it takes to defend him. But if the lawyers determine his guilt, then Samuel will spend no money on the trial and Clyde must endure the consequences (AT 587). The lawyers speak and act for Samuel. He does not speak personally with Clyde to encourage or to offer sympathy or to express anger and disappointment. He continues his behavior of neglect and distances himself farther from Clyde. He ultimately moves his family to Boston during the trial to "live as exiles" (AT 745) and escape prying eyes.

Finchley likewise uses wealth and power to purchase the services of lawyers to withhold relevant testimony, namely, his daughter Sondra's letters and Sondra's name, from Clyde's trial. Atterbury, the lawyer for Finchley, has

"plans and political information" (AT 581) to cause Mason, the district attorney, to withhold Sondra's letters from the evidence and to withhold any personal connection she may have had with Clyde. Finchley, like Griffiths, uses his wealth to move his family out of town during the trial. To further hide Sondra's identity and involvement, he changes the Finchley name to "Wilson" (AT 582). The Cranston family also uses their wealth to escape during the trial. Their destination is "one of the Thousand Islands, where there was a summer colony not entirely unsatisfactory to their fancy" (AT 582).

In other ways, personal agendas of the trial lawyers get in the way of proper trial procedure and so illustrate irresponsible behavior; and the jury is a travesty of the judicial system. The issue of whether or not the lawyers are for or against District Attorney Orville Mason's re-election sparks their responses to Clyde's case, while the judicial system behaves like a machine pushing and restraining at the same time, moving "automatically . . . without the aid or the hearts of men" (AT 807). Dreiser, in "The Jury System," voices his contempt when he calls the American jury system an "outrageous mockery," a "breeder of bribes," and "a castle from which to work in safety any sort of injury" (A Selection of Uncollected Prose 74). The jury in Clyde's trial is made up of twelve men: "all married" with one exception, "all religious" with one exception, and

"all convinced of Clyde's guilt before ever they sat down" (AT 638-639). They see themselves "as fair and open-minded men" (AT 639) yet threaten and harass one fellow juror because he dares to think and question Clyde's guilt independently (AT 737). Also, there is no one during the trial, like a character in Twelve Men, who tries to "purify the political atmosphere" (Dreiser 196). No one accuses the lawyers of either aiding or hindering the district attorney's re-election by the conduct and outcome of Clyde's trial. A courtroom exchange occurs between the defense lawyer Belknap and prosecuting attorney Mason concerning Mason's candidacy for the Republican position of county judge. The court judge summons Belknap and Mason and reprimands them. After Belknap returns to his seat, he and Jephson, Clyde's other defense lawyer, "congratulat[e] themselves that in this fashion their mood in regard to Mason's candidacy and his use of this case to further it had effectively gotten before the jury and the court" (AT 651). F.O Matthiessen observes that "the question of Clyde's guilt or innocence becomes a mere incident in the struggle between rival politicians" (Salzman, Merrill Studies 67).

In An American Tragedy, wealth and power not only influence lawyers and provide means for escaping moral responsibility, but also purchase professional medical skill and encourage doctors to behave unethically. Doctors preach against abortion to poor girls like Roberta, but perform

surgical abortions on girls who are sponsored by either their own family wealth or the boy's family wealth and influence (AT 393, 400, 406). A doctor refuses, a second time, Roberta's plea for help by saying that abortion was "against his prejudices and ethics" (AT 410), and counsels Roberta to go home, confess, and have the child. Alvin Belknap, defense lawyer for Clyde, remembers the situation in which he was entangled and how his family doctor responded. Like Clyde, Belknap gets one girl pregnant while being seriously in love with another. Belknap tells his father everything and his father, through his use of wealth and power, persuades the family doctor to abort the pregnancy and encourages the girl to forget the affair while Alvin travels for a year. When Alvin Belknap returns from his travels, he marries the more socially correct girl (AT 592).

Not only the men of the medical profession, the trial lawyers, and the men of the jury, but also the men of the church behave irresponsibly. Dreiser suggests that all who do not live the faith that they profess are morally irresponsible. The Rev. Duncan McMillan is a young minister, unordained like Asa Griffiths, but several steps higher than Asa on the scale of respectability. Rather than conducting an evangelical street mission, he conducts an "independent non-sectarian church" (AT 776). Mrs. Asa Griffiths meets him in Syracuse while "canvassing the

churches and ministers . . . for aid for her son" (<u>AT</u> 776). She asks him to visit Clyde in prison because she likes his strong, effective, religious temperament. She hopes that his youth and support will comfort Clyde as she can no longer be with him. McMillan, after talking with Mrs. Griffiths, not only agrees to visit Clyde in prison but ponders the possibility that "any strange freak or circumstance" could cause a "legal mistake" and that perhaps "Clyde was not as guilty as he appeared" (<u>AT</u> 777). However, McMillan evades moral responsibility. He takes advantage of his office to influence against a life rather than for it. He acts as jury and judge, condemning Clyde after hearing his confession. He betrays him and his confidence and then abandons him. McMillan has a chance to speak for Clyde to the newly elected governor and perhaps influence him for a new trial. Rather than stating his position with a clear, confident voice, McMillan, who first questions Clyde's guilt, now uses "peculiar silence and evasion" (<u>AT</u> 804) to respond to the governor's address, and then retreats into theology. "'As his spiritual advisor I have entered only upon the spiritual, not the legal aspect of his life'" (<u>AT</u> 803). The governor reads his body language, "at once deciding, from something in McMillan's manner that he . . . was satisfied as to Clyde's guilt" (<u>AT</u> 803) and refuses Mrs. Asa Griffiths' plea for a new trial. Concerning McMillan's retreat into theology, Richard Lehan writes, "Although Clyde

is legally innocent, McMillan believes that he is guilty before God and, as a result, fails to give the Governor the facts that could save Clyde's life" (Lehan 169).

McMilllan is not the only minister who behaves irresponsibly. Rather than continuing to respond to Mrs. Asa Griffiths with compassion, sympathy, and mercy, offering her whatever aid she needs, other ministers speak out of their prejudices and persecute her from the pulpit. They actively persuade their congregations to stop financially and emotionally supporting her efforts to help her son because they question her calling, "to walk forth and without ordination after any fashion conduct an unauthorized and hence nondescript mission" (AT 765). The clergy also blames Mrs. Griffiths for Clyde's immoral behavior. "Besides if she had remained at home, as a good mother should, and devoted herself to her son, as well as to her other children--their care and education--would this--have happened?" (AT 765).

As moral irresponsibility with power is society's standard for masculinity, so moral responsibility without power is society's standard for femininity. Women in the novel exhibit moral strength but have no wealth or power to influence others. Characteristic strengths illustrated by some women are an intuitive sense about their children, a willingness to face problems and try to solve them, and unconditional support of their children and husbands.

Even though some ordained men of the institutional church express a perverse prejudice against Mrs. Asa Griffiths, she is recognizably an example of moral responsibility, "the strongest in the family" (AT 623) and the "soul pilot" (AT 623). She has "determination" and "does what she believes" (AT 8). She believes in the individuality of her children and supports their need to express it. Though she sees that Clyde is weak physically, morally, and mentally (AT 121), much the way Joseph Griffiths sized up Asa, she does not push Clyde or ignore him, and she never turns him out of his home as Joseph did Asa. She worries about the future of her children because they have no practical or professional training (AT 14). She perceives their need, but she has no power to influence Asa against moving the family as often as he does. Clyde consults her before taking the soda fountain job at the drug store (AT 28) and finds her receptive and encouraging. She supports Clyde and respects his need for independence. Once Clyde starts working at the Hotel Green-Davidson, she does not question the amount of money he earns or his claim that the "management" demands that all the boys "look well outside as well as inside the hotel" (AT 54). She learns through a newspaper article about Clyde's involvement in the hit-and-run automobile accident. She is "startled" and "distressed" but, until she talks with him and hears his side, "unwilling to believe that her son had been one of the

party . . . (AT 161).

When Esta runs away from home, Mrs. Griffiths accepts the circumstances, but holds out hope for her return. She faces the other children and speaks as positively as she can about Esta. She does not condemn her daughter (AT 24-25), but reminds the children that it was Esta's choice to leave and prays with them for God's provision and protection for her (AT 23). When Esta writes to her mother about her pregnancy and abandonment, Mrs. Griffiths makes arrangements for her daughter's return. She pawns her jewelry and looks for a room to rent (AT 90) and even confronts Clyde for money (AT 118), which suggests that all along she intuitively knows that Clyde has more money than he willingly admits. In the end, she provides lodging, medical aid, and emotional support for Esta.

She declares that she is "not convinced" (AT 742) of Clyde's guilt in the murder of Roberta Alden, but intuitively fears his involvement. She fights courageously for Clyde, even at the end, making an emotional appeal for his life and a new trial to the newly elected governor. When Clyde is in jail, she finds employment as a correspondent for three weeks with expenses covered. She receives "ready cash" and instructions on how to file her "communication" (AT 747). She also initiates a campaign to raise money by taking speaking engagements at churches (AT 763). She fights determinedly when the odds are against

her. She works to protect her family, facing the storm with scripture as her shield (AT 764). Though she supports Asa emotionally and physically in his religious work, she admits Asa's inability to provide financially for the family (AT 118) and manages the best she can. She nurses him, during his emotional and physical collapse, while working at a religious school to earn money for the trip east to visit Clyde in prison.

Mrs. Samuel Griffiths is judgmental and snobbish, but her intuition and her dedication to her family are as strong as Mrs. Asa Griffiths'. She intuitively feels threatened by Clyde's presence in Lycurgus and in the family. Her investment in society is her children and she seeks to protect that investment. She is concerned about having a Griffiths in Lycurgus who lacks knowledge of the customs of polite society, thinking to herself, " . . . any one related to them and having their name ought to be more circumspect and have careful manners and taste and judgment" (AT 192). She thinks that "it was not wise for her husband to bring on any one who was not all of that and more" (AT 192). She senses great discomfort for Gilbert when Clyde comes to town, but has no power to influence her husband. Samuel never talks with her before he decides to bring Clyde to Lycurgus. There is no opportunity for her to express her social concerns. He informs her with the rest of the family, at the same time. When she receives Samuel's

decision to hire Clyde, "out of respect for her husband's authority and general ability in all things" (AT 157) she remains silent in support of her husband in front of the children.

Mrs. Finchley disapproves of and warns her husband and daughter about a relationship with Clyde. When her warnings go unheeded, she proposes a family trip to Europe to separate Sondra and Clyde. She is willing to use family wealth to prevent potential difficulties that she intuitively sees in a relationship between the young people. She probably hopes that distance and new surroundings, new people, and activities will help establish in Sondra a healthier and calmer perspective about Clyde. The trip does not take place, however; nor does any alternative action take place. No separation occurs.

The image of Mrs. Asa Griffiths clasping and unclasping her hands (AT 161, 624) suggests the powerlessness of these women. They have little or no power to make things happen. They have no influence or authority to act on their strong insight. Each in her own sphere sees potential difficulties relating to Clyde, but feels unable to influence those who hold authority, namely their husbands. They have no powerful influence in their own lives or in the lives of others. They manage the best they can with the results of male morally irresponsible behavior rather than being allowed to influence men in the early part of decision-

making, before irresponsibility bears fruit.

The young unmarried women, Esta Griffiths, Hortense Briggs, and Roberta Alden see men as tickets to a better life for themselves. But each uses it differently. Esta Griffiths runs away from home with an actor (AT 19). She desires pretty clothes (AT 20) and her "essentially yielding" nature makes her ripe for romantic idealism in the form of a prince charming (AT 21). Her idealism explodes into reality when she faces pregnancy and abandonment (AT 98). Hortense Briggs distances herself from men and she holds herself back as a useful commodity. She sees the demand, realizes her attractiveness, and barters herself for material luxuries.

Roberta, like Hortense Briggs, exhibits a certain amount of financial and emotional self-reliance but her immediate means for attaining goals are different. While Hortense dreams of material luxuries for herself and plots their attainment, Roberta dreams of a college business course somewhere in the future. She may have the same goals --the acquiring of material luxuries--as Hortense, but she does not seem caught up in a whirlwind of instant gratification. She sends most of her earnings home to help her family (AT 246, 271) and she even puts aside a small sum to build a new life with Clyde (AT 430).

Similar to Esta, however, Roberta Alden is a trusting romantic. She sees all her dreams coming true through her

love for her prince charming, Clyde (AT 245, 293). Unlike Esta, she does not run away with a complete stranger, but she does romanticize Clyde's "social condition" (AT 293) and his love for her, as Esta romanticized her relationship with her actor lover.

As the other women in the novel, Roberta experiences strong intuitive feelings but seems powerless to act on them. For one thing, she is intuitively nervous about the inappropriateness of a clandestine relationship with Clyde as "something untoward and even sinful" (AT 285). For another, she experiences "secret fears" of desire which Clyde awakens in her and which she is "still unwilling to face" (AT 289). She senses "something sinful, low, dreadful" (AT 289) about allowing Clyde into her room at night, but at the same time feels "somewhat in awe of him" (AT 289). Finally, she also senses the true interest Clyde feels for Sondra Finchley (AT 359). But Roberta turns to Clyde as someone to trust rather than someone to fear. Since she regards him as "her superior" (AT 289) from a work and social standpoint, her position then suggests an awkward one from which to negotiate. As a result she feels powerless to impose her moral standards and she is ashamed to allow free reign to her fears. Besides, she does not want to lose Clyde (AT 290). She wants "marriage and a home and children, and a reasonable place in such a local world as she was accustomed to . . . " (AT 349). When she

becomes pregnant, she tries over and over to solve problems with Clyde rather than run away or go home for support. She longs for her mother's "beloved" (AT 347) face, but is so torn between her love for Clyde and her guilt in compromising herself that she is unable to confess her pregnancy. "Conventions of this local world were much too strong--even where her mother was concerned" (AT 343). In addition to her personal shame, she feels that she has let her family down. She was proudly helping them out of poverty and now sees the end of her ability to rescue them. She does not want to cause her mother any more concern than she has already (AT 347) so she determines that Clyde is the one who "must help her" (AT 370). She sees herself and her "defenseless predicament" (AT 410), anticipates the shame brought on by "the stigma of unsanctioned concupiscence" (AT 369), and decides that the only solution is marriage. She gives Clyde a choice: either to find her professional help to get her out of her pregnancy or marry her and live with her long enough for the birth of their child (AT 418). When Clyde can not get her the professional help for an abortion, she proposes either a secret marriage (AT 414-415) or a marriage with the understanding that he would leave later (AT 417). One thing she demands is that he not leave her now. She refuses to go away or get out of Clyde's life.

Her self-reliance, independence, and perseverance do not save her. She is strong, but has no power or wealth or

position to influence doctors to give her a surgical abortion (AT 404, 410), or to undo the mistakes she has made. Her only source of power is her threat to expose Clyde, by returning to Lycurgus from her family's farm to tell people how he has treated her (AT 469). She expects that Sondra's family and Sondra will hear of her existence, her pregnancy, and Clyde's delays, and as a result, cut the social ties with Clyde. Then there would be no obstacles between her and marriage to Clyde. She assumes responsibility, perseveres, tries to work things out, demands morally responsible behavior from Clyde, and for that she dies.

Ultimately, authorities respond to the crime, catch and imprison Clyde, and force responsibility on his shoulders. The system takes over. He dies for allowing Roberta to die. But what if the newly elected governor had been made aware of the hidden agendas of the trial lawyers and the irresponsible behavior involved in withholding testimony, or the behavior and prejudices of the jury? With this additional information, he might have responded favorably to Mrs. Asa Griffiths' pleas for a new trial for Clyde. If the new facts had come to light about the morally irresponsible behavior modeled for Clyde by significant figures in his life or the pervasiveness of male moral irresponsibility throughout society, perhaps Clyde would have received a different sentence.

As it is, the trial is merely an illusion of justice being done. Clyde's death accomplishes nothing; the trial accomplishes nothing. There is no change. The circular movement of the novel suggests only a return to the established patterns of behavior with a new character here and there. Dreiser further suggests through the circular movement of the novel that because male moral irresponsibility infects society systemically, society itself is completely unaware of the depth and breadth of the infection. The lack of awareness feeds the illusion that Clyde's trial and subsequent death stops the infection from spreading. The novel argues that trials and deaths are not an answer to the problem, but rather an opportunity to perpetuate the problem. Finally, by ending An American Tragedy as it began, Dreiser suggests that he recognizes a limit to his vision. He offers no answers. He leaves to others the responsibility of finding a solution.

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VITA

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