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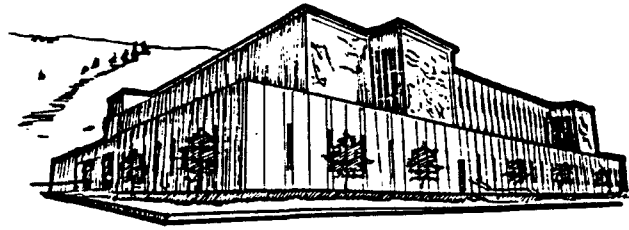
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IMPOSSIBLE JUSTICE:
THEODORE DREISER'S SEARCH FOR IDENTITY

By


James William Rains Jr.

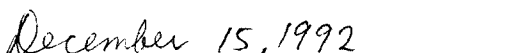
B.A., Rocky Mountain College, 1982

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
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University of Montana
1992

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Impossible Justice: Theodore Dreiser's Search for Identity (155 pp.)

Director: William W. Bevis *WB*

When Clyde Griffiths, the protagonist of Theodore Dreiser's An American Tragedy (1925), is executed for murdering his pregnant lover, he dies uncertain of his own guilt, confused by the events of his life and completely lacking any sense of identity. Clyde, born into poverty and ignorance, longs desperately for the icons of American prosperity: fine clothes, status and women. So intense is Clyde's desire for "the good life" that he is prepared to destroy any obstacle standing between him and his goals. Clyde's desire--in combination with banal personal attributes and extraordinary misfortune--results in his execution. Dreiser renders a sympathetic portrait of Clyde as victim--of social conditions, of inherited desires and of his own inadequacy. The purpose of this inquiry is to explore Dreiser's use of character to assert the determining influence society holds over its constitutive members and to explore his concept of tragedy.

This study begins with an analysis of Dreiser's four major naturalistic novels, identifying specific places in the text where the protagonists reflect the values of industrial American society. This study also includes a consideration of the social and economic conditions of late nineteenth and early twentieth century American culture and an analysis of Dreiser's life.

This study then proceeds to an examination of anomie, a principle of social theory which accounts for deviant behavior. Introduced by Emile Durkheim, anomie means literally "normlessness." It refers to a condition of society wherein societal goals are incompatible with the means for achieving them. For example, an individual might possess the American success goal, which implies that anyone at any time can achieve unlimited financial success, but lack the necessary education, opportunity or skill to achieve it--so he seeks an alternative means of achieving success.

Because these novels are informed by economic issues and feature female characters, this study reviews recent Marxist and feminist criticism of Dreiser's fiction. This paper concludes with an evaluation of Dreiser's claims about the individual in society and attempts to prove that his fiction remains a highly respectable treatment of men and women as social and tragic beings.

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I.

Carrie Meeber, the protagonist of Sister Carrie, Theodore Dreiser's first novel, arrives in Chicago in 1889 direct from her home in rural Wisconsin. Chicago at this time is an emerging city; its swelling population, glittering department stores and vast industrial center contrast drastically with the relatively desolate, colorless farm life from which she has fled. Carrie is instantly drawn to the material splendor of the city, but her enthusiasm is just as quickly tempered by the realization that she has arrived in a world quite different from that with which she is familiar. This new world--so glamorous, so appealing, so stimulating--operates under a different social order. In this new world, wealth functions as the dominant social goal:

The great create an atmosphere which reacts badly upon the small. This atmosphere is easily and quickly felt. Walk among the magnificent residences, the splendid equipages, the gilded shops, restaurants, resorts of all kinds; scent the flowers, the silks, the wines; drink of the laughter springing from the soul of luxurious content, of the glances which gleam like light from defiant spears; feel the quality of smiles which cut like

glistening swords and of strides born of place, and you shall know of what is the atmosphere of the high and mighty. Little use to argue that of such is not the kingdom of greatness, but so long as the world is attracted by this and the human heart views this as the one desirable realm which it must attain, so long, to the heart, will this remain the realm of greatness. So long, also, will the atmosphere of this realm work its desperate results in the soul of man. (Sister Carrie, 214)

In this passage Dreiser identifies the seductive power of wealth in American society. For Dreiser the virtues of wealth naturally emerge as self-evident, enduring and destructive truths. Who can truly resist the allure of wealth? In this society wealth is internalized "in the human heart"; it is the "one desirable realm which [the human heart] must attain."

In his attempt to grasp the meaning of the individual life, such as Carrie Meeber's, American novelist Theodore Dreiser ironically decided that the individual is largely determined by the society out of which he or she comes. Dreiser created, in addition to Carrie, characters like Jennie Gerhardt of Jennie Gerhardt, Frank Cowperwood of The Financier and Clyde Griffiths of

An American Tragedy and with elaborate and detailed prose established them definitively in the context of early twentieth century industrial American culture.

Cowperwood is a phenomenally successful entrepreneur; while Clyde, on the other hand, is a loser who struggles only to self-destruct ultimately. Somewhere between these two lie the characters of Carrie Meeber and Jennie Gerhardt. All of these novels, written between 1900 and 1925, explore the complex relationship between the individual and society.

Each of these characters' lives is a particular response to the ideals of the "American dream," that uniquely American myth which optimistically holds that an individual--any individual--can overcome the severest social and economic constraints to achieve the maximum fulfillment of material and spiritual desire. Implicit in this American myth is the assumption that success is not only every American's birthright but, in fact, his destiny.

Classical Marxist theory has, of course, interpreted the success myth as an ideology designed to perpetuate an exploitative economic order. Wealth, the Marxist argues, exists only as a remote possibility for the majority of working-class people. The prospect of wealth, however, serves as a lure which propels overworked and underpaid working people through the grind of

their otherwise dreary lives. Although the typical American worker never seems to achieve wealth, he nonetheless clings to the goal.

Dreiser's naturalistic novels represent his own emerging disenchantment with this American social order. While the virtues of wealth in this society are apparent, the means with which any given individual might achieve wealth are less evident. Dreiser was himself an outsider. The son of a poor German immigrant, Dreiser, too, was easily seduced by the American promise of wealth; however, despite his best efforts in his youth, wealth eluded him. He noticed, though, that in spite of his failure, his intense longing for wealth persisted. This presented a problem for Dreiser which he sought to explore in his fiction: if American society advocates the pursuit of wealth to the exclusion of all other goals, what happens when an individual is, for one reason or another, incapable of achieving success? Dreiser, like other social determinists, argues that society establishes the success goal, as it establishes virtually all values for its members, but it does not simultaneously provide an equitable means for fulfillment.

The impulse to acquire wealth in America supersedes all other impulses. Ethical codes and personal relationships are sacrificed to this dominant goal. So per-

vasive and compelling was the success goal in nineteenth century America that it literally shaped the lives of many Americans. As it shaped some lives, like those of Dreiser's characters, it created the potential for great harm. If one possessed merely the ambition for success without any concurrent substantial intellect, self-awareness or spirituality then he or she was likely to become a victim of the American social scheme. In other words, while wealth was a perfectly reasonable goal for many Americans--their educations, family connections, and personal attributes predisposed them for it--there existed still more whose personal shortcomings and material conditions excluded them from ever achieving success. Dreiser decided that since an individual can be at the same time categorically excluded from achieving wealth and yet conditioned socially to aspire to nothing less, then American culture during the industrial age was structured inevitably to produce anxiety, frustration, deviance, disappointment, sorrow--in short, tragedy--in the lives of many of its own citizens.

This recognition of the flawed American social order is Dreiser's contribution to American fiction. In his naturalist novels, Dreiser, drawing on his own troubled life, emerges as a perceptive social critic. He is among the first American novelists to identify the tragic elements inherent in industrial American society

How is the success goal perpetuated in America? Desire. Desire emerges in Dreiser's novels as the principal identifying characteristic of the American experience. Carrie, Jennie, Cowperwood and Clyde are each driven by a socially derived desire. Pure desire serves as the catalyst in each of their lives; they are moved by it, consumed by it and destroyed by it.

Dreiser's naturalistic novels, with their exploration of the individual and his relation to society, not only provide the reader with a realistic portrait of early twentieth century American life, they also serve as important cultural and historical artifacts detailing one American's recognition of the inherent shortcomings and potential destructiveness of a young political and economic order. "Given the exalted expectations inherent in the American dream and the limited potential of some lives, the possibility for tragedy is enormous," Dreiser seems to be saying. Even as America entered a new century in a spirit of boundless optimism, Dreiser represented a dissenting voice.

Through fiction Dreiser identifies a significant truth about the process by which all modern societies function. Because of the deterministic relationship between society and the individual, one can conclude that a flawed social scheme produces flawed individuals.

This appears to be Dreiser's claim; his characters indeed reflect the instability of their culture.

II.

Carrie Meeber, of Columbia City, Wisconsin, journeys from her home to Chicago in the summer of 1889. Eighteen years old, she is "bright, timid, and full of the illusions of ignorance and youth" (1). She is also just "two generations removed from an emigrant" (2). Carrie moves to Chicago to find a job and boards with her sister and her husband. She is, of course, overwhelmed by the big city, but she is also attracted by the possibilities it represents: "Ah, the promise of the night. What does it not hold for the weary! What old illusion of hope is not here forever repeated" (7). Her enthusiasm, however, is soon restrained by the realities of industrial life.

Carrie's initial attempt to get a job immediately makes her aware of the economic realities of the industrial environment and the social inferiority of her status therein: "She walks bravely forward, led by an honest desire to find employment and delayed at every step by the interest of the unfolding scene, and a sense of helplessness amid so much evidence of power and force which she did not understand" (12). This sense of help-

lessness persists throughout Sister Carrie, challenging the belief in the existence of individual will widely held by most nineteenth century Americans. The process of finding work in industrial America brings with it a sense of shame; Carrie is made to feel self-conscious about being a wage seeker, and she experiences an "indefinable shame" (13).

Her inability to find work early on makes her feel as though she is being excluded from the great economic process, that others are succeeding where she is not:

The great streets were wall-lined mysteries to her; the vast offices, strange mazes which concerned far-off individuals of importance. She could only think of people connected with them as counting money, dressing magnificently, and riding in carriages. (13)

She begins to notice differences between herself and the seemingly successful women of the city. She notices, for example, that her clothes are less attractive:

Their clothes were neat, in many instances fine, and wherever she encountered the eye of one it was only to recognize in it a keen analysis of her own position--her individual shortcomings of dress and that shadow of manner which she thought must hang about her and make clear to all who and what she was. A

flame of envy lighted in her heart. She realized in a dim way how much the city held--wealth, fashion, ease--every adornment for women, and she longed for dress and beauty with a whole heart. (17)

From the start Carrie recognizes the social superiority associated with wealth in Chicago and her own social distance from it; yet she cannot resist its appeal and resolves to achieve it. When confronted with the grim prospect of life as a wage-earner, she rejects it, for she feels herself "deserving of a better reward" (19, 20).

Carrie's first encounter with a department store heightens her desire for the objects of this new world. Carrie passed along the busy aisles, much affected by the remarkable displays of trinkets, dress goods, stationary, and jewelry. Each separate counter was a show place of dazzling interest and attraction. She could not help feeling the claim of each trinket and valuable upon her personally, and yet she did not stop. There was nothing there which she could not have used--nothing which she did not long to own. The dainty slippers and stocking, the delicately frilled skirts...all touched her with individual desire, and she felt keenly

the fact that not any of these things were in the range of her purchase. (17)

Carrie's own desire serves to alienate her from the new world in which she finds herself; it is her desire for the objects of wealth that establishes the contrast between where she is and where she would like to be. When she finally does get a job in a shoe factory, at four dollars and fifty cents per week, she dreams unrealistically about the things she can now buy with her paycheck:

Her fancy plunged recklessly into privileges and amusements which would have been much more becoming had she been cradled a child of fortune...this money cleared for its prospective possessor the way to every joy and bauble which the heart of woman may desire. (22)

Life at the factory, however, proves unbearable: time drags, the foreman is an "ogre," the conversation among fellow workers is dull and her body aches from physical strain (31). She daydreams to escape the monotony of factory work: "her imagination trod a very narrow round, always winding up at points which concerned money, looks, clothes, or enjoyment" (39).

When the industrial worker's life finally wears her down, she finds relief in the person of Drouet, a travelling salesman. He at first gives her money and later

provides for her entirely, setting her up with an apartment. The money given Carrie has an empowering effect on her: "...two soft green ten-dollar bills--and she felt that she was immensely better off for the having of them. It was something that was power in itself" (48). "Ah money, money, money! What a thing it was to have. How plenty of it would clear away all these troubles," thinks Carrie (51). Carrie's arrangement with Drouet, much to her dismay, does not involve marriage; the price of her newfound comfort and security is a break with conventional morality.

Carrie is bothered by her immorality, but measured against the prospect of poverty and inaccessibility to all the things for which she longs, she will suffer being unconventional (provided respectability will be granted eventually). Dreiser tells the reader that Carrie is willing to abide this situation because she lacks "excellent home principles fixed upon her" (60). Carrie's relationship with Drouet moves her ever closer toward her goal of wealth--her appetites rising with each advancement--but she retains an image of herself as poor, thus establishing a dualism in her character; there are two Carries, one newly wealthy and the other permanently poor:

She looked into her mirror and saw a prettier
Carrie than she had seen before; she looked

into her mind, a mirror prepared of her own and the world's opinion, and saw a worse. Between these two images she wavered, hesitating which to believe. (70)

That same dualism, perhaps suggesting the problematic nature of social advancement, surfaces again later in the novel after her status has risen considerably:

But in that flash was seen the other Carrie-- poor, hungry, drifting at her wits ends, and all Chicago a cold and closed world, from which she only wandered because she could not find work. (234)

Dreiser makes it clear to the reader that necessity and want motivate Carrie's behavior. She eventually leaves Drouet for George Hurstwood, manager of a fashionable saloon. He holds a higher social position than Drouet and can better meet Carrie's expanding desire. Their relationship begins on a dubious note when he takes her away from Chicago under false pretenses. When she becomes aware of his duplicity she contemplates leaving him; but she recalls the tenuous status of her own well-being, and her dependence on someone to care for--if not love--her: "There was always an answer, always the December days threatened. She was alone; she was desireful; she was fearful of the whistling wind. The voice of want made an answer for her" (70). Dreiser

leaves little doubt that Carrie truly loves neither Hurstwood or Drouet, that both relationships lack passion; these are relationships built on necessity. Yet, if Carrie has resorted to an unconventional means of achieving her goals, says Dreiser, so be it:

If honest labor be unremunerative and difficult to endure; if it be the long, long road which never reaches beauty, but wearies the feet and the heart; if the drag to follow beauty be such that one abandons the admired way, taking rather the despised path leading to her dreams quickly, who shall cast the first stone? Not evil, but longing for that which is better, more often directs the steps of the erring. Not evil, but goodness more often allures the feeling mind unused to reason. (368)

Hurstwood brings Carrie to New York; there his fortunes fall quickly and Carrie's ascend. Hurstwood sacrifices his comfortable Chicago life and status to be with Carrie, but he fails to establish a comparable life in New York. He deteriorates to the point where he can no longer provide for either Carrie or himself and ends up in the Bowery section of the city. Carrie, in the meantime, has discovered her natural acting ability and begins a career on the New York stage.

New York at first, though, is not kind to Carrie as the great display of wealth constantly reminds her of the unfulfilled desire in her own life. Broadway in particular, with its parade of women in fine clothes, shops and theaters, makes her resent her exclusion from the good life:

The whole street bore the flavour of riches and how, and Carrie felt that she was not of it....It cut her to the quick, and she resolved that she would not come here again until she looked better. At the same time she longed to feel the delight of parading here as an equal. Ah, then she would be happy! (227)

Perhaps the greatest source of her pain is that her expectations have not been met. She is brought into a social scheme which to this point denies her a place within it:

It ached her to know that she was not one of them--that, alas, she had dreamed a dream and it had not come true. She wondered at her own solitude these two years past--her indifference to the fact that she had never achieved what she had expected. (228)

Carrie lands a job in the chorus line of a Broadway show, begins to assert her talent and rises quickly in the theater world. She decides that supporting the

failed Hurstwood would inhibit the fulfillment of her own ambitions, so she leaves him.

The theater, with all its imaginative splendor and glamour, holds great potential for the fulfillment of what Carrie most desires.

The wonder of it awed and delighted her.

Blessed be its wondrous reality...It was above the common mass, above idleness, above want, above significance. People came to it in finery and carriages to see. It was ever a center of light and mirth. And here she was of it. Oh, if she could only remain, how happy would be her days! (280)

Participating in theater is even better than possessing wealth for Carrie. The costumes, the sets--all provide access to a life previously denied her; and theater promises more fulfillment than either of her former relationships with men. In the theater her mind "delighted itself with scenes of luxury and refinement, situations in which she was the cynosure of all eyes, the arbiter of all fate" (118).

The theater satisfied virtually all of Carrie's desires: fantasy, wealth, clothes and notoriety. Her fame skyrockets, and she soon earns \$150 per week. After meeting her minimal expenses, her paycheck is available to spend on anything she wishes. Her every dream is ac-

tualized, her every wish fulfilled. Life is perfect--or is it?

Despite wealth and fame, Carrie soon grows indifferent and lonely. "The metropolis is a cold place socially," writes Dreiser, "and Carrie soon found that a little money brought her nothing" (324). The world of real wealth was "quite as far away as ever" (324). True friends could not be found; men admired her without actually knowing her:

It does not take money long to make plain its impotence, providing the desires are in the realm of affection. With her one hundred and fifty in hand, Carrie could think of nothing particularly to do. In itself, as a tangible, apparent thing which she could touch and look upon, it was a diverting thing for a few days but this soon passed...If she wanted to do anything better or move higher she must have more--a great deal more. (335)

Add to this general dissatisfaction an attraction she acquires for a man by the name of Ames who represents an alternative to this material culture. Ames brings to Carrie's attention an awareness of good literature (as opposed to the merely popular). He introduces a new ideal for Carrie which perplexes her and reminds her that "the door to life's perfect enjoyment was not open"

(335). Ames brings an enlightenment to Carrie's life, a possibility which exceeds the "fog of longing and conflicting desires" which characterize her life (238).

At the conclusion of the novel, after Carrie has finally achieved all those things for which she longed, she is disillusioned. The reader's final image of Carrie is of her dreaming in her rocking chair. The only constant emotion in her life is longing. Longing propels her ever forward to a better quality of life; but each advancement brings no ultimate satisfaction. Longing itself appears to be the only point of the industrial American experience, implies Dreiser. Broadway and the beautiful people that occupy it appeared more beautiful to Carrie when they "glimmered afar off," and despite the "tinsel and shine" of her new life, she is basically unhappy (369): "Though often disillusioned, she was still waiting for that halcyon day when she should be led forth among dreams become real" (369). Apparently the appeal of wealth resides only in dreaming of it, not in actually attaining it. Dreams are destined for Carrie to forever "tint the distant hilltops of the world," to remain always just beyond her reach (369):

Oh, Carrie, Carrie! Oh, blind strivings of the human heart... It is when the feet weary and hope seems vain that the heartaches and

the longings arise. Know, then, that for you is neither surfeit nor content. In your rocking-chair, by your window dreaming, shall you long, alone. In your rocking chair, by your window, shall you dream such happiness as you may never feel. (369)

Carrie is shaped by the society that has given her birth. She has adopted its values and, denied a means to achieve them, has invented her own. She does achieve success, but as a result she experiences conflict. She is permanently confronted with the image of her former impoverished self and plagued by a growing sense of unworthiness and disillusionment. She dreams of still greater success, but she is destined never to feel happiness in its attainment.

Criticism of Sister Carrie, both historically and in recent years, tends to concentrate on Carrie's state of perpetual desire and issues of morality--and the relationship of these elements to the question of individual identity within society. Carrie's suspension of conventional morality as a means to increase her capacity to purchase fine things and, as a result, enhance her own sense of identity represents to critics the invasion of the new industrial values into the lives of the American people.

Writing in 1936, Charles Walcutt, in an essay titled "Theodore Dreiser: The Wonder and Terror of Life," noted Dreiser's disregard for conventional morality. In this new American industrial age, virtue is no longer an absolute: "...the only evil in what is ordinarily considered sinful comes from the codes which call it evil, because they introduce elements of guilt and hypocrisy into conduct" (505). Dreiser's characters are alone in a constantly changing world, victims of external forces which lack "meaning and purpose" (508). Carrie's willingness to surrender her virtue in order to acquire things from Drouet and Hurstwood reveals the inevitable conflict within the lives of some individuals in the new America. "Carrie must become indecent in order to live decently," writes critic Sheldon Grebstein (517).

Nineteenth century scholar Larzer Ziff, in The American 1890s: Life and Times of a Lost Generation, also finds in Carrie a subversion of traditional American values. Dreiser's significance as a writer, according to Ziff, is his ability to recognize "that a civilization which pursued commerce and technology constructed for itself a morality drawn from commerce and technology" (348). Dreiser was considered immoral because he depicted the new world's moral code as deriving from society's commercial emphasis. Dreiser not only demonstrated that the gods are dead, says Ziff, but he

proved that "life continued just the same, without gods and without a corresponding sense of human community" (341). Ziff adds, "Sister Carrie is a disturbing and convincing work not just because Dreiser, after Carrie loses her virginity, asks what it is she had lost, but because he asks it with no seeming sense of the immense traditional value assigned it" (337).

Carrie's willingness to sacrifice socially prescribed behavior in order to acquire socially desirable objects illustrates not only the emphasis the age placed on wealth, but the essential link between wealth and one's sense of self. Dreiser scholar Donald Pizer notes the connection between Carrie's desire for things and her sense of self:

Of the major forces in her life, it is primarily her desire for objects that furnish a sense of physical and mental well-being--for fine clothing and furniture and attractive apartments and satisfactory food--which determines much of her life. As she gains more of these, her fear of returning to poverty and crudity--to her sister's condition--impels her to seek even more vigorously. (Norton 572)

Carrie's very sense of well-being depends on her ability to secure objects or to become an object of desire.

Because Sister Carrie features a feminine protagonist, the novel invites a contemporary feminist reading; and because the narrative is informed by the economic conditions of late nineteenth century industrialism, Carrie also invites a Marxist interpretation. Both critical perspectives appear in a recent consideration by feminist/Marxist critic Rachel Bowlby. Bowlby places Carrie's desire for objects in a cultural and historical perspective. Bowlby notes that if the aims and methods of naturalism appear to depart from those of literature prior to it, it is because the emergence of naturalism coincided with the rise of the social sciences; both sought to observe the unembellished "facts of society." Dreiser's efforts resulted in a depiction of human beings in the role of consumers in an industrial world. "Carrie can see but cannot have," writes Bowlby, and as a result there is a "division between access to view and access to possession and participation" (59). "Pain and desire are joined together; the pain of exclusion goes with the wish to take part" (59).

Carrie is tormented by her inability to dress like the other women she sees on Broadway; she lacks, in Bowlby's terms, the power to buy. As she abandons morality she increases that power, making a "mockery of the old realism and the old ideology grounded in the force of a moral will" (61). Yet, ironically, as she

acquires the means to buy, she merely makes of herself an imitation of others whom she has seen and envied, claims Bowlby: "Carrie's personality, her recognition as an individual, is guaranteed only to the extent that it is an exact reflection of others" (62). Because objects become "indispensable to the construction of social identity" in this age, says Bowlby, they represent merely "another form of tyranny" (64). Thus objectification and commodification of women is part of the creation of objects in society at large.

Carrie's persistent desire for objects actually reveals the force behind American capitalism, claims critic Walter Benn Michaels. In an essay titled "Sister Carrie's Popular Economy," Michaels contends that through Carrie Dreiser presents a popular late nineteenth and early twentieth century image of money: money as "power in itself." Placing such value on money ensures its constant pursuit; one can never have either enough money or power. Demonstrated on a small scale by Carrie, and on a large scale by the Robber Barons, excessiveness fuels the American economy. "The economy runs on desire, which is to say, money, or the impossibility of ever having enough" (382). In this society, to exist is to want, and by extension "what you are is what you want" (382). "Dreiser...identifies [self] with desire, an involvement with the world so central to

one's sense of self that the distinction between what one is and what one wants tends to disappear," writes Michaels (381). Cessation of desire, or equilibrium, in this scheme, results in death for the individual (as in Hurstwood's case) and poses a threat to the stability of the American economic system.

In a recent consideration critic Stanley Corkin examines the social emphasis on objects and suggests that Dreiser intentionally extends the objectification to the characters themselves. Like both Bowlby and Michaels, Corkin recognizes this social tendency toward objectification as a product of the industrial age:

...as humans tended more and more toward a reduced definition of self and others, objects began to acquire disproportionate meaning, as commodities served as vital components of self-definition, seemingly filling a void created by the alienation of industrial life.

(607)

His essay, "Sister Carrie and the Industrial Life: Objects and the New American Self," argues that Carrie, Drouet and Hurstwood are all merely objects whose only value is functional. "Although Carrie is clearly central, she is symbiotically linked to the commodity world" (608). Drouet and Hurstwood produce commodities for Carrie's consumption, and Carrie functions as an

"ornament" for each of them, states Corkin. This "commodification" of Carrie "results in a novel that is about objectification and anomie" (609). Characters in Sister Carrie are presented as machines "whose essential value is productive" (610). For example, when Carrie discards Hurstwood she does so as "one would discard any device that has outlived its usefulness" (616).

Corkin notes, however, that possessing a sense of self as object is precisely what allows Carrie to survive and in the end succeed:

Carrie finally succeeds because she is able to assimilate the knowledge that in this world self is at best a transient quality. It is not a stable center from which one approaches the world but a shifting appearance that one adapts expediently. (616)

Linking one's identity so closely with objects might indeed perpetuate an economy, but the psychological toll it exacts on Carrie is profound. Unfulfilled longing for bigger and better objects, in a world order devoted to the ongoing production of the bigger and better, condemns her, and others like her, to permanent, necessary dissatisfaction, a condition noted by Kenneth Lynne, one of Dreiser's early critics:

There is, therefore, no letup on the emotional commitment to material possessions, no possi-

bility of the development of any feeling other than longing for the ever more expensive.

Indeed, the only change that rising in the world can bring is diminishment of the number of things to be yearned for, so that Carrie's personality is not only defined by the pleasure principle, but doomed by the success to expend itself on fewer and fewer dreams.

(517)

Though varying in emphasis, Dreiser critics are in agreement that the value of the character of Carrie Meeber lies in the effectiveness with which she exposes an essential truth of American industrial capitalism: in the absence of some higher purpose, sustained consumption alone exists as the primary determining force in the development of one's social identity.

Simply stated, the determinist position is this: for everything that ever happens there are conditions which guarantee that nothing else could happen. Can this truly be said of Carrie? The image of Carrie as a passive victim of industrial American society seems to be contradicted at times throughout the novel when Carrie displays both a will and a creative instinct--two qualities which undermine the deterministic paradigm.

Carrie possesses an active imagination. Her imagination inspires her to abandon the material and spiri-

tual poverty of her Wisconsin home and her sister's home. "She had vain imaginings about place and power, about far off lands and magnificent people" (59). She dreams of a better life and then pursues it.

Dreiser indicates that Carrie is making choices about her life and, furthermore, that she is aware of the implications of her choices. She acknowledges that she has exchanged her virtue for something which she desires more: freedom from poverty. "What is it I have lost?" (70) She chooses to remain in illegitimate relationships rather than subject herself to poverty. Each time the conflict surfaces "the voice of want [makes] answer" (70).

Carrie also displays a control of her feelings. Suspicious of Drouet's intentions, she does not allow herself to care for him in a meaningful way: "She really was not enamored of Drouet....if she had not been able to measure and judge him...she would have been worse off than she was. She would have adored him" (72)

Dreiser's determinism theme is further undermined by Carrie's willfulness in reshaping her life. Throughout the novel Carrie pursues an image which she has constructed for herself. To be sure, it is centered around wealth and objects, but it is nonetheless chosen from among several possible images (her sister, the factory girls, Mrs. Vance). That she is able to achieve

it--and so quickly--is evidence of a strong will. She consciously chooses the man who will best enable her to achieve that image:

She had some power of initiative, latent before, which now began to exert itself. She looked more practically upon her state and began to see glimmerings of a way out.

Hurstwood seemed a drag in the direction of honour. Her feelings were exceedingly credible, in that they constructed out of these recent developments something which conspired freedom from dishonour. (78)

Carrie willfully makes of herself "a new and different individual" (72).

Dreiser endows Carrie with the ability to act, to create, empowering and perhaps placing her definitively beyond the claims of determinism. Through her first small acting role Carrie displays "the first subtle outcroppings of an artistic nature" (117). Acting enables her to "re-create the perfect likeness of some phase of beauty which appealed to her" (117) Through performing, Carrie is an active creative agent; through acting Carrie is powerful: "The glamour, the tense situation, the fine clothes, the applause, these had lured her until she felt that she, too, could compel acknowledgement

of power" (117). Both Drouet and Hurstwood "feel her power" during her performance (117).

Regardless of the many social forces at work in her life--poverty, materialism, sexism--Carrie does achieve independence. She becomes a successful actress ("I need to make a living"), and she reconstructs herself. She succeeds largely because she resolves not to compromise herself for men again:

In a way, she felt satisfaction of the thing, but it did not wholly reassure her. She looked for nothing save what might come legitimately and without the appearance of special favors. She wanted something, but no man should buy her by false protestations or favour. She proposed to earn her living honestly. (179)

The conclusion of Sister Carrie further complicates Dreiser's determinism. Perhaps the rocking and longing in the final scene differ significantly from Carrie's longing elsewhere in the text. Financial success and access to objects may have led Carrie to dissatisfaction, but perhaps she has gained insight through her experience. For example, she seems genuinely interested in the artistic possibilities introduced by Ames. Her longing may just take her in a new direction. "Through a fog of longing and conflicting desires she was beginning to see. Oh, ye legions of hope and pity--of sorrow

and pain! She was rocking, and beginning to see," Dreiser writes (238). What exactly was Carrie beginning to see?

Perhaps Carrie's longing here transcends the material; what she now longs for is a deeper understanding of life, an understanding gained not through wealth but through art. Through art, through the act of creation she will continue to "dream such happiness that she may never feel." Longing here no longer functions as a burden, rather it functions as inspiration. In that case, instead of despair one finds hope.

Dreiser argues the deterministic view convincingly, yet his text appears to allow the possibility of imagination, creativity, will, power and hope--all of which challenge determinism. The presence of these qualities, however, requires reconciliation. How can a character be simultaneously determined and free? The answer lies in Dreiser's view of men and women as tragic beings: a creature whose dream of freedom requires the denial of a determining social reality.

III.

In the Late nineteenth and early twentieth century the rapid transition from agriculture to industrial capitalism in America had an enormous impact on society,

forcing a new way of life on the American people. The plight of a Carrie Meeber was not uncommon during this period in American history. The initial expansion of the American economy after the Civil War ostensibly seemed to be the fulfillment of America's destiny, but in time the consequences of that expansion had an unsettling effect on the American people and inspired Dreiser and other writers to re-examine national values.

The last quarter of the nineteenth century, often referred to as the "Gilded Age," was a transition period in America. Important economic developments permanently altered the shape of American labor, lifestyle and politics. America, prior to the mid-nineteenth century, was largely a nation of small independent businessmen and farmers, most of whom resided east of the Mississippi. Access to untapped natural resources and the pursuit of the romantic notion of freedom drew people to the American West. The building of transcontinental rail roads, combined with the simultaneous discovery of gold, initiated the redistribution of the American population westward.

Westward expansion signified the beginning of the new industrialist era in American history. The transcontinental railroad linked the east and west coasts, created new markets, provided access to raw materials and, most importantly, thrust mechanization to

the forefront of American society. The building of railroads such as the Union and Central Pacific, the two railroads linking the coasts, demonstrated the potential of new technology; and from that point forward mechanization became an important force in the shaping of America's future.

Scholar Alan Trachtenberg in The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age observes that the onset of industrialism in America was "in many ways a period of trauma, of change so swift and thorough that many Americans seemed unable to fathom the extent of the upheaval" (5). Trachtenberg identifies the act of incorporation itself as the single most significant force influencing social change in America during this period: "economic incorporation wrenched American society from the moorings of familiar values" (7). Increased mechanization eliminated many farm jobs, forcing displaced farm laborers to migrate to cities and take jobs in factories. The Gilded Age marked the rise of both the city and the factory.

Industrialism came to be associated with the republican ideals set forth by Thomas Jefferson: independence, individualism and productivity. The ability of a Rockefeller to build a Standard Oil or a Morgan to build U.S. Steel symbolized the fulfillment of the promise implicit in American idealism. As management and adminis-

trative skill enabled the industrialists to amass extraordinary wealth, financial success came to be the principal aim of American society. Independence, courage and determination became the essential tools of the American in the modern industrial age--or so the myth goes.

Trachtenberg challenges that myth by pointing out that it was the introduction of the concept of incorporation, a process whereby individual risk and competition are eliminated, that allowed the industrialist to enter new markets and buy out competition. Yet the myth of the self-made man pervaded all strata of the new America. As one hopeful American put it, "In America every man is king in theory, and will be eventually, and in the great time coming every man will be a capitalist" (Trachtenberg 153). Sanctioned by the founding fathers, demonstrated by the "best among us," and accepted as the national birthright by all Americans, the success-goal established lofty ambitions which the actual conditions of an industrialized society would soon betray.

Conflict between labor and management, evidenced by countless strikes between 1881 and 1905, signified the growing recognition of inequity in the distribution of the prosperity of the new economic expansion. Instead of providing opportunity for social and economic ad-

vancement, factory work, or wage labor, meant drudgery and hazard:

In short, the increasingly rigid social stratification that accompanied the dramatic rise in industrial productivity confused, angered and frustrated masses of Americans, a growing percentage of them recent immigrants recruited into the very industrial system which seemed destined to dash their hopes of social improvement. (Trachtenberg 54)

Labor itself was transformed into a commodity measurable in units of time, an "interchangeable part"; and as a component of production it was perceived by management as just one more variable subject to constant downward adjustments in an effort to maximize corporate profits.

The ruthlessness with which management dealt with labor and the violence in labor's rebellion to it revealed the fact that industrialism had established two distinct classes in American culture. Furthermore, the conflict between the labor and management revealed that the promise of republican idealism--the ideological foundation of industrialism, which promised wealth as reward--was becoming increasingly unavailable to the labor segment of the population, which grew to more than a third of the U.S. population by 1900. "Inheritors of the republican rhetoric valuing labor, independence and

free institutions," writes Trachtenberg, "[workers] tended to view wage labor as another form of slavery, of life-long dependency, and the monied classes as usurpers" (73). These Americans began to develop a "dawning sense of discrepancy between political promise and present conditions, between rhetoric and the facts of everyday life" (74). Labor's plight would eventually be somewhat eased by the successful formation of labor unions in the latter part of the nineteenth century, but the class distinction was here to stay.

Although the Gilded Age was heralded as the age of the individual, and therefore filled with opportunity for any American, it was becoming clear to the labor segment of the population that success was actually a function of status. Trachtenberg observes:

The image accumulated its ambiguities under circumstances of increasingly unnerving competition, in which rewards flowed more often to sheer power than entrepreneurial skill. In the very celebration of the businessman as the epitome of American individualism, we detect signs of concern that the older individualistic virtues no longer apply, that the ability to mobilize, to concentrate, to incorporate counted for more than thrift and diligence.

This growing realization of the disparity between what one was led to expect and what actually took place, the latter falling far short of the former, caused great social confusion:

Organization and administration emerged as major virtues, along with obedience and loyalty. At the same time the rhetoric of success continued to hail the self-made man as the paragon of free labor, even as the virtues of that fictive character grew less and less relevant. Thus, incorporation engendered a cultural paradox. (Trachtenberg 84)

This "cultural paradox" is the enormous chasm between ideology and material reality in late nineteenth and early twentieth century American culture, a chasm into which Dreiser's characters would fall.

The American businessman's values became the standard for all society. "In cultural as well as economic and legal ownership, America seemed to belong to its entrepreneurs," wrote Trachtenberg (87). The American worker's acceptance of class barriers as inevitable, however, did not prevent him from embracing the ideology of the wealthy; for although the white collar, middle-class segment of the population represented a small percentage of the nation's population, its values emerged as the predominate social goals. The 1890 census re-

vealed that "the richest one percent earned more than the total income of the poorest 50 percent, and commanded more wealth than the remaining 99 percent" (99).

Demographically speaking, the wealthy tended to be white, educated, protestant, suburban--and materialistic. An insatiable appetite for material possessions seemed to be their defining characteristic. This culturally homogeneous middle-class contrasted with labor, which tended to be foreign, uneducated, urban and non-protestant; and ignoring the disparity between their ability to acquire wealth and objects and that of the bourgeoisie, they nonetheless embraced middle-class values as their own. The ideology of industrialism, centered in individual achievement of wealth, transcended class.

In the Gilded Age goods took on a new status in society. Their value went beyond the merely practical to something larger, more symbolic of the age. The advertising and marketing of the goods had much to do with this new status:

Of all city spectacles, none surpassed the giant department store, the emporium of consumption born and nurtured in these years. Here the citizen met a new world of goods; not goods alone, but a world of goods, constructed and shaped by the store into objects of de-

sire. Here the very word "consumption" came to life. (Trachtenberg 130)

Goods became a symbol of status in the now class conscious America; and, of course, it became the advertising industry's mission to convey that message. Annual advertising expenditures grew from \$50 million to \$542 million between 1870 and 1900.

This desire for objects, or "commodity fetish," as Marx called it, is an essential component of industrial capitalism. The perpetuation of this new American society depended on the extension of middle-class goals and values throughout the society as a whole; in order to make those values appealing to a substantially different and comparatively disadvantaged (and larger) group for whom such values might otherwise be considered inappropriate, a conscious effort, in the form of advertising, was undertaken to link goods with status. The acquisition of goods symbolizing middle-class virtue and culture was the equivalent of participating in that class at some level. This is what Trachtenberg regards as "the concept of a higher culture guiding consumption and leading to a society of equals" (152).

The problematic nature of such a scheme is readily apparent. In an effort to achieve success, regarded by unanimous consent as the fulfillment of the American ideal, the individual dutifully carries on his life,

progressing gradually but certainly--as indicated by the quantity of goods he has managed to acquire--toward a higher standard of living. He, of course, is constrained by his limited general skills in a world which now values specialization; nonetheless his longing persists for those objects. Goods are therefore both produced and purchased by an unwitting but all too willing participant.

Perhaps if Americans in the industrial age had not been encouraged to expect so much, their disappointment in failing to achieve wealth and status would have been less. Perhaps, as Trachtenberg points out, these great expectations make Americans historically unique:

America seemed to promise a fusion of the civil and the political, of the personal lives of people with their status as free citizens. The vesting of political authority in "the people" seemed to fulfill that hope of Enlightenment thinkers like Rousseau and Jefferson that the private person might view his own private interests, for the first time in history, as identical with those of the whole society, of the nation, his needs and desires and efforts at enjoyment perfectly consistent with his rights as a citizen. This identity of interest, with its assumption that

all citizens whose membership in an organic body known as the nation or "the people," was the hope of utopia within the American polity.

(180)

America to most Americans must have appeared to be a society in which the individual would share in the prosperity of the nation. What a profound disappointment it is to find oneself consistently excluded from the nation's expanding wealth:

What may strike us as ironies are instead contradictions held in momentary balance--not a confusion of values, as historians have suggested, but an effort to incorporate contrary and diverse values under the unity of a system of culture in support of a system of society.

(Trachtenberg 216)

It is historically important to examine the ideology of the industrial age, an ideology which though initially effective proved ultimately destabilizing to American society; but to comprehend fully the scope of the potential destructiveness of such a scheme, one must consider the effect this scheme had on individual lives: this is precisely the achievement of Dreiser's fiction.

IV.

For his second novel, Dreiser again chose to write about a woman. The title character of Jennie Gerhardt, which was published in 1911, is, like Carrie, a young woman from a poor midwestern family. Like Carrie, Jennie also seeks to escape poverty through the use of unconventional means. In Jennie Gerhardt Dreiser explores the same social themes as he did in Carrie--desire, morality, and wealth--but he seems more concerned here about the dilemma of a fundamentally good individual forced, by conditions beyond her control, to violate social codes and thereby suffer permanent exclusion from the American middle-class. Unlike Carrie, who is destined to suffer from unfulfilled longing, Jennie's suffering appears to be of a different order. While the same social forces are at work in Jennie's life, the result feels more tragic; her unrelieved suffering is incommensurate with her innate goodness--and thus unjust.

Jennie is introduced as a beautiful, sensitive eighteen year-old girl who is at the same time devoted to her family and shamed by her poverty. "For all her soft girliness," writes Dreiser, "there lay deep-seated in her conscious deprecation of poverty and a shame of having to own any need" (24). Jennie's father is an unemployed glass blower, and therefore unable to

support adequately his wife and six children. Economic hardship forces Jennie and her mother to wash the floors of a local hotel. At the hotel, the residence of the town's most prominent citizens, Jennie is made aware of her own poverty:

Jennie fell to her task in silence, but the glamor of the great world was having its effect upon her senses. She could not help giving ear to the sounds, the brightness, the buzz of conversation and laughter surrounding her. (7)

"I wish we were rich," Jennie says at one point. The value of wealth to Jennie is twofold: first, it would eliminate the deprivations which have plagued her family's life, and, second, it would provide relief from the grind of poverty which has enslaved her youth. Jennie's desire for wealth, it is important to note, stems primarily from her wish to relieve her mother's long suffering:

All her life long Mrs. Gerhardt had been talking of this very thing--a nice home. If they could just have a larger house, with good furniture and a yard filled with trees, how happy she would be. In such a home she would be free of care of rent, the discomfort of poor furniture, the wretchedness of poverty; she

would be so happy....It had been a happy inspiration--the suggestion of a decent home for the family. (163)

Whether for herself or her family, Jennie's longing for wealth shapes her destiny.

Because Jennie is concerned for the well-being of her family and because she is herself drawn by the glamor of wealth, she falls prey to one of the hotel's wealthy residents, Senator Brander. Attracted by Jennie's beauty and youth, the senator, thirty-four years Jennie's senior, sympathizes with her family and gives money and gifts to the Gerhardts. Brander wins Jennie's affection with the promise of deliverance from poverty for both herself and her family:

She dwelt, in imagination, upon the possibilities of a new and fascinating existence. Of course he would marry her. Think of it! She would go to Washington--that far-off place. And her father and mother--they would not need to work so hard any more. And Bass, and Martha--she fairly glowed as she recounted to herself the many ways in which she could help them all. (79)

Jennie, fearful that her relationship with Brander suggests impropriety, resolves to reject the senator's beneficence, but in a critical moment she is forced to

appeal to the senator for help in releasing her brother from jail. The senator takes advantage of the occasion to seduce the grateful Jennie. Jennie, unfortunately, gets pregnant; and the situation grows more complex and unfortunate with Brander's untimely death. Jennie is now not only still poor, but she is pregnant and unmarried. The gravity of the situation is compounded by Jennie's father, a fanatical Lutheran, who casts Jennie from the family home. "Its [society's] opinions and good favor were so essential. How hard he had tried to live up to its rules," writes Dreiser (56). Ironically, Jennie sacrifices herself for the well-being of her family and is later punished for becoming pregnant in the process.

Father Gerhardt later takes work apart from his family, and they, and Jennie with child, relocate to Cleveland. While in Cleveland Jennie meets Lester Kane, heir to a manufacturing fortune. Lester, who is Jennie's social "superior," pursues her, proposing a mistress/master relationship with the promise, like Brander, that he will provide for her family. Jennie, however, resists him--she longs to avoid another "wretched, unsanctified relationship"--until her father is injured in a factory accident; then she accepts Lester's offer.

Lester's illegitimate union with Jennie alienates him from his family and associates. Her lowly status, and child from a previous illicit relationship, eliminate Jennie as a potentially legitimate wife. She is also ostracized, through no fault of her own, by her wealthy suburban neighbors. Despite his family's pleas to abandon the relationship, Lester resists and is denied his inheritance. Lester is unhappy principally because of society's challenge to his own will, and Jennie suffers because of the unhappiness which she has caused Lester.

After a failed attempt at financial independence, Lester relinquishes Jennie and marries within his station. Jennie and Lester remain apart until they are united briefly before his death. Within this same time span Jennie also suffers the loss of her mother, father and daughter and suffers the disintegration of her family.

Dreiser portrays Jennie as the victim of an unjust social order. Jennie Gerhardt is the very incarnation of goodness, an earth mother:

Life, so long as they endure it, is a true wonderland, a thing of infinite beauty, which could they but wander into it wonderingly, would be heaven enough. Opening their eyes, they see a conformable and perfect world.

Trees, flowers, the world of sound and the world of color. These are the valued inheritance of their state. If no one said to them "Mine," they would wander radiantly forth, singing the song which all the earth may some day hope to hear. It is the song of goodness.

(15)

Jennie is a "natural" child of the earth, pure, free from guile, vanity, and pretense: an "anomaly" caged in the world of the material (15). Lester is irresistibly drawn to Jennie's "sympathy, kindliness of judgement, youth and beauty" (131). For Dreiser Jennie represents the ideal woman.

However, middle-class society makes Jennie feel like a failure:

So this was her real position in another woman's eyes. Now she could see what the world thought. This family was as aloof from her as if it lived on another planet. To his sisters and brothers, his father and mother, she was a bad woman, a creature far beneath him socially, far beneath him mentally and morally, a creature of the streets. And she had hoped to rehabilitate herself in the eyes of the world. It cut her as nothing before had ever done...Oh if she could only see some

way to make herself right with the world, to live honorably, to be decent. (230)

Jennie feels that by agreeing to relationships with Brander and Lester she has made a failure of her life and that somehow she has brought on her own misfortune, that "degradation was her portion and sin the foundation as well as the condition of her state" (99). "The old helpless feeling came over her," writes Dreiser, "that her life was a failure. It couldn't be made right, or, if it could, it wouldn't be" (266). In other words, Jennie feels that her fate is being controlled by greater forces.

The advantage of having such a worthy protagonist for a writer with Dreiser's interests is the contrast she establishes between her own undeniable goodness and the unmitigated corruption of society. Society, Dreiser is saying, creates an artificial environment for men and women. The true man or woman is a natural one, acting in accordance with his or her natural instincts and appetites. Society, on the other hand, unnaturally constrains. Jennie is conflicted because she has violated the moral code of society, even though she did so to relieve her family from the shame of poverty. If Jennie is confused, it is because she has been molded by a society with a confused value system, the harshness of

whose punishment--at least in her case--exceeds the crime. Dreiser writes:

No process is vile, no condition is unnatural. The accidental variation from a given social practice does not necessarily entail sin. No poor little earthling, caught in the enormous grip of chance, and so swerved from the established customs of men, could possibly be guilty of that depth of vileness which the attitude of the world would seem to predicate so inevitably. (99)

Confused or not, though, social forces are formidable; both Jennie's and Lester's efforts to resist the force of social pressure fail. In the end, neither are a match for a society which has replaced the natural world with an unnatural, but no less deterministic, environment:

We live in an age in which the impact of materialized forces is well-nigh irresistible; the spiritual nature is overwhelmed by the shock. The tremendous and complicated development of our material civilization, the multiplicity, and variety of our social forms, the depth, subtlety and sophistry of our imaginative impressions, gathered, remultiplied, and disseminated by such agencies as the railroad, the

express and the post-office, the telephone, the telegraph, the newspaper, and, in short, the whole machinery of social intercourses-- these elements of existence combine to produce what may be termed a kaleidoscopic glitter, a dazzling and confusing phantasmagoria of life that wearies and stultifies that mental and moral nature. (132)

For Dreiser the sheer display of wealth and the effectiveness with which society banishes those members who choose to deviate from prescribed behavior overwhelm mere individuals like Lester and Jennie. Finally, the burden is too great, and would-be heroes surrender from fatigue.

Like Carrie, then, Jennie is denied the fulfillment of her greatest desires. Jennie learns a hard lesson: "Love was not enough in this world--that was so plain. One needed education, wealth, training, the ability to fight and scheme. She did not want to do that. She could not" (371). Jennie displays a growing awareness that what little happiness she experiences is tenuous. Hers is a troubled, uncertain life; she is an unlikely guest in a wonderful home who expects to be asked to leave at any moment:

Still she felt humble, out of place, holding handfuls of jewels that did not belong to her.

Again she experienced that peculiar feeling which had come over her the first time she went to New York with Lester--namely, that this fairy existence could not endure. Her life was fated. Something would happen. She would go back to simple things, to a side street, a poor cottage, to old clothes. (318)

A lifetime of exclusion and rejection has made her aware of the hierarchies in American society; and the few loved ones with whom she has shared her life are one by one taken away. And when her daughter dies, "Jennie [feels] as if earth had fallen. All ties were broken. There was no light anywhere in the immense darkness of her existence" (395). "She was numb from suffering," writes Dreiser (397).

As Jennie outlives all those whom she loves she realizes that life offers little hope for any ultimate meaning. She gains only a slight apprehension that the world "moved in some strange, unstable way," and that "apparently nobody knew clearly what it was all about" (401).

Jennie, veiled to avoid recognition, attends Lester's funeral and later watches as her lover's casket is transported by a porter, who appears oblivious to her loss:

He could not see how wealth and position in this hour were typified to her mind as a great fence, a wall, which divided her eternally from her beloved. Had it not always been so? Was not her life a patchwork of conditions made and affected by these things which she saw--wealth and force--which had found her unfit? She evidently had been born to yield, not seek. This panoply of power had been paraded before her since childhood...Him it respected. Of her it knew nothing. (430)

Society had established a great barrier over which she could observe the good life, but not participate. That the fence was man-made rendered it no less painful or insurmountable. What of a society that forces a Jennie Gerhardt into immoral behavior and then denies her redemption? What if true love, kindness and generosity are undervalued by society as Dreiser claims?

Jennie and Carrie both live in an unnatural world, and both suffer for relenting to arbitrary values which do not suit them. Only in nature, urges Dreiser, can such women find peace:

In nature there is no outside. When we are cast from a group or a condition we have still the companionship of all that is. Nature is not ungenerous. Its winds and stars are fel-

lows with you. Let the soul be but gentle and receptive, and this vast truth will come home--not in set phrases, perhaps, but as a feeling, a comfort, which, after all, is the last essence of knowledge. In the universe peace is wisdom. (94)

Participation in industrial American society means the loss of peace for both Carrie and Jennie. How, then, does one gain peace in a culture where happiness is a function of success? As evidenced by both Carrie and Jennie, unfulfilled longing--not happiness--emerges in Dreiser's fiction as the defining quality of industrial American life.

Much of the critical discussion of Jennie Gerhardt has centered on Dreiser's treatment of morality. Most critics interpret Jennie's ability to retain her essential goodness despite condemnation by society as a statement of Dreiser's contempt for the arbitrariness of American social values. For example, critic Charles Walcutt writes:

...the effect of the story is to show how utterly inadequate are standard Christian ethics for the judgement or guidance of conduct in a world that does not, as Dreiser sees it, correspond to the notion of reality upon which that ethical code is based. ("Wonder" 194)

Like Carrie, Jennie is forced to violate the prevailing moral code in order to overcome poverty.

Recent criticism by critic Carol Schwartz argues that in Jennie Gerhardt Dreiser goes beyond naturalism's substructures--Darwinism, mechanism, scientific determinism--and deals with issues of class. Jennie and Kane are less the victims of cosmic determinism than they are victims of class boundaries, claims Schwartz. Neither can deny their class origins without penalty:

A personal and in some ways idiosyncratic relation to the success ethic becomes a critique of the limitations of economic mobility. This social fluidity results for the Dreiser protagonist in a bifurcation of the self, a fragmentation which accompanies the attempt to cross social boundaries. (16)

Jennie, because of her illegitimate child, can never marry properly; and Kane, by virtue of the strict social standards of his class, must comply with convention in order to retain his wealth. Jennie Gerhardt reveals Dreiser's "preoccupation with class in the psychosocial development of the individual," writes Schwartz. The efforts of Dreiser's characters to deny class boundaries lead to suffering:

His Americans form a commentary on the radical damage incurred by a people who refuse to ad-

mit to a discrete class structure, and who accordingly become the victims of privatized suffering and failure. (16)

Furthermore, Schwartz speculates that Dreiser was so personally conflicted about issues of class because of his own poverty that he chose not to deal with it directly; his unwillingness to confront class conflict overtly accounts for the fairy tale-like transformation of Jennie from poor girl to rich queen. As a result, Jennie Gerhardt emerges as "an uneven blend of realism, naturalism, sentimentalism, and folktale" (17). What Dreiser failed to realize, Schwartz explains, is the implied class distinction common to all fairy tales. Fairy tales generally involve the exchange of wealth for sex between royalty and peasantry--they are nothing less than a demonstration of the social contract. In the classic fairy tale the inherent class issues involved with the exchange are obscured by marriage (an option denied Jennie).

Schwartz argues that the fairy tale motif only serves to heighten the determining power of class in Dreiser: "The economic and social bases of the fairy tale anticipate the overt commodification of sex and human values under industrial capitalism" (25). Literally too poor to "afford absolute honesty or middle-class morality," Jennie is forced to lie about her daughter,

her origins and her relationship with Kane (21). "The class basis of the fairy tale may be its most strikingly universal feature. Poverty makes its protagonists vulnerable to seduction, betrayal, and brutality," writes Schwartz (26).

Schwartz contends that Dreiser's recognition of social hierarchy and his ultimate acceptance of individual responsibility in Jennie Gerhardt reflect a Tolstoyian influence, and, furthermore, that these elements take his fiction beyond the simple determinism of other naturalists. In Dreiser, it is class consciousness more so than cosmic determinism, that serves to deny "the possibilities of unconditioned self-realization" (22).

In trying to avoid direct language or naturalistic explanations, where these would debase Jennie's character, Dreiser substitutes a fairy tale imagery, but the patterns of fairy tale take him back to the implicit class conflict beneath the existential argument, which supplants "free" will with determinism. (26)

Jennie Gerhardt, concludes Schwartz, is the first Dreiser novel concerned with social justice, a theme which he would later express without reservation in An American Tragedy.

Jennie Gerhardt, like Carrie, does not conform completely to the equation of determinism. Jennie appears

at times to be making choices about her life, choices regarding her family, Lester and her daughter Vesta. Jennie knowingly sacrifices her own virtue for others. Before yielding to senator Brander and Lester she weighs her alternatives as well as the cost of her actions. She realizes that without her sacrifice her family will suffer and that if she yields she becomes permanently marginalized. In other words, she chooses her own course (though, admittedly, her options are limited).

Two things are remarkable about Jennie: one, she alone is in a position to help; and two, she is confident enough in her own goodness to withstand the social ostracism certain to follow her choice: "Strangely enough, she felt no remorse, no vain regrets. Her heart was pure, and she was conscious that it was filled with peace" (99). Jennie is at times even heroic: "always she was content to face the future with a serene and unfaltering courage" (100). Although Jennie never fully comprehends the cruel mysteries of life, she never abandons her faith in herself and her judgment.

Jennie recognizes the unfairness in the demands life continually makes on her, but she continues to assume responsibility for herself and others: "She realized...that fate had shifted the burden of the situation to her. She must sacrifice herself, there was no other way" (115).

The two most compelling instances revealing Jennie's will involve Vesta, her daughter, and Lester. Jennie hides the truth of Vesta from Lester until Mrs. Gerhardt dies. Jennie tries to continue the deception in Chicago until Vesta becomes ill. At that moment Jennie realizes she must fulfill her responsibility to her daughter, and she resolves to acknowledge her child regardless of the impact it will have on her relationship with Lester:

Jennie's mind had been made up. She had sinned, and grievously, against her daughter, but now she would make amends so far as possible. Lester was very dear to her, but she would no longer attempt to deceive him in anything, even if he left her--she felt an agonized stab, a pain at the thought--she must still do the one right thing. Vesta must not be an outcast any longer. Her mother must give her a home. Where Jennie was, there must Vesta be. (208)

Jennie's unwillingness to continue to disguise her love for and deny her responsibility to her daughter demonstrates dramatically the act of an individual casting off the constraints of society. She chooses to acknowledge her daughter, and Lester accepts and even comes to love her as well. Jennie's resolve is reminis-

cent of Carrie's where she is determined to earn her own way in life without subjugating herself to men like Drouet and Hurstwood.

Jennie's final act of will comes when she makes the decision Lester is incapable of making: to leave Jennie so he can receive his inheritance. Lester, by contrast, is inert, negligent in resolving his relationship with Jennie with his family, and seriously jeopardizes his inheritance. Once Jennie becomes aware of the immanent danger, she makes the decision for him: "She was in a quandary, hurt, bleeding, but for once in her life, determined. Whether he wanted to or not, she must not let him make this sacrifice. She must leave him--if he would not leave her" (361). Here she is not only capable of agency, she is capable of making others act: "She was sure that [Lester] should be made to act" (363).

Through her action, her simple acknowledgement of the inevitable, the reader comes to an appreciation of Jennie similar to Lester's: "He was struck quite favorably by her ability to take a large situation largely, and he admired her. There was something to this woman, let the world think what it might" (369).

Clearly, Dreiser intends to make a victim of Jennie, but she contradicts that role at critical points within the narrative. She is, rather, a woman fully conscious of the consequences of the difficult choices

she is forced to make and a woman capable of acting where others are not. Jennie, like Carrie, complicates Dreiser's determinism. She is only somewhat free in a basically determined universe. While her expressions of freedom seem small against the background of the larger forces at work in her life, she nonetheless seems heroic in her gentle resignation:

She did not endeavor to explain or adjust the moral and ethical entanglements of the situation. She was not, like so many, endeavoring to put the ocean into a tea-cup, or to tie up the shifting universe in a mess of strings called law. (402)

V.

If Jennie Gerhardt appears convincing as an account of an impoverished, struggling family in nineteenth century America, it is because the Gerhardts are largely a composite of Dreiser's own family. From the religiously fanatical father to the pregnant unwed sister, the characters and plot of Jennie parallel Dreiser's own youth. It is difficult to imagine a life more representative of the social inequity of America during the Gilded Age than that of Theodore Dreiser. Social entrapment, a sensitivity to middle-class ideals, a desire for wealth

and frustrated aspirations--virtually all of these elements can be found in Dreiser's early life. Born in 1871, in Terre Haute, Indiana, the son of an immigrant mill worker, Dreiser, like countless other working class Americans, experienced both the hope and frustration of industrialized society. Unrelieved poverty throughout childhood in combination with strict religious and moral instruction, stirred within the young Dreiser a profound ambiguity toward American society.

John Paul Dreiser, Theodore's father, immigrated to the America from Mayen, Germany in 1844. A skilled mill worker, he practiced his trade in the eastern U.S. before settling for a time in Ohio, where he met Sarah Schnaab, Theodore's mother. John Paul was a devout Catholic while Sarah descended from the Mennonite faith. Sarah and John Paul married, moved to Indiana and parented ten children.

According to Dreiser biographer W.A. Swanberg, Terre Haute at the time of Theodore's birth reflected the "post Civil-War era of ruthless industrial exploitation" (Swanberg 3). Terre Haute industry included a steel mill, coal mines, a railroad car works, tanneries and foundries. Dreiser might have escaped the darker side of industrialism in America had his father not sustained a devastating economic loss due to a fire in his recently purchased wool mill. Uninsured, John Paul suf-

ferred financial losses and incurred indebtedness from which he would never recover. In addition, he sustained a physical injury that impaired him for the remainder of his life. "He was a man almost crazed by the sin of shame and debt," writes Swanberg. John Paul, in his religious fanaticism and patriotism, persisted as the nagging moral conscience of the family.

Theodore's mother, on the other hand, was a kind and forgiving woman. Unlike her husband, she demonstrated a tolerance for unconventional behavior; and unlike her husband, she would retain Theodore's admiration for the duration of her life.

The result of the Dreiser family's misfortune was severe poverty. John Paul led his family on an endless journey of relocations, moving from job to job, city to city and house to house. High expectations frustrated by industrial accidents and poverty--the Dreisers could be counted among the early casualties of American industrialism.

The most damaging effect of poverty on the young Dreiser was a developing sense of alienation. According to Swanberg, "in Terre Haute the Dreisers gained a reputation as a chaotic, hard-pressed clan, often behind in their bills, whose older sons were wild and whose older daughters were flirty" (5). John Paul worked occasionally as a laborer, Sarah took in other people's wash and

Theodore's siblings engaged in promiscuous and at times unlawful activity: all of which served to develop within the young Dreiser a profound sense of social confusion and inferiority.

The Dreisers, he saw, were different from other people--poorer. They were looked down upon. It was humiliating to wear ragged clothing and disintegrating shoes, to sneak coal from the tracks. He sometimes stared enviously through iron fences at the homes of the wealthy on Wabash Avenue, marvelling at the flowers, the lawns, the iron deer.

(Swanberg 8)

At one point during the winter of 1881, when all seemed hopeless for the Dreisers, older brother Paul, who had left home earlier, arrived to deliver the family. Paul Dreiser had left the family and happened on to a career as a writer of popular songs and an entertainer. He managed to achieve a fair degree of success and would time and again provide sustenance to his struggling family:

Theodore was snarled in a confusion of values. While his father and the priest demanded utter rectitude, his indulgent mother was satisfied with much less. And there was Paul, whom Father Dudenhuasen [schoolmaster] would cer-

tainly call a sinner, yet who went to mass, counted himself a good Catholic and was indubitably a great man. It was not surprising that the boy puzzled over such problems instead of joining in rough games he played poorly. (Swanberg 14)

If prevailing social values tend to exclude one's family, one's principal source for what constitutes "reality," where ought one place his loyalty? Well, Theodore Dreiser then and throughout his life remained loyal to his family, eventually replacing Paul as family benefactor when he became successful. Still, one does not easily abandon social influences, especially when some social values hold a certain visceral appeal (as wealth did for Dreiser).

Theodore possessed that "universal hope of youth to be conventional, respected, like everyone else," notes Swanberg (19). Because his family was unconventional, Theodore found himself excluded from acceptable society. In early adolescence when one normally begins the process of socialization, Theodore was at a disadvantage. Regarded as the product of "trash," Theodore, though longing for the companionship of others, was denied it. Few youths possess the strength of character to overcome the burden of an unconventional family, but Theodore Dreiser, cursed with a host of shortcomings--homeliness,

shyness, anxiety--was especially incapable of ignoring social ostracism.

To escape from this extraordinary adolescent tension, Theodore retreated to his imagination:

...he conjured up idyllic circumstances where his abilities would be appreciated, his employer would admire him and would sweep on irresistibly to success. What did Warsaw [Indiana, his home] mean now but economic and social failure? Sick of failure he dreamed of success, which meant money, fine clothes, social acceptance, admiring girls--all the things he had longed for and never had.

(Swanberg 22)

In his dreams he achieved all those things otherwise denied him. Too young to question the ultimate value of those things for which he longed--success, clothes, status and girls--and too drawn to them to recognize their association with a society which categorically excluded him, he internalized his yearning. His poverty intensified his appetite for such things; and that appetite would persist throughout his life and never find satisfaction. "The story of Theodore's struggle with reality," writes Swanberg, "so ridiculous in its externals (as he later candidly acknowledged), has all the tragedy of wounded, confused, maladjusted boyhood" (23).

Theodore's mother, as well as his teachers, however, recognized in his sensitivity a latent intelligence. Encouragement followed this recognition, and Theodore soon came to regard himself as special. So driven was Dreiser by this new image of himself as "superior" that he failed to hold any job which conflicted with his image of himself. Upon abandoning his formal education, Dreiser worked a variety of menial jobs. The realization that his dreams would require more money and that he could make better use of his talents led Dreiser to a career in newspaper journalism. He regarded newspapermen as men of importance, notes Swanberg, because they interviewed politicians and businessmen, the incarnations of American success. "Those who interested me the most," said Dreiser later, "were bankers, millionaires, artists, executives, leaders, the real rulers of the world" (Swanberg 36). Dreiser won his first newspaper job with Chicago's Daily Globe in 1892 at the age of 21.

Even as a young man he was tormented by anxiety over success. Swanberg writes:

But success was the highest goal. The boy who had picked coal from the tracks was determined to make life pay him back....The dream was so powerful that he had manic-depressive tendencies, sometimes exalted by the certainty of

his own genius, sometimes sunk in despair at his own inferiority. (40)

During his newspaper career, which took him from Toledo to Cleveland to Buffalo to Pittsburgh and to St. Louis, Dreiser witnessed the misfortune and tragedy of human life. It was during this time that he discovered literature, philosophy and science. By far the most important influence on Dreiser at this time was the social philosophy of Spencer from which he concluded, "Man was simply a stage in evolution, a creature responding helplessly to inner physico-chemical actions over which he had no control" (Swanberg 60).

After several initial setbacks, Dreiser's career flourished. Poverty, though, remained a constant threat. His ultimate success as a magazine editor in New York in 1907 was preceded by alternating periods of success and failure (not the least of which was the unsuccessful publication of Sister Carrie in 1900). Dreiser achieved economic success and social status when he became editor of The Delineator, a Butterick publication. Butterick, of course, was the publisher of clothing patterns. The Delineator contained, along with Dreiser's own literary contributions, dress patterns. "Theodore Dreiser," states Swanberg, "unable to find literary success...had gone into the pattern business" (119). Dreiser's success, which afforded him access to

a comfortable lifestyle long denied him, came at the expense of his literary career. Literary success, of course, would eventually come, but at this point he became what Swanberg called "the nation's greatest whore-master of letters" (119).

Dreiser's legitimate literary and financial success would come with the publication of An American Tragedy in 1925; royalties for that work totalled nearly \$48,000 while film rights brought \$90,000. The stock market crash three years later along with the natural rise and fall of personal income would occasionally challenge his wealth, but for the most part he maintained a degree of financial security for the remainder of his life; in fact, he left an estate exceeding \$100,000 upon his death in 1945! He was never able to forget the pain of poverty, though, nor was he able to overcome his dread of it:

...I became mentally colored or tinged with a sense of poverty and defeat and social ill-being in connection with our family that took me years and years, and then only in part, to overcome and traces of which I still find darkly ensconced in certain corners of that subconscious which is a part of the deeper and more mysterious self of me. For years, even so late as my thirty-fifth or fortieth year, the

approach of winter invariably filled me with an indefinable and highly oppressive dread, and that at periods when I needed not to be in dread of anything that winter and poverty, or the two of them together, could do to me.

(Dawn 100)

It was the poverty of his youth that colored the values of his life; and though he managed to acquire varying degrees of wealth later in life, the threat of poverty was constant. Dreiser's own recollections of the significance of poverty as a force in his life were published in 1931 in a memoir titled Dawn: "Our family, as I was to learn by experience and reflection, had sometime before my birth taken on the complexion of poverty and failure, or, at least seeming failure" (14). He came to realize that failure was a relative term; it originated from America's unquestioning belief in republican ideals:

Also America, and especially the Middle West, was at that time miasmatically puritanic as well as patriotic, twin states bred of ignorance and what mental or economic lacks I am not able to discern. At any rate all of the old was bad, all the new good. The enlightenment of the world, as I was to learn by degrees, dated from the Declaration of Independ-

dence. The United States constituted the greatest country in the world, the strongest and only free one. (Dawn 16)

He was aware of the lack of tradition within his family, and he recognized the chaos and problems it would later cause for each of them. "If asked to describe our family as distinguished from others," he wrote, "I would say that it was of a peculiarly nebulous, emotional, unorganized and traditionless character" (Dawn 10).

Through his own personal poverty Dreiser experienced the unfulfilled longing that his characters would later express. He knew what it was to dream without result:

And dreams. I remember dreaming of beautiful red, green, blue and yellow marbles floating about in the air, and of nickels, dimes and quarters lying everywhere on the ground! What disappointment, what despair, to wake at morn and find that a seeming reality was not! So I came to know of dreams and their sweet futility. (Dawn 18)

Isolation and inferiority were the permanent scars of Dreiser's childhood. "Ah, who schemed the sorry scheme whereby all conscious creation must suffer so for that which it lacks," he asks in his memoirs (48). Dreiser's

unfulfilled characters are convincing because he himself experienced virtually the same frustrations in his own life. Just as Carrie and Jennie dreaded poverty, just as they experienced intense longing for a better life and just as they defied convention to escape poverty, so did Dreiser.

VI.

While Carrie and Jennie reflect Dreiser's own experience with poverty, the protagonist of his third novel, Frank Cowperwood, reflects instead the fulfillment of the American dream. Strength and magnetism are the principal qualities of Frank Cowperwood in The Financier. Published in 1912, The Financier provides a different Dreiserian perspective on industrial American society. The author is still preoccupied with wealth and morality in this novel, but in Cowperwood Dreiser creates a character whose inherent strength and ability seemingly better equip him for the competitive nature of capitalism and fortify him against the social pressure to conform. Ultimately, though, Cowperwood proves no less capable of overcoming the constraints of society; like both Carrie and Jennie, he derives from society an appetite for the symbols of wealth and he, too, disregards the conventional means of acquiring them. The im-

mensity of Cowperwood's stature, however, makes his appetites larger and his battle against society more spectacular.

Frank Algernon Cowperwood is born to a middle-class family in Philadelphia in 1837. Frank's father is a bank clerk who lacks "magnetism and vision" and who is altogether "too honest, too cautious"; in other words, he lacks those very qualities that will ultimately propel his son to the heights of American industry and finance (6, 13). Cowperwood by virtue of birth, then, is better prepared socially to achieve success than either Carrie or Jennie.

At a very early age Cowperwood displays the gifts that will later serve him well. Dreiser describes him as a "natural-born leader" who is "good-looking and magnetic" (7, 21). "He was a financier by instinct, and all the knowledge that pertained to that great art was as natural to him as the motions and subtleties of life are to a poet" (11). Cowperwood, Dreiser tells the reader, "knew how to make money" (21).

Cowperwood observes in his youth two images that shape the course of his life: first, he noticed that in spite of his own comfort, there exists a better, richer manner of life in America:

During the years in which he had been growing into manhood he had come instinctively into

sound notions of what was artistic and refined. He had seen so many homes that were more distinguished and harmonious than his own. One could not walk or drive about Philadelphia without seeing and being impressed with the general tendency toward a more cultivated and selective social life.

(55)

Cowperwood becomes obsessed with the dream of the "cultivated and selective social life," and it serves as his primary motivation for financial success. The second important lesson Cowperwood observes in childhood is a metaphorical demonstration of the ferocity of natural competition. He observes an ongoing struggle between a lobster and a squid at a local fish market. When the squid is finally devoured by the lobster, Cowperwood concludes that this is the defining order of the universe: the strong defeat the weak. "How is life organized? Things lived on each other--that was it....And what lived on men? he asked himself. Was it other men?" (9). In youth Cowperwood discovers the predominant American social goal--wealth--and he identifies the most efficient means of attaining it--strength. "Life was a dark, insoluble mystery," observed Cowperwood, "but whatever it was, strength and weakness were its two constituents. Strength would win--weakness lose. He must

rely on swiftness of thought, accuracy, his judgement, and on nothing else" (241).

Cowperwood incorporates these lessons into a world view, and by the time he reaches his early twenties, he establishes himself, through the assertion of his innate ability, as a worthy financier. Not content to work for another, he develops a career in the stock market and launches his own business:

It never occurred to him that he belonged in the realm of clerkdom. Those people were the kind of beings who ought to work for him, and who would. There was nothing savage in his attitude, no rage against fate, no dark fear of failure. (29)

Cowperwood realizes that real power lies not with the brokering of other people's transactions, but in the construction and manipulation of one's own interests. He longs to be one of the men possessing real power in this world:

Back of them were other men, men with shrewd ideas, subtle resources. Men of immense means whose enterprise and holdings these stocks represented, the men who schemed out and built the railroads, opened mines, organized trading enterprises, and built up immense manufactories. (42)

"A man, a real man, must never be an agent, a tool, or a gambler--acting for himself or for others," thinks Cowperwood, "he must employ such. He used tools. He created. He led" (42). Confident of his abilities and encouraged by early success, Cowperwood resolves to be one of these "men of immense means"; "vaguely but surely he began to see looming before him, like a fleecy tinted cloud on the horizon, his future fortune. He was to be rich, very, very rich" (76).

Cowperwood's life proceeds according to plan: "It was fine to be getting on this way in the world and having such a fine time" (30). A successful young man on the rise needs a wife, so Cowperwood pursues an older, recently widowed woman and marries her despite her reservations about her age--she is four years older--and the appropriateness of marrying so soon after her husband's death. Cowperwood demonstrates his disregard for convention and asserts the moral independence of the strong individual as he tells his new wife,

"That's the one thing I have against you--you are so worried about what people think. They don't make your life. They certainly don't make mine. Think of yourself first. You have your own life to make. Are you going to let what other people think stand in the way of what you want to do?" (51)

Cowperwood relegates morality to the weak, and in so doing strikes a Nietzschean chord. Only the weak, those emotionally and physically incapable of doing otherwise, observe the moral code, claims Cowperwood. "I satisfy myself," he declares. The strong observe convention when it serves him; otherwise he creates his own code:

One found oneself in a given social order, theory, or scheme of things. For purposes of social success, in order not to offend, to smooth one's path, make things easy, avoid useless criticism, and the like, it was necessary to create an outward seeming--ostensibly conform. Beyond that it was not necessary to do anything. (268)

As he did in Sister Carrie and Jennie Gerhardt, Dreiser once again challenges the source of morality in American society. Like Nietzsche's slave morality, American morality was a function of power: the disempowered, of necessity, abide by and enforce morality--and only then when it is within their power to do so:

Again it was so evident, in so many ways, that force was the answer--great mental and physical force. Why, these giants of commerce and money could do as they pleased in this life, and did....Worse--the little guardians of so-called law and morality, the newspapers, the

preachers, the police, and the public moralists generally, so loud in their denunciation of evil in humble places, were cowards all when it came to corruption in high ones.

(121)

Moralists "were never significant, practical men," rather "they were poor, nondescript, negligible dreamers" (200).

The careers of Cowperwood and his real-life counterparts--Rockefeller, Carnegie, Morgan, etc.--suggest that success in business in industrial America requires the suspension of morality. Dark transactions, manipulation of stock, illegitimate gain, unethical practices, conflicting interests--these are the stuff of American business. What of hard work, enterprise, honesty and other republican virtues? How far could one expect to go by observing these? Not far, according to Dreiser. American society as a whole advocates one set of values--generally Christian ethics--while the business sector practices quite another. "Life was war--particularly financial life; and strategy was its keynote, its duty, its necessity" (306). Cowperwood, in his willingness to violate what he regarded as moral pretense, Dreiser tells the reader, "was no sharper or shrewder than any other financier--certainly no sharper than any other would be if he could" (101). Wife in hand, career in

place, Cowperwood begins his quest for eminent "respectability and wealth" (57). Aware that a man with his aspirations has to present a certain scale of lifestyle, he begins a lifelong accumulation of those objects associated with great wealth: home, furniture, tapestries, rugs and art. The most important symbol of his wealth is the mansion Cowperwood builds for himself:

The effect of a house of this character on its owner is unmistakable. We think we are individual, separate, above houses and material objects generally; but there is a subtle connection which makes them reflect us quite as we reflect them. They lend dignity, subtlety, force, each to the other, and what beauty, or lack of it, there is shot back and forth from one to the other as a shuttle in a loom, weaving, weaving. (98)

Cowperwood, for all his independence, still looks to society for affirmation; his acquisitions display his financial superiority and provide evidence of his triumphal march toward social eminence: "The sight of his new house going up made Cowperwood feel of more weight in the world" (98). Cowperwood's desire for society's goals when considered in light of his contempt for society's morals at the very least suggests a social confu-

sion: he seeks the admiration of others but rejects their scrutiny of his personal actions.

Dreiser instills within his larger than life character an appreciation for art. This aesthetic sensibility appears intended to place Cowperwood among the uppermost classes of American society where art is appreciated.

And now art, for art's sake--the first faint radiance of a rosy dawn--had begun to shine in upon him, and to the beauty of womanhood he was beginning to see how necessary it was to add the beauty of life--the beauty of material background--how, in fact, the only background for great beauty was great art. (145)

This appreciation for art is evidence of some transcendental personal quality; and though it may seem unnecessary to Cowperwood's character, it certainly reflects the author's own perception of himself as in some way aesthetically superior to even the wealthiest, and presumably cultured, levels of American society.

Cowperwood's aesthetic quality reminds one of the character of Ames from Sister Carrie. Ames, in a role often identified by critics as a surrogate for the author, encourages Carrie to abandon the empty middle-class pursuit of objects and take up good literature and serious drama.

Cowperwood's craving for wealth and his willingness to violate moral standards to satisfy his desires undermines his achievements in Philadelphia. Cowperwood's ambition soon brings him into a questionable, if not illegal, alliance with city officials. He enters into an arrangement with the city treasurer to borrow city funds, without interest, and invest them in the stock market. Cowperwood and the treasurer get free use of vast sums of public money with which they build their own equity in the emerging city-wide street railway system. Cowperwood's ill-gained fortune, however, is lost when the 1871 Chicago fire initiates a stock panic. Unable to cover the numerous loans being called, he fails. In addition, in a moment of panic, he executes a questionable stock transaction for which he is prosecuted and eventually imprisoned.

Cowperwood's demise is hastened by an illicit affair with the daughter of one of the city's most influential autocrats. No longer attracted to his wife, who has aged and grown weary from childrearing, Cowperwood becomes involved in a love affair with Eileen Butler. Eileen is young, beautiful and "eager for life," and wanting "ever so much to get up in the world" (81). In the midst of the great financial panic, Eileen's father, once Cowperwood's ally, discovers the affair and uses

his political influence to prosecute and convict Cowperwood.

The efficiency with which the offended forces in society conspire to bring him to justice momentarily challenges Cowperwood's faith in the all-powerful individual. Maybe there is something to the notion of fate, maybe the tyranny of social forces is simply too big for one individual to challenge and overcome, Cowperwood ponders in his dingy prison cell:

It was the first time in his life that Cowperwood had ever shown the least sign of weakening or despair. He had felt all along as though there were nothing to the Greek theory of being pursued by the furies. Now, however, there seemed an untoward fate which was pursuing him. It looked that way. (206)

Like Jennie Gerhardt, he comes to the realization that the life of one person does not amount to all that much in the larger scheme of things. "His own life appeared very trivial in view of these things, and he found himself asking whether it was all really of any significance or importance" (418). Cowperwood, like Carrie the actress, feels as though life is a kind of drama in which one merely plays a role and relinquishes any control over its outcome:

After all, he said to himself, it was all a play of sorts, a dream even, if one chose to view it so, a miasma even, from which, in the course of time and with a little luck one might emerge safely enough. He hoped so. It could not last. He was only acting a strange, unfamiliar part on the stage, this stage of life that he knew so well. (338)

Cowperwood's defeat, though, is brief. He is pardoned after serving thirteen months in prison, and he resumes his financial business. Cowperwood possesses an intuitive sense that his life is not ordinary, and the realization of this fact empowers him to fight on. While others could accept the losses he incurred, he could not; if his accomplishments are greater than those of most others, it is because wealth and position mean much more to him than it does to others:

Few people have the sense of financial individuality strongly developed. They do not know what it means to be a controller of wealth, to have that which releases the sources of social action--its medium of exchange. They want money, but not for money's sake. They want it for what it will buy in the way of simple comforts, whereas the financier wants it for what it will control--

for what it will represent in the way of dignity, force, power. Cowperwood wanted money in that way. (182)

Ultimately, it is Cowperwood's own sense of individuality that reminds him of his destiny and propels him forward:

...for the man was possessed of a sense of grandeur, largely in relation to himself and his affairs, and his temperament was essentially material and vital. Something kept telling him that whatever his present state he must grow to be a significant personage, one whose fame would be heralded the world over-- who must try, try, try....there was no more escaping the greatness that was inherent in him than there was for so many others the littleness that was in them. (418)

Upon his release Cowperwood takes advantage of the financial panic of 1878 to rebuild his fortune. By shorting the market, buying low and selling high, he once again becomes a millionaire. "I am a millionaire. I am a free man. I am only thirty-six, and my future is all before me," declares Cowperwood as he leaves Philadelphia for the West (444).

That, of course, does not conclude the life of Frank Cowperwood; he does indeed go West in The Titan

(published in 1914) where he expands not only his financial success but his appetite for art and women and his contempt for conventional morality. Cowperwood, in contrast to Carrie and Jennie, is a magnificent symbol of American success. Unlike either of Dreiser's two previous protagonists, Cowperwood is aggressive, commanding--successful. Like the others, however, he does not escape the forces of society. His ambitions, his appetites are not dissimilar to either Carrie's or Jennie's in some respects, yet his inherent, dynamic qualities make him more favorably predisposed to their attainment.

Success for Cowperwood is inevitable; the question is only one of magnitude. If disillusionment and unfulfilled longing become the fate of Jennie and Carrie, then Cowperwood's fate is to suffer the misfortune of an insatiable appetite. The more he acquires, the more he wants; there will always be for Cowperwood a bigger house, a bigger deal and a "better" woman to master and possess: "There was no limit to the resources of which he now found himself possessed, except the resources of his own energy, ingenuity, and the limits of time in which he had to work" (100).

Cowperwood's "I satisfy myself" philosophy has often been read by critics as a kind of Nietzschean world view, wherein the strong individual is positioned above

and apart from society; but at least two Dreiser critics believe that rather than placing the individual in opposition to society The Financier reveals that Dreiser conceives of man as a being profoundly interconnected with his society.

Donald Pizer finds in Cowperwood a character possessing a "perceptive and feeling mind which could sense the beauty present in the mechanistic world" (Novels 15). Cowperwood's fortune rises and falls, revealing the great flux of life with which Dreiser was so preoccupied. Throughout Cowperwood's turbulent, unconventional life, he retains a great appetite for women and art. This passion for art and women--beauty--according to Pizer, reflects a great nature; and it is this great nature, or energy, that leads to conflict with the artificial constraints of society:

Celebrating all life as beautiful, Dreiser absorbs and resolves all ethical dilemmas and paradoxes within a faith in the transcendent goodness of the inexplicable force which makes for beauty in life. (15)

Cowperwood's conquests suggest a natural vitality, a universal spirit, at war with a conventional morality which constantly seeks to constrain him. Dreiser argues that, though powerful, morality is unnatural; it possesses no universal or absolute quality.

Pizer sees Cowperwood as representative of the natural man, a man who in following his own natural instincts confronts the chaotic flux of life, and not only holds his own, but delights in the struggle.

"Cowperwood is a paragon of amoral force and aesthetic sensibility," writes Pizer (Novels 169). The ruthlessness and the desire of Dreiser's hero are not unlike those of other American businessmen; he simply makes less of an effort to conceal his ambition:

American society was therefore a vast hypocrisy in which most commercial and public officials professed both a private morality and a devotion to the public welfare while robbing the public blind. The epic truth of American life was its facade of righteousness, its underlying rapacious self-interest, and its bestowal of its greatest riches upon those who had perfected the art of combining hypocrisy with theft. (171)

Dreiser, then, is exposing the falseness of American life and offering an alternative type of social man: a strong, independent man willing to face the rage of society in order to respond to a greater, more natural energy or force whose source remains independent from the social experience. This is not to say that Cowperwood does not need society, however, for in his conflict with

social forces Cowperwood experiences the excitement and drama of what is essentially an aesthetic process (169):

Cowperwood...discards hypocrisy for an open declaration of his nature, methods and goals and thus achieves a kind of Satanic magnificence which to Dreiser is a heroic magnificence. (190)

Since Cowperwood eventually meets defeat as a direct result of his disregard for conventional morality, what is the message here? According to Pizer, Dreiser presents the reader with a "vibrant, rebellious nature who comes into conflict with the laws of the universe and thereby renews our sense of the mystery and terror and wonder of life" (197). Cowperwood's life is a tribute to the triumph of the natural aesthetic spirit over the artificial constraints of society.

Critic Lois Hughson, in "Dreiser's Cowperwood and the Dynamics of Naturalism," also recognizes Cowperwood as a naturalistic hero. She, like Pizer, acknowledges Cowperwood's adherence to a force superior to social morality:

He understands the lines of true force in his society and, in manipulating them, prospers. He is not distracted by sentiment, morality, ideals, or conventions. He feels the energies of his own sexuality; and, understanding the

connection between that appetite and his drive for power, he draws strength from his belief that through his appetites he shares in the energies that drive the world. (53)

The world is ruled not by some ultimate moral authority, but by the will of men; and Cowperwood recognizes himself as one of those men. He trusts his own instincts. In his refusal to act as another man's agent, Cowperwood declares his own autonomy, says Hughson.

When his actions lead to conviction and imprisonment, it is not because he has violated some universal law, it is because he is opposed by the allied forces of other men:

Dreiser never questions that Cowperwood broke a law. What his narrative moves to dissolve is the authority and rationality of that law, while at the same time bringing into the light the wide range of social powers that operates without opprobrium outside the law in the financial world it was supposed to control. Real wrongdoing can only come from opposing the true power of a community. (54)

Cowperwood's trouble is the result of underestimating the superior political power of his adversaries. What Dreiser is challenging, though, claims Hughson, is society's irrational tendency to impose a universal order

and ethical system on a world determined solely by the will of men. Cowperwood loses not because he is wrong, rather he loses because of Butler: "...Dreiser's world tends always to the tragic and loss, whatever the magnificent surge of energy because other selves are never wholly subsumed" (57). If Cowperwood was following his own self-interest, so were others.

The Financier seeks to undermine permanently the notion of moral authority generally held by society; in its place Dreiser seeks a frank acknowledgement of the imposition of human will on an otherwise chaotic universe. This is a significant contribution according to Hughson, who writes, "As long as we cling to the older way of defining value we will have to be prepared for what must appear to us disjunctions and irrationalities in our judgements" (59). As long as this moral ambiguity exists there will be social confusion, and all justice will be in reality injustice. The Financier, asserts Hughson, depicts

...a clash between a false assertion about the nature of reality and a true one. In any case, social forms always received their energy from individuals driven by their appetites so that any containment of the individual achieved by those forms was in truth a triumph of other particular individuals. (61)

For Hughson, Dreiser's characters are bound to their worlds. Cowperwood's world gives him definition and identity; when he is imprisoned he is "lost to the world, his identity obscured" (63). Hughson cites Eliseo Vias, who writes that in Dreiser "relationships with society...are 'integral and internal,' not external. Society is an organic pattern and it makes the individual possible as much as the individual makes it possible" (53). In spite of a setback Cowperwood re-emerges, stronger and more determined; and he will succeed because he removes himself to an environment--a young Chicago--where his natural abilities will better serve him.

Far from a superman, Cowperwood, is all too human. He is Dreiser's statement on humanity in the twentieth century. The tragic strain of this novel resides in Dreiser's belief that the "world must always show the ultimate frustration of the desires it arouses"; and Dreiser's world "is a world of radical disequilibrium where the prolific energy that creates leaves nothing intact for long," writes Hughson (67). Cowperwood's struggles reflect what Dreiser called the "essential strife of life." This, then, is Dreiser's hero: a strong, self-interested successful man who nonetheless is as bound to and limited by the society which defines him as is the weakest--and as such is equally suscepti-

ble to its false notions of morality. Cowperwood is not someone who "transcends the limits of humanity," concludes Hughson, "but someone who embodies its natural fullness" (68). Frank Cowperwood fully participates in society; he is as much a product of American industrialism as Dreiser's other characters.

To the extent that Cowperwood is less restrained by society he appears more autonomous than Dreiser's earlier characters. In fact, Cowperwood's dynamic force seriously challenges the deterministic substructure present in Dreiser's naturalistic novels. Like Carrie and Jennie, Cowperwood exhibits both will and imagination. Like Carrie he establishes early on an ideal image for himself and undertakes a conscious--and successful--course to achieve it. Wealth and status, though socially derived goals, nonetheless serve as the objects of his energy, talent and effort. Cowperwood is virtually a paragon of autonomy in his pursuit of wealth and beauty.

While society denies Cowperwood complete success, his utter confidence allows him to extend social constraints to their limits. He does not exist in the margins of society as a Carrie or a Jennie; he lives and moves within the centers of true economic and political power. Though he ultimately yields to those powers, he displays an independence few Americans can claim:

His only safety lay, he thought, in the magnificent subtlety of his own brain, and nowhere else. You could not convince Cowperwood of any great or inherent virtue in this mortal scheme of things. He knew too much; he knew himself. (292)

Cowperwood is as self-determining as a person in an industrial society can be. He is limited only by his inability to defeat superior forces--other wills, in Hughson's words.

Imagination, manifested in a passionate appreciation for art and beauty, also sets Cowperwood apart from other victims of determinism. His acquisition of beautiful objects reveals an aesthetic instinct. His tastes, one may argue, undoubtedly reflect social conditioning--genres, media, styles--but his instinct for beauty seems to reflect an uncommon quality of character. Furthermore, this sensibility seems to signify a "seeking" aspect of his nature: an attribute not compatible with determinism.

His mind, in spite of his outward placidity, was tinged with great seeking. Wealth, in the beginning, had seemed the only goal, to which had been added, the beauty of women. And now art, for art's sake--the first faint radiance of a rosy dawn--had begun to shine in upon

him, and to the beauty of womanhood he was beginning to see how necessary it was to add the beauty of life--the beauty of material background--how, in fact, the only background for great beauty was great art. (145)

The theme of determinism is complicated in The Financier more than in Dreiser's other novels.

Cowperwood is far too forceful, imaginative and strong for the reader to accept as a simple victim of society. At the conclusion of the novel, upon regaining his fortune he declares, "I am as rich as I was, and only a little older. They caught me once, but they will not catch me again" (444). This statement parallels the statements of resolve uttered at the conclusion of Carrie and Jennie; Dreiser's characters seem to grow over the course of the novels. They seem to achieve a recognition of the domination of society and vow to resist it to the limits of their ability from that point forward.

Are these characters true victims? Do the characters of Dreiser's naturalistic novels betray his deterministic assumption? At the very least their displays of will, imagination and creativity complicate Dreiser's world view. This apparent conflict is resolved in his final naturalistic novel.

VII.

Clyde Griffiths, the protagonist of An American Tragedy, Dreiser's final naturalistic novel, is an antithesis to Frank Cowperwood: Cowperwood is strong and successful, Clyde is weak and a failure. In this novel, which was published in 1925, Clyde emerges as a product of virtually the same industrial social and economic conditions out of which came Dreiser's earlier characters. Like those characters, Clyde is driven by a socially derived desire--for things, for wealth, for status, the American Dream. Yet, Clyde differs from each of his predecessors in important ways: he lacks Carrie's talent; he lacks Jennie's goodness; and he lacks Cowperwood's force. An American Tragedy is generally regarded as Dreiser's masterpiece because Clyde, possessing an intense desire for wealth and status coupled with a marginal quality of character, seems to illustrate most effectively the potential for tragedy in the industrial American social scheme. Clyde is a kind of composite, an amalgamation of all the hopes, values, flaws and ambitions of Dreiser's age. If American society is going to fulfill its promise, Dreiser seems to say, it must do so even for someone like Clyde; and the extent to which it fails Clyde convinces the author that the hope that the individual places in industrial

America is not only misplaced but, in some instances, fatal.

If success looms as the ideal for the young Clyde it is because it is viewed by him from a position of severe poverty and social isolation. Clyde is born into a street-preaching family. He is one of four children who roam the streets of Kansas City with their parents who sing hymns and preach the gospel of Christianity.

Clyde is described as a sensitive adolescent who is shamed by his family's way of life. "He wished that they need not do this anymore," writes Dreiser, "or at least that he not be a part of it. Other boys did not do such things, and besides, somehow it seemed shabby and even degrading" (10). Clyde in the beginning of the novel is at that age where he is painfully aware of the differences between his life and the lives of other children. His family's life is too hard, too deprived of adequate clothes, food and entertainment:

Yet the family was always "hard up," never well clothed, and deprived of many comforts and pleasures which seemed common enough to others. And his father and mother were constantly proclaiming the love and mercy and care of God for him and for all. Plainly there was something wrong somewhere. He could not get it all straight. (9)

So here, in the formative years of his life, Clyde develops the feeling that he is inferior, that the values which his parents hold have banished the family from social acceptability. There is "something wrong somewhere," he concludes.

Clyde's perspective is further complicated by a yearning for beauty which in his mind he links with wealth. His attraction to women is frustrated by his inability to purchase fashionable clothes:

...if only he had a better collar, a nicer shirt, finer shoes, a good suit, a swell overcoat like some boys had. Oh, the fine clothes, the handsome homes, the watches, rings, pins that some boys sported; the dandies many youths of his years already were!
(19)

This sensitive, though shallow, disposition causes Clyde to reject his parents' way of life; he decides that he will "work and save his money and become somebody" (29). "What a wretched thing to be born poor and not to have any one to do anything for you and not to be able to do so very much for yourself!" he declares (18). The immediate result of Clyde's conflict, however, is an ongoing state of "depression melancholia," which makes him "rebellious and hence lethargic" (19).

The family's poverty is the result of Clyde's father's own misfortune; and like his father, Clyde himself does not appear to possess extraordinary qualities which might equip him for eventual success. In fact, his own mother considers Clyde to be "not any too powerful physically, or rock-ribbed morally or mentally" (121).

Clyde begins to distance himself from his family by taking, first, a job at a soda fountain and, later, a position as bell-hop in a luxury hotel. In these positions he acquires a taste for the "good life" and resolves to participate in it. "Could it be that he would be admitted to such a grand world as this..." (35). Witnessing the comings and goings of the wealthy provide him with a model for success:

This, then, most certainly was what it meant to be rich, to be a person of consequence in the world--to have money. It meant that you did what you pleased. That other people, like himself, waited upon you. That you possessed all of these luxuries. That you went how, where and when you pleased. (47)

The fast-paced life of a hotel bell-hop causes conflict in Clyde's life. Exposure to a distinctly non-Christian environment--sex, prostitution, easy money and "Aladdin-like" wonders--challenges the values which for

so long constrained Clyde. He develops a relationship with Hortense Briggs, a "crude shop-girl." The relationship confirms Clyde's belief in the merits of wealth because the relationship depends entirely on Clyde's ability to provide clothing, gifts and entertainment to Hortense. This new, liberal world confuses him because it seems to undermine his parents' values. Yet, writes Dreiser, "so starved had been Clyde's life up to this time and so eager was he for almost any form of pleasure, that from the first he listened with all too eager ears to any account of anything that spelled adventure or pleasure" (55).

Clyde's view of conventional morality changes when he discovers his sister's illegitimate pregnancy and his mother's efforts to hide it from the family. His sister, Esta, runs away with an actor who later abandons her. She returns to Kansas City where her mother assists her, concealing her from her father, Clyde and the rest of the family. Clyde inadvertently discovers Esta and is puzzled by the implications of her pregnancy as well as by his mother's "disturbed and somewhat unmoral" attitude:

For such deception in such an instance had to be, no doubt, even where people were as religious and truthful as his mother, or so he

thought. You couldn't just let people know...what would they think? (98)

From this incident Clyde learns several significant lessons: first, basically decent people like his sister can make mistakes and remain fundamentally good; second, that even his honest mother must misrepresent the truth in order to preserve the family dignity; and finally, that life is in general sad and troubled:

And Clyde felt for the moment as though he could cry too. For life was so strange, so hard at times. See how it had treated him all these years. He had nothing until recently and always wanted to run away. But Esta had done so, and see what had befallen her....Gee, life was tough. What a rough world it was anyhow. How queer things went! (99)

Clyde's Aladdin-like world is shattered when he and his friends wreck a stolen car and accidentally kill a girl. He flees to Kansas City and spends the next two years on the run. Tormented by his fate, Clyde nevertheless clings to his hope of "getting on in this world." He settles in Chicago where he resumes his bell-hop work at an exclusive club.

Here Clyde meets his wealthy uncle and asks for a position in his collar and shirt factory in New York. His uncle, Samuel Griffiths, agrees and invites Clyde to

Lycurgus, site of the factory, where he takes an entry-level position. Clyde, of course, sees this as the fulfillment of his ambition, his opportunity to become a person of importance.

Upon arriving in Lycurgus, Clyde immediately becomes aware of his family's wealth and position in the community. He is intoxicated with the beauty of wealth:

Indeed in his immature and really physically unilluminated mind it suddenly evoked a mood which was as of roses, perfumes, lights and music. The beauty! The ease! What member of his own immediate family had ever even dreamed that his uncle lived thus! The grandeur! And his own parents so wretched--so poor. (188)

Clyde is unaware that his wealthy relatives intend to exclude him from their world, believing that he ought to work his way up, prove himself worthy of social advancement. Lonely and frustrated, he begins a forbidden relationship with a factory employee. Clyde falls in love with Roberta Alden, a beautiful, but equally poor, girl from the country. The relationship, through Clyde's urging, eventually becomes sexual. However, Roberta's low social status and Clyde's own social ambition prevent the relationship from becoming legitimate.

For poor or not--a working girl by misfortune only--he could see how he could be very happy

with her if only he did not need to marry her. For now his ambitions toward marriage had been firmly magnetized by the world to which the Griffiths belonged. (258)

Clyde's affection for Roberta, however, turns to resentment when he meets Sondra Finchley, a society girl who can bestow wealth and status on Clyde.

Sondra's wealth and beauty embody everything for which Clyde longs but to this point has eluded him:

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 most agonizingly that he was destined not even to win a glance from her. It tortured and flustered him. (220)

Nevertheless, Clyde eventually wins Sondra's affections and is faced with the problem of divesting himself of Roberta. Through his relationship with Sondra, Clyde is granted access to the world previously denied him; even his family in Lycurgus is compelled to acknowledge him when he is taken up by local society. Clyde's ambition is achieved: a good job; promise of a beautiful, wealthy wife; and instant status are now within his reach.

Fate intervenes, however, to destroy Clyde's dreams: Roberta becomes pregnant. Afraid for her own reputation, she threatens to expose Clyde unless he marries her. Can Clyde really be expected to abandon the fulfillment of his dreams for this pregnant poor girl?

And would it be fair in one of her station and considering the connections and the possibilities that Sondra offered, for her to demand or assume that he should continue a deep and undivided interest in her as opposed to this other? That would not really be fair, would it? (336)

Clyde refuses to marry Roberta because he is unwilling to surrender the success which is now so close at hand:

For this would spell complete ruin for him, the loss of Sondra, his job, his social hopes and ambitions in connection with the Griffiths--all--a thought which sickened and at the same time caused him to hesitate about how to proceed. But he would not! he would not! He would not do this! Never!! Never!! Never!! (413)

Unwilling to marry her, unable to terminate the pregnancy, and fearful of the threat of exposure, Clyde plots to murder Roberta. Marriage to Roberta means a

return to the unbearable poverty from which he has so recently risen:

...all this other splendid recognition would be destined to be withdrawn from him, and this other world from which he sprang might extend its gloomy poverty-stricken arms to him and envelop him once more, just as the poverty of his family had enveloped and almost strangled him from the first. (428)

So, Clyde decides to drown Roberta and make it appear accidental. Of course, Clyde, in his incompetence, plots carelessly and leaves too many clues and too many witnesses. And at the crucial moment, he falters; overcome with a "palsy of the will," he inadvertently causes Roberta's drowning without actually intending to.

The threat removed nonetheless, he proceeds with his social life. Roberta's death, however, is soon discovered and Clyde is hunted and arrested, and then tried and convicted for Roberta's death. Ironically, Clyde is portrayed by the prosecutor as the "wretched rich" who uses and then disposes of an innocent country girl. Clyde's loss is total: he loses Sondra and the world of wealth, and he dies in the electric chair.

The story of Clyde Griffiths is interesting because it depicts a compelling account of tragedy in industrial society. Clyde passionately pursues the goal of wealth

which he has no reasonable hope of achieving (he lacks the necessary education and opportunity). Even when the opportunity seems to arise, he is so inextricably trapped by the conditions of his miserable life that he is unable to achieve completely economic and social success. Clyde is forced to choose between murder and poverty, so, in his weakness, he chooses murder, "a second evil which...still provided for freedom and success and love" (464). Clyde's "change of heart" at the final moment does not deliver him from his fate. Clyde is destined to long for and even come close enough to touch the American dream, but, by virtue of poverty and a compulsion to violate the social moral code in order to escape it, he never actualizes his aspirations. He is too weak, too helpless and too stupid to master the desires that consume him; ironically, Clyde's defense rests on the jury's acceptance of him as a "mental and moral coward"--which is more or less what he is.

One of the most interesting, and perhaps redeeming, aspects of Clyde's character is his own confusion over his guilt. Did he actually murder Roberta? He does not know! His entire life has been a series of events in which he has had little conscious participation. When Clyde does act he does not act freely; he is noticeably passive. He is certain that he contributed to Roberta's

death, but the willfulness of the act remains unclear even to him:

...Clyde sat there, trying honestly now to think how it really was (exactly) and greatly troubled by his inability to demonstrate to himself even--either his guilt or his lack of guilt. Was he--or was he not? (795)

Clyde goes to his death uncertain in his own mind. "But if my conscience tells me that I am right, is not that enough?" he asks McMillan, a minister. In a life shaped by society, in which each event of a person's life lies beyond his capacity to control it, then even one's perception of truth is not entirely within his command.

In this respect, Clyde is like Hurstwood in Carrie. Hurstwood steals money from his employer's safe when the safe, accidentally open, closes before he can replace the owner's money. He contemplates stealing, then reconsiders, and finally does steal when the safe closes by accident. Though neither Clyde nor Hurstwood thoroughly intend to commit a crime, they allow events to move them toward the fulfillment of their ambitions.

"Marvelling and suffering," Clyde notices during the trial the "unbreakable chain of facts that could thus be built up by witnesses from such varying and unconnected and unexpected places" (658). Indeed virtu-

ally every action Clyde undertakes, premeditated or not, implicates him and hastens his conviction.

By the novel's conclusion Clyde's confusion leads him to a nearly complete loss of identity. Uncertain of his guilt, he is uncertain of his identity. Clyde is also like Bigger Thomas, protagonist of Richard Wright's 1940 novel, Native Son. Bigger also commits a murder, although the extent of his guilt is uncertain. In an effort to silence a young white woman, Bigger, a black man, accidentally suffocates her. Poor and black, Bigger seems as victimized by society as Clyde and perishes at the hands of a dominant society which has denied him identity.

Now that the "wonderful dream" has ended, Clyde wants desperately to understand who he was: "...his old connections and ambitions relating to that superior social life that had so recently intrigued him, laid aside, he might recover himself in some small way" (783). In other words, he wants to know who he might have been had not society burdened him with such lofty aspirations of wealth while at the same time handicapping him with poverty, and ignorance and unremarkable character.

Clyde longs also for understanding from another human being. "Only, only, if someone could only know how it had all come about!" he cries. Clyde believes that

if another person--his mother, Sondra, the minister-- could have perceived Clyde's life as he himself did as opposed to how society and its law did, then his actions would not have seemed so demonic after all.

How could they judge him, these people, all or any one of them, even his own mother, when they did not know what his own mental, physical and spiritual suffering had been?...Even in the face of all the facts and as much as everyone felt him to be guilty, there was something so deep within him that seemed to cry out against it that, even now, at times, it startled him. (798)

Dreiser appears to be suggesting that society with its determining and its constraining elements does not account for the mitigating conditions of the individual life in its pursuit of justice. Clyde, therefore, wants to be judged by an altogether different standard, one that takes into account the particular influences and events of his life. "How sad. How hopeless," writes Dreiser, "Would no one ever understand--or give him credit for his human--if all too human and perhaps wrong hungers--yet from which so many others--along with himself suffered" (805)? Clyde's dilemma is not unique, then, according to Dreiser; who at some level has not

felt the unfairness of society's standards, constraints and justice?

Clyde would have opted for another life had he been given the choice. Dreiser vividly captures the potential for tragedy for an individual such as Clyde in the American industrial society in the following passage near the novel's conclusion:

He had longed for so much there in Kansas City and he had had so little. Things--just things--had seemed very important to him--and he had so resented being taken out on the street as he had been, before all the other boys and girls, many of whom had all the things that he so craved, and when he would have been glad to have been anywhere else in the world than out there--on the street!

(806)

As he faces electrocution, Clyde realizes how helpless he has been in directing his own life; he imagines a different life in which his desires and frustrations might not be so intense, so fatal.

The character of Clyde Griffiths represents Dreiser's most complex variation on the individual versus society theme in his naturalistic novels. An American Tragedy, with Clyde's death, is the most overtly tragic of the naturalistic novels. Jennie,

Carrie and Cowperwood oppose society and prosper, but Clyde opposes it and dies. Still, each of the characters experiences the immensity of social forces: it shapes men and women, and it constrains them--and in some cases it destroys them. An American Tragedy concludes with Clyde's final desperate thoughts on death row; here Dreiser leaves the reader with a final metaphorical image of the power of society:

There was a system--a horrible routine system--as long since he had come to feel it to be so. It was iron. It moved automatically like a machine without the aid or the hearts of men. These guards! (807)

Carrie Meeber, Jennie Gerhardt, Frank Cowperwood and Clyde Griffiths are all victims of that "horrible routine system"; each adopt its values, and each suffers when he or she violates the prescribed means of achieving society's goals. If industrial American society is a failure, as Dreiser would later assert openly, it is because its efficiency in establishing universal values is incommensurate with its ability to establish equitable opportunities for all its members.

Not surprisingly most of the critical considerations of An American Tragedy focus on the extent to which Clyde's fate is determined by his place in soci-

ety. Most critics regard this novel as an indictment of American capitalism, a portrait of America at its worst.

Robert Elias places the responsibility for Clyde's crime on the society that produced him:

The indictment implied by the career of Clyde Griffiths was not of Clyde or nature but of a society in which Clydes were so often inevitable. Not only were obstacles constructed that weaklings could not surmount, but men and women were brought up in ignorance that assumed they would remain weaklings. It is the attitude and customs of society that force Clyde to embrace Roberta secretly, and it is is Clyde's "ignorance, youth, poverty and fear" that renders him powerless to deal with the consequences of his actions. (223)

In such a reading, Clyde emerges as a victim of a society which stirs his desires and then prevents him from fulfilling those desires. Poor, poorly educated, denied adequate role models, Clyde is unprepared for the demands his desire places on him.

But these longings have not been his fault. If there is a fault, it is society's for setting the standard of success it has and for imposing restraints that will, as the individual's desires drive him, result in "crime."

Thus Dreiser condemned society because by its definition of the desirable it stimulated efforts on the part of those who, in consequence of the very condition that led them to exert themselves, could not hope to attain their goal responsibly. (Elias 223-24)

Elias views this social restraint of conditioned impulses as being at the heart of Dreiser's tragedy. Life is at best uncertain, and society's presumption of moral absolutes, given its materialistic ideals, results in tragedy for Clyde and others like him.

What Clyde actually longs for is not the newfound materialism of industrial America, claims critic Irving Howe; what he truly longs for is an identity, personal affirmation. For Howe, Clyde's pursuit of the symbols of wealth reflects a desperate longing for a sense of identity. Clyde is cursed with a "fractional awareness" --of self and life--that permanently prevents him from achieving peace or fulfillment. And his ambition is actually a quest for "a need for some principle of value by which to overcome the meanness, the littleness of [his life]" ("An American Tragedy" 295). Clyde's poverty and ignorance, though, prevent him from articulating his true desire.

The attractiveness of the American success goal makes it an appealing substitute for what people like Clyde really need and want:

Money, worldly success, sensual gratification are the only ends they know or can name, but none of these slakes their restlessness. They grapple desperately for money, they lacerate themselves climbing to success, yet they remain sullen and bewildered, always hopeful for some unexpected sign by which to release their bitter craving for a state of grace or, at least, illumination. Dreiser's characters are romantics who behave as if the Absolute can be found, immaculately preserved, at the very summit of material power. (294)

The social conditions of American industrialism produce "seekers." "Great energies can flow from this ingrained American delusion, both for the discharge of ambition and the aggressiveness of ego," writes Howe (294). In An American Tragedy Dreiser creates a "parable of our national experience" (297).

Clyde endures as an important character representing the American people of the early twentieth century because of his smallness. He is not a hero, a symbol of great potential, rather, in his "puniness" he represents the "collective smallness" of the American people, ac-

ording to Howe (297). Clyde, trapped by a desire imposed from without is a prisoner of a confused culture, an individual demonstrating "the futility of misplaced desire in a society that offers little ennobling sense of human potentiality" (297). A heroic character could not have functioned as effectively as Clyde as the "common denominator of our foolish tastes and tawdry ambitions" (297).

For Howe, Clyde "embodies the nothingness at the heart of our scheme of things, the nothingness of our social aspirations" (297). His failings are not his at all; failure is inherent in the American social scheme:

It would be hard to find in American literature another instance where the passivity, rootlessness and self-alienation of urban man is so authoritatively presented. For in one sense Clyde does not exist, but is merely a creature of his milieu. (300)

In support of this argument which places the blame of Clyde's crime on society, Howe cites sociologist Bernard Rosenberg who identifies in Dreiser's fiction a link with Durkheim's social theory:

Emile Durkheim had suggested in Dreiser's day that when men speak of a force external to themselves which they are powerless to control, their subject is not God but social or-

ganization. This is also Dreiser's theme, and to it he brings a sense of religious awe and wonder. "So well defined," [Durkheim] writes, "is the sphere of social activity, that he who departs from it is doomed"...Durkheim identified social facts, i.e., the existence of norms, precisely as Dreiser did: by asking what would happen if they were violated... Norms develop outside the individual consciousness and exist prior to it; we internalize them and are fully aware of their grip only when our behavior is deviant. Durkheim illustrated this proposition in a dozen different ways, and so did Dreiser. (294)

The tragedy of this novel lies in Clyde's struggle against his own mediocrity, his "slow crawl to awareness" (295). "One sometimes feels that in the novels of Dreiser," writes Howe, "there is being reenacted the whole progression of the race toward the idea of the human" (295).

Feminist and Marxist critics are no less intrigued by the relationship between Clyde and his society. Critic Susan Wolstenholme, in an article titled "Brother Theodore, Hell on Women," detects in An American Tragedy the repressed hostility of men toward women inherent in American culture. "Given the social conditions, the

'Americanness' of the Tragedy," writes Wolstenholme, "women's biological circumstances are made into a trap to ensnare both women and men like Clyde" (258). Clyde plans the murder of Roberta because she has come to represent a violent threat to him. When he does strike the fatal blow, "Roberta is not, to Clyde...Roberta at all, but the embodiment of what he perceives as female forces that entrap him" (259). Wolstenholme goes so far as to suggest that those critics (presumably men) who "exonerate Clyde do so on the grounds that Clyde only expresses the culturally normal hatred for women and what they represent. To suggest that Clyde is guilty of murder is to hold men responsible for their expressed hatred for women" (259).

Clyde and Roberta, according to Wolstenholme, are symbols of society's hatred for women--in spite of the fact that Clyde needs Roberta in order to define himself. "To disclaim responsibility as Clyde does is merely to echo the same societal disclaimers that make a system of male-female mutual victimization possible" (260). Nonetheless, Wolstenholme commends Dreiser's effort to deal with this latent hostility:

What is remarkable for the feminist reader of Dreiser is that he so honestly dealt with his own primal rage and rarely reduced either men or women to the simple level of "victim" or

"villain." In all his fiction, Dreiser deals with an issue of vital concern to women, this issue of power. He acknowledges and accepts the idea that women can have power....Although men perceive women's power as threatening, the problem lies not in some inherent female destructiveness, for both men and women share a death wish, but rather in structures that force sexual power to be used destructively.

(261)

Like Elias and Howe, the feminist critic identifies the fault as residing within society itself--in this case a society which hates women.

Susan Mizruchi analyzes the use of narrative as a means of denying identity in Dreiser's naturalistic novel. Clyde's tragic flaw is his inability to "assimilate or fashion any sense of self" (Mizruchi 242). Clyde is alienated from his own history and, therefore, readily accepts society's incomplete description of reality:

...Clyde's life is more fully seen in terms of a social hegemony that overregulates his aspirations. The novel's narrative features a discrepancy between a social rhetoric that insists that nature (both biological and universal) is everything, the all-encompassing fac-

tor predetermining human destiny, and its own underlying political revelations, which expose how such rhetoric masks the social and political particulars governing and constricting Clyde's life. Clyde's alienation from his own actions in history, and his related inability to narrate his past, can be seen to result from his excessive beliefs in society's tales. The novel reveals narrative itself to be the means by which a social determinism is entrenched. (282)

Evidence of Clyde's "fragmented awareness" are his incomplete knowledge, his misunderstanding of society's success narrative and his own passivity, contends Mizruchi. Success for Clyde is separated from personal initiative. Like his cousin Gilbert, the wealthy are born to success. Clyde's view of the world is an "immobilized view" (293). Success is possessed, not made: thus Clyde's faith in social connections (292). Life becomes separated, through such a narrative, from the person who lives it.

Clyde's passivity is the result of his unwillingness to acknowledge his past; and this serves to make him exploitable by his uncle, Sondra and his defense attorney who all seek to satisfy their own needs through Clyde. What Clyde lacks, says Mizruchi, is an effective

governing paradigm (283). She regards the deterministic world view in Dreiser as rhetoric, functioning as a means to immobilize poor people like Clyde and to perpetuate the dominance of a privileged class:

Rather than exemplifying the human condition in a predetermined universe, Clyde's "fractional awareness" represents the specific conditions of a lower-class youth in a society where some lives are more predetermined than others, and where the conception of a world ruled by impersonal forces might precisely serve the interests of that society's elite. (289)

Clyde's future, because of his embrace of the success narrative, is inevitable self-destruction, for it inspires him to pursue a reality quite incompatible with the material conditions of his life:

...the element of futility in Dreiser's portrait, and its links to the function of American ideology, registers a far sharper critique. For Dreiser's novel is precisely interested in how the dream creates the reality, aware that the perceptions that hem beings in cannot be separated from any actual barriers in their way. (293)

As Clyde moves closer toward the fulfillment of his desire for success, he in fact moves closer to his own destruction. Clyde's inability to escape from this narrative implies the omnipotence of its social rule and the existence of social hegemony. And because of his own impoverished origins, Dreiser is able to demonstrate convincingly "the links between narrative and political power" (288).

An American Tragedy endures as a poignant indictment of the American social scheme. Whether in terms of social determinism or social hegemony, the criticism reflects a unanimous appraisal of this novel's worth as a historical document illustrating American society's failure to fulfill its promise of wealth to the individual.

Critics are drawn to Clyde, though, largely because he seems to be in some ways an argument against the very deterministic social view he represents. His search for identity at the end of the novel seems to redeem his humanity and make of him a kind of hero. Clyde is clearly more of a victim of social determinism than any of Dreiser's previous characters: virtually every event of his life leads him to the electric chair. He is so shaped by society's success goal and so powerless to resist its pull that the only interest he holds for the reader is that of a specimen from some social experi-

ment; but at the end, as he seeks a clarification of self, he undermines the deterministic paradigm.

Clyde displays none of the conviction Carrie, Jennie and Cowperwood exhibit in shaping his own identity. Where they sought to control to some extent the external forces in their lives, Clyde surrenders himself to the forces in his life; where they strove, he drifts, where they understand, he remains unaware--until the conclusion, that is.

In seeking to determine his responsibility in the death of Roberta he recognizes, for the first time, where society ends and Clyde begins. In other words, he makes the distinction between what he has been conditioned to desire and what he naturally desires: the social Clyde versus the "essential" Clyde. Confronted with imminent death, he realizes what he most values in life: "Why say to him so constantly as his mother and Reverend McMillan now did to resolve all his care in divine mercy and think only of God, when now, now, was all" (804)? Living--not the pursuit of objects or reconciliation with some religious ideal--is what the essential Clyde most desires. "But life--life--how was one to do without that--the beauty of the days--of the sun and rain--of the work, love energy, desire. Oh he really did not want to die. He did not" (804).

Clyde's insights as he approaches certain death indicate an emerging consciousness. Clyde, alone, comes to an understanding of life. He recognizes the influence of society in his life and, more importantly, his own inability to resist it:

And yet also he was given to imagining at times that perhaps it was because of superior mental and moral courage in the face of passions and desires, equivalent to his own, which led others to do so much better. (785)

Clyde arrives at a subtle, almost innocent comprehension that he was unfit for the society in which he was born. The things he most valued--the sun, work, beauty--were subsumed by values established by industrial American society. Clyde, however, is not comforted by this revelation; in fact, he is profoundly saddened by a world that he can imagine but cannot actually experience:

His was a mind that, freed from the miseries that had now befallen him, was naturally more drawn to romance than to reality. When he read at all he preferred the light, romantic novel that pictured some such world as he would have liked to share, to anything that even approximated the hard reality of the world without, let alone this. (776)

Denied, by virtue of birth and environment, a strong will like Carrie, Jennie and Cowperwood, Clyde is redeemed by a single quality: imagination. In his final hours he comes to a realization that life is unjust, that given another set of experiences and qualities his life might have turned out differently; for this reason the "essential" Clyde is innocent ("But if my conscience tells me that I am right, is not that enough?").

Through revelation Clyde escapes being a victim of determinism. He is not just a specimen--he is a human being. His story is tragic not because he fails to escape his fate, rather it is tragic because he possesses just enough imagination to conceive of a better, more just world. Through his imagination, Clyde transcends the bitter conditions of his life and the smallness of his fate, but his life is no longer nor more fulfilling for it.

The truths Dreiser discovers about the human condition come out of the truths he discovers about society. Interestingly, these truths were subsequently confirmed by other social theorists.

VIII.

Clyde, Carrie, Jennie and Cowperwood are individuals in conflict with society. Each is pursuing wealth,

the predominant social goal, yet each violates prescribed social behavior to do so. Carrie and Jennie sacrifice virtue, and Cowperwood sacrifices relationships in the pursuit of success. And each operates outside of the realm of social acceptability. The pursuit of wealth for Clyde, however, drives him beyond the other Dreiser characters: Clyde's ambition results in murder.

The role of society in the development of these characters, particularly in the case of Clyde, reveals Dreiser's interest in social determinism. The fate of these characters seems to be determined by the conflict between the social goals they embrace and the conditions of the particular environment out of which they come. At the center of each of their troubles is a fundamentally irreconcilable ambition. For example, Carrie cannot realistically acquire the objects for which she longs given her own constrained economic status. In order for her to get the objects she wants, she must find a way to overcome her financial limitations--and she does.

Clyde, of course, presents an even greater dilemma: his only hope of achieving wealth is to marry someone wealthy. So intense is his ambition that when his goal is blocked he becomes desperate. Murder appears to him as the only solution.

Dreiser's interest in social determinism actually surpasses his interest in either mechanistic or biological determinism, the themes present in the fiction of other naturalists such as London, Crane and Norris. Dreiser's determinism parallels that of social theorists like Comte and Durkheim. In fact, Clyde's willingness to commit murder in order to preserve his dream of wealth effectively illustrates Durkheim's explanation for deviance.

French sociologist Emile Durkheim, the founder of modern sociology, investigated the phenomenon of deviant behavior in industrialized Europe and published his findings in 1897 in a work titled Suicide. Durkheim concluded that suicide was a result of a state of society wherein individual values are not compatible with the material conditions of the social order. Durkheim labelled this condition of society "anomie," which means literally normlessness.

As Europe shifted from an agrarian way of life to industrial capitalism, population shifted to cities. Behavioral norms appropriate for the rural life became inadequate for the new setting in which people found themselves. The new social order was more complex and lacked the stability of the agrarian society. Transplanted citizens lacked, in Durkheim's terms, "adequate normative regulation." Values and norms of a

group anchor its members within society; when those values and norms change--because society changes--individuals feel isolated and confused. When this happens, a society is said to be in a state of anomie.

The concept of anomie has become a mainstay in modern social theory. Durkheim's concept was expanded by subsequent sociologists like Robert K. Merton who developed the concept of anomie more fully in a 1968 essay which is included in Social Theory and Social Structure. Merton, like Durkheim, was seeking a scientific understanding of social deviance. Merton shares Durkheim's view that a "stable" society both establishes goals for its members and provides a means to achieve those goals.

Each society sets forth "culturally-defined goals," objectives and values toward which individuals strive. Society also establishes "regulatory norms," or institutionalized means for achieving those goals. In other words, society defines the values which its members ought to pursue and then sets forth an acceptable range of behavior that may be employed to achieve them.

A stable society maintains a balance between goals and means. In such a society, the individual feels a sense of satisfaction from conforming to regulatory norms, because, even though the social order may require sacrifice, he is rewarded often enough to retain emotional support for the rules:

An effective equilibrium between these two phases of the social structure is maintained so long as satisfactions accrue to individuals conforming to both cultural constraints, viz, satisfactions from the achievement of goals and satisfactions emerging directly from the institutionally canalyzed modes of striving to attain them. (188)

Anomie, on the other hand, occurs in an unstable society. In such a society heavy emphasis is placed on the goals "with comparatively little concern with the institutionally prescribed means of striving toward these goals" (187). Individuals in an unstable society grow frustrated from continued observance of the regulatory norms with infrequent or nonexistent benefit or reward. In this society the achievement of goals is often limited to certain classes:

The distribution of statuses through competition must be so organized that positive incentives for adherence to status obligations are provided for every position within the distribution order. Otherwise...aberrant behavior ensues. (188)

If compliance with regulatory norms produces no benefit, individuals eventually abandon those norms, or begin be-

having deviantly (relative to the social order). Merton writes:

It is indeed my central hypotheses that aberrant behavior may be regarded sociologically as a symptom of dissociation between culturally prescribed aspirations and socially structured avenues for realizing these aspirations. (188)

Merton chooses the American success goal to illustrate the concept of anomie. American culture, with its unconcealed emphasis on monetary success, represents an unstable society. According to Merton, "wealth comes to be the basic symbol of social achievement arising from a state of anomie" (189). In American culture "money has been consecrated over and above its expenditure for articles of consumption or its use for the enhancement of power" (189). Merton cites sociologist Irwin Gordon Wyllie who concluded in The Self-Made Man in America that no other definition of success "enjoys more universal favor in America as that which equates success with making money" (221). The value of the acquisition of wealth is integrated into and reinforced by all the social forces influencing the individual personality: family, school and the workplace.

To say that the goal of monetary success is entrenched in American culture is only to say

that Americans are bombarded on every side by precepts which affirm the right or, often, the duty of retaining the goal even in the face of repeated frustration. (191)

Merton claims that the "emphasis on the goal has so attenuated the satisfaction derived from sheer participation in the competitive activity that only a successful outcome provides gratification" (187). The desire for the goal, in other words, becomes so intense that the individual abandons the regulatory norms if they do not lead to success. In order to achieve the success-goal, the individual resorts to the "technically most efficient procedure, legitimate or not" (188). This, concludes Merton, begets a "process of attenuation" which leads to the instability of society, or anomie.

America is said to be in a state of anomie because while society instills within the individual the desire for monetary success, it does not at the same time provide equal access to the means for him to achieve it. "Contemporary American culture appears to approximate the polar type in which great emphasis upon certain success-goals occurs without equivalent emphasis upon institutional means," observes Merton (190). And while the success goal is distributed democratically across race and status, the legitimate methods by which one

might achieve it historically seem to be limited to a select few:

The social structure strains the cultural values, making action in accord with them readily possible for those occupying certain statuses within the society and difficult or impossible for others. The social structure acts as a barrier or as an open door to the acting out of social mandates. When the cultural and the social structure are mal-integrated, the first calling for behavior and attitudes which the second precludes, there is a strain toward the breakdown of the norms, toward normlessness.

(216)

Why not give up the success goal if the odds are against one's ever achieving it? Well, one characteristic of the American dream is determination; that is, the "truly worthy" individual will overcome even the most severe challenges to achieve wealth. In fact, the greater the challenges, the greater the stature of the individual when he finally does succeed. Folkways, mores and institutional controls are integrated into the fabric of society, so the pursuit of goals such as monetary success become a very natural thing to do.

The distinctive nature of this cultural doctrine is twofold: first, striving for success

is not a matter of individuals happening to have acquisitive impulses, rooted in human nature, but it is a society-defined expectation, and second, this patterned expectation is regarded as appropriate for everyone, irrespective of his initial lot or station in life.

(221)

Failure to achieve success given the social pressure to do so, needless to say, can produce conflict in certain individuals:

This leads naturally to the subsidiary theme that success or failure are results wholly of personal qualities; that he who fails has only himself to blame, for the corollary to the concept of the self-made man is the self-unmade man. To the extent that this cultural definition is assimilated by those who have not made their mark, failure represents a double defeat: the manifest defeat of remaining far behind in the race for success and the implicit defeat of not having the capacities and moral stamina needed for success. (222)

Merton identified five "modes of adaptation," five responses for an individual in an anomic society: conformity, innovation, ritualism, retreatism and rebellion. Conformity means just that--conformity to both

society's goals and institutionalized means; most individuals respond in this way. Innovation represents an acceptance of cultural goals but a rejection of institutionalized means. Questionable business practices or the sale of illegal commodities occur here. In the ritualism response the individual rejects the cultural goals, or at least lowers his expectations, but continues to support the institutionalized means. The zealous bureaucrat best represents this response. Those individuals who reject both goals and means practice retreatism; they simply withdraw from society. As Merton says, "they are in the society but not of it" (207). The vagrant is representative of this response. The final adaptation, rebellion, "leads men to bring into being a new...and greatly modified social structure" (20). This individual regards cultural goals and institutional means as arbitrary, unworthy therefore of allegiance; and he calls for a restructuring of society which would establish greater compatibility between merit, effort and reward (209).

Merton emphasizes that anomie is a condition of society and not a characteristic of individuals. While individuals may respond to this condition in a variety of ways, this view assumes, first, that individuals are fundamentally shaped by their culture and, second, that

their actions are basically reactions, limited and constrained.

This is a sociological perspective, and as such, contains a quality of relativism. Judgments of good and bad give way to analysis of how behavior conforms to or deviates from the norm, and how the behavior of individuals contributes to or undermines the successful functioning of the society as a whole. Finally, Merton notes that cultures are in a constant state of flux and that alternative goals periodically emerge, providing a stabilizing effect on a culture.

Dreiser presumably did not set out to develop an elaborate scientific theory seeking to explain the behavior of early twentieth century Americans; but, in his major naturalistic novels as he explored the behavior of particular characters he discovered what later sociologists identified as significant universal cultural principles. Dreiser's characters--Clyde in particular--appear as reflections of American society in transition. Each character forgoes institutionalized means in order to acquire the rewards of American industrial life.

Marxist critic Fredric Jameson in The Political Unconscious offers another assessment of the fundamental problem of capitalistic societies. Jameson posits an unfallen social reality which he calls "primitive communism." According to Jameson there existed a point in

history in which the individual was not distinct from a collective whole. Industrial capitalism created the concept of the individual which perceives the world in terms of units and results in fragmentation, alienation and estrangement.

The world lost its fullness and people lost their humanity, becoming merely objects. Jameson calls this process "reification": "the total transformation of the world into a sphere whose relations among rational or conscious beings altogether cease and there are left only relations among things" (Dowling 26). Desire emerges as the "primal energy that gives form not only to individual lives but to human society in all its manifestations" (32).

The American success-goal according to this theory would be considered a "strategy of containment," a way of denying the truth about history: the truth that society is comprised of relations of domination. A Clyde Griffiths or a Jennie Gerhardt experiences reality from the perspective of this fallen social order. Their embrace of the success-goal and other cultural narratives prevent them from recognizing their own oppression. Narrative, according to Jameson, is the "specific mechanism through which the collective consciousness represses historical contradictions" (115).

These strategies of containment result in ideological hegemony, wherein

a ruling class establishes dominance not only by controlling the legal system, the prisons, and so on, but also by establishing a climate of thought in which the oppressed classes perpetuates their own oppression by learning the values of their masters. (129)

Each of Dreiser's characters conform to this world view. They indeed appear alienated and estranged; and in embracing middle-class values they demonstrate ideological hegemony. Both Jameson's Marxist perspective and Durkheim's sociological analysis of society confirm Dreiser's belief that society creates conditions hostile to the actualization of the individual. Carrie, Jennie, Cowperwood and Clyde struggle because the society from which they come is inherently flawed.

In titling his greatest novel a "tragedy," however, Dreiser indicates that though individuals are determined by society, he is not content to let the issue rest there. There is something profoundly sad about the lives of these characters that a reductive social theory cannot entirely account for. Dreiser strove to identify something courageous, dignified and grand in his characters. If Clyde is merely a victim of a society in transition, then his life, though sad, is not necessarily

tragic; however, if Clyde represents modern man, and his struggle symbolizes the cosmic struggle for identity, then he deserves further consideration.

IX.

If Dreiser's fiction retains its literary value as America nears the end of the twentieth century it does so because Dreiser was the first novelist to demonstrate the potential for tragedy inherent in the nation's social scheme. Naturalism, as a literary movement, has historically been defined as materialistic and deterministic. The naturalists sought to engage the principles of objective scientific inquiry to identify universal rules defining the human condition. To the extent to which Dreiser has followed this method, he is of the naturalist school; but his fiction betrays the assumption of absolute social determinism. When Clyde near the end of his life hopes for the opportunity to relinquish his old "ambitions" so "he might recover himself in some small way" Dreiser departs from the substructure of social determinism (783). Clyde's emerging consciousness reveals a humanistic quality determinism denies.

Carrie, Jennie, Cowperwood and Clyde each, in their own way, undermine the deterministic paradigm. Each

transcends, perhaps in small ways, the conditions of their lives. By the end of each novel the characters have grown: Carrie desires more than objects; Jennie demonstrates a will; Cowperwood and Clyde discover their powers of imagination. To be sure, each character is in some sense limited by his or her society. Their goals reflect society's goal; they define their goals within the limited range of options available to them.

Wealth, the success goal, is primary to each of Dreiser's characters. Each views wealth as the fundamental solution to their personal conflicts. In this respect they are shaped by their society. However, the emergence of wealth in the America of Dreiser's fiction as the universal solution to individual conflicts reveals something important about the age: the society in which Carrie, Jennie, Cowperwood and Clyde seek to establish identity, meaning and purpose predisposes them to fail.

American society is in a state of anomie, or disconnectedness--the individual life, therefore, is inherently difficult and frustrating. Dreiser, given his own poverty and aspirations, was sufficiently qualified to create characters who struggle against the social conditions of industrial America. Each of his characters battle against the chaotic, disconnected social order--and lose. Howe writes,

But whatever their individual lot, they all act out the drama of determinism--which, in Dreiser's handling, is not at all the sort of listless fatality that hostile critics would make it seem but is rather a fierce struggle by human beings to discover the limits of what is possible to them and thereby perhaps to enlarge those limits by an inch or two. That mostly they fail is Dreiser's tribute to reality. (294)

Howe recognizes the presence of some greater beauty emanating from Dreiser's work. Although his characters are engaged in a losing battle for an identity independent of a flawed social order, they persist. Their determination, despite the futility of their quest, signifies what Dreiser regards as man's only redeeming virtue. To struggle, to rage on in the face of certain defeat evokes the romantic image of an embattled warrior holding off the inevitable onslaught of a superior enemy; he is spent but he is invigorated by the opportunity to have lived and to have been a part of something simultaneously wonderful and terrible.

While Dreiser's fiction may not conform to any classic definition of tragedy, it contains something universal, elemental, permanent and dignified. Clyde in his smallness represents something bigger, and something

noble. All men are small against the enormity and incomprehensibility of the universe; Clyde's stature is simply not disguised by the social and moral pretension that artificially inflates and buoys others. Dreiser's rejection of morality and his exposure of hypocrisy within American culture opens the door for a new and more just means by which to order society.

Feminists find in Dreiser an honest depiction of the woman's role as commodity in this industrial social order. Dreiser discovers hard truths about the terms of the relationship between men and women in a social order basically hostile toward women:

He points to the problems inherent in our social sexual arrangements; and although speaking from a male perspective, he is clearly aware that both men and women are victims.

If...Dreiser stood at one time for "brotherhood, allied with motherhood, against fatherhood," he is, if not a feminist, at least a fellow traveller, allied with feminists in a struggle against patriarchy. For his initial impulse in writing a novel was to tell the story of a sister. (Wolstenholme 261)

Dreiser's genius rests precisely on his ability to explore his own sense of disconnectedness through a

highly developed power of observation. Larzer Ziff argues that Dreiser endures as an important American voice because his life and his work reflect the social confusion of the age:

But Dreiser does not distinguish between heresy and commonplace because he does not proceed from any confident sense of his place or his society's place in history. His genius provided him with a total blindness to the foundations available for his constructions and a superhuman strength to dig new ones and erect a work on entirely different principles.
(338)

Dreiser and his characters are representative of the human condition in late nineteenth and early twentieth century; they embody the incompatibility of America's republican ideals and the realities of industrial capitalistic life. American society is inherently competitive, class conscious and as likely to limit one citizen as it is to elevate another. If the results of this indifferent process seem particularly cruel--or even tragic--it is because embedded in the culture is a rhetoric that promises reward for sacrifice and success for effort. Critic Allen Trachtenberg cites Louis Henry Sullivan, the great American architect of the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, as an example

of the Gilded Age's unrestrained expectations for American culture:

America is the only land in the whole earth wherein a dream like this may be realized for here alone tradition is without shackles, and the soul of man free to grow, to mature, to seek its own. (227)

What Sullivan did not know, and what Dreiser later came to recognize, is that that lack of tradition actually reflected social anomie, not freedom, and the soul of man would become lost, not enlarged. Carrie, Jennie, Cowperwood and Clyde each subscribe to this optimistic view of the potential of American society.

Carrie will achieve the promise of American society by acquiring objects, Jennie through illegitimate affairs will gain security for her family, Cowperwood will conquer the financial world to satisfy his appetites and Clyde will marry a rich girl to gain access to wealth. Each ambition, though, falls short or fails to satisfy.

History has proven that American progress and idealism have given birth to a new kind of tragedy.

American writer Robert Penn Warren writes of Dreiser's An American Tragedy:

His "tragedy" is that of namelessness, and this is one aspect of its being an American tragedy, the story of the individual without

identity, whose responsible self has been absorbed by the great machine of modern industrial secularized society, and reduced to a cog, a cipher, an abstraction. (286)

Dreiser's Carrie, Jennie, Cowperwood and Clyde in their unwilling immersion of self in American society suffer the fate of anonymity. Socially defined and constrained they exist not independently but indistinguishably from the industrial American landscape.

Comments by Dreiser in an interview shortly after the publication of Tragedy suggest that he himself, in spite of his inquiries in fiction, remained as uncertain, as confused by the events of his own life as Carrie, Jennie, Cowperwood and Clyde were of theirs:

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. (Elias 239)

To be shaped by a society which seeks nothing more than senseless perpetuation is to exist in a spiritual vac-

uum. If all meaning is lost to mere process then the individual who suffers the misfortune of disconnection with it, for whatever reason, experiences the nothingness at its base.

Failing to achieve happiness in their lives, Dreiser's characters long intensely for understanding. When one's ambitions fall hopelessly short, as Clyde's did, one seeks affirmation, acknowledgement that despite failure one's life was ultimately worthwhile. To suffer the denial of one's social significance, and therefore one's individual significance, is tantamount to never having existed at all. Pizer summarizes the universally tragic element of Clyde's character:

There is both dignity and passion in his pleas for understanding--the dignity of a being conscious of a pattern and a meaning in his life, and the anger of someone who finds himself judged by those who have not experienced or realized the "mental, physical, and spiritual suffering" of his life. Clyde's "appealing" eyes at the moment before his death represent one of the most poignant of human tragedies--the realization that we have been judged but not understood. (Novels 279)

Clyde Griffiths symbolizes all victims of a flawed social scheme. The reader therefore sympathizes with

Clyde as McMillan, the minister, does: "sorrowing with misery, yearning toward an impossible justice" (Novels 277).

True humanity lies at the center of each Dreiser character. Recognizing the failure of society to satisfy their individual needs, they seek only understanding. This is what makes Carrie, Jennie, Cowperwood and Clyde tragic figures finally. Trapped in a world which defines and constrains them, they possess just enough humanity to resist, and just enough imagination to conceive of a more perfect world: a world in which Clyde has the abilities to match his socially-derived desire, and where Jennie is rewarded--not punished--for her devotion to a family and man whom she loves.

Dreiser, it would seem, displays the instincts of the romantic in his naturalistic novels. Carrie, Jennie, Cowperwood and Clyde, it turns out, are far more than "mechanisms with conscience"--they are human beings possessing will, imagination and creativity. And they are tragic because they struggle nobly but futilely to overcome a universe which severely limits and constrains them. Identifying and glorifying this effort is the contribution of Dreiser and other naturalists, according to Donald Pizer:

The naturalist appears to be saying that although the individual may be a cipher in a

world made amoral by man's lack of responsibility for his fate, the imagination refuses to accept this formula as the total meaning of life and so seeks a new basis for man's sense of his own dignity and importance. (569)

Through the application of imagination, Carrie, Jennie, Cowperwood and Clyde emerge from the constraints of society, though briefly, to assert their humanity. Imagination--unifying, shaping and ordering--is power itself. They are mostly determined by their society, yet they dream of a better one. Through their dreaming they offer hope for a new reality. Imagination, according to the dictionary is "the act or power of creating mental images of what has never actually been experienced." Does this not describe Dreiser characters? If Clyde can imagine a world where he is not compelled to desire "things"--a world which he has not experienced--is he not at once powerful and tragic? Dreiser's characters transcend the deterministic society through intuition and personal revelation. Dreiser, for this reason, may have as much in common with Emerson as he does with Norris. Howe writes:

But he is marvelous in his devotion to whatever portion of life a man can have; marvelous in his conviction that something sacred resides even in the transience of our days; mar-

velous in his feeling that the grimmest of lives retain the possibility of "a mystic something of beauty that perennially transfigures the world." Transfigures--that is the key word, and not the catch-phrases of mechanistic determinism he furnished his detractors. (302)

While Dreiser did not himself advocate an alternative social order--despite the fact that he joined the Communist party before his death--his naturalistic novels demonstrated the need for one. If man is to remain determined by his culture, ought he not aspire to its improvement? Dreiser himself turned later in life to mysticism, abandoning any hope for a more equitable society. Perhaps, though, one need not look to mysticism as the only solution to the tragedy of social determinism in Dreiser's naturalistic novels; if a Carrie Meeber, a Jennie Gerhardt, a Frank Cowperwood or a Clyde Griffiths can transcend--though momentarily--the limits of an unjust, materialistic and tragic social order there is still hope for the rest of humanity. Perhaps Dreiser's message can be interpreted as a hopeful one: "Yes, we are largely determined, but each of us, no matter how weak, possesses the instincts, the capacity--the imagination--to identify and assert our humanity." If so, then men and women can claim some responsibility for

the conditions which have produced the world in which Dreiser's characters struggle. Philosopher Sidney Hook has written:

We are responsible, whether we admit it or not, for what it is in our power to do; and most of the time we can't be sure what it is in our power to do until we attempt it. In spite of the alleged inevitabilities in personal life and history human effort can redetermine the direction of events, even though it cannot determine the conditions that made human effort possible. (192)

Until America and other industrialized societies acknowledge and assume responsibility for the inherent destructiveness of the society which they have constructed and the latent potential for tragedy for many lives in the false reality which it projects, then the characters of Dreiser's novels will continue to represent in a sad but powerful way the constraints those societies place on the human spirit.

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