

## THE ROAD TO AN AMERICAN TRAGEDY

By KIYOHICO MURAYAMA\*

*Oh, what is this  
That knows the road I came?  
—Theodore Dreiser*

*An American Tragedy* seems an odd title for a novel. "American" in the title is too bare, too big; it would seem to be associated with some area study. "Tragedy" may lead one to expect an essay of the literary genre, or, if viewed figuratively, a report of some tragic event rather than a novel. In fact, one of my students told me that before reading it he had thought that *An American Tragedy* was a sociological study of ugly aspects of American society. In every sense this title is problematical, and it seems that Dreiser himself was aware of this, for he clung to this title in spite of the publisher's advice that the novel should be given some other name. This title actually reveals Dreiser's fixed intention to write an American tragedy, and his literary activities, reviewed from the elevation of the achieved American tragedy, would turn out to be no less than a search for it. Then it is no wonder that the discussion about the novel has been done around the two pivots of its Americanness and its tragic elements.

Before looking into his full-scale attempt at a tragedy, however, what is a tragedy is a question that should be examined. Refusing to be involved in the long and tedious history of dispute over the genre, I must confine myself to defining in my own way the conception of a tragedy as briefly as possible. To put it tersely, it is a dramatic form with a plot on the theme of the defeat of a central character with whom the author, and supposedly the reader, is in sympathy. A great tragedy deals with a most serious problem in a given society, and the protagonist is a hero who faces the problematic, endures its tensions, and is finally defeated.

In traditional tragedies, the hero could not be other than a member of the ruling class in that society, and therefore had a public role whose destiny could be regarded as closely connected with the community's destiny. They were works of art that depicted the noble and sublime torments of the respectable rulers. While such traditional tragedies were alive, the masses, who could never be regarded in the same light as the nobility, could not enter the stage without being comic characters. As Auerbach makes clear in *Mimesis*, the separation of styles, the rule of which "specified that the realistic depiction of daily life was incompatible with the sublime and had a place only in comedy or, carefully stylized, in idyl—,"<sup>1</sup> was inevitable during the times when the class hierarchies were comparatively secure. Even if a mixture of styles could happen during unsettled times, the results were either melodra-

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<sup>1</sup> Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, translated by Willard Trask (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co. Inc., 1957), p. 18.

matic or fabulous. In short, before this modern age there could never have been classical tragedy in which a common man was the hero.

Needless to say, in this modern age, literature has been able to acquire a new importance as a cultural need, indispensable to human life, not because it is able to be good entertainment, but because it is able to deal totally with the problematic in life, allowing no scientific analytical approach to displace it, and because in that way it is able necessarily to force the readers to take a broad outlook on problems which can be shared with the whole of humankind. In other words, after the collapse of the feudalistic caste, individuals become equal, with personalities, so characters in literary works have ceased to be personae substantiated by the hierarchical system, and have become persons that have as their substance, individual personalities. It follows then that the vicarious role of the characters for the author-reader has been intensified. At the same time the ruler has ceased to be able to exercise naked force, religious authority or hereditary power. When the quality of rule becomes more impersonal, abstract and institutional, heroes that have a decisive influence in conditioning the whole community cannot readily be found. In such a modern country, literature is democratized, and the new protagonist becomes a secular common man rather than a heroic ruler. If the new protagonist has any heroic features, they are to be related to the issues of the possession of money and/or women, and then the outcome will be the establishment of his own self. In this sense, the heroic character in modern literature will have more private qualities than are to be found in traditional literature.

After modern society becomes settled and stable, however, such a hero can hardly be expected to appear unless he is rich enough to be able to pursue possessions as such, or an aesthete who, with contempt of the actual world, has self-control enough to confine himself within the sacred world of pure beauty. On the other hand, those who are neither bourgeois nor aesthetes may as well expect that a new hero will appear and condition their society favourably for them, but such an expectation can hardly materialize, since literature has already been democratized. So they have to proceed to the creation of their own literary form in which the problematic in their everyday life can be depicted seriously. And yet this need is not easily fulfilled. To reach such a destination, the people have to prove themselves really capable of remodeling society, but as they lack such powers as the traditional heroes' and cannot be content with establishing their own private selves like modern heroes, it is natural that the job should be very difficult. Dreiser took up this job of creating a new literary device for the lower classes, and *An American Tragedy* was his final achievement.

It is not only the achievement of Dreiser, one writer, but also a solution to an unavoidable question which lay along the way of historical progress of American literature. In other words, both American literature and Dreiser followed objectively the road to an American tragedy. What Robert E. Spiller calls "the decline of one cultural cycle and the rise of a second"<sup>2</sup> began after the Civil War. Spiller says, "the American romantic movement rose, triumphed, and declined as the literary expression of the Atlantic seaboard Republic. A Continental Nation was at the same time in the making, and its literature was as yet unformed."<sup>3</sup> Among the makers of the new literature, Mark Twain, Henry James and William Dean Howells each played an important part. The greatness of Mark Twain was that he

<sup>2</sup> Robert E. Spiller, *The Cycle of American Literature: An Essay in Historical Criticism* (New York: The Free Press, 1955), p. 83.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 85.

grasped the national issues of his day as the subjects of his works, but he did not reach the point of overthrowing the forced separation of styles, which meant that artistic representation of the common man was always restricted within comic forms. As a result, his true importance as a writer was obscured by the tag of the "great American humourist." The so-called pessimism of his later years possibly was no more than another tag the conventionalists in the prevailing genteel tradition invented to push him into the category of a humourist, even after he began to deal with the problematic that could not in any way be rendered within the comic. Henry James, as a conscious realist, sought to create serious works of art, but he also failed to surmount the separation of styles, though unlike Mark Twain, who was not so alienated from the American common people, he confined himself within the life of the upper classes in the pursuit of the problematic, so that finally he could not but find himself exiled from America. W.D. Howells apparently approached the question more directly, but his best achievement could not be considered a successful solution, for he failed to overcome the separation of styles due to the class segregation, too, as is seen in *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, where Basil March's world remains basically unaffected by Lindau's world. His outlook on the problematic went no further than to watch the ethical difficulties a sensitive person could not but face when sincerely observing everyday life around him. Even younger writers such as Frank Norris and Stephen Crane were unable to grasp the life of the lower classes except from the outside as a subject of curiosity, partly because they were middle class. In this respect Jack London and Hamlin Garland, who rose out of poverty, with more concrete knowledge of the life of the people, indicated the possibility of a new literature, but they lacked tenacity enough to pursue it to the end.

Until the turn of the century, American literature had not achieved the creation of a great serious novel. But the awareness of this hoped-for goal was expressed in critical works by novelists of those days. It was in 1868 that John W. De Forest published his essay, "The Great American Novel," and since then the title has been a term used to indicate the goal in American literature. Howells seems to have found in the evolution of the American *nouveau riche* "the material of that great American novel which after so much travail has not yet seen the light."<sup>4</sup> Silas Lapham and Dryfoos were therefore for Howells the materials from which he tried to create a great American novel, but he did not conceive it to be a tragedy, as he says, "I should prefer the novel which kept itself entirely to the actualities, . . . with elements of equal tragedy and comedy, and a pathos through all which must be expressed, if the full significance of the spectacle were to be felt."<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, what mattered most was that he indeed could not believe in the great American novel, so that he was obliged to confine himself to "the more smiling aspects of life."<sup>6</sup> He must have apprehended, even if but vaguely, that if he had earnestly sought the great American novel, it could not but have been tragedy, which he disliked temperamentally.

Norris's notion of the great American novel was a little different from Howells's, as he showed his own concern about it by repeatedly discussing it. He argued that it related to the national spirit and that "the national spirit is the inspiration and opportunity of the national novel, just as the early fiery patriotism is the inspiration and opportunity of the na-

<sup>4</sup> W.D. Howells, *Criticism and Fiction, and Other Essays*, ed. by Clara Marbury Kirk & Rudolf Kirk (New York: New York University Press, 1959), p. 341.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 342.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 62.

tional epic."<sup>7</sup> "So that it seems almost conclusive," he continued, "that the great American novel will not be written until the development of the great American national spirit."<sup>8</sup> Accordingly, what should have been done at that time was to him to write "a neglected epic."<sup>9</sup> So his masterpiece was *The Octopus*, where Presley, a man of letters who provides the point of view in the novel, says, "The great poem of the West. It's that which I want to write. Oh, to put it all into hexameters; strike the great iron note; sing the vast, terrible song; the song of the people, the forerunners of empire! . . . Epic, yes, that's it,"<sup>10</sup> just as Basil March, also a man of letters providing the point of view in *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, says, "Yes, I believe I can get something quite attractive out of it (=life in New York City, especially the gulf there between the comfortable and the uncomfortable)."<sup>11</sup> But Basil, though he is also obsessed by the notion of "the Great American Novel,"<sup>12</sup> is searching not for an epic but a tragedy, for "a sense of the striving and the suffering deeply possessed him, and this grew the more intense as he gained some knowledge of the forces at work—forces of pity, of destruction, of perdition, of salvation."<sup>13</sup> In short, while what Howells was groping for was a tragedy, what Norris was searching for was an epic; a great American epic written in Whitmanesque style.

Objectively speaking, Dreiser's literary pilgrimage was a response to this question of the great American novel about which both Howells and Norris felt such a strong concern but after all retreated from the need to take pains to solve it.

His first published novel, *Sister Carrie*, was an American tragedy but which had not been disclosed yet. Because its protagonist, Carrie, is "full of the illusions of ignorance and youth,"<sup>14</sup> it may well become a tragedy in which her illusions drive her to bitter disillusionment. Nevertheless, this heroine presents no obvious tragedy, never going beyond unsatisfied expectations. The first factor in *Sister Carrie's* becoming a failure as a tragedy, is Dreiser's sympathy with and pity for her. He not only has too much sympathy and pity, but is too deeply involved with her to stop combining her destiny with his own. At the end of this novel, he goes so far as to exclaim, "Oh, Carrie, Carrie! Oh, blind strivings of the human heart!"<sup>15</sup> If she is defeated, it means that "the human heart" as well as Dreiser's sisters and their fellow creatures are defeated. Such a thing Dreiser could not allow. True, Carrie is possessed by illusions, and therefore logically she cannot avoid her disillusionment, but even if he is engaged in inquiring into the quality of those illusions, Dreiser cannot put aside the hope of saving her as she is, if possible, without exposing "the human heart" to its tragic situation.

The second element is that Carrie has "the feeling mind,"<sup>16</sup> a kind of spiritual property. On the other hand, "the machine girls . . . seemed satisfied with their lot, and were in a

<sup>7</sup> Frank Norris, *The Literary Criticism of Frank Norris*, ed. by Donald Pizer (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1964), p. 118.

<sup>8</sup> *Loc. cit.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 119.

<sup>10</sup> Frank Norris, *The Octopus* (New York: Airmont Publishing Co., Inc., 1969), pp. 34-5.

<sup>11</sup> W.D. Howells, *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (New York: The American Library of World Literature, Inc., 1965), p. 128.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 233.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 265.

<sup>14</sup> Theodore Dreiser, *Sister Carrie* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co. Inc., 1970), p.1.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 369.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 368.

sense 'common.' Carrie had more imagination than they."<sup>17</sup> The way Dreiser seeks to save her out of respect for her earnest quest for happiness, earnest enough to be worthy of sympathy, here resolves itself into granting the privilege of survival to the individual who has the mental ability to search for happiness. Since she is given this privilege from the first, Carrie is able to avoid becoming a tragic heroine.

The third and the most basic element, however, is Dreiser's intellectualism, which is similar in import to the philosophy of enlightenment. His notorious "philosophizings" in this novel are the preachment of this philosophy. According to his intellectualism, "Our civilization is still in a middle stage, scarcely beast, in that it is no longer wholly guided by instinct; scarcely human, in that it is not yet wholly guided by reason,"<sup>18</sup> so that Carrie's illusions and disillusionments would not have any importance other than relative significance; they are simply necessary results of the equating process of our civilization. Basically, this rationalization of the unsatisfactory condition and the arrogant and transcendental world view his philosophy entails are the greatest barrier to the realization of tragedy.

Because of these factors, certainly the expectation that Carrie would be a tragic character is mocked by the actual novel, but, if this is so, it cannot be refuted that as a whole it is a tragedy, but one that is merely not obvious. In the light of tragedy, as Matthiessen says, "the central vitality of the novel, however Dreiser may have conceived it, lies in Hurstwood,"<sup>19</sup> and yet, if only the impact of tragic Hurstwood is emphasized, it will induce the failure to capture the totality of this work. Although Carrie herself remains to the last an unrealized tragic figure, from the point of view of the totality of the work it can be seen that her tragedy emerges as the reverberation of Hurstwood's tragedy.

Carrie keeps earnestly questioning what true, not false happiness, is. But, out of line with her sincere attitude, she is saved from that collision with the outer world (such as Hurstwood's clash with workers on strike and his final ruin) which cannot be eluded if she makes a thorough inquiry into her own question, and the tragic end as one possible result of her illusory search. Accordingly, instead of the collision, there needs to be something that would answer and justify her question. This need is responded to by Ames, the incarnation of the light of reason, introduced to bring about a solution based on intellectualism. Actually his attempt to enlighten her has no great effect upon Carrie. Compared with the problems so realistically raised, the answer Ames preaches is too weak. Ames is a shadowy character, lacking substance. However irreplaceable his role is to Dreiser, the impression he gives in the novel is overwhelmed by that of Hurstwood, so that his positive role remains unfulfilled. After all, the falseness of the intellectualistic philosophy of Ames and Dreiser is exposed by the totality of the imaginative insight represented by the characterization of Hurstwood.

In the light of accomplishment, *Sister Carrie* can certainly be termed naturalistic, which is incompatible with tragedy. Dreiser is overwhelmed by the blind and indifferent force of "Nature," but what arrests his attention is not the "smiling aspects" which would allow human conditions to be painted rosy, but the tragic aspects of a situation in which human desires cannot easily be fulfilled and the place where true happiness can be sought is not so much as known. He is interested, not in the acceptance of the absolute domination of "nature," but, even by awkwardly offering his notorious "philosophizings" or such a

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 56.

<sup>19</sup> F.O. Matthiessen, *Theodore Dreiser* (New York: Dell Publishing Co. Inc., 1966), p. 73.

“sketchy” character as Ames, in insisting that the fulfillment of human desires should be possible. Even if the import and quality of the insistence be illusory and to that extent weak, what matters is his passion and striving, through which he tries not to be content with the mere acceptance of what is, but somehow to indicate the way forward. It should not be overlooked that the whole novel has a three-dimensional structure, approximating to a tragedy, which has been brought into existence as an unexpected product from Dreiser’s positive intention represented by Ames. This novel, as *Carrie’s* tragedy, can be regarded as only half-baked, but its latent dramatic quality is tragic. And only when her life is seen as overlapped by Hurstwood’s tragedy, not as merely contrasting with it, as is seen by many critics, will it become clear that she is destined to be trapped by the same predicament as his.

It must be confirmed that the work Dreiser gave himself to at the turn of century was, if only latently, tragic. This potential of a tragedy, however, was not to be quickly accepted in those days. Dreiser was so shocked by this that he was unable to write another novel for ten years. But *Jennie Gerhardt*, which he published after that period of silence, staking his comeback as a novelist, was a work whose motif as a tragedy was more apparent than his first novel; for Jennie, unlike Carrie, remains outwardly unhappy to the last. Her fate is pathetic, treading the path of a daughter of a poor family, mistress first of a senator and then of a rich man’s son, and finally becoming a social outcast. Then, can it be said that *Jennie Gerhardt* achieves a perfectly disclosed tragedy? No, this can never be said, because Jennie, at the end of the novel, is not in the least a completely defeated heroine, but rather praised for her endurance, and the many misfortunes she has to suffer through the story are nothing but trials to test this endurance. This tells us merely about the paradox of triumph through defeat. The pathos Jennie will convey to the readers is sentimental or melodramatic rather than tragic. If the humble and weak are not treated comically but regarded as human beings troubled with serious conflicts, certainly they present a kind of the mixture of styles, but the mixture often tends to be melodramatic.

The point, however, is why Dreiser was not able to create a tragedy, in spite of giving Jennie the role of an apparently defeated heroine. The first reason relies on the fact that Jennie, too, like Carrie, is endowed with just the same spiritual property—in her case, the “poetic mind,”<sup>20</sup> and because of this she can avoid utter and tragic ruin if she finds herself in any woeful predicament. The second reason, related to the first, is again Dreiser’s intellectualism. In *Jennie Gerhardt*, as a character representing Dreiser’s élitist philosophy, there is Lester Kane, who is much less sketchy than Ames; his “philosophical”<sup>21</sup> mind is nothing but a development of Ames. And yet, at the same time, what is remarkable about Lester Kane is his unenjoyable later years, his real defeat at death, in contrast to Jennie’s apparent defeat but real triumph. It means that as soon as he realized an incarnated philosophy of intellectualism through Lester Kane, Dreiser could not help exposing its debility. Now that what remained positive in *Sister Carrie* proves to be impotent, in *Jennie Gerhardt* only one foundation is left, a more fragile one, Jennie’s own “poetic mind.” As a result, *Jennie Gerhardt*, while it is much more tragic in appearance than *Sister Carrie*, is weaker in its tragic import and descends to the plane of melodrama.

To overcome sentimentalism became, for the time being, the greatest need for Dreiser, who had failed twice in creating an authentic tragedy, and this motivated him to proceed

<sup>20</sup> Theodore Dreiser, *Jennie Gerhardt* (New York: Dell Publishing Co. Inc., 1963), p. 15.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 192.

to the creation of Cowperwood. Cowperwood has nothing to do with any pitiableness. He is a kind of Nietzschean superman; all of Ames-Kane's intellectual properties and Carrie-Jennie's artistic merits are poured into him, appearing as at once his "Machiavellian . . . brain"<sup>22</sup> and his desire for beauty in women and works of art. Though *The Titan*, in which Cowperwood, called "Ishmael,"<sup>23</sup> appears to suffer like Atlas burdened with the world, has a smack of tragic implication, *The Desire* trilogy as a whole is more epic than tragic. Cowperwood is the kind of heroic figure which Dreiser had to create in order to explore the possibilities of a tragedy without sentimentality. It may be gathered from the travel book preceding the trilogy, *A Traveler at Forty*, that to overcome sentimentalism was an inner urge to Dreiser, brooding over Cowperwood. The climax in the book is Florence, and in the chapter called "The Makers of Florence," Michaelangelo, as well as Machiavelli and others, is praised as an ideal hero, described thus; "They struck swiftly and surely and smiled blandly and apparently mercifully; they had the Asiatic notion of morality, —charity, virtue, and the like, combined with a ruthless indifference to them."<sup>24</sup> The worship of superhuman heroes was adopted as the antidote to sentimentality. In this way this travel book, like Dreiser's other two travels, indicates a turning point in his literary career, rejecting sentimentality, or too much sympathy with the underdogs.

The epic hero requires the epic style. What Dreiser himself calls "rhythmic, vaguely formulated word-pictures or rhapsodies. . .—free verse, I suppose we should call it now"<sup>25</sup> is the Whitmanesque style that Norris often used. This is the elevated style that frequently appears in his works, especially before *An American Tragedy*. The Cowperwood trilogy is a natural consequence that was brought about by this style, and it is a Dreiserian variation of the great American epic which Norris called for. But Dreiser was after all compelled to abandon the epic style. It could not but become clear to him that an epic would be impossible in a highly institutionalized society, so he came to the realization that what had to be achieved was an American tragedy such as Howells barely suggested. Later he made another effort to overcome sentimentalism, returning to the facts of his own life, and showing something in common with Hemingway's efforts resulting in the creation of his hard-boiled style.

*The Desire* trilogy was given up by Dreiser on its way to completion after publishing *The Titan*, which seems to come close to being a renewed attempt at another tragedy, for it ends in Cowperwood's failure to acquire the franchise of the railway in Chicago, defeated by the mass movement. It was as if Dreiser had lost interest in writing the third volume. The next novel, instead of this, was *The 'Genius'*, which was heavily laden with autobiographical interests. It may be that Dreiser, who from the start was interested in autobiographical writing, became tired of Cowperwood, after all a character living outside his own world. But the reception to *The 'Genius'* was one of the worst he had met, adversely reviewed and banned in cities and towns. It is clear that the work is another failure, particularly in that it is a reflection of the novelist's unsettled attitude toward its autobiographical protagonist, Eugene Witla; Dreiser appears to be unable to decide whether he should be made a hero like Cowperwood or a social victim like Jennie, as is evident in the chaos near the end of

<sup>22</sup> Theodore Dreiser, *The Financier* (New York: Crowell Co., 1974), p. 377.

<sup>23</sup> Theodore Dreiser, *The Titan* (New York: Crowell Co., 1974), p. 2.

<sup>24</sup> Theodore Dreiser, *A Traveler at Forty* (New York: The Century Co., 1913), p. 377.

<sup>25</sup> Theodore Dreiser, *A Book About Myself* (Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett Publications, Inc., 1965), p. 8.

the book, where the mood lapses into mere sentimentality, unconditional praise of the beauty of life, which is not unlike the tone near the end of *The Titan*; Dreiser can become tremendously excited by life in the affirmation of everything in it. In short, Dreiser still remained trapped by sentimentalism, even if it was different from the kind in *Jennie Gerhardt*. What is noteworthy in *The 'Genius'* is not its achievement but Dreiser's intense renewal of interest in the autobiographical, and this is seen not only in the novel but appears again in another travel book,—*A Hoosier Holiday*. The book is a record of Dreiser's journey by automobile with another Hoosier artist from Greenwich Village to his home state, Indiana, through which he is possessed by the memory of his own early years. From the fact, too, that he began to write overt autobiographies after that, we can judge that his renewal of this interest was not perfunctory. It means that he returned to the leitmotif in *Sister Carrie* and *Jennie Gerhardt*. The leitmotif is related to the impetus peculiar to the literature of this modern age to inquire into the meaning of life on the basis of a writer's own private life. Since the collapse of theological and metaphysical world views, this has been one of the best ways still open to modern writers to grasp and squeeze a world view out of their own experiences and education.

But this is not the only reason why *A Hoosier Holiday* is a milestone in Dreiser's progress as a writer; another is that in it his criticism of snobbism unfolds. It finds expression in innuendoes at the rich in resort places, dislike of the shabby conformity of small cities to big cities, comments on Elbert Hubbard, and other remarks on American snobberies he observed during the journey. While the worship of a superman such as Cowperwood is never less than snobbism, Dreiser's use of criticism of it must have something to do with his loss of interest in the trilogy and renewal of interest in the autobiographical. If the efforts to overcome sentimentalism in *A Traveler at Forty* was a checkrein on his self-pity, the criticism on snobbism in this travel book is a checkrein on his megalomaniac overconfidence, and the élitist intellectualism related to it. Now that Dreiser restrains himself by so many checkreins, there remains to him one way only, another attempt to achieve a tragedy driven by the autobiographical impetus.

During World War I, Dreiser, who had zigzagged since *Sister Carrie*, now took up again the job of writing a new kind of tragedy, but this time with sheer determination and clear awareness of what he was doing. The first of his efforts was *The Hand of the Potter*, whose subtitle is *A Tragedy in Four Acts*. Explicitly announced to be a tragedy, however, it has little to do with traditional tragedies, though its basic plot is the same, in that its protagonist, Isadore, commits suicide, the play ending in his defeat. Actually, Isadore is the very opposite of a traditional hero. He can be called the first anti-hero realized by Dreiser out of his quest, even one of the first that the twentieth century literature produced. In order to demonstrate Isadore's life as having tragic significance, however, another character, Quinn, a reporter who comes to cover his suicide, is necessary as the interpreter. For the audience, he interprets Isadore's life, using an unethical argument that exempts Isadore from his responsibility, saying, "laa is merely somethin' that forces people to do what they don't want to do whether they will or no, naht somethin' that aalways shows 'em how to do it."<sup>26</sup> And yet this method of making a character present an interpretation and the argument used for the purpose are weaknesses in the work; the former prevents the full dramatization, and the latter is incompatible with the conception of a tragedy as a story

<sup>26</sup> Theodore Dreiser, *The Hand of the Potter* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1918), p. 200.



of significant defeat in spite of the protagonist's sincere struggle.

*An American Tragedy* was a great advance on *The Hand of the Potter*, a full development of what Dreiser had been seeking, consciously or unconsciously, since *Sister Carrie*. Its protagonist, Clyde Griffiths, is evidently an anti-hero like Isadore, and yet his characteristics as an anti-hero do not lie in such deformity or degenerative insanity as Isadore's. He is much more commonplace. In order to show that he is at once an ordinary person and an anti-hero, an underplot is laid in the former part of the novel, delineating his character in detail. A hero, as I have described him, was a person endowed with an honorable lineage, religious authority or personal strength, and governing his community; but Clyde lacks those distinctions, as is elaborately and methodically depicted. As for his pedigree, he remains a person of doubtful origin through Book One. But just after the beginning of Book Two, he meets his uncle, Samuel Griffiths, a rich owner of a big collar factory, and thus he proves, as many traditional heroes also did, to be of respectable stock, betraying the appearance at first as a young man of unknown antecedents, for a rich business man can be regarded as having a kind of nobility, in the American concept. By this disclosure, he appears to obtain at least one condition of a hero. But presently, this blood-tie proves to be no guarantee of prestige for him. As a result, since what seemed to be a qualification for a hero turns out to be ineffective, his being as an anti-hero paradoxically becomes all the more evident. As for religion, too, it is obvious that this is dealt with very consciously in this novel, and this is also used paradoxically to emphasize Clyde's character as an anti-hero; for he was born son of a self-appointed missionary and at the last stage he faces religious questions imposed by his mother and the Rev. Duncan McMillan, as if Dreiser suggested that Clyde retained the religious dignity as a condition of a hero; but undoubtedly his religious background has only an ironical implication, functioning as an element contradictory to the demonstration of him as a hero. Finally, as for personal strength, too, Clyde has no personal merits except that "Clyde possessed the looks—the 'goods'—,"<sup>27</sup> lacking in money and brains. His only possession—his good looks—apparently could be qualification for a hero, but in his case it is nothing but a mask of incompetency. In contrast, the most powerful man in the novel is an ugly man with "a broken nose, which gave to him a most unprepossessing, almost sinister, look,"<sup>28</sup> Orville W. Mason, district attorney. In short, though at first glance Clyde seems to be endowed with all the qualifications for a hero, or rather because of his appearances, all the more is it ironically emphasized that after all he is utterly devoid of such qualifications, so ultimately he is revealed as a perfect anti-hero.

If such an anti-hero as Clyde can be a tragic protagonist, then it means that even an ordinary person of the common people can be involved in the problematic in a given society. And yet, if a tormented person who groans under the heavy burden of the whole world is not prince but everyman, it may be doubted whether he can be termed a tragic figure. But once all human beings come to be considered equal, each person can necessarily be regarded as an irreplaceable kernel of the world. In such a vision, an anti-hero like Clyde would rival Hamlet, the tragic prince of Denmark.

The serious problem Clyde faces is that of poverty in America, particularly its effect upon youth, and their spiritual devastation as its particular manifestation. Clyde's egoism, meanness and crime are not in the least such results as the power of the evil nature of a

<sup>27</sup> Theodore Dreiser, *An American Tragedy* (Cleveland: The World Publishing Co., 1948), p. 324.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 546.

characteristically wicked man brings about, working as an active force, but his completely passive reactions to his circumstances. In this sense, he is a victim rather than assailant. He cannot possibly act subjectively nor take the responsibility for it, but rather maintains only a victim's consciousness. And his very victim consciousness is most representative of his character as an anti-hero. He is the victim; the aggressor is nature or society. Therefore, within the sphere of his awareness, it would not be Clyde himself but the outer world that is guilty. Such a view is highly anti-tragic, because only an irresponsible person can hold it. As far as Clyde's consciousness is concerned, *An American Tragedy* does not go any further in its accomplishment as a tragedy than *The Hand of the Potter* and Quinn's logic for the justification of Isadore's crime.

In the light of the totality of the work, however, it succeeds in narrowly escaping such an anti-tragic vision. One momentum to this success is the impact on the reader of the scenes of Clyde's strenuous search for truth during his stay in Sing Sing, waiting for the electric chair. His sincerity in it is a sign that barely indicates that he may be a human subject that cannot continue to be wholly a passive victim, though his seeking, after all, may result in just an impotent struggle in which he gropes in the silence that follows his repeated words "And yet—," and his frequently raised questions he asked himself. The abundance of interrogative sentences is one of the characteristics and energies of Dreiserian style, and Dreiser himself was aware of it, as he describes his own skill at questioning in *Dawn*; "I could go on and on, asking one and then another question until at last the unhappy victim would extricate himself in any possible way he could."<sup>29</sup>

Another momentum, which is more fundamental, is that in *An American Tragedy* Dreiser could exploit those merits of its form as a novel which the play, *The Hand of the Potter*, could never provide, so that the voice of omniscience in its descriptive part performs an important role in relativizing the simply anti-tragic plot. The voice, which can be seen as almost that of Dreiser, is not limited within Clyde's consciousness, while it shows full sympathy with him. In a way, omniscience here plays a role similar to Quinn's in *The Hand of the Potter*. The story follows Clyde's actions and thinking, but they are objectified, and the logic used for the objectification is unlike Quinn's, not the argument of exempting the individual from responsibility but the determination to forsake the victim, presenting no means of salving Clyde, arguing that there apparently is no solution, as Lundquist points out; "only when we realize there is no way out for Clyde do we understand his tragedy."<sup>30</sup> It is not Clyde himself but the voice of omniscience that criticizes the protagonist's flaw. This peculiar function of omniscience makes the primary difference of the mechanisms between traditional theatrical tragedies in which the tragic problems could be revealed in the hero's awareness, and modern novelistic tragedies that can have only an incognizant anti-hero as the central figure. By the term novelistic, I mean a form not limited just within the dramatic actions of the characters, the form in which the tone and style of omniscience in telling the story is an essential element. In *An American Tragedy*, the implied author and the protagonist are more closely incorporated through the author's autobiographical sympathy than in Dreiser's former works like *Sister Carrie*, where omniscience was so aloof from the heroine that it sometimes had to shout to make itself heard by her, and yet at the same time omniscience here takes such complete detachment that the protagonist is more

<sup>29</sup> Theodore Dreiser, *Dawn* (Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett Publications, Inc., 1965), p. 425.

<sup>30</sup> James Lundquist, *Theodore Dreiser* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1974), p. 98.

determinedly objectified; clearly characterized as an anti-hero doomed to ruin without any sense of significance. Since Clyde, unlike Carrie or Jennie, is delineated perfectly as an anti-hero, the tragic power in *An American Tragedy* rises to the surface, while it would likely remain unnoticeable if only his inner awareness were watched, or if only his outer actions were marked. The tragic power consists in the situation where, though he is just an anti-hero, the protagonist who is cornered in an inevitable predicament in the social machine can enact a scene of a serious defeat that illuminates human dignity, though negatively, because he both captures sympathy through vicariousness and is driven relentlessly into ruin.

It would be too much to call Dreiser "the man of ice," as Kenneth Lynn does in *The Dream of Success*, even if it is certain that Clyde's "soul is ice cold."<sup>31</sup> Lynn fails to take note of the significance of omniscience in this novel, so that he cannot realize how Dreiser had to set himself free from his own illusions before he could depict Clyde relentlessly as a quite egoistic boy, victimized by the American dream of success. His argument rests upon his own ignorance of the modern art form in the novel, or negligence of it because of his political prejudice against Dreiser. Existentialist critics also neglect the significance of omniscience evident in it, though in a way different from Lynn's. The tragic structure in *An American Tragedy* differs from the existentialist tragic vision that Glicksberg admires in *The Tragic Vision in Twentieth-Century Literature*. In most modern tragedies, the protagonists are anti-heroes like Clyde. But their function is to tempt the reader either to indulge in their own unfathomable sorrow, cherishing what Sartre defines as "bad faith," the refusal to struggle because of the conviction that no good can result from life, or to worship the anti-heroes transformed ironically into metaphysical rebels who blindly challenge the boundaries of the human condition, only to be defeated. Even if it is rendered in the form of a novel, the existentialist tragedy approximates to a theatrical form called the absurdity drama, because the voice of the implied author, who should show a sufficient detachment toward the protagonist, is elaborately extinguished so that the only means of objectifying the anti-hero's sentimentality is deliberately rejected. The tragic in *An American Tragedy* must be strictly distinguished from the existentialist tragedy by the presence of the voice of omniscience, though there are certain common characteristics between them. What is crucial to the interpretation and appreciation of this novel is whether or not one can comprehend this distinction.

Dreiser had various weaknesses that had been hindrances to the fruition of a tragedy—such as his intellectualism, his sentimentalism, his snobbism, his self-justification and his transcendental naturalism that may be understood as a kind of pastoralism which would inspire the rhapsodic style. Even though he may not have succeeded thoroughly, he at least made intense efforts to overcome them, deepening his interests in social conditions, and taking pains moreover to remake his style into a *sermo humilis*, a mixture of the reporting style and the low style of an inarticulate young American's soliloquy. As a result, he was able at last to provide an answer to the question of the great American novel by indicating that it should not be a grandiose epic nor a tragi-comedy but a modern tragedy in a *sermo humilis*—a low style.

Americanness in *An American Tragedy* lies in the fact that it deals with the American

<sup>31</sup> Kenneth Lynn, *The Dream of Success: A Study of the Modern American Imagination* (Boston: Little, 1955), p. 63.

youth problem, particularly youth's spiritual poverty in an affluent society. But seeing how deplorable the moral devastation of youth is becoming in Japan, too, it is evident that this is not a problem peculiar to America but a universal tendency in the modern world. Accordingly, "American" here means nothing more than America leading the tendency, and its specific import is just the same as that of "tragedy" explained above. Both "American" and "tragedy" are to be understood in this limited sense in *An American Tragedy*. Notwithstanding the fact that it is an American tragedy in this limited sense, or even because it is, it is great. It was published in 1925, the year when, as *Literary History of the United States* clearly designates, "the literature of the United States was recognized here and abroad as a world literature."<sup>32</sup> It is as if American literature's coming of age could be defined as the birth of an American tragedy.

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<sup>32</sup> *Literary History of the United States*, ed. by Robert E. Spiller, & al. (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1959), p. 1427.