

DREISER'S WORLD OF ILLUSION; THE IMAGERY OF THE  
THEATER AND THE MOVIES IN HIS NOVELS

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A Thesis

Presented to  
the Graduate Faculty of the Department of English  
University of Houston

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts

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by

Muriel Harrop Tyssen  
August, 1972

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Despite widely varying critical opinion of Theodore Dreiser's artistry or his purpose, many critics agree that the most praiseworthy facet of Dreiser's fiction is vivid imagery which effectively conveys the theme that life squandered in a pursuit of insubstantial dreams is tragic. The long list of images analyzed by critics is impressive, but theatrical imagery, an important metaphor for the illusions which deceive man, has received only cursory attention, a surprising oversight, since Dreiser relies on theatrical props to indicate misplaced values and, in addition, frequently alludes to established dramatic traditions to heighten the tragic mood of his novels about mundane characters of lowly social station. Drawing from the traditions of the nineteenth-century melodramatic stage in his first five novels, Dreiser, to illustrate the worthless goals which motivate his characters, parodies popular stage characterizations to provoke an ambivalent response to reality. In An American Tragedy, considered his best novel, Dreiser's imagery derives from the world of the movies, an extension of the melodramatic stage traditions and twentieth-century man's favorite entertainment, to display the destruction of life by a belief in glittering, but false values, which prove to be optical illusion. Dreiser's last novel, The Bulwark, becomes tragedy through his allegorical presentation of Solon Barnes

as Oedipus, a modern man who suffers the same self-deception and possesses the same spiritual blindness as the ancient Greek king. Dreiser draws also from Elizabethan dramas and from the morality play conventions. In overt references to existing plays or in comparisons of such plays and their characters to his fictional world, the author expands the tragic potential in his modern dramas of common men, who become Faustus, or Hamlet, or Macbeth, as they struggle to find a purpose in life. The morality play tradition--noticeable in all the novels in Dreiser's use of names to represent situations and desires of his characters--provides an elemental response to the dilemmas of characters who become representatives of all men. Such diverse uses of theatrical imagery serve a dual purpose: they illuminate Dreiser's views within a universal framework; and they display his artistry by suggesting insight into style, purpose, and philosophy. The theatrical imagery is like a continuous and timeless reflection of man in all ages of history. This thesis advances the theory that theatrical images, which consistently appear in Dreiser's stories, are more important than heretofore considered because they reveal that Dreiser was a conscious artist who wished to portray the totality of life--its value, its purpose, and its meaning.

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## I. THEATRICAL IMAGERY: ITS SOURCES AND IMPORTANCE

Theodore Dreiser's place in American literature has not been clearly assessed despite the extensive critical attention which has been given to his writing; Dreiser's stature as an artist remains a controversial issue. Most critical discussions begin with an evaluation of his style (about which there is little agreement) and then move to one or more of six general areas of interest:<sup>1</sup> a definition of his naturalism; a statement of his value as a spokesman for the effects on society of the industrial age; a demonstration of Dreiser's exposure of the false values embodied within the American dream; a parallel of the events and characters in his fictional world with their real counterparts; an investigation of the influences

<sup>1</sup> The following list of critics is representative of those who have explored all or part of the six major areas cited: Joseph Warren Beach, The Twentieth Century Novel; Warner Berthoff, The Ferment of Realism; William Blankenship, American Literature as an Expression of the National Mind; Percy H. Boynton, America in Contemporary Fiction; Alexander Cowie, The Rise of the American Novel; Marcus Cunliffe, The Literature of the United States; Robert H. Elias, Theodore Dreiser, Apostle of Nature; James T. Farrell, Literature and Morality; Blanche H. Gelfant, The American City Novel; Philip L. Gerber, Theodore Dreiser; Frederick J. Hoffman, The Twenties; Alfred Kazin, On Native Grounds; Alfred Kazin and Charles Shapiro, eds., The Stature of Theodore Dreiser; Richard Lehan, Theodore Dreiser, His World and His Novels; Kenneth S. Lynn, The Dream of Success; F. O. Matthiessen, Theodore Dreiser; John J. McAleer, Theodore Dreiser, An Introduction and Interpretation; Michael Milgate, American Social Fiction; Ellen Moers, Two Dreisers; Donald Pizer, Realism and Naturalism in Nineteenth-Century American Literature; Charles Shapiro, Theodore Dreiser: Our Bitter Patriot; W. A. Swanberg, Dreiser; Robert Penn Warren, Homage to Dreiser. This list does not include examples of the many articles which have appeared in journals.

on his novels of literature, philosophy, and science; or an assessment of Dreiser's fight to free American letters from puritanical literary conventions. While many critical articles concentrate on Dreiser's numerous writing flaws, other discussions trace effective use of imagery in individual novels; yet, despite the impressive amount of commentary on his contribution to twentieth-century American literature, his stature as an artist continues to be the subject of debate. Nonetheless, although critics often disagree on definitions of Dreiser's naturalism, his philosophy, or his influence on American letters, nearly all agree on two points: that Dreiser's characters move in a world of illusion and spend their energies in pursuit of materialistic gain which is promised them in the concept of the American dream; and, that the most important facet of his writing is an ability to display false ideals through vivid imagery, a technique which conveys a sympathetic treatment of his fictional characters and their situations. Beach notes this sympathy when he points out that Dreiser does not develop his subjects satirically, nor does he indulge in mockery.<sup>2</sup> He understands the difficulty of living in a society built on unnatural social and moral codes, alien to man's true nature, and he wants man to recognize his duality--his admirable and less desirable instincts--and to accept such duality, thereby to achieve a

<sup>2</sup> Joseph Warren Beach, The Twentieth Century Novel, Studies in Technique (New York: The Century Company, 1932), p. 324.

greater dignity through understanding of himself. A pursuit of materialistic goals obscures life's true values and complicates man's existence, for such aims cause his disillusionment.

Dreiser's effective use of imagery establishes, in all probability, the best defense for his stature as an artist since his symbols delineate the dichotomy of man's self-deception as it conflicts with his natural instincts. McAleer lists those images which have been discussed most frequently in analyses of the novels: the rocking chair; vehicles (boats, trains, carriages); windows; stars; seasons and weather; light; electricity; clothes; money; flowers; colors; dancing; crowds; birds and animals; buildings and roads--all symbols of life, of movement, of nature, or of the American dream.<sup>3</sup> Images from nature display the external forces which buffet his characters while symbols of material gain represent internal pressures which result from the frustration of unrealistic hope. However, imagery from the theater has not been adequately explored by critics despite the voluminous commentary otherwise. For Dreiser, the world of the theater and of the movies effectively displays the conflicts suffered by his protagonists since the theater is a world built completely on illusions, which simulates reality with artificial props, and, thus, it serves to illustrate those artificial goals pursued by several of Dreiser's characters. The nineteenth-century

<sup>3</sup> John J. McAleer, Theodore Dreiser, An Introduction and Interpretation (New York: Barnes & Noble, Inc., 1968), p. 72.



melodrama and the early twentieth-century films, which were adapted from melodrama, embodied the qualities most admired by American society and, thereby, provide Dreiser with the most important source for his symbol. According to Meserve, the theater of any age "is history, sociology and philosophy, as well as literature, theater art and simple entertainment. To a greater or lesser degree, the theater reflects the interests of a people, the views of social critics, and the culture of a period."<sup>4</sup> Therefore, since the theater reflects the ideals of an age, it can effectively mirror the ideals pursued by Dreiser's characters who are so caught up in their own images of life that they eventually become victims of their illusions. They find that money does not satisfy their inner needs, that social position is never truly attained, and that sexual conquests fail to provide psychological security. Through his parallels of man's dreams with the illusory world of both stage and screen, Dreiser forces man to focus his eyes on reality.

Ellen Moers is the only critic who explicitly cites theatrical imagery as an effective metaphor for Dreiser's central theme, and she does not develop the idea. The major portion of her book, Two Dreisers, analyzes Sister Carrie and An American Tragedy. She discusses Dreiser's interest in the theater world, his desire for a career as a writer of movie scenarios, his experiments with the writing of dramas, and

<sup>4</sup> Walter J. Meserve, An Outline History of American Drama (Totowa, N. J.: Littlefield, Adams & Co., Inc., 1965), p. 81.

his emphasis on the importance of the theater in Carrie's story. However, Moers traces the imagery in Dreiser's first novel only to the point in Carrie's life at which she first performs in a play, in the role of Laura Cortland in Augustin Daly's melodrama, Under the Gaslight, the performance of which is the central part of the novel. Moers does not develop the important usage of known plays to express theme, nor does she discuss Carrie's professional career. Moers' only statement about Dreiser's use of movie technique, an important metaphor in An American Tragedy, is her observation that, at each important moment in Clyde's life, when fate gives a "strange twist" to his destiny, Dreiser allows his readers a "closeup of Clyde's face,"<sup>5</sup> a movie device which she speculates is the result of Dreiser's association with Hollywood films. After this cursory survey of movie technique, Moers turns her attention to Clyde's eyes as the central image in the novel; but, she does not analyze the significance of the movies as they influence characters in the novel, nor does she treat the role of the theater as a factor in Carrie's ultimate tragedy.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Ellen Moers, Two Dreisers (New York: The Viking Press, 1969), p. 232.

<sup>6</sup> The word "tragedy," as applied to the novels by most critics, and as used in this thesis, does not imply that the novels, with the possible exception of The Bulwark to be discussed in Chapter V, are tragedies in the Aristotelian definition. Dreiser's characters are not of high station except in their own limited spheres of influence. However, Dreiser felt that the failure of any life dominated by illusion was a serious action, and that the standards which society determines to gauge the success of an individual force him to waste his life in pursuit of worthless goals. Through allusions to Greek and Elizabethan dramas, Dreiser seeks to elevate the statures of common characters to more tragic proportions in his effort to demonstrate man's true value and purpose.

Carrie is defeated by her triumph in the world of illusion, and Clyde's eyes, which Moers states is the central symbol in the book, absorb the images of his dreams from the optical illusion of the films, and he is motivated by his desire to participate in the world which he admires.

Theatrical imagery is also important to Dreiser's theme--the exposure of materialism as a false objective in life. Despite his apparently deterministic view, one in which nature exerts a capricious force on the individual, Dreiser's characters choose their goals, but from inadequate guides, and they create their own failures. Clothes, money, position, and elaborate houses--materialistic aims--conflict with the moving forces of nature, water, weather, and seasons, and, as characters select their goals, they create their disasters. Dreiser uses several forms of theatrical imagery, like mirrors, to reflect man's dilemma, his purposeful choice of his fate, and his final tragedy. Enigmatically, though critical surveys point to the significance of Dreiser's symbols as a condemnation of life built solely on the illusion that wealth will provide the reason for living, they seldom connect the structure of his novels to the structure of the drama, nor do such articles examine Dreiser's stress on the importance of setting and costume, his use of actors and actresses as dramatis personae, or his characters' attendance at the theater as illustrations of illusion. Dreiser not only alludes to the works of such dramatists as Shakespeare, Marlowe, Euripides, or Sophocles as part of his imagery from the theater, but he

also incorporates in the novels deliberate distortions of stereotyped characterizations from nineteenth-century melodrama, a form of theater which epitomizes the American dream in its idealistic portrayals of society. In his early novels, Dreiser displays his belief in such theater as an art form; this thesis postulates that Dreiser moves from an initial admiration for the dramatic art of his age to an ultimate vision in which the fantasy world of the melodramatic stage constitutes a major corrupting influence in society; the only dramas which Dreiser approves are those which have withstood the centuries as valid expressions of universal aims.

Dreiser's interest in the realm of the theater stems from his experiments with the writing of plays and from his desire to write film scenarios. His autobiographies reveal the importance which he placed on the theater world and provide a clue to his use of the melodramatic theater as a symbol to expose the false ideals of society. The stage reflected the ideals so admired by the American people--the persistent triumph of "good," the defeat of "evil," the achievement of success, usually in the last act, and the glory of the American democratic credo which promises equal opportunity to all. The "genteel good taste" displayed in the melodramas denies reality and such ideals are flaunted when reality proves that all men are not heroes, all women are not virtuous, and all villains do not announce their true natures by twirling black mustaches or by swirling dark cloaks. Dreiser was appalled that many people refused to recognize the true state of humanity as the antithesis of the stage view of life:

Not a day, not an hour, but the pages of the very newspaper we were helping to fill with our scribbled observations were full of the most incisive pictures of the lack of virtue, honesty, kindness, even average human intelligence, not on the part of a few but of nearly everybody. . . . But in spite of all this, judging by the editorial page, the pulpit and the noble mouthings of the average citizen speaking for the benefit of his friends and neighbors, all men were honest--only they weren't; all women were virtuous and without evil design--but they weren't; all mothers were gentle, self-sacrificing slaves, sweet pictures of songs and Sunday schools--only they weren't; all fathers were kind, affectionate, saving, industrious--only they weren't.<sup>7</sup>

Dreiser believes that such false ideals contain little truth, the most important prerequisite in the creation of art, for, in an article in Booklover's Magazine, February, 1903, he said, "the sum and substance [of art] as well as social morality may be expressed in three words--tell the truth."<sup>8</sup> Since the melodramatic theater reflects only the illusions which conform to society's ideal images, the stage conventions adapt themselves well to Dreiser's theme that dependence on illusion is the source of man's disappointment with reality.

Dreiser's autobiography of his first nineteen years, Dawn, A History of Myself, details the impact of the theater on his life and displays his conviction that materialistic ambitions

<sup>7</sup> Theodore Dreiser, A Book About Myself (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1922), pp. 132, 133; hereafter, references to this volume will be indicated with ABAM, and page numbers will be cited parenthetically in the text. Since no definitive edition of Dreiser's works has been attempted, the sources used in the preparation of this thesis are simply the available ones.

<sup>8</sup> Theodore Dreiser, "True Art Speaks Plainly," rpt. in Sister Carrie, ed. Donald Pizer (New York: W. W. Norton Co., Inc., 1970), p. 473.

were his own greatest source of pain; personal experience often becomes the author's vehicle for the depiction of his philosophy because Dreiser knew intimately the contrast between hope and reality, and this knowledge engenders his compassionate treatment of characters and events in his fictional world. His use of the world of the theater and the movies in his fiction as a metaphor for the emphasis which his characters place on their materialistic dreams parallels the author's youthful enthusiasm for the theatrical world with its gilded sets and clear-cut delineation of characters. The stage world extends a view of perfection which is attainable only in fairy tales or in dreams, and Dreiser, even as a child, knew the contrast between dreams and reality. His autobiography exhibits his longing for wealth to ease the deprivation of poverty, his desire for security which would combat the social alienation of his family, his search for a faith which was more attractive than his father's beliefs, and his dreams of sexual conquests to prove himself a worthy man. Similar impulses to achieve wealth, security, faith, and sexual gratification motivate all Dreiser's characters. Just as Dreiser tried to find solace in dreams, especially in the fantasy of the theatrical world, his characters seek satisfaction in the same form of escapism.

Two fantasies which Dreiser cites in Dawn illustrate his awareness of the inadequacy of dreams. The first which Dreiser relates is a myth, which he claims was told to him by his mother, of three muses who danced in her bedroom just

before his birth,<sup>9</sup> a story which Dreiser interpreted as a precognition of his future success in the arts. As a boy, he dreamed of the benefits of instant success, but, when he began to write fiction, Dreiser realized that his struggle to gain recognition denied the vision. He includes a second dream to illustrate his earlier awareness of the startling contrast between imagination and reality. Though a man of fifty when he wrote Dawn, Dreiser details a fantasy which he claims occurred when he was three or four years old. "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, pp. 17, 18). Dreiser found little satisfaction in his childhood visions. In his novels, he exposes the American dream, that money and success are available to all, as false and an embittering contrast to a reality of poverty and failure. He complained, "I am haunted by the truth that life is built upon murder, and lust, and nothing less! Sweet, tender, flawless universe, indeed!" (Dawn, p. 47). Dreiser's novels express his conviction that, just as he has been, all men will be continually disillusioned as long

<sup>9</sup> Theodore Dreiser, Dawn, A History of Myself (New York: Horace Liveright, Inc., 1931), p. 6; subsequent references to this volume will be cited parenthetically in the text.

as society fails to recognize reality and persists in a belief in the myths which it creates.

Only two aspects of Dreiser's early life provided him with happy recollections: the warmth and love of his mother and the few brief periods of relative comfort which he enjoyed when his brother, Paul (who changed his name to Dresser for his theatrical profession), supported the family. Love and wealth, opposite poles of worth, are the goals sought by most of his major characters in the novels. Dreiser, a sensitive boy, retreated into dreams and into reading to escape his distress when moralistic judgments of neighbors caused them to ostracize the Dreisers. As cause of his discontent, he frequently contrasts the family's poverty with the affluence which others enjoyed. In addition to a lack of material goods, Dreiser suffered a further sense of alienation from society because, in order to escape the social criticism leveled at the family, they moved often, never staying in one place longer than one or two years, and each move was made with the hope for better circumstances, a hope which was eventually shattered by increased poverty. His mother's love was the only constant security he remembered, and he considered her death, when he was nineteen, the greatest sadness in his life, a loss which Dreiser felt had caused his life to take a new direction. The importance of his mother to the youth is indicated in his novels wherein Dreiser expresses the belief that love is the only enduring value of life; the misdirection of love is central to the conflicts within every novel.



A second major influence on Dreiser's fiction, especially in his use of theatrical imagery, is Paul Dresser, who was thirteen years older than Dreiser. Paul would occasionally help with money, and, at one time, and only briefly, he totally supported his family. The Dreiser home in Evansville, Indiana, subsidized by Paul's contributions, was their most comfortable house. Ten years old at the time, Dreiser was much impressed by this prosperity provided by Paul, who, when he learned of his family's suffering, left a profitable career on the New York stage to become a comedian at Evansville's Apollo Theater. To Dreiser, Paul was a hero, the personification of fame, for Paul's face beamed from every theater advertisement in the town. The boy was little affected by the discovery that Paul was able to contribute so much to the family income because his own living expenses were provided by Annie Brace, alias Sallie Walker, the madam of a whorehouse in Evansville.<sup>10</sup> In Dreiser's account of his one visit to the house, he tells of his awe at the luxurious decor and his admiration for the beautiful, scantily-clad women who lived and worked there. Dreiser's later hero, Clyde Griffiths, will be similarly impressed by his first visit to a house of prostitution. Dreiser's only judgment of the situation was that Paul was an extremely fortunate man. However, prosperity ended when Sallie ejected Paul from her house because he was too prone to extend

<sup>10</sup> Dresser's most widely-known song, "My Gal Sal," is his nostalgic tribute to Sallie; W. A. Swanberg, Dreiser (New York: Scribners, 1965), p. 15.

his favors to the other women; Paul returned to New York, and the Dreiser family resumed its nomadic life.

Through Paul, Dreiser was introduced to the theater, and he records his first observations of Paul's performance: ". . . the commonplace local world . . . had vanished, and in its place had appeared this super-cosmic realm wherein my wand-commanded fancy had forgotten all commonplace things" (Dawn, p. 362). Dreiser had earlier established his view of the theater while he was a youth as "one of my great reliefs, and even delights," and states that "at this particular period [the theater] seemed the epitome of all transcendent earthly blisses" (Dawn, p. 360). He recalls that the situations in the plays which he saw created an image of life as painless, for the stage conventions made judgments so simple; the audience had few decisions to make since "evil [was] garbed as evil and easily detectable, and good arrayed as good. . . . Bad men and women were obviously to be known by their clothes" (Dawn, p. 363). Clothes, as has already been stated, are an important symbol in his novels, indicating attitudes and desires, and Dreiser, in his autobiography, distinctly links this symbol to theater costuming. Moreover, the life portrayed on the stage was attractive because evil was always punished and good rewarded, but this simple view of virtue did not fit the mature Dreiser's interpretation of reality. In their discussions, theater historians confirm Dreiser's estimation

of the nineteenth-century melodramatic stage conventions,<sup>11</sup> in which the general format of a play of two hours duration was that the first hour and forty-five minutes portrayed evil forces dominating all good characters, but in the last fifteen minutes, heroes always triumphed over villains, denouements not discernible in actuality. Obviously, the theater represented to Dreiser an image of an unreal world built on false ideals. He records his later impressions that the stage illusions were probably built with "claptrap scenery and most wretched mimes . . . glorified by the imaginations and illusions of youth" (Dawn, p. 362). Therefore, the theatrical world, with its impressions of grandeur built on insubstantial props, serves as Dreiser's symbol for man's purposeful rejection of reality. He further condemns such entertainment as a form of escapism which had nurtured his frustrations, for he remembers that as a youth the theater was a relief in that it allowed him to divorce himself from his suffering. He adds, "the playhouse as I tasted it at that time was responsible for the endurance in me of many illusions far beyond their normal length of life" (Dawn, p. 363). Dreiser's frank comments lead to a logical conclusion that, since he believes that the stage depicts only an

<sup>11</sup> Montrose J. Moses, The American Dramatist (New York: Benjamin Blom, Inc., 1964), p. 299, states, "Audiences would not countenance the regeneration of a stage bad man; they must have the victory of virtue and the happy ending; the good must be rewarded suddenly, the bad must be punished lingeringly." Meserve, p. 174, says, "Saved!" was always a key word in these endings.

imitation of life, the metaphor of the theater serves an important function in his novels which stress reality.

Despite the fact that his early view of the theatrical world changed as he matured, Dreiser had only admiration for it in his youth. The success of his brother as a star in musical comedies was proof to the immature Dreiser that stagecraft was a key to fame and fortune--an attractive realm, and not until later in his life was Dreiser to view the theater as less admirable. Though somewhat envious of Paul's fame, Dreiser greatly admired his brother and his profession. Paul's most important influence was in Dreiser's intimate connection with Paul's world as a profession since, according to Moers, Dreiser's use of theatrical imagery in Sister Carrie directly results from his admiration for Paul's success.<sup>12</sup> The second volume of Dreiser's autobiography, A Book About Myself, also called Newspaper Days, reveals many additional contacts which Dreiser had with the world of the stage and provides further insight into his use of this world as a metaphor for illusion.

Dreiser began his career as a journalist when, inexperienced but optimistic, he sought work as a reporter for a Chicago paper and was hired by its editor to sell the book which the editor had written. The prospect of a future on the newspaper was the bait used to trap Dreiser into foisting the

<sup>12</sup> Moers, pp. 246-252.

editor's work on his wealthy, personal acquaintances.<sup>13</sup> As Dreiser records his visits to the homes of prospective buyers, he describes them as seekers after illusion, who adopt pretentious airs and flaunt their money in visible displays which could attest to their worth; as Dreiser compares the effect of their houses, their clothes, and their way of life to a drama, he presents further evidence that the stage was illustrative of all illusion: "The whole thing had the quality of a play well staged: really, the houses, the lawns, the movements of the people, their games and interests all harmonizing after the fashion of a play. They saw this as a great end in itself, which, perhaps it is" (ABAM, p. 45). Dreiser's observations of the theatricality of the life style of the rich establishes his view of such ambitions as the ultimate in illusion, a harmful world in that any dependence on "things" is a deliberate rejection of reality. Any monument to man's achievements which is built on dreams--whether success, a fine house, or money--will evaporate with time and cannot attest to the importance of the individual or to the purpose of life. The life style of the rich becomes the source for Dreiser's statement about the worthlessness of material desires which is the theme of his trilogy of the businessman, Frank Algernon Cowperwood.

<sup>13</sup> In a letter to Edna Kenton, dated May 6, 1905, Dreiser refers to this incident again; he states that the selling of the book was "the price of my admission to the staff of the Globe." Letters of Theodore Dreiser, Vol. I, Robert H. Elias, ed. (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 1959), p. 73.

After his false start as a book salesman, Dreiser did become a reporter for the Chicago Globe, and his exposé of an auction racket earned him enough fame so that a St. Louis paper, the Globe-Democrat, invited Dreiser to relocate in that city, a move which provided further impetus to his use of the theater as a metaphor. His St. Louis associates and friends dabbled in art or in writing, and Dreiser felt privileged to be in, what he considered, such distinguished company. He was overjoyed to be allowed to read an unpublished manuscript of a novel, Theo, written by a fellow reporter whom Dreiser identifies as Bob Hazard, whose central character was an actress (ABAM, p. 131). That Dreiser's first heroine is also an actress offers proof that he was inspired by the experience. As Dreiser records such activities, he states his own ambition to become a serious writer: "to be considered a writer, a dramatist--even a possible dramatist--raised me in my own estimation," an elevating ambition because "books or plays, or both, were the direct entrance to every joy which the heart could desire" (ABAM, pp. 129, 130). Marguerite Tjader, in her reminiscences about Dreiser's last few years, records that Dreiser always saw his novels as dramas,<sup>14</sup> an indication that he never abandoned his first dream to become a playwright; moreover, he devotes several pages in A Book About Myself to a discussion of the illusions which could be created with stage

<sup>14</sup> Marguerite Tjader, Theodore Dreiser, A New Dimension (Norwalk: Silvermine Publishers, Inc., 1965), p. 52.

scenery and costumes--additional proof of the importance of these devices in the creation of illusion and of his purposeful use of such symbols in his novels (ABAM, pp. 136-138).

Dreiser's work in St. Louis provided a second association with the professional theater. He recalls that as a reporter he became an ardent playgoer as part of his quest for an education (ABAM, p. 25), and he indicates that the highest point in his journalistic career was his appointment to drama editor of the Globe-Democrat. As a result of his new status, Dreiser received complimentary tickets to every show, enjoyed the preferential treatment which he received from stage managers, and felt his access to important actresses was the reality of every sexual fantasy in which he had ever indulged. "It was all such a wonder-world to me, the stage, such a fairyland, that I bubbled with joy" (ABAM, p. 174). Dreiser, from the standpoint of maturity, places a different interpretation on the theater of the 1890s. "America was then entering upon its worst period of stage sentiment or mush. The movies had not yet appeared, but 'Mr. Frohman presents' [15] was upon us, a master of middle-class sweetness and sentimentality. . . . The saccharine strength of the sentiment and mush which we could gulp down at that time, and still do, is to me beyond

<sup>15</sup> Meserve, p. 208, identifies Frohman as one of six powerful booking agents of the day who virtually controlled all of the dramas which reached the stage. Even playwrights were forced by economic controls in agency contracts to comply with the policies dictated by Frohman, who insisted that only plays which the public preferred would be performed.

belief" (ABAM, pp. 178, 179). Dreiser extends his condemnation of the melodrama to include the movies; "you can still see [such illusions] in any movie house in America" (ABAM, p. 179).<sup>16</sup> Dreiser felt that the stage and screen blinded man with their unreality for ". . . we went home cured, reformed, saved. And there was little of evil of any description which went before, in acts one and two, which could not be straightened out in the last act" (ABAM, p. 179). Lost in such fantasy, man could ignore the inequities apparent in American society since "the dreary hum-drum of actual life was carefully shut out from these pieces; the simple delights of ordinary living, if they were used at all, were exaggerated beyond reasonable belief" (ABAM, p. 179). Dreiser saw too many scenes which contradicted the view of life on the stage in his coverage of news stories, events involving rape, murder, lynching, thievery, and political corruption, and which contrasted harshly to the stage world. But the theater was a favorite form of entertainment for the young man and his fiancée, Sara (Sally) White. Thus, Dreiser moved fitfully between his real world and the world of stage illusion, and he says that only the theater caused him "to weep over the torturing beauty of life" (ABAM, p. 323), a statement which contrasts with Dreiser's

<sup>16</sup> Dreiser's view of early films is supported by several movie historians who state that these movies were filmed melodramas, staged outdoors. A. R. Fulton, Motion Pictures (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1960), p. 21; Gerald Mast, A Short History of the Movies (New York: Pegasus Divn. The Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1971), p. 44.



later discussions of truth as the acceptance of reality. In his novels, dramatizations of "beauty" as it appeared on the stage express the harmful effect of such false belief about reality.

Life at that time, outside of the dark picture of it presented by the daily papers, must . . . be all sweetness and gayety and humor. We must discuss only our better selves, and arrive at a happy ending; or if perchance this realer world must be referred to it must be indicated in some cloudy manner which could give it more the charm of shadow than of fact, something used to enhance the values of the lighter and more perfect and beautiful things with which our lives must concern themselves. . . . When I think of the literary and social snobbery and bosh of that day, its utter futility and profound faith in its own goodness, as opposed to the facts of its own visible life, I have to smile (ABAM, pp. 499, 500).

Thus does the older Dreiser condemn the stage as a false world.

However, in 1892, at the age of twenty-one and still enchanted by the world created in the theater, Dreiser began writing plays. He details the plot of his first effort, a frothy musical-comedy (perhaps with Paul in mind) which Dreiser entitled Jeremiah I. While plowing, Jeremiah, a simple farmer, uncovers an ancient Aztec stone and, by magic, is suddenly transported into antiquity and hailed as the new king of the tribe. He allows power to corrupt him, and Jeremiah becomes a cruel despot, but, in the last fifteen minutes, the love of a young Aztec princess restores him to his former "good" personality (ABAM, p. 194). Beyond reading the script to his friends, Dreiser made no effort to have his first play published, but it does serve to display his knowledge of the melodramatic productions popular in the last years of the

nineteenth century. His later plays present an entirely different view of life, and Plays of the Natural and the Supernatural, published in 1916, and The Hand of the Potter, published in 1918, bear no resemblance to Jeremiah I. Their plots develop Dreiser's belief in the acceptance of reality and his reaction to what he calls "American idealism and faith, a fixedness in sentimental and purely imaginative . . . tradition, in which I alas! could not share" (ABAM, p. 426).

Though Dreiser's later dramas have never been successfully performed, the published plays illustrate the same themes which he expresses in his novels--that illusions eventually destroy man. Plays of the Natural do not depict a "profound faith in goodness" but display the true state of man. The first play, "The Girl in the Coffin," the only one staged,<sup>17</sup> presents the depressing plight of a mill worker, as it shows him in a scene set in his parlor, which contains the coffin and corpse of his daughter, Mary Magnet, a girl who had too many notions to ". . . 'a been content to be a mill worker's wife."<sup>18</sup> She left her home to pursue her dream of a better life and moved to the city where she died. The drama treats principally the miserable existence endured by the laborers at the mill, with the coffin as a visible symbol of the

<sup>17</sup> Helen Dreiser, My Life With Dreiser (New York: The World Publishing Co., 1951), p. 277; "Spring Recital," another of the plays, was used as the story for a ballet presented in 1941; Swanberg, p. 448, "The Girl" was expanded into a longer version and performed in 1938.

<sup>18</sup> Theodore Dreiser, "The Girl in the Coffin," Plays of the Natural and the Supernatural (New York: AMS Press, Inc., 1969), p. 16.

worthlessness of a pursuit of illusions. Within other short plays in this volume, Dreiser dramatizes the death of a mongoloid child, lured in front of a moving train by a blue sphere which floats in the air, another symbol for false dreams. Dreiser's favorite play, "Laughing Gas," depicts the fantasy of a renowned doctor, under ether for minor surgery, who talks to the spirits of life which convince him that nature acts capriciously and is no respecter of position, proof that fame cannot endure. In another drama, "The Spring Recital," the spirits of past and present religions, summoned by the beautiful music, state the fact that God is man's supreme illusion, a conviction which Dreiser modifies only in his final novel, The Bulwark. Dreiser, in the last two plays in the volume, "The Light in the Window" and "The Ragpicker," contrasts the bickering dissatisfaction of a rich young couple with the false impressions of their happiness on the poor, through the use of multiple setting, a technique which he frequently employs in his novels, to present simultaneously opposite poles of truth.<sup>19</sup> The old ragpicker's story proves that social status has no lasting value since he, once wealthy and famous, has been so far removed from his former state that even he no longer remembers his name. Both plots reflect the central theme of Dreiser's novels--that reliance on success

<sup>19</sup> John C. Wentz, "An American Tragedy as Epic Theater: The Piscator Dramatization," Modern Drama, IV (February, 1962), 371, comments that Erwin Piscator's dramatization of the novel divides the stage in a similar manner, a proof of the effectiveness of this technique as it is used in the novels. In the play, the homes of the rich are on one side of the stage, the poor on the other, and Clyde stands in the middle.

and wealth fails to satisfy man spiritually because things are no gauge of human values. Elias describes these plays as views of "man as either the sport of inscrutable and unconquerable forces or the victim of his own illusions,"<sup>20</sup> and Swanberg calls them "interesting departures from conventional drama."<sup>21</sup> Interesting, perhaps, but these plays are theatrical only by virtue of having been written solely as dialogue since the supernatural effects would be difficult to achieve in a live production, and, as an attempt to dramatize man's true condition, the dramas are failures, for they are abysmally dull reading. However, they cannot be accused of sentimentality, and their existence testifies to Dreiser's interest in drama as an art which can present the truth.

Von Szeliski, who writes one of the few critical articles available on The Hand of the Potter, A Tragedy in Four-Acts, Dreiser's one long play, interprets the drama as "a wretched play" which Dreiser meant as an attack against "neuroticism over the sex impulses," an attitude inherent in puritanism. Von Szeliski calls Isadore Berchansky a modern tragic hero who "whimpers and whines," and this critic judges naturalism as a poor philosophy for drama since a play can be successful tragedy only when the hero has sufficient nobility

<sup>20</sup> Robert H. Elias, Theodore Dreiser, Apostle of Nature (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1970), p. 179.

<sup>21</sup> Swanberg, p. 183.

of character to evoke a feeling of empathy; Dreiser's psychopathic protagonist does not evoke empathy, and his play creates "an unlikely atmosphere for tragic art."<sup>22</sup> Moers contends that the plot is the result of Dreiser's reading of Freud's theories about the effects of man's sexual drives on his personality,<sup>23</sup> and Elias claims that the purpose of this play is to show man that abnormality comprises part of human nature,<sup>24</sup> interpretations which appear to fit the situation in which a helpless man, driven by his uncontrollable sex urges, rapes and murders and finally mutilates the body of an eleven-year-old girl. A twitching, pathetic, young man, Isadore suffers a physical as well as a psychological abnormality, for he hates his twitch, his Jewish heritage, and his poverty. He dreams of a happier life, but, hunted and frightened, Isadore eventually commits suicide. When a reporter recognizes the body as that of the much-sought killer, he comments that "crazy people . . . look just like other people," to which a policeman replies, "Can you blame a man when he ain't right?"<sup>25</sup> However, to most of the characters in this last scene, the

<sup>22</sup> John J. Von Szeliski, "Dreiser's Experiment with Tragic Drama," Twentieth Century Literature, XII (1966), 31-39.

<sup>23</sup> Moers, p. 261.

<sup>24</sup> Elias, p. 205.

<sup>25</sup> Theodore Dreiser, The Hand of the Potter (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1918), p. 191.

greatest tragedy stems from the fact that no one can collect the reward offered for Isadore's capture, a stinging appraisal of the capacity of money to blind man to reality. The production of this play, in 1921, in an off-Broadway theater, ran only three weeks and closed with a loss of \$1500 and, according to Swanberg, Dreiser, who could not see the play as weak, blamed faulty production and puritanical critics for its failure.<sup>26</sup> Dreiser, despite so many failures, refused to abandon his dream of becoming a successful playwright, and, at the same time in which his plays were being ignored, Dreiser, who hoped to write effective and truthful screen scenarios, was suffering frustration in Hollywood, again by the rejection of his dramatic efforts.

Swanberg describes Dreiser's desire to be a "movie mogul" as an expression of a belief that movies could be "an honest art in the new medium."<sup>27</sup> Dreiser had accompanied his mistress, Helen Richardson, to Hollywood in 1919 with the intent of selling his ideas to movie studios; however, his scenarios were rejected because producers felt that Dreiser's harsh view of life would not appeal to movie patrons.<sup>28</sup> Consequently, in 1922, Dreiser denounced Hollywood for the triumph of commercialism and returned to New York.<sup>29</sup> Earlier, in 1921,

<sup>26</sup> Swanberg, p. 193.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Helen Dreiser describes Dreiser's later scenario, Revolt, as an exposé of the tobacco industry's abuse of labor, a film which was never released. Though she does not detail early attempts at films, she implies that Dreiser's work was not in the popular taste.

<sup>29</sup> Swanberg, p. 263.

Dreiser had begun to write An American Tragedy, and his personal disappointment with film studios and their products may well be the reason that Dreiser uses movie films and techniques, as well as the illusions which movies create, as the metaphor for the dreams which delude and destroy Clyde Griffiths.

Since Dreiser's first expression of his desire to write (ABAM, p. 129) indicates that he felt his destiny was to be a dramatist, and because his efforts with this art form were continually frustrated, he developed a distaste for the public's consumption of sentimental melodrama and a disgust with the public's rejection of his endeavors. Perhaps as a result of this disappointment, his later novels present the modern theater as a metaphor for corruption, as well as for the illusions which his characters pursue. Ironically, though Dreiser fails with drama, his novels have all been turned into either successful plays or films, a fact noted by both Elias and Swanberg. Dreiser was unable to convey his multi-faceted philosophy of life within the tight-knit structure of a play, and he created dramas which are lifeless and dull. His novels are more effective dramatizations of the dilemma faced by man when his dreams fail to materialize. As his characters search for what Dreiser called in Dawn "the epitome of transcendent earthly bliss," they discover that "earthly bliss" is merely illusion. In his novels, Dreiser defines man's tragedy as his inability to accept his natural

instincts as part of his total condition; man's erroneous goals of fame, wealth, and sexual gratification deny his true nature. Society, which chooses such goals and prefers to idealize mankind, as evidenced in the portrait of man projected in the popular melodramas of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, prefers to reject truth; like Dreiser's protagonists, society believes the illusion that good and evil are clearly delineated in black and white, that virtue is always rewarded and misbehavior is always punished, convictions which deny the reality of man's natural instincts.

As a confirmation of Dreiser's condemnation of the social control over the world of the stage, Meserve states that the nineteenth-century melodrama perpetuated a myth of innate goodness and that the plays were designed to offend no one.<sup>30</sup> Dreiser, in his novels, paradoxically uses the devices from inoffensive dramas to achieve his realistic view of human nature, and, perhaps, his distortion of cherished stereotypes in characters and situations explains why his novels so offended his first readers. Dreiser's characters, because they depart from their idealized roles, display the falseness in the Gilded Age. Theatrical setting, vividly detailed costumes, the illusion of fame illustrate the misconceptions of the promise of the American dream; actors and actresses, both professional actors and others who have an innate capacity for role-playing, depict the misdirection of

<sup>30</sup> Meserve, p. 171.



society's ideals' and dramatic structure, borrowed from Greek and Elizabethan tragedies, heightens the pathos of man's despair when he cannot measure up to the established social standards. A close analysis of Dreiser's novels will demonstrate that his appeal is closely tied to his symbolic use of the theater and the movies and to his use of the techniques native to these forms. Theatrical imagery helps to explain the continuing attention which has been paid to the novels because the imagery illustrates Dreiser's view of life, his language, his plots, and his characterization. Dreiser's development as a novelist may be seen as he moves from a writer who is attracted to the melodrama to an artist who provides universal truth through his use of established dramatic forms. With his growing maturity as a writer, Dreiser changes his imagery of the theater to create a more poignant sense of the tragedy of modern life. The modern theater becomes the purveyor and perpetrator of the false goals which destroy man who tries to exist only on insubstantial dreams, and the classical theater provides a clear view of the sole purpose of existence. Dreiser's extension of his metaphor, from the concrete world of illusion created on the stage and for the screen--which exist on fantasy--to the abstract world of the meaning of life indicates a greater artistry in his fiction than is usually attributed to him.

## II. DREISER'S FIRST USE OF THEATRICAL IMAGERY: SISTER CARRIE AND JENNIE GERHARDT

Dreiser, in his first two novels, Sister Carrie, 1900, and Jennie Gerhardt, 1910, borrows extensively from theater tradition in plot and technique to display the potential tragedies in the lives of Carrie Meeber, who is absorbed into the fantasy world of the theater, and Jennie Gerhardt, who tries to accept reality but is defeated by the values which society has created from its illusions. Carrie finds only shallow comfort in her success whereas Jennie finds strength from her defeat. Though their tragedies are different, the two women share many common traits in background, physical attributes, and situation. Each woman's story roughly parallels the life pattern of an Horatio Alger hero who moves from "rags to riches" and achieves the kind of success promised by the American dream,<sup>1</sup> both are eighteen, innocent, beautiful, and idealistic as their stories begin,

<sup>1</sup> Many critics remark on Dreiser's distortion of the widely popular Horatio Alger theme in his novels. In Dawn, Dreiser admits his boyhood pleasure in romantic dime-novels (p. 125). Kenneth S. Lynn, The Dream of Success (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1955), pp. 4-18, cites the dates 1870-1900 as the period when Alger's stories had their greatest audience. Lynn describes the typical hero as a ragged boy who "alone [and] unaided . . . is plunged into the maelstrom of city life, but by his own pluck and luck he capitalizes on one of the myriad opportunities available to him and rises to the top of the economic heap." Lynn states that Dreiser's novels stress that "pecuniarity and sexual success" were the real values of American society, a fact which Dreiser proves with the success stories of his characters.

and both are alienated from the family unit as the result of their decisions to live with men, without benefit of matrimony, and neither woman can enjoy her more comfortable circumstances. The melodrama of the nineteenth-century stage provides Dreiser with his theatrical model, which he uses to reflect the illusions that Carrie pursues and which Jennie rejects. Though the theater and stagecraft are most important in Carrie's world, Jennie confronts the same temptations, in costume and money, which motivate Carrie to become an actress. The plots of the novels contain distinct parallels since each woman is seduced by material need, but each succumbs for a different reason, Carrie for personal success, and Jennie for her family's welfare. Carrie actively seeks her superficial dreams and achieves acceptance by a certain segment of society though she is totally artificial in her emotions; Jennie embraces life, through love, but she is a misfit in a society which judges only by appearance; thus, each woman's tragedy results from society's false standards.

Since the nineteenth-century melodramatic stage, on which Carrie becomes a star, nurtured society's ideal image of itself, the stage stereotypes of women, which advocate the perfection of the sex and the sanctity of women's roles as wives and mothers, provide Dreiser with a dramatic device for delineating the destructive effect of unrealistic social canons upon his leading ladies. Dreiser's distrust of these standards evidences itself in his distortions of socially-dictated stereotypes. Each woman is drawn from stage ideals,

but neither woman in his first two novels remains faithful to the ideal image. Dreiser's parodies of stage conventions in his totally realistic stories create new dimensions for the measurement of value in life. Several critics have noted a purposeful use of melodramatic technique in the novels, among them, Ellen Moers, who observes that "from the contrast between day-to-day life as it was lived by his brothers and sisters, and life as it was played out in popular melodrama, he [Dreiser] devised a literary style that gave form, and even heroism, to the inarticulate."<sup>2</sup> Grebstein also comments on stage tradition when he points out that "what has been portrayed [in Carrie] is an essentially Victorian heroine of popular melodrama."<sup>3</sup> Dreiser, through his use of a socially-approved structure, the melodrama, creates irony by making each woman the victim of the society which envisioned her, and he achieves a heightened effect on his audience through a realization that, according to Schneider, whenever social conventions win, the characters in Dreiser's novels lose.<sup>4</sup> His women have the qualities formed by society as "good" stage personalities but must be judged as "bad" from their actions. Since Dreiser, according to Swanberg, "detested the

<sup>2</sup> Ellen Moers, "The Finesse of Dreiser," American Scholar XXIII (1963), rpt. in Sister Carrie, ed. Donald Pizer (New York: W. W. Norton Co., Inc., 1970), pp. 599,600; subsequent references to this volume will be designated as Pizer SC.

<sup>3</sup> Sheldon N. Grebstein, "Dreiser's Victorian Vamp," Midcontinent American Studies Journal, IV (1963), p. 544; he adds that, in his opinion, naturalistic forces are Dreiser's attempt to "make his heroine conform to Victorian taboos."

<sup>4</sup> Robert W. Schneider, Five Novelists of the Progressive Era (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965), p. 169.

hypocrisies of convention, the taste of the masses for sweet nothings,"<sup>5</sup> he turns "sweet nothings" into startling reality.

The public's concept of gentility dominated the popular stage productions from 1870-1900, and even a "common" character had to adhere to prescribed behavior patterns. According to Davis, the stage hero of this period had "a certain Victorian delicacy of feeling, sometimes poetic, sometimes philosophical, but always bound by propriety," and the audience was most interested in "the refined agonies of the hero's romantic soul."<sup>6</sup> She expands her description of the hero to include the most popular heroines, among whom are the genteel lady who is persecuted by an evil villain, the heroic maiden who is characterized by an independent spirit, the faithful wife, the "poor but worthy maiden . . . who interprets every calamity as an act of God, which she must endure with patience," the child of nature, "unlettered, but bubbling over with good nature," or the "poor little . . . waif mistreated," who wins success by her "sunshiny character."<sup>7</sup> Both Carrie and Jennie become pseudo-genteel ladies; each is heroic in her independence; each is introduced by her lover as a wife. Furthermore, Dreiser characterizes them as poor and innocent waifs, and Jennie, particularly, is a child of nature.

<sup>5</sup> W. A. Swanberg, Dreiser (New York: Charles Scribners' Sons, 1965), p. 73.

<sup>6</sup> Blanche E. Davis, The Hero in American Drama, 1787-1900 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1950), p. 6.

<sup>7</sup> Davis, pp. 75-96.

Though modeled on attractive ideals, which, on stage, guaranteed perfection, each woman sacrifices her virtue and, by stage standards, should hide in shame or die of a distressed soul since, according to Meserve, immorality was always punished in melodrama; an impure wife could "never reinstate herself in the world of art on this side of the grave," and any seducer of an innocent girl must make her an "honest woman." If a genuine prostitute appeared in a play, she had to be obvious in her role of "Zidella of the purple gown and reptilian eyes" whose wiles bedazzle the stalwart hero, and all villainous characters had to be recognizable as villains.<sup>8</sup> Rascoe notes Dreiser's distortion of such stage conventions in his fictional world when the critic comments that Carrie was universally hated because "neither of the men with whom Carrie Meeber lived was painted as a villain out of stage melodrama."<sup>9</sup> Dreiser also thwarts convention because he creates no stalwart heroes to rescue his maidens in the last fifteen minutes of the conflict, nor does he provide villains who can be blamed for the distress of his heroines; society, itself, is their persecutor.

Dreiser desires to picture the real world in his fiction, and, again, the stage provides precedents in setting and in diction. The only realism visible as such on the late

<sup>8</sup> Walter J. Meserve, An Outline History of American Drama (Totowa, N. J.: Littlefield, Adams & Co., 1965), pp. 165-175.

<sup>9</sup> Burton Rascoe, Theodore Dreiser (New York: Robert M. McBride & Co., 1925), p. 33.

nineteenth-century stage existed as part of the setting,<sup>10</sup> a realism which producers went to great lengths in providing, for excitement. No realism was considered necessary in language. Stylized poses and postures conveyed emotion while dramatic dialogue consisted of involved, poetical, and philosophical diction with which playwrights projected the refined agonies mentioned by Davis. Critics have often attacked Dreiser for the trite, monosyllabic dialogue used in his novels, but this flaw could be Dreiser's reversal of stage technique. In reality, few people agonize in flowery phrases, and Dreiser's heroines speak in a manner consistent with their backgrounds. A Carrie Meeber or a Jennie Gerhardt could not speak eloquently; they are the products of poverty, of limited education, and of a continual struggle for self-preservation. Dreiser resorts to elaborate stylistic devices to explain the social, economic, and natural pressures which affect his characters, and this philosophic commentary earns much negative critical attention. Perhaps, since Dreiser greatly admired the theater world when he wrote these first two novels, he retains those aspects of melodrama which he enjoyed, the involved diction and the realistic setting. He uses the vast panorama of an actual city, one peopled with believable characters who speak as their backgrounds determine that they should speak, and

<sup>10</sup> See Daniel Blum, A Pictorial History of the American Theater, 1860-1970, rev. ed. (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1969); photographs of theater casts and sets display elaborate costumes and exaggerated gestures, much admired techniques, and stage sets offer the only realistic scenes. But this, too, was exaggerated, for, to portray an Alabama plantation, the stage was almost totally smothered in Spanish moss.

the author's comments present, in the involved language, an ironical contrast, a representation of the dreams which Carrie and Jennie pursue. The realism in Dreiser's fictional world mocks the simplistic stage world, and Dreiser, within the opposing views, provides insight into unrealistic social values to reveal that all society is dominated by illusion and destroyed by frustration of its dreams; Dreiser establishes reality in the ways by which his heroines, their settings, and their speech, defy their ideal counterparts.

Dreiser's first novel, Sister Carrie, startled its early readers because its heroine not only lives amorally, but she does not suffer noticeable punishment for her lack of morals; instead, she seems untouched by her actions. Critics of the book were shocked by its blatant sexuality and by the crudity of Dreiser's language and construction, but they were affected by his "talent for character drawing."<sup>11</sup> Dreiser left an impression of strength, and primary to this view is Dreiser's picture of Carrie's life as it is developed through theatrical imagery. In Carrie, the theater serves as background, connecting storyline, a device for analyzing inner character, and a method for displaying the artificiality of lives which are dominated by love of appearance and worship of money and things. Sister Carrie, in her rise from "waif" to successful

<sup>11</sup> Newspaper reviews of Sister Carrie, from Commercial Advertiser, New York, December 19, 1900; Louisville Kentucky Times, November 30, 1900; Newark Sunday News, September 1, 1901; rpt. in The Stature of Theodore Dreiser, A Critical Survey of the Man and His Works, eds. Alfred Kazin and Charles Shapiro (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1955), pp. 53-63.



actress, is elevated through images of the theater into a heroine of more tragic stature than her station would normally provide her. Her ambitions reflect the aimlessness of American society, its artificial dreams, and its inability to see reality as more than material gain. As Carrie becomes more successful in her artificial world, she becomes less successful in the world which she denies. H. L. Mencken praises the novel which "stands quite outside the brief traffic of the customary stage. . . . It is not a mere story, not a novel in the customary American meaning of the word; it is at once a psalm of life and a criticism of life . . . its burden is despair. . . . Dreiser's novels . . . get below the drama that is of the moment and reveal the greater drama that is without end, the drama of elemental and universal tragedy."<sup>12</sup> Carrie's universal tragedy is that she must suffer the pain of an empty existence, the punishment of an aimless life with no value.

Dreiser elevates Carrie's melodrama, somewhat, through his use of devices derived from Elizabethan tragedy, a structure which is first obvious in the five-act division of the events in Carrie's rise to the status of star in the theater. Each act has its climax. The first act introduces Carrie as she arrives in Chicago, a country girl who is

<sup>12</sup> H. L. Mencken, "Theodore Dreiser," Critiques and Essays on Modern Fiction, 1920-1951, ed. John W. Aldridge (New York: The Ronald Press Co., 1952), p. 401; as Dreiser's close personal friend, Mencken's comments may be colored by their relationship, a possibility pointed out by Ernest Earnest in The Single Vision (New York: University Press, 1970), p. 40, in which he calls Mencken's praises "tub-thumping."

attracted by the magnetism of the city, and, in this act, Dreiser shows her only family connection, her sister, Minnie, who is worn, grim, and work-hardened, an indication that Dreiser's title points to the ironic contrast. As a foil to Carrie, Minnie provides a sharp sense of what Carrie will eventually become if she cannot escape poverty. Minnie's prophetic dream in which Carrie drifts through space in a basket and then floats out into black waters, symbolically dramatizes the seduction of Carrie by Drouet at the end of the first act. During the second act, Carrie lives with Drouet and meets Hurstwood, and the third act, a high point in Carrie's life, is her participation in the amateur production of Augustin Daly's play, Under the Gaslight. After her role in the drama, Carrie grows more independent of the two men who desire her while they are more physically attracted to Carrie. Thus, Act Three contains the most important crisis in the novel-drama. Act Four begins with Carrie's being kidnapped by Hurstwood and depicts their lives together in New York while the fifth and final act displays her success in the professional theater, her self-imposed loneliness, and the final tragedy in Hurstwood's story, his suicide.

To further establish the parallel between Sister Carrie and an Elizabethan tragedy, Dreiser frequently uses the dramatic device of a play within a play to provide a view of contrasting moral issues. Freeman notes the effectiveness of this device in his discussions of Dreiser's dramatizations

of life,<sup>13</sup> and Berthoff, though he does not specifically discuss imagery from the theater, mentions another Elizabethan dramatic technique when he observes that while Carrie rises in life, Hurstwood declines,<sup>14</sup> a structure which is characteristic of that used in all of Shakespeare's chronicle plays. Even Carrie notices the change which occurs in her "husband," for the New York Hurstwood "was not the easy Hurstwood of Chicago--not the liberal, opulent Hurstwood she had known. The change was too obvious to escape detection."<sup>15</sup> Dramatic structure contributes to the total effect of the novel, a fact to which Markels pays tribute when he states that Dreiser's "method of arranging the episodes in his plots . . . dramatizé[s] with perfect coherence that absence of foreordained purpose in the universe."<sup>16</sup> Carrie's success appears accidental but is plausible because Dreiser, by showing her success through the theater, an artificial world of fleeting values, makes Carrie's lucky accidents believable. Also, since the author carefully delineates Carrie's character in terms of the popular melodrama of the day,

<sup>13</sup> William A. Freeman, "A Look at Dreiser as Artist: The Motif of Circularity in Sister Carrie," Modern Fiction Studies, VIII (Winter, 1963), 390.

<sup>14</sup> Warner Berthoff, The Ferment of Realism, American Literature, 1884-1919 (New York: The Free Press, 1965), p. 240.

<sup>15</sup> Theodore Dreiser, Sister Carrie, A Norton Critical Edition, ed. Donald Pizer (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1970), p. 219; future references to this volume will appear parenthetically in the text.

<sup>16</sup> Julian Markels, "Dreiser and the Plotting of Inarticulate Experience," Massachusetts Review, II (Spring, 1961), 433.

wherein success was always guaranteed in the last act, her predetermined success is more graphically outlined as a pathetic victory, in actuality, representative of failure, one which extends to all society since Carrie, as Gerber points out, reveals the ideals of American society in the Gilded Age--the power of money and sex.<sup>17</sup> Carrie's tragedy extends to the entire nation as it is the product of the American dream.

Sister Carrie's initial appearance in the first act conforms to a melodramatic convention whereby clothes indicate social status, for her unsophisticated costume and imitation finery establish her background. Dreiser stresses her innocence as she approaches the city with awe and is overwhelmed by Drouet's urban sophistication. Carrie has few possessions, enough to fit into a small trunk; she carries "a cheap imitation alligator-skin satchel, a small lunch in a paper box, and a yellow leather snap purse," items which reveal her poverty, and Carrie is a country girl, "full of the illusions of ignorance and youth" (p.1). Dreiser sets the stage for tragedy when he comments on her probable future: "When a girl leaves her home at eighteen, she does one of two things. Either she falls into saving hands and becomes better, or she rapidly assumes the cosmopolitan standard of virtue and becomes worse" (p. 1). Carrie chooses the latter

<sup>17</sup> Philip L. Gerber, Theodore Dreiser, Twayne's United States Authors Series (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1964), p. 52; Gerber also asserts that the exposure of society in Carrie is roughly equivalent to the revelation of America's false values in Vance Packard's book, The Status Seekers.

course. Her costume foreshadows her fall into Drouet's hands. In addition to stressing the irony of Carrie's appearance, Dreiser describes her, when she arrives in Chicago, as a girl for whom "self-interest . . . was high. . . . In the intuitive graces she was still crude" (p. 2). These intuitive graces, as they mature and function more completely in Carrie, lead to her dubious success and her ultimate tragedy. As she perfects her ability to imitate, both on the stage and in life, she becomes more entrapped in the world of illusion. Dreiser's major concern in this novel is to show Carrie's tragic potential through her refinement of her "intuitive graces." When she adopts a totally artificial manner, Carrie is unable to view existence in terms of lasting human relationships; she becomes increasingly concerned with the acquisition of material things, and her new life fails to satisfy her.

While perfecting her ability to imitate, Carrie lives in Chicago, in itself a giant stage complete with excitement and lights, almost a fairyland. The lights at night create a bright contrast to the misery of her early days. Dreiser says, "to the child, the genius with imagination, or the wholly untravelled, the approach to a great city for the first time is a wonderful thing. Particularly if it be evening--that mystic period between the glare and gloom of the world when life is changing from one sphere or condition to another" (pp. 6, 7). This glittering evening view is Carrie's first glimpse of the city, and she is to remain

fascinated by the "promise of the night" (p. 7). Her awe is part of the American dream, for, as Farrell observes, in Dreiser's youth, the city was "the most powerful of all social magnets."<sup>18</sup> Carrie is irresistibly drawn to the excitement of Chicago, with its illusions of unlimited opportunities, despite the fact that the only work which she can find is as one of the "clattering automatons" (p. 27) in a shoe factory. She dreams away the agony of her day by watching the city at night, which has, what Lynn calls, a theatrical effect with its "ambitions false, its love of light and show of finery somehow diseased,"<sup>19</sup> a gaudy view for which Carrie maintains a constant love, as the embodiment of her desires. The obvious effect of the night, a time of transformation under bright but artificial light, is displayed in all the important scenes in the book, most of which take place after dark. Caught up in the charm of the play, The Mikado (with its famous song, "Let the Punishment Fit the Crime"),<sup>20</sup> Carrie accepts Drouet's offer of protection; Hurstwood meets, falls in love with, and kidnaps her; and

<sup>18</sup> James T. Farrell, Literature and Reality (New York: The Vanguard Press, Inc., 1947), p. 32.

<sup>19</sup> Kenneth S. Lynn, "Introduction," Sister Carrie (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1957), p. xi.

<sup>20</sup> Sir William S. Gilbert, Plays and Poems (New York: Random House, 1932), pp. 382, 383; the words of this song are particularly applicable to Carrie and her fate: "My object all sublime/ I shall achieve in time--/To let the punishment fit the crime/ . . . And make each prisoner pent/ Unwillingly represent/ A source of innocent merriment. . . ." Carrie's life with Drouet is her first step toward her career as a star in musical comedies which will allow her the material gain she covets while such success makes her a prisoner of loneliness.

night is the only witness to his suicide. Illuminating the urban stage for Carrie's melodrama, the artificial lights disguise the tawdriness of many scenes as characters play out their major roles, and the lighted city continues its role as a giant stage again and again as the characters become audiences who stare at the view, rhythmically rocking in chairs, watching the city change as the lights go on. In its color and movement, it is like the theater, which Dreiser labels "Elf Land" in his chapter headings, a magic world of lights and artificial splendor.

Dreiser's chapter titles focus on his use of popular melodramatic stereotypes,<sup>21</sup> for in them, he identifies Carrie as a waif (I, "The Magnet Attracting: A Waif Amid Forces"); as a heroic maiden (VI, "The Machine and the Maiden: A Knight of Today"); or the poor but worthy maiden who attributes all acts of fate to God (XIII and XXX both have Biblical overtones in "His Credentials Accepted: A Babel of Tongues," and "The Kingdom of Greatness: The Pilgrim Adream"); and Carrie wants to be a genteel lady (XI, "The Persuasion of Fashion: Feeling Guards O'er Its Own"). Dreiser's captions parody trite sentimentality and emphasize reality in that each chapter exposes the fallacy which is inherent in the title.

The role of the city as a stage is paralleled in the

<sup>21</sup> For a further discussion of Dreiser's chapter titles, see Philip Williams, "The Chapter Titles of Sister Carrie," American Literature, XXXVI (November, 1964), 359-365. Williams views the titles as a long poem.

attraction of the melodramatic stage, for, with the exception of Sven Hanson, Carrie's brother-in-law, all characters are drawn frequently to the theater, an entertainment which Lynn calls "a microcosm of the glamorous city, a quintessence of its artificial splendors."<sup>22</sup> The theater is the primary topic of conversation between Carrie and her men, of Hurstwood and his family, of Drouet and his companions, and Carrie's first ambition, after her arrival in Chicago, is to attend the theater. She reacts with disappointment when Sven refuses to go, for he equates the theater with "a full career of vanity and wastefulness which a young girl might indulge in" (p. 25), a haunting echo of Dreiser's first warning of the dangers of the city, perils which are further illustrated in the dramas that the characters see, plays comprising important parts in the action. Not long after Hanson's warning, Carrie submits to Drouet after they leave the theater, for "her head was so full of the swirl of life" (p. 60), and, later, Hurstwood will pursue Carrie at the theater. In the scene wherein Drouet, Carrie, and Hurstwood attend the play Rip Van Winkle, a comic drama about a farmer's re-awakening, starring Joe Jefferson,<sup>23</sup> she is more aware of the action through the "spot-lighting quality of Hurstwood's eyes."<sup>24</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Lynn, "Introduction," p. xii.

<sup>23</sup> Meserve, p. 91, quotes Jefferson as saying he played Rip about twenty-five hundred times between 1859 and 1881; he was still enacting this role at the time of his death in 1905.

<sup>24</sup> Ellen Moers, Two Dreisers (New York: The Viking Press, 1969), p. 105.



Again, theater-going becomes important in the novel when both Hurstwood and Drouet acknowledge their love for Carrie during the emotional heights of her performance in Under the Gaslight. Her later attendance at a matinée with Mrs. Vance signals Carrie's growing independence from Hurstwood, and she, ultimately, achieves her fame on the stage. The artificial settings of the theater, which Dreiser often stresses, reinforce his parallel between a real world destroyed by illusion and its artificial counterpart built of fantasy. The dramas mentioned in Sister Carrie support a large share of the structure of the novel and the development of Carrie's personality, and, with only two exceptions, The Covenant and The Wives of Abdul, are actual productions, popular in the time of his novel, 1894.<sup>25</sup> Dreiser weaves the plots of the plays into his story both as evidence of the interest his characters have in the stage and as foreshadowing or mirror images of the plot of his novel. The dramas display Carrie's dream of success, for theater-goers of the late nineteenth century, according to Moses, "fed . . . on romantic dreams,"<sup>26</sup> and Carrie admires the stage as the pinnacle of achievement.

The Covenant, with its made-to-order plot, ironically provides a view of what is to happen to Carrie, Drouet, and

<sup>25</sup> Sally L. Tippetts, "The Theater in Dreiser's Sister Carrie, Notes & Queries, XIII (1966), 100; also, see Arthur H. Quinn, A History of the American Drama From the Civil War to the Present Day (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1927), for discussions of individual plays.

<sup>26</sup> Montrose J. Moses, The American Dramatist (New York: Benjamin Blom, Inc., 1964), p. 174.

Hurstwood, for Drouet, unaware that he is actually fostering the loss of his own "wife" by encouraging her friendship with Hurstwood, thinks the stage husband a fool not to recognize his wife's infidelity. Following this drama, as the trio leaves the theater, a beggar accosts them, and only Drouet is sympathetic; Hurstwood ignores him, just as Carrie will ignore Hurstwood when he is in the same hopeless state, and Carrie does not even see the beggar. Thus, the stage drama, and the later scene, mirror the future of the three central characters as does each stage drama featured in the novel.

The central play, Daly's Under the Gaslight, wherein Carrie enacts Laura Cortland, the heroine, concerns a society girl, accused of being a slum child, who is kidnapped by the villain who claims to know her origins, and, when her true birth is discovered (for it is really Laura's sister, Pearl, who was born in the slums), Laura is reinstated as a member of New York society.<sup>27</sup> Carrie will soon make New York her home, and, once a slum dweller, only her sister remains in the slums while Carrie receives acclaim from society as she triumphs over her misfortunes to gain wealth and renown on the stage. As a contrast, however, Laura is saved in Daly's drama whereas Carrie's reenactment of the play leads to her personal dissatisfaction and emotional sterility.

Carrie's theater debut occupies four chapters at the center of the novel. It is Under the Gaslight (the light of

<sup>27</sup> Quinn, p. 11.

the city at night) which is the climax of her story since her achievement feeds her ambitious pursuit of success. Hurstwood's decline is also established, for her performance so captures his imagination that he resolves that she will become his mistress; at this point, they begin reversing positions. Carrie has been an innocent, awe-struck country girl with a natural talent for imitation, who becomes self-assured and independent as a result of her role. The first of the four chapters shows Drouet's part in Carrie's receiving the part of Laura. He has, in a sense, been her director and mentor up to this point in the novel, for Carrie has been careful to note what qualities Drouet most admires in other women, and she then practices diligently until she can perfectly imitate these traits which will make her the image of "the genteel lady." In the second chapter, while Carrie rehearses her part, Hurstwood carefully plots his role in her future. The third chapter, which describes the audience, moves the action forward in that one member of this audience reports to Mrs. Hurstwood that her husband, after telling her that he had no time to attend, was at the performance. The discovery of his perfidy forces her to push him from her house, an action which gives Hurstwood the freedom to kidnap Carrie, and he, too, breaks away from his past to search for a dream. The final chapter of the four, the actual performance, is important to Carrie and her future since, as Moers asserts, Carrie emerges as a "creative" figure in her own right.<sup>28</sup> Carrie's

<sup>28</sup> Moers, Two Dreisers, p. 107.

growing self-confidence in her role--she is at the start overly nervous--foreshadows her growing self-reliance, and, ironically, as she begins to know her own power, both men are so caught up in the enchantment which she displays on the stage that they are more closely tied to her. For Hurstwood, "under the fascinating make-believe of the moment, he rose in feeling until he was ready in spirit to go to her and ease her out of her misery by adding to his own delight" (p. 138), and for Drouet, Carrie is "the dandiest little girl on earth" (p. 141) while Carrie feels no true emotion toward either man--her concern is her performance as Laura.

Dreiser displays mastery of his material by choosing Daly's play for Carrie's stage debut, not only because the title connotes the romance of the city or because the two plots contain parallels, but, also, in the fact that Laura's stereotyped role is a contrast to Carrie's life at the moment. Laura, according to Davis, is an example of the genteel, innocent, and heroic maiden who is persecuted by the forces of evil, a lady of social position who has been guilty of no misdeeds which can be blamed for her misfortune, and Laura's outstanding character trait is self-sacrifice.<sup>29</sup> This virtue is a reverse mirror image of Carrie's self-centeredness. "Her beauty," says Laura-Carrie, "her wit, her accomplishments, she may sell to you; but her love is the treasure without money and without price" (p. 139). Carrie has already been bought

<sup>29</sup> Davis, pp. 75-79.

with twenty dollars for a new coat, and Carrie has no love to sell. Laura-Carrie remarks on the steadfastness of a woman's love which asks only for a gentle glance and a loving voice (pp. 139, 140) while Carrie wants material benefits and will soon desert Drouet. Later in the novel, her second lover, as he stands before her apartment, a ragged and cold beggar, will present silent testimony to the lack of steadfastness and comfort of Carrie's "love." Moers points out Dreiser's subtlety in adapting Daly's scene about the "sanctity of courtship" to Carrie's situation and states that Dreiser has signaled this ironic contrast through the fact that the men become sexually aroused by Laura-Carrie's words, not by her purity. Dreiser also predicts the deception in the first meeting of Carrie with Hurstwood wherein his true interest is established as he woos Carrie with "the charm of attentiveness" (p. 72). In this scene, the conversation among the three characters concerns "playing," or make-believe. Drouet has not provided a piano for his wife; "'Oh, I don't play,' ventured Carrie" (pp. 72, 73). A game of cards is organized, which Carrie, again cannot play, and Hurstwood proceeds to teach her the game and appears far more impressive to Carrie because, at his suggestion, they begin playing for money.<sup>30</sup> The words "play," "show," and "game" continually recur in this scene to expose the superficial status of all relationships.

As further evidence of her changed stature, determined by her triumph as Laura, Carrie resolves that she will become

<sup>30</sup> Moers, Two Dreisers, p. 102.

a professional actress and seeks work in the Chicago theaters. That she has matured is apparent in her attitude. At the start of the novel, she suffers from timidity and fear as she approaches prospective employers, anticipating failure before she makes her request, and her rejections stem from her lack of experience. Now, she confidently asks for work as an actress, convinced that she has sufficient knowledge. However, the stage managers want more professional experience than she has and suggest New York as the place to develop such maturity, and Dreiser, through this situation, makes plausible Carrie's acceptance of Hurstwood's ruse; she resists little because she must move to New York to pursue her dream.

Professional acting corresponds to the role-playing which is evident in the action of many characters. Carrie's career is the result of several roles which she has played as an amateur. At first unsophisticated and naive, Carrie changes as she learns to imitate the manners and dress which she senses are valued by society. Her lovers also play roles since, according to Lynn, "their personalities are not expressions of themselves, but of the roles they are playing."<sup>31</sup> Drouet is the image of a salesman, vulgar in his display of comfortable and flashy clothing; he speaks in cliches, and, according to Dreiser, "he was a splendid fellow in the popular understanding of the term, and captivated Carrie completely" (p. 45). For Charles Shapiro, Drouet's is "the greatest

<sup>31</sup> Lynn, "Introduction," p. xiii.

tragedy of all, for he unconsciously assumes all the values of his day without a trace of rebellion."<sup>32</sup> He is a man of whom ". . . a Shakespeare would have said 'my merry child'" (p. 49), not a villain despite the fact that he seduces an innocent maiden, an action which the melodrama projects as villainous, but a happy young man, self-confident, uninhibited, and sure of himself, who remains unaware of his absorption of the materialistic values of society. Freeman correctly observes that Drouet is a static figure, neither growing nor diminishing.<sup>33</sup>

On the other hand, Hurstwood consciously plays the part of a successful manager of Chicago's most elite saloon, frequently patronized by influential and wealthy men. He knows just the right words and gestures for any given situation and easily adapts his personality to whoever is his audience at the moment--a respectful tone when he speaks to an important personage, an easy familiarity with the relatively unimportant Drouet, an attentiveness when with Carrie. "It was surprising --the ease with which he conducted a conversation. He was like every man who has had the advantage of practice and knows he has sympathy . . . never dull for a minute, and [he] seemed to make her [Carrie] clever. At least, she brightened under

<sup>32</sup> Charles Shapiro, Theodore Dreiser: Our Bitter Patriot (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1962), pp. 13, 14.

<sup>33</sup> Freeman, pp. 388-390; he adds also that Dreiser develops a built-in response to Drouet through his French name, as either villain or hero. The name combines two words, roué, a rake, and rouet, a wheel, which foreshadows the use of the name Wheeler by Hurstwood and Carrie, and possibly reflects the medieval concept of fate as a Wheel of Fortune which brings about a character's fall.

his influence until all her best side was exhibited. . . . At least, he seemed to find so much in her to applaud" (pp. 87, 88). In New York, when Hurstwood has lost his audience, he can no longer perform adequately, and Carrie loses her interest in him, for he impresses her only when he plays a role. To signal Hurstwood's reversal, Dreiser uses costume. Hurstwood, as he recognizes his loss of stature as a man about town, neglects to shave, is careless with his appearance, and spends most of his time dreaming in a rocking chair. He takes over the household chores and begs Carrie, now employed as an actress, for a few cents for food. "Of course, as his own self-respect vanished, it perished for him in Carrie" (p. 261). Dreiser, through his use of props and costume, reveals Hurstwood's decline, for Hurstwood now resembles the Carrie of the first chapters of the novel. As another manifestation of self-deception as debilitating to the individuals in the novel, both Carrie and Hurstwood have denied their origins in their pursuit of their dreams. From the unsophisticated Carrie Meeber, Carrie becomes the static Carrie Wheeler, and then the successful Carrie Madenda, a reassumption of the name coined by Drouet when he arranged her acting debut, a change which marks her return to the stage as a place to achieve her goal. She does not seek success under her own identity. Hurstwood's alias signifies that he, too, undergoes a change, and when he becomes Wheeler, he cannot retain the illusion of his Chicago prominence. In a sense the



tragic hero of Carrie's drama, Hurstwood loses his successful position because of his flaw, his sexual instincts; he makes an error in judgment when he takes the money and elopes with Carrie, and he suffers a complete reversal from his Chicago grandeur to his New York degradation.

In conjunction with their role-playing, each character is dominated by deception, a key motif in Carrie. Drouet seems to promise marriage but has no intention of making Carrie an "honest woman." Carrie attracts both men sexually with her loveable appearance, yet she is incapable of loving. Hurstwood lies to her in saying that he is unmarried, and Carrie believes that he is free to wed her. Thus, all relationships between the three principal characters begin with lies. In addition, all judgments of character and individual worth are made on the basis of external appearances, also a form of deception. Carrie, who reminds Drouet of "some popular actress" (p. 5), is first attracted to Drouet by his clothes: "good clothes, of course were the first essential, the things without which he was nothing" (p. 3), and, later, Hurstwood's appearance also recommends him to Carrie--"how suave was the counsel of his appearance" (p. 88). Clothes play an important part in the creation of deception, again, when Drouet first meets Carrie and seeks for mutual acquaintances, recalling the names of a clothier and a dry goods man in Carrie's hometown. She is aroused "by memories of longings their shop windows had cost her" (p. 4). In the opinion of Gerber, Carrie uses

costume as "a yardstick for measuring worth and attainment,"<sup>34</sup> and Carrie is happiest when she clothes herself. Her love of such display is particularly evident in Carrie's dissatisfaction when she attends a *matinée* with Mrs. Vance. Extremely unhappy because she believes that her clothes fail to set her off to the best advantage, Carrie bemoans her poor appearance and regrets her lack of a proper setting in which to display her misery.

The play was one of those drawing-room concoctions in which charmingly overdressed ladies and gentlemen suffer the pangs of love and jealousy amid gilded surroundings. Such *bon-mots* are ever enticing to those who have all their days longed for such material surroundings and have never had them gratified. They have the charm of showing suffering under ideal conditions. Who would not grieve upon a gilded chair? Who would not suffer amid perfumed tapestries, cushioned furniture, and liveried servants? Grief under such circumstances becomes an enticing thing. Carrie longed to be part of it (p. 228).

Destined to mourn in a gilded room, Carrie yearns for true feeling but is incapable of such emotion since her feelings are totally artificial, simulated to fit each situation. When Carrie attains her proper setting, she gains only despair.

Carrie's friendship with Mrs. Vance serves two purposes in the novel: to display Carrie's growing discontent with Hurstwood and to launch her into the final act of her drama, which, in Shapiro's view, is Carrie's "misdirection of the American success dream."<sup>35</sup> Mrs. Vance introduces Carrie to

<sup>34</sup> Gerber, p. 70.

<sup>35</sup> Shapiro, p. 14.

Bob Ames, a man "far ahead of her," who "seemed wiser than Hurstwood, saner and brighter than Drouet" (p. 237).<sup>36</sup> Ames encourages Carrie to try the theater again, and Carrie is impressed by his advice for "there was something in him, or the world he moved in, which appealed to her. He reminded her of scenes she had seen on the stage--the sorrows and sacrifices that always went with she knew not what" (p. 238). In her next search for employment as an actress, Carrie easily finds work, and, though she begins as a lowly chorus girl, her accidental addition of dialogue to her minor role as a slave girl in The Wives of Abdul causes her rise in the theater to be meteoric. Just as her character in her debut mirrored her true situation, Carrie's first professional role holds up an ironic mirror; Carrie, whose sexual appeal is the cause of her success and who will become a slave to her illusions, enjoys her second taste of triumph as a slave girl in a harem. Later, Carrie's most popular role with the public is that of "a little Quakeress," the antithesis of her actions in life, a fact which indicates that Carrie can make deception seem real.

Dreiser stresses that Carrie, despite her new success, is unhappy. In Chapter XLIV, "And This Is Not Elf Land: What Gold Will Not Buy," she moves to an elaborate apartment in which, rather than showing excitement and delight at the rooms, Carrie discontentedly lifts the curtain and examines

<sup>36</sup> Dreiser sets up a further parallel to his metaphor of the glamor of artificial lights with this minor character. Ames (aims?) is "connected with an electric company" (p. 233).

Broadway. Old acquaintances return, but Carrie has outgrown Drouet and no longer needs Mrs. Vance, and Hurstwood, now a derelict seeking a hand-out, receives little sympathy. But, with all the outward signs of comfort, Carrie finds no joy in her gilded setting, a fact shown when Ames reappears and challenges Carrie to try for more serious roles on the stage because her eyes mirror the unhappiness which dominates her personality. She has a quality about her which is "a thing the world likes to see, because it's a natural expression of its longing" and "is representative of all desire" (p. 356). Ames implies that desire is really human warmth, but Dreiser has shown that Carrie's desire is only for wealth and fame, and hers is the face that "the world likes to see."

Carrie has not escaped untouched by her life in an artificial world of false values; her melancholy is her punishment. She has lost sight of the true value in life because she is incapable of love, and the emptiness of her success is proof that it is artificial triumph. "She could look about on her gowns and carriage, her furniture and bank account. Friends there were, as the world takes it--those who would bow and smile in acknowledgment of her success. For these she had once craved. Applause there was and publicity--once far off, essential things, but now grown trivial and indifferent. Beauty also--her type of loveliness--and yet, she was lonely. In her rocking-chair she sat, when not otherwise engaged--singing and dreaming" (pp. 367, 368). Her

life is hollow, and her story ends much as it began as Carrie sits and rocks and looks out at the street. "Sitting alone, she was now an illustration of the devious ways by which one who feels, rather than reasons, may be led in the pursuit of beauty" (p. 369). She still awaits the pleasure which life seems to promise, but watching the street is now an empty gesture. Once Carrie studied the city scenes with an air of expectation, to dream of a worthwhile existence, but her final view of such scenes illustrates that she no longer feels the same enchantment in life and that she will never find satisfaction in artifice and deception. Dreiser ends his novel with a dirge for Carrie's life: "In your rocking-chair [which goes nowhere], by your window, shall you dream of such happiness as you may never feel." Carrie has lost all hold on life's promises.

Jennie Gerhardt, Dreiser's second heroine, suffers also from her pursuit of the promises of life, but, unlike Carrie, who has only shallow feelings, Jennie feels too deeply. She is, according to Beach, "condemned to checkmate in the ruthless game of hearts . . . with . . . her relative weakness economically and biologically."<sup>37</sup> Obviously much weaker than Carrie, Jennie cannot be as ruthless and self-centered, for she is as completely self-sacrificing as Laura Cortland, who was Carrie's first stage personality, and though Carrie is judged by critics to be the better novel, Jennie Gerhardt is

<sup>37</sup> Joseph Warren Beach, The Twentieth Century Novel (New York: The Century Company, 1932), pp. 323, 324.

seen as a more appealing character. Earnest, for example, praises her "real human warmth,"<sup>38</sup> and Gelfant calls Jennie a "singular Dreiserian protagonist" who "does not reflect directly the materialism of the city," although Jennie suffers indirectly from society's value judgments.<sup>39</sup> Gerber cites the contrast between Jennie and Carrie as the difference between all love and all ambition.<sup>40</sup> The public, too, was more receptive to this later heroine because, as Swanberg speculates, Jennie is punished at the end of the novel and cannot be condemned as an immoral heroine.<sup>41</sup> Dreiser's readers may have missed his point. Jennie is unhappy at the end of the novel, but her future prospects seem hopeful, for, like Hester Prynne (and Hawthorne is Jennie's favorite author), Jennie, because of her selfless service to her neighbors, has become a source of strength, love, and service to her community, and, far from being alone, as is Carrie, Jennie has Rose Perpetua and Henry, two adopted children, to share her life. It is Lester Kane's story, like Hurstwood's, which is the more tragic, for he rejects Jennie's love, submits to social pressures, and dies unfulfilled. Perhaps the greatest irony in Jennie's story is

<sup>38</sup> Ernest Earnest, The Single Vision, The Alienation of American Intellectuals (New York: New York University Press, 1970), p. 42.

<sup>39</sup> Blanche H. Gelfant, The American City Novel (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1954), p. 91.

<sup>40</sup> Gerber, p. 77.

<sup>41</sup> Swanberg, p. 146.

that she continually worries that she may not be good enough for Lester.

Jennie Gerhardt does not contain the massive details of theatrical imagery which are obvious in Sister Carrie; rather, the absence of such detail is important. Dreiser originally drafted the novel in 1901, soon after Carrie was published, and Lehan carefully examines the changes which Dreiser made when he resumed writing many years later. Originally entitled The Transgressor, the novel introduced its heroine as more lascivious, and her brother, Bass, whose arrest for stealing coal leads to Jennie's seduction, was to have been a stronger character in the earlier version, in which his crime was embezzlement. Bass, in the original draft, sends Jennie to Senator Brander with the deliberate intent to sell herself for the money which Bass needs to replace, thereby averting discovery. Lehan also describes a scene, later deleted, in which Jennie and Lester stroll up Broadway and equate the theater with "a true paradise." In the final version, when the couple attend the theater, Jennie, introduced to others as Lester's wife, looks forward to their return home, not backward to an abandoned paradise. Her only fictitious identity in the novel is as Lester's wife, and to provide his comfort, as a wife in spirit, is her sole ambition. If the sections cut from the novel had remained, Jennie would have emerged as a character much like Carrie, motivated solely by greed. Instead, Dreiser portrays her as "a selfless and idealistic girl in a selfish and materialistic world," a world

which cannot understand her.<sup>42</sup>

Dreiser does not, however, totally abandon theatrical imagery in Jennie; the plot of this book resembles a typical melodramatic situation, for Davis describes one standard plot which is used to display the mistreated innocent, wherein the "heroine . . . betrayed by a false marriage, [has] a hard-hearted father who casts his daughter out into the cold." After contemplating suicide, she is usually rescued by her true lover, and the end is "a melting scene of forgiving by the old father."<sup>43</sup> In addition to portraying his second heroine through the same melodramatic stereotypes as his first, Dreiser uses costume and setting, important in Carrie, to show, through Jennie's rejection of such things, the contrast in the character of love shown in the second novel, for Jennie's rejection of materialism signifies her warmth of character, and, as a fallen woman, Jennie is more attractive. Jennie's true lover cannot rescue her, however, for he is a weak-willed man who finds himself unable to resist the pressures of society. His decision to give up love in favor of money provides the irony which turns melodrama into a drama of tragic reality.

Most critics define Jennie as Dreiser's expression of his belief that the family unit, as part of society, fails to provide adequate guides for life. With a multiple-staging effect in the novel, much like he would later use in Plays of

<sup>42</sup> Richard Lehan, Theodore Dreiser, His World and His Novels (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1969), pp. 80-86.

<sup>43</sup> Davis, p. 86.



the Natural and the Supernatural, Dreiser juxtaposes scenes, one of the impoverished Gerhardts with another of the wealthy Kanes, and both families are shown to share an equal responsibility for the destruction of their children although each family unit represents an extreme of material worth. Though each professes to be Christian, with a faith built on love, the Gerhardts, in their need, take advantage of Jennie's love to cause her submission to both Brander and Kane; the Kanes, through their pressures on Lester, manufacture the forces which separate the lovers. McAleer states that in the first draft of the novel, Dreiser had Lester resist economic and social forces, represented by his family, in order to marry Jennie,<sup>44</sup> but to have given the novel a "happy" ending would have been to destroy its impact--it would have been too close to the melodrama which serves as its model. By separating the lovers, society, depicted through the family unit, displays a lack of appropriate standards by which to judge human values.

Despite her eighteen years of poverty, Jennie, the oldest of five children and the center of her family, is a happy girl who loves nature. Birds, bees, squirrels, sounds of evening fill her with "an agony of poetic longing,"<sup>45</sup> an echo of the effect of such agony which was admired by the nineteenth-century theater audience. "From her earliest youth goodness and mercy molded her every impulse" (p. 16); Jennie fills her days

<sup>44</sup> John J. McAleer, Theodore Dreiser, An Introduction and Interpretation (New York: Barnes & Noble, Inc., 1968), p. 93.

<sup>45</sup> Theodore Dreiser, Jennie Gerhardt (Cleveland: The World Publishing Company, 1954), p. 142; subsequent references to this novel will be cited parenthetically in the text.

with helping her mother, aiding her brothers and sisters, and serving as peace-maker in family quarrels. She truly loves, and, in contrast to Carrie who deserts her family ties, Jennie strives to hold the family intact. She is the "sister" that Carrie is not.

Jennie is tricked into two false marriages, one to Senator Brander, who dies before fulfilling his commitment to her, and another to Lester, who, because he is of high social station, decides that marriage is unnecessary although he senses that he must have Jennie to be happy. In each seduction, the Gerhardt family forces her choice. She seeks help from Brander when Bass is in jail, not only for stealing coal to heat the house but also for assaulting the arresting officer, a more serious offense with a greater penalty. The family cannot pay the ten dollars assessed as his fine. Jennie's reward for her help is a promise of marriage and an illegitimate child. Later in her story, Jennie turns to Lester when, again, her family needs financial help, a difficult choice for her since Lester, when first attracted to Jennie had tried to buy her with an offer of money, to which she reacted with horror: "That was the worst of all" (p. 142), but after her father has his hands severely burned in an accident, the family funds, already strained, cannot provide the medical care he needs, and Jennie submits to a second "false marriage" because "fate had shifted the burden of the situation to her. She must sacrifice herself; there was no other way" (p. 156). However, though indifferent fate may cause Jennie to suffer, she never

contemplates suicide for she loves life and trusts her fellow man.

Jennie's father causes her the greatest sorrow. True to the plot of the melodrama, Mr. Gerhardt drives her from his house when he learns of Jennie's first seduction and her pregnancy. He, himself, moves away from the family because he feels shame and hopes to avoid the glances of his neighbors and the wrath of his stern Lutheran minister. Mr. Gerhardt does not forgive Jennie, but forced by his accident to rejoin his family and because of his need for money, the bitter father pretends to believe that Lester is Jennie's legal husband although he senses the truth. A tearful reconciliation does occur, however, because Mr. Gerhardt, still physically crippled, can no longer depend on his other children, who refuse to support their father after their mother has died. Jennie, living in Chicago, returns to Cleveland to find her father in order to care for him in the house which she shares with Lester. Mr. Gerhardt stays with the couple until his death, and, ironically, he learns to forgive because he learns to love through the visible symbol of Jennie's shame, her daughter, Vesta. At his death, Mr. Gerhardt recognizes Jennie's true worthiness: her love and her loyalty through love.

Lester Kane, like Hurstwood, suffers the greatest tragedy in the novel, for his reconciliation with his family costs him his only happiness. In his father's will, Lester

is presented with three choices, one of which he must select at the end of a three year period: he can leave Jennie and inherit millions; he can stay with her, unmarried, and forfeit his right to the family fortune; or he can marry her and receive a small lifetime allowance. Torn by indecision, Lester suffers an internal conflict much like Hamlet's when he postpones the inevitable, seeking any alternative to avoid taking decisive action. A first parallel to Hamlet occurs in Lester's expectations from his father's evident favoritism toward him. The father's avowed love proves as empty as Claudius' declaration of affection after Claudius has stolen his nephew's birthright.

You are the most immediate to our throne,  
And with no less nobility of love  
Than that which dearest father bears his son  
Do I impart toward you . . .  
(Hamlet, I, ii, 115-118).

Lester's father implies to the son that he is the favored prince of their financial empire, but Mr. Kane uses his position and wealth to destroy his son's happiness. Jennie, when she learns of the will, again sacrifices herself to preserve the unity of a family. To save Lester, she moves to a modest cottage and urges him to marry Mrs. Gerald, a woman of his own station, whom his family deems a worthy choice. Lester, who follows Jennie's advice, lives only five unhappy years with his new wife, and, upon his death-bed, he recognizes that he should have married Jennie because he loves her.

At the end of the novel, Jennie, isolated by an iron

grill from Lester's true family, becomes the only concerned audience in the railroad station where she watches Lester's coffin, destined for burial near his parents, as it is loaded into a freight car. A porter calls, "Hey Jack! Give us a hand here. There's a stiff inside" (p. 429), a startling view of society's indifference to life or death. Jennie stands apart from the chatter of the other people in the depot and contemplates her future: "Before her stretching a vista of lonely years down which she was steadily gazing. Now what? She was not too old yet. There were those two orphans to raise. They would marry and leave after a while, and then what? Days and days in endless reiteration, and then--?" (p. 431). But this last impression is not the hopeless one which Carrie leaves. Jennie is in a crowded room, full of life and movement, and she is "not old yet." Jennie will endure because she is, as Warren describes her, the definition of love, a woman who will find peace through "a triumph of spirit."<sup>46</sup>

Dreiser's two heroines present, through his dramatic contrasts, a testament to the true values of life. Carrie, because she loses herself in the promise of the American dream, alienates herself from love in her reflection of society's values. Jennie, who rejects such illusions, finds herself through a love which combines both sexual and maternal

<sup>46</sup> Robert Penn Warren, Homage to Theodore Dreiser on the Centennial of His Birth (New York: Random House, 1971), p. 47.

instincts; she never ties herself to society's mores but aligns herself with nature. Dreiser's women prove that human beings are a combination of both good and bad traits, and that no individual is as clearly defined in life as he is in the melodrama, and, in his departures from the melodramatic conventions, Dreiser states what he believes is man's true condition. Carrie and Jennie, through they stem from stereotypes from the nineteenth-century stage, are opposite poles of love. As a result of her materialistic desires, her shallowness, and her absorption into the world of the theater, Carrie chooses her fate, an empty and meaningless existence. Jennie, because she decides to love, exemplifies the concept that love is a significant goal in life. Although Dreiser borrows heavily from theater tradition from his own time, the melodrama, he achieves the effect of universality, for his message is designed for any audience which has experienced the frustration of a worthless pursuit of material things. Melodramatic plots and characters, which effectively delineate the duality of instincts in Dreiser's characters, do not limit his appeal although the melodrama is no longer a favored form of entertainment. The ideals reflected by these plays are still sought by the majority of each new generation as it mistakes materialism for security, searches for a standardized code of behavior, and strives to find a sense of the true values of life. Costume, setting, and fame, all elements of the theatrical world, as well as the real world, continue to

be the criteria by which society judges each individual, and the belief of society in the American dream remains a reality. Although the stage traditions have changed, the pursuit of illusory goals is as much a part of America today as it was in the early twentieth century, and society still experiences frustration when it can find no tangible yardstick, either religious or social or philosophical, by which it can measure the purpose of life.

Dreiser continues to use theatrical imagery in his later novels since the theater, because it creates an illusion of reality and is recognized by society as fantasy, serves as a universal metaphor for all illusion. As the following chapter will demonstrate, Frank Cowperwood, Dreiser's next hero, like Carrie Meeber, does not love; he instinctively knows that his life is empty, but he can fill it only with things--clothes, buildings, fame, and sex.

### III. THEATRICAL IMAGERY AND AMERICA'S HERO: THE SUCCESSFUL BUSINESSMAN

Before Dreiser had completed his revisions of Jennie Gerhardt, he began writing two additional novels, The "Genius", the story of an artist,<sup>1</sup> and The Financier, a novel based on the life of Charles Tyson Yerkes, a financier famous in the late nineteenth century. This book was, according to Swanberg, so lengthy that his publisher urged Dreiser to split it into three volumes, eventually called The Financier, published in 1912, The Titan, published in 1914, and The Stoic, planned for 1918 but not published until 1947.<sup>2</sup> Dreiser's Yerkes is Frank

<sup>1</sup> The "Genius" is the only novel in which Dreiser does not make extensive use of the metaphor of the theater as a symbol for illusion. The story of an artist's search for the meaning of life through his paintings, this novel is universally condemned as boring, a weak story filled with too much random detail and peopled with ineffectual characters. Since the novel is thinly-disguised autobiography, perhaps Dreiser's subjective attitude toward Eugene Witla, his fictional identity, prevented Dreiser from using the theater as evidence of Witla's misconceptions about life, for art, apparently, was a form of reality, not illusion, to Dreiser. Witla is corrupted by his high salary as a magazine illustrator and by his over-sexed and narrow-minded wife. Several critical articles on this book trace specific painters and pictures which are alleged to be the inspiration for Witla's artistic achievement, and the only theatrical associations made by critics are directed toward Eugene's work. Elias, for example, describes Witla's art as that of a man so "excited by the insoluble drama" in the spectacle of life that "he gives his paintings . . . a theatrical appeal." (Robert H. Elias, Theodore Dreiser, p. 155.) Witla abandons his pursuit of sex and money as the result of his study of Christian Science and regains his integrity as an artist, but Dreiser fails to make Witla's story a vibrant expression of life.

<sup>2</sup> W. A. Swanberg, Dreiser (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968), p. 158; he later states, on p. 178, that The Stoic was probably abandoned by Dreiser after his discouragement over poor reception by the public of the first two books. Dreiser was, at the time, distracted by a court battle over the salacious theme of The "Genius". No one can adequately account for Dreiser's strange punctuation of the title of this novel, which, probably, is his humorous evaluation of his own talent.



Algernon Cowperwood, the epitome of the American success dream. In The Financier, Dreiser uses theatrical setting as a unifying device to delineate personalities, desires, and changes, both physical and psychological, in his characters, and employs the same devices in The Titan and The Stoic, to which he adds attendance at the theater, actresses, and Cowperwood's acting ability, to show the increasing degeneration of his protagonist's ideals. In an effort to expand the tragic effect of Cowperwood's drama, Dreiser makes his protagonist analogous to Macbeth, who sacrifices integrity for ambition, and Faustus, the hero of Marlowe's morality play, who sells his soul to attain worthless power; like Macbeth, Cowperwood's ambitions cause his defeat, and like Faustus, Cowperwood envisions himself as godlike in his usurpation of power which belongs only to God. When death proves Cowperwood's mortality, his power disintegrates and his only reward is an elaborate tomb. As Muller points out, Dreiser's hero suffers because he judges success by the wrong standards and is "unhappy . . . because [he has] a greater capacity . . . for recognizing the emptiness of [his] triumphs."<sup>3</sup> Cowperwood seeks to fill his spiritual void with women, with art, and with world fame, and these things fail to provide satisfaction or to confer godlike immortality since they are actually the instruments of his self-deception.

Critics, as a rule, do not praise the trilogy as an

<sup>3</sup> Herbert J. Muller, Modern Fiction, A Study of Values (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1937), p. 214.

artistic achievement, because they judge the novels as episodic layers of business and sex scenes which resemble what Sherman defines as an awkward and unappetizing sandwich,<sup>4</sup> and Heiney states that the trilogy is interesting only "as a panoramic picture of industrial triumph at the end of the century."<sup>5</sup> Most critics appear more intrigued by the hero than by his story, a man whom they describe as an example of Darwinian "survival of the fittest,"<sup>6</sup> as a Machiavellian villain,<sup>7</sup> as a modern Tamburlane,<sup>8</sup> as an American Richard the Lion-hearted,<sup>9</sup> as an Alger hero,<sup>10</sup> or, most frequently, as a

<sup>4</sup> Stuart P. Sherman, "The Barbaric Naturalism of Mr. Dreiser," rpt. in The Stature of Theodore Dreiser, eds. Alfred Kazin and Charles Shapiro (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1955), p. 78 (this volume will be identified as TSTD in all subsequent references); Sherman is the originator of this metaphor, but most critics include it in their discussions.

<sup>5</sup> Donald W. Heiney, Essentials of Contemporary Literature (Great Neck: Barron's Educational Series, Inc., 1954), p. 56.

<sup>6</sup> Swanberg, p. 160; Kenneth Lynn, The Dream of Success (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1955), p. 52; Harry Hartwick, The Foreground of American Fiction (New York: American Book Co., 1934), p. 92; Maxwell Geismar, "Dreiser and the Dark Texture of Life," American Scholar, XXII (Spring, 1953), 218.

<sup>7</sup> Philip L. Gerber, Theodore Dreiser (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1964), p. 88; Hartwick, p. 92.

<sup>8</sup> Alfred Kazin, "Theodore Dreiser: His Education and Ours," TSTD, p. 156.

<sup>9</sup> Burton Rascoe, Theodore Dreiser (New York: Robert M. McBride & Co., 1925), p. 49.

<sup>10</sup> Lynn, p. 52; Richard Lehan, Theodore Dreiser, His World and His Novels (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1969), p. 99; Charles Shapiro, Theodore Dreiser: Our Bitter Patriot (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1962), p. 28.

Nietzschean superman,<sup>11</sup> and though no consensus has been reached on the hero's character, most critics agree that Dreiser presents an episodic portrait of the false ideals of the Gilded Age.<sup>12</sup> They have not noted Dreiser's use of the theater as a metaphor for the empty promises of the American dream, a device which unifies the novels and establishes his theme, that life, built only on illusion, destroys not only the individual, but all society, because Cowperwood's pursuit of money and sexual conquest is admired by his society,<sup>13</sup> one which Erskine defines as characterized by a faith in its progress.<sup>14</sup> Cowperwood's concept of progress, for the purpose of self-aggrandizement, is condoned by his contemporaries, and, as he becomes more adept at deception, a change symbolized through theatrical imagery, Cowperwood proves that his society is willing to be victimized by false ideals.

To present an accurate picture of this age, Dreiser engaged in tireless research into Yerkes' life and into the methodology of banks, of the stock market, and of urban

<sup>11</sup> Robert W. Schneider, Five Novelists of the Progressive Era (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965), p. 172; Michael Milgate, American Social Fiction (New York: Barnes & Noble, Inc., 1965), p. 74; Lynn, p. 59; Alfred Kazin, On Native Grounds (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1942), p. 93; Van Wyck Brooks, "Theodore Dreiser," University of Kansas City Review, XVI (Spring, 1950), 195.

<sup>12</sup> Shapiro, p. 26; Kazin, p. 86; Gerber, p. 89; John Chamberlain, "Theodore Dreiser Remembered," TSTD, p. 130; George J. Becker, "Theodore Dreiser: The Realist as Social Critic," Twentieth Century Literature, I (October, 1955), 118.

<sup>13</sup> Kazin, pp. 19-23.

<sup>14</sup> John Erskine, "American Business in the American Novel," The Bookman, LXXIII (July, 1931), 450.

politics, of America at the turn of the century.<sup>15</sup> The Financier fictionalizes Yerkes' early career in Philadelphia, where he made a fortune, lost it, and went to prison; The Titan recounts Yerkes' career in Chicago and New York, and The Stoic details his later interests in London. Historically, Yerkes was a materialist who collected art, attracted women, and bought power, and Lehan cites from a newspaper article entitled "The Materials of a Great Man," dated February 4, 1900, which probably inspired Dreiser to write a novel of the business world, for in the margin of the article, Dreiser wrote, "the tale is too intricate and various and melodramatic for any kind of living novelist. . . ." Dreiser, ignoring this comment, used the events of Yerkes' life to draw the character of Cowperwood.<sup>16</sup> However, Dreiser does more than report biographical data, for he presents the financial world as a battlefield and seeks to portray his protagonist as an impressive fighter in the struggles of the financial world. In A Hoosier Holiday, to describe the methods of those men who make much money in the business world, Dreiser uses the metaphor of cruel fish, a symbol from nature which is employed similarly in the story of Frank Algernon Cowperwood. Dreiser says, "The swordfish were among the bluefish slaying and the

<sup>15</sup> Among the critics who refer to Dreiser's extensive research are: Shapiro, p. 26; Lehan, p. 98; Helen Dreiser, My Life With Dreiser (New York: The World Publishing Co., 1951), pp. 123, 124.

<sup>16</sup> Lehan, p. 101.

the sharks were after the swordfish. Tremendous battles were on, with Morgan and Rockefeller and Harriman and Gould after Morse and Heinze and Hill and the lesser fry."<sup>17</sup> The sea image is repeated in the scene in The Financier in which Cowperwood, as a boy, watches a lobster overpower a squid, and Cowperwood, after his defeat and imprisonment, learns to deceive his opponents like another fish, the grouper, which "lying at the bottom of a bay, . . . can simulate the mud by which it is surrounded. Hidden in the folds of glorious leaves, it is of the same markings. Lurking in a flaw of light, it is like the light itself shining dimly in water. Its power to elude or strike unseen is of the greatest."<sup>18</sup> Cowperwood strikes, lobster-like, at the timid squid, his business opponents, by emulating the ability of the grouper, through disguising his purpose and changing his roles at will to fit any given situation.<sup>19</sup> As Cowperwood consciously seeks to perfect his ability to act deceptively, he becomes a more corrupt figure, who is, apparently, no worse than the people he outwits in his battles, just more skillful. Cowperwood's

<sup>17</sup> Theodore Dreiser, A Hoosier Holiday (New York: John Lane Company, 1916), p. 58.

<sup>18</sup> Theodore Dreiser, The Financier (New York: The New American Library, 1967), p. 447; subsequent references to this novel will be cited parenthetically in the text with the code "F".

<sup>19</sup> Theodore Dreiser, A Book About Myself (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1922), p. 456, states Dreiser's distrust of the ability of the wealthy to deceive, a skill "which in subsequent years I have come to look upon as the most deadly and forceful in all nature: the power to masquerade and betray."

society, since it admires the struggle for success, bears the responsibility for the existence of such men, and Willen, in his discussion of Dreiser's morality, concludes that, "to Dreiser, American middle-class society is immoral," full of "hypocrites, the individuals in whom the prevailing attitudes are embodied."<sup>20</sup> The businessman squids are vulnerable because their weakness is fear of exposure of their secret vices, which are masked by public conformity to religious and social codes that are denied in private, and Cowperwood is stronger because he professes no inclination to hide behind such a false front. However, he eventually succumbs to social pressures, in that public approval of his wealth and power convinces him that he has attained an almost godlike strength, a belief which is exposed as a delusion when Cowperwood finds that he cannot defeat old age and death. Money and sexual conquest prove to be inadequate armor in the battle of life.

As in his first two novels, Dreiser again uses the melodramatic stage stereotypes to provoke an ambivalent response to his hero. According to Davis, the typical hero has "a taste for beauty,"<sup>21</sup> and a portion of Cowperwood's attractiveness, in the first novel, is his instinctive response to beauty in art and to the beauty in women, to him a form of art. Thus, he partially conforms to society's ideal image, but he loses stature

<sup>20</sup> Gerald Willen, "Dreiser's Moral Seriousness," University of Kansas City Review, XXIII (Spring, 1957), 186, 187.

<sup>21</sup> Blanche E. Davis, The Hero in American Drama, 1787-1900 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1950), p. 98.

in a second stereotyped role, his relationship with Berenice Fleming, wherein Cowperwood resembles the hero whom Davis describes as a "benefactor-character, . . . the elderly 'good angel' to the younger romantic characters,"<sup>22</sup> for, while he claims that his intent is to protect Berenice, he obviously hopes to add her to the list of his conquests. Cowperwood, as he tries to drive away suitors interested in Berenice, becomes Mephistopheles, a fallen angel.

Davis establishes the typical businessman stage hero as one who displays three traits: a cynicism in his business deals, a cynical attitude toward art, which he regards as an investment, and "a susceptibility to the soft influence of women."<sup>23</sup> Cowperwood reflects all three attitudes. Dreiser shows his protagonist's business cynicism as it begins in the lobster-squid episode which introduces Cowperwood, at the age of ten, to the concept of survival as a victory for the strongest and most deceptive creatures.

The boy stayed as long as he could, the bitter struggle fascinating him. . . . The least touch of sorrow for the squid came to him as he stared at it slain. Then he gazed at the victor. . . . The squid wasn't quick enough. . . . The incident made a great impression on him. It answered in a rough way the riddle . . . . "How is life organized? Things lived on each other--that was it. Lobsters lived on squids and other things. What lived on lobsters? Men, of course! . . . And what lived on men? . . . Sure, men lived on men" (F, pp. 8, 9).

Also, Cowperwood, from this battle in nature, learns the value of having adequate weapons to survive, evidenced later as he

<sup>22</sup> Davis, p. 105.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 109.

describes his fellow businessmen as ". . . hawks watching for an opportunity to snatch their prey from under the very claws of their opponents" (F, p. 41), imagery which links the world of finance to the nature drama which Cowperwood viewed as a boy. He develops his role-playing technique to defend himself against stronger predators.

Cowperwood's cynical attitude toward art evolves more slowly in the novels. He starts his collection with the ideal of "art . . . for art's sake" (F, p. 145), but, in The Titan, his motives change, and art represents both beauty and investment. After his release from prison, "Cowperwood's taste for art and life and his determination to possess them revived," but he "could not be a slavish admirer of anything, only a princely patron. So he walked and saw, wondering how soon his dreams of grandeur were to be realized."<sup>24</sup> He buys paintings with the idea that ". . . a number will be weeded out eventually . . . as better examples come into the market" (T, p. 283). In The Stoic, art no longer has the connotation of beauty, for it becomes part of his dream of eternal fame in which his house in New York, modeled on a Renaissance palace, will be given to the city as an art museum as a lasting monument to Cowperwood's power. However, this dream is exposed as illusion, for the house and its art collection are sold at an auction to repay

<sup>24</sup> Theodore Dreiser, The Titan (New York: The New American Library, 1965), p. 60; subsequent references to this novel will be cited parenthetically in the text with the code "T".



his numerous debts, leaving "nothing . . . but a tomb."<sup>25</sup> His only true "art" is finance, which is out of harmony with beauty, an art which does not survive him. Thus, his growing cynicism in his search for beauty, through art, is exposed as self-deception.

The third trait of the melodramatic stage tycoon evidences itself in Cowperwood's susceptibility to women, to their sexual attraction and physical beauty, since they have a value to him only as decorations and as conquests. When time diminishes the charm of one of his women, Cowperwood replaces her. His first wife, Lillian, five years his senior, is set aside because she "was no longer what she should be physically and mentally, and that in itself was sufficient to justify his present interest in this girl [Aileen]" (F, p. 122); Aileen, in turn, will be replaced by others, and even Berenice, the woman Cowperwood acknowledges as the most perfect in the world, cannot rely on his loyalty. His susceptibility to women leads to his financial difficulties in Chicago when he seduces the wife and the daughters of three men "of repute and standing in the community" (T, p. 225), who, after they learn of the seductions, incite a public outcry against Cowperwood which costs him public approval, leads to his loss of the necessary franchises to control Chicago's public transportation and utility systems, and forces him to leave in search of more

<sup>25</sup> Theodore Dreiser, The Stoic (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1947), p. 303; subsequent references to this novel will be cited parenthetically in the text with the code "S".

fertile fields for his endeavors. His susceptibility to women proves to be Cowperwood's major weakness.

Because of his ruthless exploitation of business competitors, art, and women, Cowperwood accurately conveys the image of the melodramatic businessman protagonist, and Dreiser's financial titan illustrates the waste of a life built on worldly success as the only value. As Cowperwood suffers each minor setback in his efforts to succeed, he perfects his ability to deceive and, eventually, becomes a victim of his own deception. To define the changes in Cowperwood's attitudes, Dreiser uses such theatrical devices as setting to demonstrate ideals, actors and actresses to show self-deception, the theater as entertainment to reflect false values, and allusions from well-known classical tragedies to expand Cowperwood's personal tragedy.

Setting is the most important device from the theater in The Financier, for Cowperwood ". . . was influenced to a great extent by the things with which he surrounded himself" (F, p. 57). Dreiser states that

the effect of a house . . . on its owner is unmistakable. We think we are individual, separate, above houses and material objects generally; but there is a subtle connection that makes them reflect us quite as much as we reflect them. They lend dignity, subtlety, force, each to the other, and what beauty, or lack of it, there is, is shot back and forth from one to the other as a shuttle in a loom, weaving, weaving. Cut the thread, separate a man from that which is rightfully his own . . . and you will have a peculiar figure (F, pp. 97, 98).

Both owner and house suffer the indifference of fate.

Setting also indicates background. Henry Cowperwood, Frank's father, a bank teller, has provided his family with a "rather conventional three-story house" (F, p. 14). The word "conventional" indicates the middle-class limitations which Frank escapes by rejecting conventional social values, an act symbolized by his attitude toward education: "Grammar was an abomination. Literature silly. Latin was of no use." Frank enjoys "bookkeeping and arithmetic" (F, p. 15). He leaves school at seventeen, and the stock exchange becomes his higher education, an initiation into deception. He studies the techniques, learns the dialogue, and practices the proper facial expressions as he rehearses for his role in the world of finance (F, pp. 40, 41), which he well suits, since he is a "financier by instinct, and all the knowledge that pertained to that great art was as natural to him as the emotions and subtleties of life are to a poet" (F, p. 11). Cowperwood's tragedy develops as he gradually loses his innocence, a process shown in his continual need to provide new settings through which he can display his wealth and his changed social position. Setting also reveals Cowperwood's denial of his natural instincts.

Cowperwood marries Lillian Semple because he convinces himself that he must love her since she is, after all, very rich, but he instinctively recognizes her limitations as he views her setting. "The interior of the house was not as pleasing as he would have it. . . . The pictures were--simply

pictures. There were no books to speak of--the Bible, a few current novels. . . . The china was good--of a delicate pattern. The carpets and wall-paper were too high in key. So it went. Still, the personality of Lillian Semple was worth something. . . . She had a habit of sitting and apparently brooding reflectively at times, but it was not based on any deep thought. . . . Thoroughly conventional, . . . she had settled down to a staid and quiet existence" (F, pp. 43, 44). After their marriage he immediately changes the decor of the house which they now share, but he cannot alter Lillian's personality as easily, and, when her age, delicate health, and conventional attitudes repel him, he rejects her for Aileen. Cowperwood briefly pretends to be loyal to Lillian, whose money he needs to launch himself as an independent stock-broker in an elaborate office which "he saw in his mind's eye [as] a handsome building, fitted with an immense plate-glass window . . . [with a sign] over the door . . . set in bronze letters, Cowperwood & Co." (F, p. 76). When completed, the new office has "the interior . . . finished in highly-polished hardwood. . . . The office safe was made an ornament. . . . One had a sense of reserve and taste pervading the place, and yet it was inestimably prosperous, solid, and assuring" (F, p. 95). The solidity of setting is negated when Cowperwood is caught in a stock market panic; the building merely reflects his determination for success and his delight in wealth.

For Cowperwood, success dictates a new house, built in the Tudor style, to mirror his new impression of himself as a noble lord in the aristocracy of finance, and Cowperwood's father, who has been promoted to a vice-president of the bank which employs him as the result of his son's growing repute, erects a house on an adjoining lot. The two buildings are connected by "a covered passageway" (F, p. 75), a strange umbilical cord which symbolizes the family's dependence on Cowperwood's fame. When he fails, his father's fortunes crumble also, and, ". . . a brilliant sun . . . set on their local scene" (F, p. 370). Cowperwood's new house, in which he enacts the role of ideal husband and father, is the lure which captures Aileen Butler.

Aileen, dissatisfied with the Butler abode, "wished sincerely that her father would build a better home--a mansion --such as those she saw elsewhere, and launch her properly in society" (F, p. 80). Her father, who started his career as a garbage collector and rose to power from political connections, conducts his business from an office in his house, which Cowperwood judges as "somewhat commercial-looking," with "several pictures on the wall--an impossible oil painting, for one thing, dark and gloomy; a canal and barge scene in pink and Nile green for another, some daguerreotypes of relatives and friends . . ." (F, pp. 66, 67), to symbolize the vulgarity of the Butler family. This "vulgarity" is Cowperwood's later justification for his disloyalty to Aileen, for

he feels that she handicaps him socially. Her social ambitions are shown through Dreiser's description of her bedroom, a room which is ". . . a study in the foibles of an eager and ambitious mind . . . full of clothes, beautiful things for all occasions--jewelry--which she had small opportunity to wear--shoes, stockings, lingerie, laces . . . perfumes and cosmetics. . . . She was not very orderly, and she loved lavishness of display; and her curtains, hangings, table ornaments, and pictures inclined to gorgeousness, which did not go well with the rest of the house" (F, p. 81). Aileen retains her love of costume and display throughout the trilogy, and she earns her new social setting in a bedroom, Cowperwood's, as his mistress and eventually his second wife, only to discover that the elaborate house which she envisioned is no guarantee of happiness.

Aileen accompanies Cowperwood to Chicago, after his release from prison, a westward movement toward a new start in life, and this city serves as an appropriate stage for Cowperwood's expanding financial dreams.

The world was young here. Life was doing something new. . . . This singing flame of a city, this all-America, this poet in chaps and buckskin, this rude, raw Titan, this Burns of a city. By its shimmering lake it lay, a king of shreds and patches, a maundering yokel with an epic in its mouth, a tramp, a hobo among cities, with the grip of Caesar in its mind, the dramatic forces of Euripides in its soul. A very bard of a city, this, singing of high deeds and high hopes, its heavy brogans buried deep in the mire of circumstances (T, pp. 12, 13).

Its youth promises enthusiastic reception of new leaders who

plan to conquer it, and Cowperwood, to overcome the effect of the "heavy brogans" of his past and of his flamboyant Irish wife, builds a new house, this time modeled on a French chateau, which provides a veneer of culture to obscure his background. In the housewarming scene, designed to introduce the Cowperwoods into Chicago society, Dreiser links the three major interests of the businessman protagonist--art, beauty, beautiful women. The central attraction is Cowperwood's art collection, graced by a portrait of Aileen which is "a little showy, as every thing [sic] related to her was" (T, p. 68), but Aileen is ignored by the people she hopes to impress. The magnificent house proves of little use socially, and the Cowperwoods, when they move to New York, will repeat the same mistake in that city with a house that is "neither a modified Gothic . . . nor a conventionalized Norman-French" but an "Italian palace of medieval or Renaissance origin" (T, p. 398), an appropriate house for a financial king. But it too fails as a social asset. Aileen lives there alone since she will not divorce Cowperwood, who claims to love Berenice, and must content herself with the appearance of "wife," a masquerade for the benefit of society (S, p. 35).

Theatrical decor, increasingly more elaborate, indicates that Cowperwood's goals are conceived by society's standards, which provide inadequate criteria for lasting value, evident when, after Cowperwood's first defeat in Philadelphia, his house and goods are sold at an auction; his fine Chicago and New York mansions will meet the same fate after his death, his

ultimate defeat. All that remains of his dreams is an elaborate mausoleum, "a gray, austere, and northern version of a Greek temple" (S, p. 272), with a few mourners to visit the tomb. Cowperwood, who envisions himself as a financial god, proves to be mortal, and his "temple" serves only as an ironic mirror of the worthlessness of material goals in that the cold, gray walls resemble the snow-covered walls of the prison which "stretched . . . its gray length . . . and looked as lonely and forbidding as a prison should [F, p. 381]7. . . . No friends were permitted to accompany him beyond the outer gate" (F, p. 383).<sup>26</sup>

Cowperwood's imprisonment is the most important dramatic climax in the trilogy, for, from the moment when his head is covered with a gray sack, the symbolic death of his youthful identity, deception becomes a key motif in his story. The less-experienced financier has served as a scapegoat since he is no more guilty than many of the men who accused him, and from his defeat, Cowperwood learns the value of deception as protective covering. Throughout the first act, The Financier, Dreiser applies the word "instinct" most frequently to his central character, but in the last two novels, he describes his protagonist with the words "deception," "appearance," "dramatics," or "games," signals of the businessman's growing skill as an actor. Dreiser warns of Cowperwood's fate at the end of the first book when he parodies the witches' scene from Shakespeare's Macbeth.

<sup>26</sup> John J. McAleer, Theodore Dreiser, An Introduction and Interpretation (New York: Barnes & Noble, Inc., 1968), p. 106.



The three witches that hailed Macbeth upon the blasted heath might in turn have called to Cowperwood, "Hail to you, Frank Cowperwood, master of a great railway system! . . . builder of a priceless mansion! . . . patron of arts and possessor of endless riches! You shall be famed hereafter." But . . . they would have lied, for in the glory was also the ashes. . . . To have and not to have. . . . Brilliant society that shone in a mirage, yet locked its doors; love that eluded as a will-o'-the-wisp and died in the dark. "Hail to you, Frank Cowperwood, master and no master, prince of a world of dreams whose reality was disillusion." (F, p. 448).

Cowperwood, like Macbeth, is destined to be destroyed by his ambitions. Within the action of The Titan, Dreiser stresses the world of illusion through the theatrical imagery, and Cowperwood becomes the source of his own tragedy through his choice of disguises, evident from the moment he is introduced to Chicago society as "a man who had apparently been dragged down to the very bottom of things, his face forced into the mire, and now he was coming up again strong, hopeful, urgent" (T, p. 20). This is a restatement of the drama of the grouper's ability to camouflage himself and a reminder of the lobster who hides in the mud until he can leap up after the squid.

Cowperwood becomes a successful actor because he cleverly hides his true interests when he hires others to act in his name. He demands absolute loyalty from his agents while he deliberately deceives his opponents with "a line of subtle suggestion from some seemingly disinterested party" (T, p. 169), a method which works when the opponents are split into factions through their greed, a device which is "just as good as mortgaging the soul" (T, p. 168). Cowperwood, like a combination

of Faustus and Mephistopheles, not only sells his own soul with the deception he practices, but he collects the souls of others to achieve his power; however, like the grandeur for which Faustus bargains, Cowperwood's eminence proves to be worthless. Far more important to the impact of the novels is the fact that the society of the Gilded Age is accused of villainy in that its admiration of such men as Cowperwood makes it willing to sell integrity, and "Cowperwood was probably destined to become a significant figure. Raw, glittering force, however compounded of the cruel Machiavel-  
lianism . . . seems to exercise a profound attraction for the conventionally rooted. Your cautious citizen of average means, looking out through the eye of his dull world of seeming fact, is often the first to forgive or condone the grim butcheries of theory by which the strong rise" (T, p. 175). Cowperwood easily attains the franchises he needs to control Chicago's gas company and its elevated train system by bribing elected city officials, and "the rank and file of the city, ignorant of the tricks which were constantly being employed in politics to effect one end or another . . . little knew the pawns they were in the game" (T, p. 166). In addition, society's codes create the necessity to deceive, as evident in Cowperwood's ability to control the politicians. Chaffee Thayer Sluss, Chicago's mayor, and one of the socially-approved who "lead dual lives," is vulnerable because "he claims . . . that religion was essential and purifying," but ignores "undue

profits, misrepresentation, and the like" in his business; although he says that "God was God, morality was superior . . . [and] one should be better than his neighbor, or pretend to be" (T, pp. 296, 297), Sluss has a weakness for women which makes him susceptible to blackmail. Ironically, Cowperwood, too, will be forced to comply from the same weakness, but, as a master of deception, he avoids complete disaster. Despite the villainous caricature of him in the Chicago newspapers as "a thief, a black mask over his eyes, and as a seducer, throttling Chicago, the fair maiden," Cowperwood attains fame as a national and international philanthropist (T, p. 472), a reputation which seems to fulfill his desire for fame, but which Dreiser warns is illusion. He brings back the witches from Macbeth at the end of the second novel. "What thought engendered the spirit of Circe, or gave to Helen the lust of tragedy? What lit the walls of Troy? Or prepared the woes of an Andromache? By what demon counsel was the fate of Hamlet prepared? And why did the weird sisters plan ruin to the murderous Scot? Double, double toil and trouble;/ Fire burn and cauldron bubble" (T, p. 501). Cowperwood's dreams can lead only to tragedy. Helen of Troy is Faustus' last demonstration of his power, a reminder that Faustus is not saved but is dragged, screaming in agony, into the mouth of Hell. Cowperwood's tomb, a monument to his affair with Aileen, whose father engineered Cowperwood's first failure in Philadelphia, corresponds to the walls of Troy, a monument to the uncontrolled

passion of Paris and Helen. Cowperwood, who considers himself a great leader in the realm of finance, is destined to die.

The Helens who destroy Cowperwood are actresses, either professionally or by innate ability. Rita Sohlberg, the first who becomes his mistress, "could take an old straw-hat form, a ribbon, a feather, or a rose, and with an innate artistry of feeling, turn it into a bit of millinery which somehow was just the effective thing for her" (T, p. 108), and she is charmed by Cowperwood "one evening at the theater" (T, p. 118). Their liaison lasts until Aileen uncovers the affair and savagely attacks Rita, "animal fashion, striking, scratching, choking, tearing her visitor's hat from her head, ripping the laces from her neck" (T, p. 138), and Rita loses her appeal when she is deprived of her proper costume. The second love of Cowperwood's life is Stephanie Platow, a professional actress who muses "soulfully--conscious (fully) that she was musing soulfully" (T, p. 188), who is "an artist, and as formless and unstable as water" (T, p. 188). Cowperwood is attracted to Stephanie when he sees her perform as Electra, daughter of Agamemnon, leveller of the Trojan walls.

However, it is Stephanie who rejects Cowperwood, frequently deceiving him with other men and pleading forgiveness, at first, with "the voice she used in her best scenes on the stage" (T, p. 196). Stephanie, too much like Cowperwood, has "the strange feeling that affection was not necessarily identified with physical loyalty . . ." (T, p. 206). Warren points

out that Stephanie, since she sees the business titan as a fellow artist, recognizes that they both view love as an illusion, to which he adds, "the aesthetic commitment of the actress . . . is to the role and the scene, nothing more, and each role, each scene, is its own validation,"<sup>27</sup> a statement which can be applied to Cowperwood's rationalization of his actions, a proof of his self-deception when he feels injured as the victim of his own tactics.

Dreiser's protagonist suffers only briefly from Stephanie's rejection of him; he turns to Cecily Haguenin, daughter of a powerful publisher, and to Florence Cochrane, daughter of a man who is a rival in the business of transportation. Florence reads "Marlowe and Jonson," which recalls the Faustus' image and expands it to include, possibly, the greedy Volpone. Cowperwood's next lover is Caroline Hand, wife of a third rival, who becomes the aggressor with an invitation to play tennis. Such references to plays and to games again reinforce the idea that Cowperwood chooses his own fate, for Haguenin and Cochrane, the fathers, and Hand, the husband, become ". . . quite the most dangerous and forceful of all his Chicago enemies" (T, p. 243). Cowperwood outmaneuvers his opponents with another deception, the gift of three hundred thousand dollars to a university for a telescope and an observatory. As a result of his donation, New York bankers willingly loan him money to rebuild his enterprises

<sup>27</sup> Robert Penn Warren, Homage to Dreiser on the Centennial of His Birth (New York: Random House, 1971), pp. 82, 83.

since they reason that no man in financial straits could make so magnanimous a gesture. However, Cowperwood reveals his changed character in his obvious manipulation to achieve such a "universally advantageous" goal, because, with this gift, he knows that "the whole world would know of him in a day" (T, pp. 337, 338).

Cowperwood's deceptive role as "public benefactor" (T, p. 338), parallels his role as guardian-benefactor to Berenice Fleming, an actress by innate ability. Again, the titan shows that he denies truth, for though he knows that Berenice's mother is the owner of a house of assignation, Berenice, to him, appears "a lady born, if there ever was one" (T, p. 313). Berenice, deeply conscious of her sexuality and of her natural acting ability, thrives on "appearance" and she reminds her guardian "in the least degree of Stephanie" (T, p. 327).

. . . she moved always with a feline grace that was careless, superior, sinuous, and yet the acme of harmony and a rhythmic flow of lines. One of her mess hall tricks . . . was to walk with six plates and a water pitcher all gracefully poised on the top of her head. . . . Another was to put her arms behind her and with a rush imitate the Winged Victory. . . . She was superior . . . and her fellow students gathered to hear her talk, to hear her sing, declaim, or imitate. She was deeply, dramatically, urgently conscious of her personality. . . . One of her chief delights was to walk alone in her room . . . to pose and survey her body, and dance in some naive, graceful, airy Greek way . . . (T, pp. 319, 320).

Cowperwood decides, when Berenice is fourteen, that he must have her, ignoring all warnings of her actions because the girl, younger than any of his conquests, is, apparently, an attempt on Cowperwood's part, to recapture his waning youth;

his "humanitarianism" is always a ruse.

Cowperwood shows that he has lost his one redeeming nobility--his instinctive response to beauty--when, perplexed by Berenice's daughterly manner, he considers a deliberate revelation of her mother's past, unknown to the girl because she has been sheltered in a school, in order to force her submission. "He felt he must have her, even at the cost of inflicting upon her a serious social injury" (T, p. 407), but he is spared the necessity of a forced exposure. The opera, La Bohème, figures prominently in the action, for after attending the performance, while dining in a restaurant, Cowperwood, Berenice, Mrs. Carter (her mother), and Braxmar (her suitor) are accosted by a drunken reveler who recognizes Mrs. Carter. The deceptions of Cowperwood and the tragic story of the opera add dimension to this scene as the illusion on the stage combines with the deceptions practiced by the characters. Cowperwood, "now playing the role of disinterested host and avuncular mentor" (T, p. 407), becomes "like a true Mephistopheles" (T, p. 408), who mentally plots how he might ruin Braxmar, a plan which he hides behind an expressed interest in the young man. He comments, about the opera, "'That makeshift studio may have no connection with the genuine professional artist, but it's very representative of life,'" a comment which is a verbal advance to Berenice who is an amateur sculptor, and Berenice, as if emerging "from a dream," remarks "'Life is really finest when it's tragic, anyhow'" (T, p. 408), a shallow

statement from a girl who has been shielded with lies from all suffering. Only Mrs. Carter disliked the opera; "'we have enough drama in real life'" (T, p. 409). Berenice's fall is established since Cowperwood's feigned geniality will seduce Berenice into following her mother's example, and her tragedy begins when a "drunken rake" places "a genial and yet condescending hand on Mrs. Carter's bare shoulder" (T, p. 409). The elated Cowperwood seems doomed to disappointment when Braxmar, who does not abandon his courtship, proposes to Berenice, but she will not accept the younger man since she acknowledges that Cowperwood must be repaid. "An artist in all the graces of sex--histrionic, plastic, many-faceted--Berenice . . ." finds that "life had sad, even ugly facts" (T, p. 415), and she resolves to repay Cowperwood. However, Berenice, in her recognition of reality, is deterred by her guardian from a commitment to truth when he pretends that she can choose to remain as his daughter: "'I love you, Berenice, but I will make it a fatherly affection from now on. When I die, I will put you in my will'" (T, p. 424). Berenice makes one attempt to remain independent when she conceives "a dance series of her own" (T, p. 450) and makes "one slight investigation of those realms that govern professional theatrical experience." She is discouraged by ". . . this make-believe world! The crudeness! The effrontery! The materiality! The sensuality! . . . How could one rise and sustain an individual dignity and control in such a world as this?" (T, p. 450). She chooses to



retain her amateur status, performing only for Cowperwood's benefit, rejecting one form of illusion only to submit to another.

Cowperwood's illusory world grows more threatening in the final act of his drama, for, in The Stoic, the actresses who dominate his life--Aileen, who learns to act; Berenice, who is a natural actress; and Lorna Maris, who is a professional dancer--become extensions of the three weird sisters who warn Macbeth (and Cowperwood) of the folly reaped by ambition.

Aileen, coached by Bruce Tollifer, a disgraced member of a once aristocratic southern family, finally reduced to living off the generosity of an actress, uses his knowledge of social graces to teach Aileen, a willing pupil; and to display her new accomplishments, Aileen arranges a dinner party in her husband's honor, a party which reveals her as a prophetess. The main attractions at the affair are Grelizan, who presents a parody of the pretentious social codes, and is more attractive than the business tycoons, nobility, and highly-placed ladies at the dinner, and a party game, as part of which, each guest is given an ice which holds a toy balloon, containing another toy which prophesies the future. Cowperwood receives "the key to the city of London" (S, p. 161), which proves worthless for he dies before gaining control of the city. Tollifer, who receives "a small roulette wheel with the indicator at zero" (S, p. 161), is playing that game when another guest at the party maliciously reports to Aileen that Tollifer's attentions to her have been

arranged by her husband. She dismisses Tollifer and questions Cowperwood who "lie[s]" with the air of one who had never told anything but the truth," and Aileen wants to believe "this bit of acting" (S, pp. 163, 164). She later achieves a small bit of revenge when she sends Berenice a newspaper clipping which gossips about Cowperwood's attachment to Lorna Maris, his grandniece. Aileen, like the witches who prophesy Macbeth's doom, accidentally predicts Cowperwood's failure and creates, with her feigned credulity, his feeling of false security.

Lorna, the second witch, aggressively approaches Cowperwood, who returns briefly to America to borrow money, and she introduces herself as his niece. Cowperwood seduces her at their first meeting, an incestuous union, which is shocking, but not surprising, in view of the fact that Cowperwood, as a "father guardian," has already seduced his daughter, Berenice. The incest theme runs throughout The Stoic as proof that he has been corrupted by his pursuit of illusory goals. Lorna displays her role as a witch when Cowperwood visits the theater to see her dance in a "silken clown costume," an echo of Grelizan, and her performance dramatizes the theme, "the bogeyman . . . , might catch you if you didn't watch out!" For her second dance, Lorna wears "a slip of white chiffon" in a dance which conveys "to the utmost the abandon of a bacchante" (S, p. 170), a dress which appropriately fits Cowperwood's temple-like tomb. Admitting Lorna is a poor actress, Cowperwood, bewitched by her charm, ignores all warnings of danger and stays with her until

he becomes alarmed by Berenice's strange silence. Of all the women, Berenice has the most powerful hold on him.

Berenice labels herself as a witch (S, p. 97), and, in a very early scene in the last novel, she builds a replica of Cowperwood in snow, an omen which foreshadows Aileen's ices. Cowperwood sees his statue at dusk, illuminated by "the last rays of a blood-red sun" (S, p. 58), a scene that recalls the blood-bathed walls of Macbeth's fire-illuminated castle, which contains the body of his king, murdered to fulfill the prophecy of the sisters. Amused by Berenice's sculpture, Cowperwood calls her a witch while Berenice destroys the figure, saying, "'See, I made you, and now I'm unmaking you!'" (S, p. 58). He insists that Berenice, as well as Lorna, has "cast a spell" over him (S, p. 195), and, thus, both women are witches.

Dreiser, through the theatrical imagery which he uses in The Stoic, presents Cowperwood's greatest absorption into the world of illusion, but Cowperwood does not live to enjoy the results of his ambitious dreams. He has changed, through deception, from a man who moves "pawns" to a "master chess player," (S, p. 199), but not even Cowperwood can manipulate time. He dreams of immortality and discovers that death is no respecter of social position, financial power, or money. Dreiser's recurring references to actresses and to the theater in this novel serve to illustrate the worthlessness of Cowperwood's illusions, for, just as the witches have predicted, his empire crumbles when he dies of Bright's disease, Dreiser's pun on the

sun and fire imagery earlier applied to his protagonist.

The seemingly unnatural spiritual conversion at the end of the novel, in which Berenice rejects illusion to seek reality in mystic philosophy, draws most critical attacks on the novel. After Cowperwood's death, Berenice goes to India in an effort to find the answer to the meaning of life. Swanberg speculates that Helen Dreiser wrote the "bizarre ending" since Dreiser's original plan was to end the novel on an "ironical note stressing the vanity of human effort and the futility of success."<sup>28</sup> Dreiser died before he could finish the book, but, in light of the ending of The Bulwark, published just before Dreiser resumed work on The Stoic, the author may have planned a redemption and salvation similar to the one which he created for the hero of The Bulwark. Cowperwood totally rejects Christianity in The Financier, a faith which he calls a way to control the weak through fear, and he respects only art, beauty, and money, which Cowperwood says must be looked on "as a shrine" (T, p. 401). At the end of The Titan, Berenice becomes "nirvana" to Cowperwood (T, p. 500), a possible foreshadowing of her ultimate search for heaven within the Hindu religion. When he describes her, Wagner calls Berenice the embodiment of Cowperwood's untheological creed in that she mirrors the shrines which Cowperwood acknowledges: money trains her; she has natural beauty; she

<sup>28</sup> Swanberg, p. 518. Helen Dreiser, pp. 150-154, recounts her interest in oriental philosophy and claims that Dreiser was enchanted with her new faith.

satisfies him sexually, and she is an artist.<sup>29</sup> From the beginning pages of The Stoic, Berenice seeks a faith. She visits churches first "to dream over the simple architecture" (S, p. 19), and later, to discover "a reason or excuse for life" (S, p. 137), which she finds within the oriental philosophy, and she learns what Cowperwood never understands, that a man never truly owns anything except his body, and even this possession is temporary. All material objects are illusions which destroy man's natural dignity. Berenice uses her inheritance to build a children's hospital to commemorate Cowperwood's name, and this act, though an expression of her spiritual change, is the event which weakens the tragedy, whether the ending was written by Dreiser or by his wife. Since Dreiser, after so carefully paralleling Cowperwood with Macbeth and Faustus, gives Cowperwood his dream of immortality with this hospital, the ending changes tragedy to melodrama, for Cowperwood is "saved!" and such an ending negates the impressions of Cowperwood which have dominated the novels. Cowperwood, like Faustus, should have ended his drama doomed to eternal oblivion. Cowperwood has been a "superman in his own estimation who has been revealed as a failure as a man: "How long had he struggled and fought--for what? Wealth, power, luxury, influence, social position? Where were they now, the aspirations and dreams of achievement that so haunted and drove Frank Cowperwood?" (S, p. 310); this thought should

<sup>29</sup> Vern Wagner, "The Maligned Style of Theodore Dreiser," Western Humanities Review, XIX (Spring, 1965), 177.

end the trilogy if Cowperwood is to demonstrate the futility of ambitious pursuit of materialism. Until the final pages, Dreiser's use of theatrical imagery--setting, stage, actors and actresses, and allusions to classical tragedies--provides an interpretation of Cowperwood's failure as the result of self-delusion, as the protagonist changes from a man of instinct and spiritual insight into beauty to a financial titan who sacrifices his instincts on an altar of illusions. Cowperwood should not be redeemed by a love which he neither understands nor acknowledges.

#### IV. THE MOVIES AS A SYMBOL OF DREAMS; AN AMERICAN TRAGEDY

In An American Tragedy, completed in 1925, Theodore Dreiser develops Clyde Griffiths' tragic pursuit of the American dream of success through the most popular entertainment medium of Clyde's lifetime--the movies, a celluloid, artificial world which achieves an appearance of reality through optical illusion.<sup>1</sup> Dreiser's protagonist conceives his dream of a worthwhile life from ideals reflected on the screen, idolizes women who most imitate the dress and mannerisms of popular movie stars, and, with a camera, accidentally kills the girl who loves him and is most like him in background and aspirations. As the star of a dramatically sensationalized trial, Clyde is convicted by the evidence of his camera, from the photographs he took with it, and through the exposure of the lies in his well-rehearsed testimony. As a result, Clyde's dreams of paradise turn into a nightmare vision of the electric chair in which he dies, still confused by his fate, unaware that illusions have destroyed him.

<sup>1</sup> A. R. Fulton, Motion Pictures, The Development of an Art From Silent Films to the Age of Television (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1960), pp. 3, 4; Fulton labels movies as the only form of art to arise solely from the machine age, and he describes them as a process whereby frames of film move too rapidly for the human eye to discern changes, and the resulting optical illusion creates the impression of life. Gerald Mast, A Short History of the Movies (New York: Pegasus, Divn. of The Bobbs-Merrill Co., Inc., 1971), p. 18, also describes movies as optical illusion, and Edward Wagenknecht, The Movies in the Age of Innocence (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1962), p. 6, states that ". . . a rapid-fire hail of images . . . left considerable room open for individuality of interpretation."

Critical opinion is much less divided about Dreiser's artistic achievement in An American Tragedy; it is judged to be Dreiser's best novel.<sup>2</sup> Flanagan, for example, cites Dreiser's strength in An American Tragedy as his "narrative power . . . to sustain a long detailed story," one which has the "cumulative power of drama"<sup>3</sup> in its three sections, the first revealing Clyde's socially and materially impoverished background, which ends with his flight from a murder scene; the second dealing with Clyde's relocation in Lycurgus, which ends with Roberta's murder and Clyde's second flight from the law; and the third section exposing his pursuit, his capture, trial, and execution for a crime which was carelessly planned and accidentally achieved. Thus, each segment of the novel contains a death and a flight, and each reflects the action from the proceeding part, a dramatic balance in structure which heightens the impact of the tragedy. Critics interpret An American Tragedy as Dreiser's most forceful expression of social criticism since no social institution adequately prepares Clyde for his failure, and society manufactures the false standards which mislead Clyde, even to the point of causing his death. The immature youth partially disproves this interpretation in view of the fact that he is responsible

<sup>2</sup> Randall Stewart, "Dreiser and the Naturalistic Heresy," Virginia Quarterly Review, XXXIV (1958), 100-116, is one of the few exceptions; his discussion, which attacks naturalism as an invalid philosophy, describes Dreiser as a clumsy writer and uses An American Tragedy as an example of the failure of naturalism.

<sup>3</sup> John T. Flanagan, "Dreiser's Style in An American Tragedy," Texas Studies in Literature and Language, VII (Autumn, 1965), 285.



for his actions, but he fails to understand his punishment because society has never labeled his ambitions as criminal. According to Cunliffe, "everybody and nobody is to blame . . . the moral and social codes of Clyde's America misrepresent the truths of human nature,"<sup>4</sup> and Gerber concurs with this view when he calls Clyde's tragedy part of the "patently false but widely accepted notion that an ambitious boy may rise to wealth with comparative ease . . . a primal cause of such crimes."<sup>5</sup> In addition, Clarence Darrow, a famous lawyer, interprets Clyde's fate as the result of the influence of his society which sets the standards which mislead him,<sup>6</sup> and many critics, when they discuss Clyde as the new American hero, the white collar worker, point to society as a source of Clyde's corruption, for he believes that menial work is beneath him and

<sup>4</sup> Marcus Cunliffe, The Literature of the United States (Baltimore: Penguin Books, Inc., 1967), p. 222.

<sup>5</sup> Philip L. Gerber, Theodore Dreiser (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1964), p. 129; among critics who agree with this view are Robert H. Elias, Theodore Dreiser, Apostle of Nature (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1970), p. 224; Charles Campbell, "An American Tragedy, Or, Death in the Woods," Modern Fiction Studies, XV (Summer, 1969), 257; Irving Howe, "Afterword," An American Tragedy (New York: New American Library, Inc., 1964), pp. 822, 823; Charles Shapiro, Theodore Dreiser: Our Bitter Patriot (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1962), p. 94; Herbert J. Muller, Modern Fiction, A Study of Values (New York: Funk & Wagnalls Co., 1937), pp. 214, 215; Carl Van Doren, The American Novel, 1789-1939 (New York: The MacMillan Co., 1966), p. 258.

<sup>6</sup> Abe C. Ravitz, Clarence Darrow and the American Literary Tradition (n. p.: The Press of Western Reserve University, 1962), pp. 34, 35; Helen Dreiser, My Life With Dreiser (New York: World Publishing Co., 1951), p. 163.

pursues success to enhance his false image of himself.<sup>7</sup> Clyde, in effect, chooses to follow false visions of instant success, a choice which Dreiser defines through his metaphor of the movies, a modern form of drama for which Dreiser expressed great contempt. Lehan states that Dreiser "was particularly hard on Hollywood, where he claimed the producers and directors held the new actresses in sexual captivity, 'while the movies themselves titillated the American public with vapid plots free of any social message or moral problems.'"<sup>8</sup> Clyde Griffiths' tragedy results from his illusion that life, as portrayed by such films, is reality.<sup>9</sup> Dreiser's imagery indicts motion pictures as a deliberate corruption of impressionable minds since Clyde, while still vulnerable and inexperienced, conceives his fantasy of life as a paradise from ideals derived from the films, and Dreiser provides many clues which indicate that the world of the movies directly influences his hero. Two elementary clues which point to a parallel between Clyde's

<sup>7</sup> Gerber, p. 134; Campbell, p. 254; Kenneth S. Lynn, The Dream of Success (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1955), p. 61; Ellen Moers, Two Dreisers (New York: The Viking Press, 1969), p. 288; she calls Clyde "the American Everyman."

<sup>8</sup> Richard Lehan, Theodore Dreiser, His World and His Novels (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1969), p. 174; interior quotation from the San Francisco Journal, February 4, 1921.

<sup>9</sup> Ironically, the first of Dreiser's novels to be filmed was An American Tragedy, and he fought to have it removed from the theaters. The most recent version is A Place in the Sun, which George Barbarow discusses in "Dreiser's Place on the Screen," Hudson Review, V (Summer, 1952), 290-294, in which he states that the new film also distorts Dreiser's social theme from "the moral epic" of the novel to "crime does not pay." Barbarow judges the movie as "a pathetic misreading of the novel" which reduces "literature . . . to a pulp."

life and the film industry are apparent in the fact that Clyde is born in the year that films become successful, and in Dreiser's insistence that Clyde's eyes "absorb illusory visions." The parallels are so striking and obvious that they can hardly be ignored, especially when Moers notes that Clyde's eyes constitute the most important symbol in the book,<sup>10</sup> and Wagenknecht says that the world of silent films seemed "to have required far more active and uninterrupted concentration than sound films do,"<sup>11</sup> a statement which makes sight important to imagination. Dreiser introduces Clyde's susceptibility early in the novel: "this youth . . . brought a more vivid and intelligent imagination to things, and was constantly thinking of how he might better himself if he had a chance; places to which he might go, things he might see, and how differently he might live."<sup>12</sup> Clyde, even as a boy, is concerned with appearances and worries about the shabby impression of his parents' missionary work "in the eyes of others" (p. 14). When Clyde reaches sixteen, he obtains what he considers his first important job, ". . . a place as an assistant to a soda water clerk in one of the cheaper drug stores of the city, which adjoined a theater and enjoyed not a little patronage . . ." from audiences, and Clyde attends

<sup>10</sup> Moers, p. 230.

<sup>11</sup> Wagenknecht, p. 6.

<sup>12</sup> Theodore Dreiser, An American Tragedy (New York: New American Library, 1964), p. 14; subsequent references to this novel will appear parenthetically in the text.

the theater as often as he can, ". . . a form of diversion which he had to conceal from his parents, but he felt he had a right to go" (p. 27). The movies, which captivate Clyde very early in his life, continue to exert a strong influence on him.

Dreiser's choice of Clyde's birthdate as 1900 becomes significant in light of the history of the film industry. Before 1900, films exploited the novelty of movement, but the public soon lost interest in such fare as "Fred Ott's Sneeze" or "The John Price-May Irwin Kiss," and Mast cites 1900 as the year in which the industry turned to stage melodramas to revive waning interest in films.<sup>13</sup> Clyde dies in 1922, the year in which Dreiser left Hollywood, bitterly denouncing the immaturity of attitudes and the false social values in films. The date, 1900, otherwise has no bearing on the events in the novel except in the correlation between the movies and Dreiser's use of them. Dreiser conceived Clyde's story from a newspaper account of the bludgeoning and drowning of Grace Billy Brown, the pregnant lover of Chester Gillette, who was executed for his crime on March 31, 1908,<sup>14</sup> many years before Clyde dies for the murder of Roberta Alden. Dreiser chose his fictional dates for his own purpose--to display the destruction of Clyde by the illusions which he forms from the movies.

<sup>13</sup> Mast, pp. 38, 43.

<sup>14</sup> The fullest accounts of the Gillette-Brown murder appear in Moers, pp. 196-200, and Lehan, pp. 143-151.

In 1916, when Clyde gets his important job and when the world of the films first attains importance for Clyde, the most influential and innovative film maker in Hollywood was D. W. Griffith, and audiences flocked to his productions, which began with the words "D. W. Griffith presents,"<sup>15</sup> an advertisement almost identical with "Mr. Frohman presents," the theatrical agent whom Dreiser calls "a master of middle-class sweetness and sentimentality" (ABAM, p. 177). The name Clyde Griffiths, with the final "d" sound of the first name and the almost identical last name, hardly seems coincidental since Griffith's career and his controversial position in Hollywood, frequently aired in public, would have, in all likelihood, attracted Dreiser's attention while he lived in that city. In addition to the similarity of names, many of Griffith's cinematic techniques resemble devices used by Dreiser in An American Tragedy, for both men feature dancing as a seduction symbol and both use city streets as indicators of mood and atmosphere; Griffith originated the use of full-size sets as realistic movie backgrounds to accomplish the sense of domination of a character by setting. In another parallel of techniques, both Dreiser and Griffith include many "extras," characters who enter only briefly into the action but add dimension to the stories.<sup>16</sup> Dreiser, for example,

<sup>15</sup> Wagenknecht, pp. 78, 79; Fulton, p. 76, speculates that Griffith was, because of his start in the legitimate theater, partially responsible for the introduction of melodramas as screen plots.

<sup>16</sup> Fulton, pp. 44, 101-109.

has one hundred and twenty-seven witnesses appear at Clyde's trial to testify against him. Several additional similarities, which will be developed later in this chapter, can be found between the novel and Griffith's films.

Mast states that Griffith used city streets as a "barometer of the film's emotional and social tensions,"<sup>17</sup> and Dreiser, in his development of Clyde's story, also presents the city atmosphere as intensifying Clyde's distress. Gelfant observes that his "protagonists submit to the city: they learn to want that which it obviously values--money, fashion, and ease." She adds that urban settings in An American Tragedy symbolize Clyde's sense of isolation from the things which he covets since the city walls tower over him as a threat.<sup>18</sup> The novel opens with a view of Clyde and his parents, his sisters, and his brother, anonymous in their setting, identified only as "a little band of six," who are an insignificant part of "the great thoroughfare . . . a canyon-like way, threaded by throngs and vehicles and various lines of cars" (p. 7), all of which awe twelve-year-old Clyde, who ". . . seemed keenly observant and decidedly more sensitive [and] appeared indeed to resent and even to suffer from the position in which he found himself" (p. 9). Thus, Dreiser indicates that he, like D. W.

<sup>17</sup> Mast, p. 85.

<sup>18</sup> Blanche H. Gelfant, The American City Novel (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1954), pp. 11, 15; most critics point out that walls, especially city walls, symbolize the negative effects of heredity and environment on Clyde.

Griffith, is aware of the definite influence of the urban setting upon a character. Other camera tricks, devised by Griffith and applied by Dreiser, are the closeup, either on a character or an object to heighten tension, the use of mirrors to reflect a character's desires; a "dream balloon" which graphically displays a character's interior thoughts; and "iris shots" wherein a scene begins in a small circle and gradually spreads out to the full screen.<sup>19</sup> Moers specifically cites closeup camera technique as part of the symbolic concentration on Clyde's eyes.<sup>20</sup> Mirror imagery, movies in Clyde's mind, and doors which become "iris shots" into Clyde's paradises are Dreiser's literary adaptations of Griffith's filming devices. In addition to these effects, Dreiser, in An American Tragedy and in his autobiography, Dawn, includes references to Intolerance, Griffith's most popular film in 1916, the year in which movies become most important to Clyde. Dreiser does not record that he saw the picture, but one interesting parallel from the film appears in Dawn. Four separate episodes in the film explore religious and social intolerance, and the linking theme between segments is a recurring image of a woman rocking a cradle and three Fates or Muses dancing in the background,<sup>21</sup> images which Dreiser recreates in the introductory pages of his life history as

<sup>19</sup> Mast, p. 49; Fulton, p. 99; Wagenknecht, p. 92.

<sup>20</sup> Moers, p. 232; this thesis will not treat the closeup technique.

<sup>21</sup> Fulton, p. 106.

the myth told by his mother of the prophecy of his future success in the arts. That Dreiser was quite capable of borrowing Griffith's muses for his own account is further illustrated by his obvious plagiarism of almost thirty pages of newspaper accounts of Gillette's trial and verbatim copies of Grace Brown's letters.<sup>22</sup> In addition, one of the four plots in Intolerance depicts the plight of a twentieth-century boy who is "falsely convicted of murder," and presents the most fully developed example of Griffith's theme, "the constant triumph of injustice over justice."<sup>23</sup> Dreiser's murderer is also "falsely accused" since Clyde feels that Roberta's death is an accident, and the evidence which is most damning to his testimony are the two hairs, identified as Roberta's, which are discovered in the lens of Clyde's camera, and which were deliberately planted to convict him.

In Burton Raleigh [a detective] there existed as sly a person as might have been found . . . and soon he found himself meditating on how easy it would be, supposing irrefragable evidence were necessary . . . to take from the head of Roberta two or three hairs and thread them between the sides of the camera. . . . And after due and secret meditation, he actually deciding [sic] to visit the Lutz Brothers morgue and secure a few threads of Roberta's hair. For he himself decided that Clyde had murdered the girl in cold blood. And . . . was such a young, silent, vain crook as this to be allowed to escape? (p. 575).

This deceptive evidence, the exposure of Clyde's lies, and religious intolerance combine to convict Dreiser's protagonist,

<sup>22</sup> W. A. Swanberg, Dreiser (New York: Charles Scribners' Sons, 1965), p. 294.

<sup>23</sup> Mast, p. 88.



evident as Clyde's lawyer advises, "'I don't know whether you're at all religious--but whether you are or not, they hold services here in the jail . . . attend them regularly. . . . For this is a religious community and I want you to make as good an impression as you can'" (p. 597). The jury which decides Clyde's fate is "with one exception, all religious, if not moral, and all convinced of Clyde's guilt before ever they sat down, but still because of their almost unanimous conception of themselves as fair and open-minded men . . . convinced that they could pass fairly and impartially on the facts presented to them" (pp. 638, 639). The events in the novel provoke the same response to justice which Griffith projects in his film.

As further evidence of the trial as a mockery of justice, Dreiser reveals the district attorney's and the defense lawyer's political aspirations which will be advanced by the publicity of the trial. Before Mason's first address to the court, he thinks, "Were not the eyes of all the citizens of the United States upon him? He believed so. It was as if some one [sic] had suddenly exclaimed: 'Lights! Camera!'" (p. 639). From this point in the novel, Clyde's destruction is inevitable; he will die because he is tried by deception and judged by the evidence of a camera.

Dreiser's use of a camera gains significance in a consideration of the facts surrounding the original murder by Chester Gillette, who, according to Moers, was born in the

West, Nevada; his parents ran a mission, and he became a minor executive in his uncle's shirt factory in Cortland, New York, where Gillette, like Clyde, enjoyed some social success; and Gillette's victim, Grace, once a farm girl, worked under Gillette's supervision.<sup>24</sup> These facts are incorporated into the novel. However, Lehan states that the socialite whom Gillette claimed to love did not care for him, and the romance between Chester and Grace was not clouded with secrecy, facts which Lehan speculates were changed by Dreiser to heighten the tension in Clyde's decision. Other differences between the two men, listed by Lehan, include a "sentimentalized Clyde . . . less calculating, more an innocent victim of his own nature," and the accidental aspect of the murder, since Gillette used a tennis racket to beat Grace severely before he threw her almost lifeless body into the lake. Dreiser invents the political aspects of the trial which make it a travesty of justice, and he changes the background of Clyde's life to make his dilemma more appealing since Gillette's experiences, unlike Clyde's, were broad: he was well-traveled and had completed two years of college. Lehan contends that through Dreiser's departures from the facts of the case, he causes Clyde to appear more victim than villain.<sup>25</sup> Probably the most significant change is in the murder weapon, a change which indicates Dreiser's use of the movies as a metaphor for Clyde's illusions.

<sup>24</sup> Moers, pp. 200, 201.

<sup>25</sup> Lehan, pp. 149, 150.

In addition to the actual camera, Clyde's eyes become a kind of camera which creates his false values; they see what he desires and his imagination convinces him that his picture is reality as he projects it against the screen of his mind. The ideals which he conceives are gleaned from movie ideals,<sup>26</sup> and he lies, not only to others, but to himself as well. Clyde's tragedy is only partially the result of the injustice of his trial; it is also the effect of the movies which he sees in his imagination, an escapism that grows increasingly more elaborate as Clyde sinks more deeply into his world of illusion. Even as he is introduced in the novel, Clyde indulges in movies in his mind with reveries of "the handsome automobiles, . . . the gay pairs of young people, laughing . . . [which] troubled him with a sense of something different, better, more beautiful than his life" (p. 10). The only interesting fact about his heritage, to Clyde, is that his father's brother, Samuel, is "rich . . . [and] pictured [as] . . . some kind of Croesus, living in ease and luxury" (p. 17). Clyde resents his poverty and dreams of a higher position, which, for him, is the job in the drugstor adjoining the movie house, "a most fascinating connection" since "the place was visited, just before the show on matinee days, by be vies of girls" who admire themselves in the counter mirror and discuss ". . . the fascination of certain actors and

<sup>26</sup> Helen Dreiser, p. 71, recalls that Dreiser was appalled by the most popular film stories of the day about poor boys who win their fortunes through marriage to rich girls.

actresses . . . and very often one or another of these young beauties was accompanied by some male in evening suit . . . a costume which . . . Clyde felt to be the last word. . . . What a true measure of achievement!" (pp. 38, 39). The movie audience mirrors Clyde's desires, and the women in his life, Hortense, Roberta, and Sondra, aspire to the same ideals as the girls who visit the store.

Clyde's second job, as a bellhop at the Green-Davidson Hotel,<sup>27</sup> attracts his attention because it, too, has a door leading from a drugstore, and, thus, it represents a view of pleasure similar to that provided by the movie theater. The "great twelve-story affair . . . represented, as he saw it, the quintessence of luxury and ease"(p. 31). With Clyde's approach to this building, Dreiser uses a modification of Griffith's "iris" technique, one which will be obvious in each change of Clyde's locale, which begins with a closed door that opens to expand his view of the scene as a world of new splendors, all stimulating Clyde's "imaginative flights" (p. 35). To get the job, which he interprets as "Kind Heaven! What a realization of paradise! What a consummation of luxury!" (p. 39). Clyde "contrived an eager, ingratiating smile" (pp. 34, 35), and after the job is his, all doors in the hotel open to views which Clyde calls "looking through the gates of paradise" (p. 46). Clyde is to open many doors

<sup>27</sup> Many critics call the hotel a symbol of decadence and illusory ambition; see: Lehan, p. 154; Gerber, p. 137; Howe, p. 823; F. O. Matthiessen, Theodore Dreiser (New York: Random House, Inc., 1966), p. 23; Shapiro, p. 94.

to dreams--to his uncle's home and factory, to Roberta's room, to the social life of Lycurgus and Sondra's home, and finally, Clyde is locked behind the doors in the jail which open on a nightmare.

Another aspect of Clyde's work as a bellhop is "Aladdin-ish, really," for he is "impressed by the downpour of small change that was tumbling in upon him and making a lump in his right-hand pocket--dimes, nickels, quarters, and half-dollars even" (p. 53), a fantasy much like Dreiser's account in Dawn of his own childish dream. Money plays a significant role in his life by causing him to become increasingly snarled in his deceptions. Clyde deceives his mother about the amount of his salary, preferring to buy clothes rather than to contribute any of the money needed to help his sister, Esta, who eloped with an actor, became pregnant, and was abandoned in a distant city. Esta's plight, according to Shapiro, foreshadows Clyde's fate in that Roberta's pregnancy threatens Clyde's dream, and his lack of money exaggerates his situation.<sup>28</sup> He eventually becomes so confused by his illusions that he believes that money equates with love, for when Sondra gives him seventy dollars, Clyde thinks, "his beautiful, warm, generous Sondra! She loved him so--truly loved him" (p. 536). Each of Clyde's love affairs involves the importance of money.

Clyde's fellow bellhops initiate him into the world of sensual delights during an evening which begins when Clyde

<sup>28</sup> Shapiro, p. 88.

goes "through the main door of Frissell's," a restaurant which "enormously impressed" him (p. 59), although "it was little more than an excellent chophouse . . . , walls hung thick with signed pictures of actors and actresses, together with play-bills of various periods" (p. 57). Anticipating later adventure at a brothel, Clyde views an imaginary movie of "pictures--bacchanalian scenes--which swiftly, and yet in vain, he sought to put out of his mind" (p. 61). When Clyde and his friends enter the door of the house of prostitution, opened by a black girl in a red dress, "it was really quite an amazing and Aladdin-like scene to him" (p. 66), and women are now part of Clyde's dream of paradise, for he determines that he must have a girl of his own, which, for him, becomes Hortense Briggs, a girl who simpers and poses,<sup>29</sup> but so impresses Clyde with her artificiality that he gives up his plan to attend a show in order to escort her to a party. She first teaches him to dance (p. 77), an act which consistently symbolizes seduction in the novel. The result of his attraction to Hortense is an arrangement to meet during the next week for dinner and a show. As she hurries to meet Clyde, Hortense "as usual . . . gave herself all the airs of one very well content with herself" (p. 81), and for Clyde, "her gestures, moues [moues] and attitudes were sensuous and suggestive" (p. 85). He never understands that Hortense uses

<sup>29</sup> Wagenknecht, p. 23, states that actors were always said to be "posing" in those days, never "acting."

him to gain what "she would like to buy if only she had the money . . . [or that he is] conducting a feverish and almost painful pursuit without any promise of reward." Just as in Clyde's first dream of sensual pleasure, Hortense stimulates movies in Clyde's mind, and "at night, in his bed at home, he would lie and think of her--her face--the expressions of her mouth and eyes, the lines of her figure, the motions of her body in walking or dancing--and she would flicker before him as upon a screen" (p. 101), fantasies which Dreiser says are "an illusion only" (p. 102). Through word choice--"flicker," "motion," "screen" and "illusion," Dreiser attaches Clyde's dream world to the world created by Hollywood products, a connection which is continually stressed in all Dreiser's descriptions of Clyde's first romance. Hortense's greatest desire is to own a beaver coat: "'Oh, you pity sing!' . . . thinking much of her own pose before the window," another mirror (p. 103), and she decides that Clyde, of all her admirers, will, in all likelihood, provide the coat. She plans her campaign with flattery, and Clyde ". . . accept/s/ all her pretty fabrications as truth" (p. 111), because she promises fulfillment when she ". . . allow/s/ her eyes to become soft and swimming . . . a bit of romantic acting which caused him to become weak and nervous" (p. 114). At their last meeting, Hortense wears a red and black dress (a reminder of the girl who opens the door to the brothel), and "on her left cheek, just below her small rouged mouth, she had pasted a minute

square of black court plaster in imitation of some picture beauty she had seen" (p. 125). Clyde's "dreaming of fulfillment" (p. 136) ends with the murder of a small girl, and since he runs away to avoid capture by the police, he never gets the reward for the coat. Clyde even loses his former identity, for he assumes an alias, Harry Tenet, a name which mocks the law.

The first section of the book establishes the pattern of Clyde's remaining years. Howe points out that the novel builds "a series of waves . . . variations upon the central theme. Clyde's early flirtation with a Kansas City shopgirl anticipates in its chill manipulativenness, the later and more important relationship with Sondra Finchley, the rich girl who seems to him the very emblem of his fantasy."<sup>30</sup> Hortense combines Clyde's dreams of sexual gratification and wealth, for he believes she is purchasable, and she foreshadows both Roberta's death with her "swimming eyes" and the shallow promises of Sondra with her baby talk.<sup>31</sup> The coat image, too, is repeated, for when Clyde first meets Sondra, she wears a "striking coat of black and grey checks . . . [and] her effect on him was electric" (p. 219). Sondra's speeches, poses, and interest in costume extend the image of the artificial Hortense, and Clyde's interest in Sondra leads to a second death--Roberta's

<sup>30</sup> Howe, p. 824.

<sup>31</sup> With a strange twist of humor, Dreiser repeats the dance theme in the first instance of Clyde's social life in Lycurgus, where he has gone to pursue the American dream in Uncle Samuel's factory. The girl, whom he meets at a church social, plays "Brown Eyes," (Clyde's), and "The Love Boat," to which they dance. Shapiro, p. 84, speculates that with Sondra's vapid baby-talk, he wonders "whether Clyde didn't take the wrong girl for a rowboat ride."



--and Clyde again runs to avoid capture. Sondra's flattery leads him further away from reality into a world which Moers describes as filled with "pretty, sexy girls cut to a pattern; the shiny cars, the college songs and slang and dance rhythms; the confusingly overlapping parties and sporting events; the nauseating witchery of Sondra's baby talk, running like mockery through the social whirl."<sup>32</sup> As the feverish pace of his life intensifies, Clyde courts Sondra who is less accessible to him than Hortense.

Sondra, too, is part of the imagery of the movies; her name appears often in the society columns of The Star, Lycurgus' newspaper, and Clyde dreams of "this newer luminary" (p. 315). However, Clyde will always remain outside her world, a fact which Dreiser symbolizes with a parade, for "on a Saturday afternoon, Clyde, dressed in his best . . . as an ordinary spectator, was able to see once more the girl who had so infatuated him on sight, obviously breasting a white rose-surfaced stream and guiding her craft with a paddle covered with yellow daffodils . . . she was arresting enough . . . to recapture Clyde's fancy" (p. 236). The tableau of floats, especially Sondra's canoe, presages Roberta's death, Clyde's arrest for murder, and the loss of his dream of attaining the star of the social parade--Sondra, who is "the central or crowning jewel to so much sudden and such Aladdin-like splendor" (p. 425). Clyde's new fantasy turns into hellish nightmare,

<sup>32</sup> Moers, p. 237.

for to maintain his transient hold on Sondra's world, he decides to murder Roberta.

Clyde's dream proves to be illusion as he becomes part of Sondra's world only because she persuades her friends to accept Clyde as a "prank" which will annoy his cousin Gilbert (pp. 310, 311). Clyde, however, firmly believes that he has won social acceptance, and the result of his false status is "a temperament that [is] as fluid and unstable as water" (p. 309), the same description which Dreiser once applied to Stephanie Platow, the actress who humbles Cowperwood. His instability indicates Clyde's loss of all sense of reality, for, to the actress, or actor, each role is its own justification. Clyde will create his own disaster from his cherished, but erroneous, view of his self-importance, which proves to be optical illusion since Clyde's acceptance is the result of his resemblance to Gilbert. Clyde's appearance compounds his difficulties, not only because it promises the attainment of his dreams, but because it also promotes Roberta's death. Dreiser, in the central portion of the novel, stresses the image of Clyde as a double for Gilbert. With mutual dislike, each accuses the other of "taking to himself airs and superiorities" (p. 181). Lane discusses Dreiser's use of double images as an example of "mirror gazing,"<sup>33</sup> but such a usage also recalls the movie double who, usually, takes the place of the star during the filming of a dangerous scene. Clyde's

<sup>33</sup> Lauriat Lane, Jr., "The Double in An American Tragedy," Modern Fiction Studies, XII (Summer, 1966), 214.

double image proves to be ironic, for Clyde, the hero of the novel, encounters danger because he has a double. Though Lane does not link his discussion to the film tradition, he does establish that "Clyde and Gilbert are the two halves of an ideal hero: on the one hand, romance and excitement of the unusual and forbidden; on the other hand, reality and the security of financial and social status."<sup>34</sup> The ironic contrast is introduced immediately in the second part of the novel as Samuel Griffiths, seated at the dinner table with his family, listens to his daughter's chatter about a friend who has married a man who is "tall and dark and sorta awkward, and awfully pale, but very handsome--oh, a regular movie hero" (p. 155), and this description triggers the memory of his accidental meeting with his nephew, whom he has encouraged to move to Lycurgus because his remarkable resemblance to Gilbert makes Clyde appear "very intelligent and ambitious" (p. 158). Clyde, encouraged by his appearance to pursue his dream of success at the "Griffiths Collar & Shirt Co., Inc.," as he first approaches the factory, observes Lycurgus, which has among its attractions, a dry goods store, two hotels, automobile show rooms, and a moving picture theater (p. 178), reminders of the things which have proved disastrous to him in Kansas City. The hero meets his double when he opens the door to Gilbert's office. Clyde has already noted that his appearance brought an "unusual deference" which "strangely

<sup>34</sup> Lane, p. 218.

moved" him (p. 179), but Gilbert puts his cousin to work in a menial job, in the basement of the factory. Though Clyde receives his first position in Lycurgus, his later promotion, his social invitations, and his aspirations from appearance, and not from his merits, this appearance becomes his nemesis and adds to his self-deceptive evaluation of reality. The family, on Gilbert's advice, ignores Clyde while he avoids people who are potential friends because "his high blood relations with the family" (p. 235) might be jeopardized if he cultivates people of lower social station. His dreams of "that high world" result in loneliness "because . . . his vain hope in connection with it" provokes his choice "to cut himself off in this way" (p. 249). Thus, all appearances to the contrary, Clyde is more isolated in Lycurgus than he was in Kansas City.

Mutual loneliness attract Clyde and Roberta to each other. Now the head of a small department because his uncle feels that Clyde, because he so obviously looks like a Griffiths, should not be forced to stay in a basement, the young man has been cautioned against mingling socially with the girls under his authority. Roberta represents a forbidden pastime, and they must meet secretly because, again, Clyde's appearance would betray his identity. They drift into intimacy when winter closes the open-air dance halls which they have frequented during the summer, entertainments sufficiently removed from Lycurgus to guarantee anonymity. They meet in a

a park "just west of Dreamland" (p. 269), and Clyde seduces Roberta while they dance; "it was the delightful sensation of being held by him and guided here and there that so appealed to her," but when warm weather disappears, they have no place to go--"as for the churches, moving-pictures, and restaurants of Lycurgus, how . . . owing to Clyde's position here, could they be seen in them?" (p. 288). Later, when Roberta is pregnant, Clyde's double keeps him from asking advice for fear that his resemblance to Gilbert will cause a willing doctor to charge him more money than his small salary could provide. Thus, his appearance, which promises to fulfill his desires, actually promotes his defeat.

The romance between Roberta and Clyde is promoted by chance appearances, also, in that each has noticed the other in the plant but has been afraid to approach the other. Clyde, while paddling a canoe over a lake and envying couples whom he sees in other boats, recognizes Roberta as she stands near the shore, gathering water lilies. He persuades her to join him in the boat so that they might collect lilies which grow in water too deep for wading, and though Roberta wants the flowers, she fears the canoe since she cannot swim. But she trusts Clyde who looks protective. After an enjoyable afternoon, together, they return to their separate rooms, and Dreiser once more associates the impending tragedy with the movies, for "the same evening . . . instead of . . . going to a moving picture, as he so often did now, or walking alone . . . he

chose . . . to seek out the home of Roberta" (pp. 265, 266). Their romance begins before Clyde meets Sondra, and Clyde, at first, realizes Roberta's value; she is "human and gay and tolerant and good-natured" with "a very liberal measure of play in her" (p. 252), and she shares many common characteristics with Clyde: they both leave impoverished backgrounds to pursue dreams; her parents, though farmers, are also religious; and Roberta, too, is "seized with the very virus of ambition and unrest that affected him" (p. 250). "Clyde was thinking as she talked how different she was from Hortense . . . not . . . brash or vain or pretentious . . . and yet really as pretty and so much sweeter" (p. 273); he regrets only that her clothes are not sufficiently attractive. Clyde never envisions Roberta as paradise; she is too real. Dreiser stresses her hold on reality through emphasizing her rural origin, and he repeats the image of Roberta's earthiness when, as he symbolizes her pregnancy, she is reading a catalog entitled "Bebe's Garden Seeds" (p. 294). Roberta insists that Clyde rescue her, preferably with marriage, but Clyde is an inadequate hero. He wants no part of the reality of Roberta since he has now been enchanted by Sondra who "act[s] as grandly as possible for his benefit--a Hortensian procedure and type of thought that was exactly the thing best calculated to impress him" (p. 320). Only Sondra makes Clyde feel "transported to paradise" (p. 323), for he adores her "ways and airs" (p. 332).

When all attempts to obtain an abortion fail, Clyde sends

Roberta back to her parents while he contemplates a possible solution to their mutual problem, and his illusory world does not provide the answer as "he drifted--thinking most idly at times of some possible fake or mock marriage such as he had seen in some melodramatic movie . . . to deceive some simple country girl . . . but at such expense of time, resources, courage, and subtlety as Clyde himself, after a little reflection, was wise enough to see was beyond him" (p. 423). He knows also that Roberta would see through such a scheme. His second inspiration urges him to "decamp as in the instance of the slain child in Kansas City" (p. 429). Again, Dreiser plays with words to build ironic contrasts. Clyde's capture occurs while he stays at a camp in the woods; Roberta's murder takes place when they drift on a lake, and Clyde's lack of subtlety leads to his capture. But Clyde's inner movies provide a solution, for he is answered by an inner voice like "a genie at the accidental rubbing of Aladdin's lamp and the efrit . . ." (p. 463) suggests murder as the way to achieve the paradise promised by Sondra. Clyde has recently read in the newspaper an account of a double drowning of a mysterious couple; the man's body is never found. The "Efrit, his own darker self" (p. 472), reminds him of the story, and Clyde ineptly plans to stage a "double" drowning to rid himself of Roberta, who has threatened to expose him. Sure that Clyde will marry her, Roberta makes "at least one or two suitable dresses--a flowered gray taffeta afternoon dress, such as she

had once seen in a movie, in which . . . she could be married" (p. 431), but her dress, copied from the film world, will be worn to an afternoon drowning.

Drifting on the lake, Clyde cannot deliberately murder Roberta although "by now she had faded to a shadow or thought really, a form of illusion . . . there was something about her in color, form that suggested reality" (p. 489), and the pool becomes a mirror wherein "kaleidoscopically," he sees "Roberta struggling and . . . reaching toward him! God! How terrible!" (p. 490). As he debates and delays action, he takes several pictures of her, and she gathers water lilies. Roberta, sympathizing with his dark mood, moves toward him with the intention of taking the camera from him and holding his hand to comfort him. Clyde flings out his arm to "free himself of her . . . pushing at her," forgetting the camera. He hits her with sufficient force to throw her off balance, and her fall capsizes the boat. Clyde does not precisely kill Roberta; he merely neglects to save her which, in his mind, absolves him of guilt. He swims to shore and runs through the woods toward Sondra's house. The photographs in the ill-fated camera, which Clyde believes rests at the bottom of the lake, seal his fate, for, after capture, Clyde denies having owned a camera. The water-soaked film, when developed, proves that Clyde and Roberta were together since they both appear in the photographs. These snapshots reflect reality. Unlike the movies, they do not move and cannot create optical illusion,



and they, therefore, become the only truth at Clyde's trial.

Wagenknecht points out that since movie studios often exploited current events for the sensationalism inherent in them, a good trial always attracted movie crews,<sup>35</sup> and Clyde's trial is no exception. Both lawyers, recognizing the value of such publicity are more interested in advancing themselves than in providing justice during a trial scene which has the atmosphere of a "holiday or festival" with Clyde as the star attraction. "'Peanuts!' 'Popcorn!' 'Hot dogs!' 'Get the story of Clyde Griffiths . . . only twenty-five cents!'" (p. 630). The town where the trial is held hates Clyde because he is "the wretched rich! the indifferent rich!" (p. 516), and this false estimation of his stature reflects a second Griffith epic, Way Down East (Clyde's trial is in the East), made in 1920. Mast recalls the plot as one "related to the evil doings of rich folks . . . who act snobbish toward the pure of heart but poor of purse, and seduce innocent virgins with false marriage vows."<sup>36</sup> This opinion, applied to Clyde by the audience at the trial, is part of the portrait painted of him by the prosecuting attorney. To dispel such a view, Clyde's lawyer decides that, at all costs, Clyde's defense must be fictional in order to create some sympathy for him, and he concocts a defense which promotes the image of Clyde as a moral coward; Clyde, carefully rehearsed for his role,

<sup>35</sup> Wagenknecht, p. 68.

<sup>36</sup> Mast, p. 96.

practices from a prepared script (p. 613). When he achieves his real stardom, as a murderer, he "shrank down within himself mentally" (p. 633). He now has a different mental movie, one which has become "with all the prison silent--dreams--a ghastly picture of all that he most feared" (p. 629). Clyde's sentence is the electric chair, and his dream of paradise dissolves during the "well-staged" (p. 681) trial. Nothing can save Clyde.

After his conviction, his mother attempts to raise money for an appeal by means of lectures which she plans to deliver in churches, but "after three weeks of more or less regional and purely sectarian trying, she was compelled to report the Christians at least were very indifferent" (p. 765); she is turned away "because of what the newspapers had said . . . and [because] the picture that she herself presented in her homely garb [caused] . . . most ministers" to assume "that she was one of those erratic persons, not a constituent of any definite sect, or schooled theology, who tended by her very appearance to cast contempt on true and pure religion." Only "a Jew who controlled the principal moving picture theater of Utica--a sinful theater" (p. 765) will help her. The appeal, to be financed by the money raised in the theater lecture, is denied by the governor, and Clyde knows he will die. He is "islanded . . . in one . . . of twenty-two cages" (p. 767), and from the only friend he makes in prison, Miller Nicholson, who is executed first, Clyde receives two books, Robinson

Crusoe and The Arabian Nights, ironic mirrors of his new reality and his old dream. These book titles also become part of Dreiser's use of imagery from motion pictures, accused as the creators of Clyde's destructive goals. Wagenknecht discusses a second film producer, Georges Mèliés, (certainly Dreiser must have noted the interesting spelling of this name), who was "the first real artist of the screen"; Mèliés "used his camera not to reproduce reality but to create a world of illusion," and among his titles are Robinson Crusoe and The Arabian Nights.<sup>37</sup> Mast adds that before Mèliés left the industry, he created the star image, for, in early films, no actors' names were listed in the credits, and Mèliés began the practice of identifying actors.<sup>38</sup> Thus, the books given to Clyde are a fitting final image: his stardom, his world of dreams, his loneliness, his starved imagination, and his death--are violently ended by electricity, the power that runs the movie camera--and the books apply all these connotations to Clyde's life, and indicate that the movies have played a major role in An American Tragedy as a factor contributing to Clyde's disillusionment and his death, which results from his belief in illusion. Though all social institutions--family, church, and law--fail Clyde, and society can be blamed for the concept of the American dream and for its support of the film industry, Clyde's deliberate choices,

<sup>37</sup> Wagenknecht, pp. 35, 36.

<sup>38</sup> Mast, p. 47.

his active seeking of a dream image of life, more accurately condemn him, because Clyde, so caught up in his illusory world, believes that his dreams are the only reality. The formation of his self-deception is obvious in a catalog of his weaknesses: Clyde imitates movie heroes and becomes a moral coward; he loves women who act and pose like film stars yet kills the one woman who loves him; he sees movies in his mind and loses his life because he cannot achieve the world of his imagination. His dreams, formed from the world of the screen, distort his personality since Clyde comes to believe only in deception, and his dream of Paradise ends when the green curtains close over the cell doors while Clyde moves down the corridor toward his execution.

V. ARTIFICIAL LIGHT SUBDUED;  
THE "INNER LIGHT" IN THE BULWARK

After completing An American Tragedy in 1925, Dreiser did not attempt another novel until 1942, three years before his death, when he returned to The Bulwark, a book outlined soon after Jennie Gerhardt was published.<sup>1</sup> Containing little of the turgidity which frequently mars Dreiser's earlier fiction, The Bulwark is unique both in point of view, which shifts from youth to old age, and in ending, in which Solon Barnes, the central character, overcomes defeat to gain a stronger faith in God, a denouement that appears contradictory to Dreiser's view of God as man's greatest illusion. Yet, despite changed style and emphasis, the author retains many of the images which he used extensively in past novels to convey his view of life as it is destroyed by insubstantial dreams: vehicles, rocking chairs, clothes, dancing, and nature, and theatrical imagery from classical drama and from the modern stage and movies. The twentieth-century drama represents the lure of materialism and the savagery of uncontrolled passions, especially as they influence Stewart, Barnes' youngest son, and, the older theater, which

<sup>1</sup> Helen Dreiser, My Life With Dreiser (New York: The World Publishing Co., 1951), pp. 80, 81, cites 1910 as the date when Dreiser first conceived the idea for the book, and she claims that by 1916 Dreiser had completed one-third of the novel. In a letter to H. L. Mencken, dated August 22, 1914, Dreiser comments that he was again "taking a stab at" The Bulwark, an indication that he had started the book at a much earlier date; Robert H. Elias, ed., Letters of Theodore Dreiser, Vol. I (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 1959), p. 173; hereafter cited as Letters.

allegorically parallels Sophocles' Oedipus Rex, stresses the spiritual blindness which characterizes Barnes, a psychological lack of vision enduring until he is purged of self-pity and fear. Dreiser's drama, much like Sophocles' play,<sup>2</sup> presents a renewal of religious faith, and vital to an interpretation of the novel as a spiritual experience is the structure, concept, and motifs of the Greek tragedy, for Barnes, though physically weakened, dies spiritually strong, and he rediscovers God, Who manifests Himself in nature, a conclusions recalling the purpose of Greek drama, performed in the spring, a time when all nature renews itself, and dedicated to Dionysus, god of nature and of fertility.<sup>3</sup> Dreiser combines the attributes of the pagan god and the Christian deity to present his belief in a Divine Consciousness, controlling all forms of living matter. In his intrinsic weaving of Greek dramatic tradition, the writings of Quaker leaders,<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Nowhere does Dreiser record that he read this play, but, in Dawn, p. 265, he says that he began reading the classics at the urging of Miss Fielding, the teacher who financed Dreiser's one year in college, who recommended a knowledge of Greek, Roman, and Elizabethan writers. On August 9, 1914, just prior to the letter telling Mencken that he was resuming work on The Bulwark, Dreiser wrote, again to Mencken, that he was spending much time in the library reading Greek myths (Letters, I, p. 165). Internal evidence in the novel strongly suggests that Dreiser was attempting a contemporary rendering of the Oedipus story.

<sup>3</sup> Kenneth Macgowan and William Melnitz, The Living Stage (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1955), pp. 23-27; Theodore W. Hatlen, Orientation to the Theater (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1962), pp. 5-9.

<sup>4</sup> Gerhard Friedrich gives the most complete account of these influences in "A Major Influence on Theodore Dreiser's The Bulwark," American Literature, XXIX (May, 1957), 180-193.

and the values of the Gilded Age, Dreiser achieves a universal expression of man's struggle to understand God and to know the purpose of life. Barnes' story, as it is projected through allusions to Oedipus Rex, presents the testing of faith as a timeless and eternal struggle because Barnes, the twentieth-century Quaker, suffers from the same mental blindness which handicaps the Greek king, and both Christian and pagan learn the truth only after they understand their responsibility for their own suffering. Dreiser's adaptation of Greek dramatic traditions explains the changed focus and style of the novel, while a second mode of dramatic expression, the morality play tradition, illuminates the strange conclusion, the three attributes which most distress critics of The Bulwark.

No critic has noted the Oedipus dramas as the source for Barnes' tragic situation, but many comment on the spiritualism in the tale. In Shapiro's view, the novel is "Dreiser's slow and mannered study of the spiritual struggles of a modern American Quaker," and he adds that it "is a disturbing book" since the usual criticisms of Dreiser's style--awkwardness, excessive detail, and flowery diction--cannot be applied.<sup>5</sup> Instead, attacks center on the changed theme. Trilling, for example, calls Dreiser and his novel offensive in "the vulgar ease of [the] formulation" of his religious philosophy and in the inconsistency shown by Dreiser's

<sup>5</sup> Charles Shapiro, Theodore Dreiser: Our Bitter Patriot (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1962), p. 65.

abandonment of naturalism,<sup>6</sup> and Drummond accuses Dreiser of writing the book as an atonement for his earlier "irreverent attacks on God,"<sup>7</sup> while Lynn calls the novel "a hollow shell" with little substance.<sup>8</sup> Thus, by implication, Dreiser is condemned for not committing his previous sins of poor style, for not using naturalism which has been rejected by some critics as an inadequate vehicle for tragedy, and for discontinuing his irreverent attacks on God. The Bulwark remains an enigma to the critics who do not note the theatrical traditions which form the story. Gerber, however, alludes to the Greek theater when he compares Barnes to a classic tragic hero, one whose failure transcends pity and whose tragic flaw is his "oversimplified view of life" as a world of only black and white, and Gerber maintains that Barnes, in his defeat, learns two lessons: that life is really complex, and that no man is isolated from the paganism in society.<sup>9</sup> In actuality, Barnes' flaw is his pride in his ability to judge good and evil, but his simplistic view of

<sup>6</sup> Lionell Trilling, "Reality in America," rpt. in The Stature of Theodore Dreiser, eds. Alfred Kazin and Charles Shapiro (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1955), pp. 143, 144; this volume will appear as TSTD in all subsequent references.

<sup>7</sup> Edward Drummond, S. J., "Theodore Dreiser: Shifting Naturalism," Fifty Years of the American Novel, A Christian Appraisal, ed. Harold C. Gardiner, S. J. (New York: Charles Scribners' Sons, 1951), p. 45.

<sup>8</sup> Kenneth S. Lynn, The Dream of Success (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1955), pp. 72, 73.

<sup>9</sup> Philip L. Gerber, Theodore Dreiser (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1964), pp. 158, 159.



morality proves inadequate since good and evil are not clearly discernible in external appearances, and he learns that he has been a worshipper of materialistic gods despite his rationale that money can serve God. Though Barnes does not lose his property after his reversal, his possessions lose their control over the hero, and he earns renewed strength and wisdom in his rejection of false gods, thereby achieving victory, not defeat.

Having revised his own faith, Dreiser seeks to portray his personal renewal of spirit through the experiences of Solon Barnes. Swanberg states that The Bulwark, as originally conceived, was of little use to Dreiser in 1943 "because his concept of the novel had changed," since it was designed, at first, to expose religion as man's greatest illusion.<sup>10</sup> Helen Dreiser claims that, by 1939, her husband believed that a conscious divine spirit controlled the natural forces which work on man,<sup>11</sup> a changed view which Tjader calls the result of ". . . twenty years collecting facts, plodding in and out of libraries and laboratories, consulting with scientists and thinkers in many fields, seeking to . . . reach the truth,"<sup>12</sup> a quest which convinced him of the presence of a Divine Consciousness that motivates all forms of life. In his need for faith, Dreiser visited many churches, and Elias reports

<sup>10</sup> W. A. Swanberg, Dreiser (New York: Charles Scribners' Sons, 1965), p. 484.

<sup>11</sup> Helen Dreiser, p. 265.

<sup>12</sup> Marguerite Tjader, Theodore Dreiser, A New Dimension (Norwalk: Silvermine Publishers, Inc., 1965), p. viii.

that Dreiser interpreted the Quaker doctrine as "the most reasonable of all religions," one less binding to the individual spirit.<sup>13</sup> Thus, the material in the revised novel "was closer to Dreiser's interests than it had ever been, with the principal character not only a religious man, but a Quaker, a man preoccupied with the inner light, the promptings and impulses of the all-pervasive, intelligent creative force."<sup>14</sup> Dreiser completely reworked his first draft, retaining only small parts of the original and changing the proposed ending from a complete loss of faith to a great resurgence of Barnes' religious convictions.

Theatrical imagery provides insight into the testing of Barnes' faith, the major conflict in The Bulwark, and such imagery is apparent in Dreiser's prologue which establishes that the point of attack in the drama will be Solon's wedding to Benecia Wallin (perhaps a pun on the walled city of Thebes as well as on the wall which Barnes believes can be built around his faith); the ritual joins the Quaker faith to the benefits of wealth. In his description of the guests at the ceremony, Dreiser, insinuating that society "has already breached the walls of Quakerism, says ". . . as anyone familiar with the history and traditions . . . could see at a glance, times had changed since those days when the customs and beliefs

<sup>13</sup> Robert H. Elias, Theodore Dreiser, Apostle of Nature (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1970), p. 231.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 289.

binding and regulating the members of this highly spiritual organization were still strong . . . ."15 Costume indicates the changes, for, though many of the guests adopt "a modification of that earlier costume and manner, many others were more modern in aspect," especially "the younger of both sexes," who find "the formalistic dress of their elders . . . a handicap" (p. vi). Costume, established early as an indicator of attitude, continues to provide insight into Dreiser's theme.

In addition, the prologue introduces the theater as part of the decadence in modern society. "As for dancing, singing, music, the theater, show in dress, books and pictures, and any undue accumulation of wealth--all were professedly against these. Yet, . . . there were many Quakers, long since successful in commercial ways, whose homes contained books, prints, and objects of art, some even music . . . in this gathering . . . might have been seen many examples of various shades of feeling and practice in connection with Quaker thought and custom that surrounded the youth of Solon Barnes" (p. viii). Later on, Solon's children will succumb to the temptations of music, dancing, the theater, clothes, the lure of money and appearance; and their inability to understand their father's beliefs causes them to seek sensual pleasures to replace the Christian God. As Gerber points out, the children share the same heredity and environment, yet each

15 Theodore Dreiser, The Bulwark (Garden City: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1946), p. v; subsequent references to this volume will be cited parenthetically in the text.

one seeks satisfaction in a different way, from one of the worldly influences on Quakerism listed in the prologue:<sup>16</sup>

Orville becomes a commercial success; books and art influence Etta; show in dress and dancing captivate Dorothea, and she marries out of the Quaker faith; Stewart goes to the theater, to the movies, and to dances; and Isobel suffers because she lacks the necessary beauty and grace to become an active part of the material world which she covets. Barnes' forceful personality cannot guide his children, for he is blind to their desires and oblivious to their temptations, and each child is disillusioned by his choice, a tragic consequence, for, according to Hicks, "the process of disillusionment . . . was almost unmitigated tragedy" for Dreiser.<sup>17</sup> Not only do the children violate the Quaker tenets but even many of the Ten Commandments, for among them they worship false gods, lie, steal, murder, commit adultery, bear false witness, and fail to honor their parents or God. Solon, representing the spiritual alternative to materialism, is the source of the forces which corrupt and destroy his children because he is blind to his own faults. Though "a bulwark of . . . faith" (p. 334) at his death, Solon has been a flawed leader throughout most of his life, and, like Oedipus, Solon cannot save his people until he recognizes his responsibility for their suffering.

<sup>16</sup> Gerber, pp. 165, 166.

<sup>17</sup> Granville Hicks, "Theodore Dreiser and The Bulwark," rpt. in TSTD, p. 220.

Several specific events in the novel link Solon's tragedy to the Greek myth. Important to the story of Oedipus are the curse which plagues his house, the injury to his foot, the murder of his father, the marriage to his mother, and the blindness motif which displays Oedipus' unwitting creation of the tragedy which, in turn, reduces him from a king to a sightless exile. Barnes also inherits a house which embodies a curse--that of materialism and its pagan gods; his foot is injured; his father is murdered symbolically; Barnes wants his wife to mother him; and his rigid morality makes him blind to the injustices which he perpetrates.

The house first affects Solon's parents, Rufus and Hannah, who move from Segookit, Maine,<sup>18</sup> to Dukla, Pennsylvania, to help Hannah's sister, Phoebe. The house, Thornbrough, is a pre-Civil War mansion, decayed by misuse but restored by Rufus. With honorable motives, Rufus moves in order to better manage the financial affairs of his helpless sister-in-law, but "this service . . . was destined to affect his personal life and interests and those of his son . . ." (p. 2), for the house represents Rufus's move toward worldliness. Significantly, as McAleer points out, "Dreiser always associated a change in thinking with a change in physical locale."<sup>19</sup> When Rufus views

<sup>18</sup> Friedrich, p. 188, establishes that Rufus Barnes and Rufus Jones, the famous Quaker leader, share a first name and a birthplace; Jones was born in South China, Maine, and Friedrich states that Dreiser changes China to "gook," the slang word for the nation.

<sup>19</sup> John J. McAleer, Theodore Dreiser, An Introduction and Interpretation (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1968), p. 46.

the mansion, which "Phoebe intended to will . . . to him and Hannah, . . . he, for the first time in his life, had become strangely, even poetically, enamored of it, since it had so many features that somehow appealed to him" (p. 7), and Rufus abandons his simpler life, advocated by Quaker doctrine, to live in comparative luxury. Tjader maintains that Dreiser purposefully uses the setting to symbolize corrupting influences, and she quotes an article which she found in Dreiser's files, originally published in Direction, December, 1937, which states: ". . . the antique order of an old house becomes the disorderly decay of a newer age . . ."<sup>20</sup> Though the house is restored outwardly, the influence of "disorderly decay" is felt in the loss of the Quaker ideals, and though Rufus rationalizes that he has restored the building only to increase its resale value, he has already been corrupted somewhat by the materialism that is part of its luxury and beauty.

Dreiser shows the threat of decay inherent in the house:

. . . in the center of what was once no doubt a large smooth lawn to the south of the house, he saw the remains of a double circle of decayed posts so arranged as to indicate the one-time presence of an arched-over and exceptionally large arbor or garden-party retreat such as still existed on other superior estates of this area . . . which suggested something which never before had in any way intruded itself in Rufus's life: leisure, the assembling of people of means under such circumstances as precluded all thought of ordinary labor. . . . It suggested plenty, and also waste in the matters of food, drink, clothing, and show, which he was convinced should never be--never in this house at least. For why . . . could not such beauty and charm be divorced from waste and show, to say nothing of greed, drunkenness, immorality, and other sins . . . (p. 8).

<sup>20</sup> Tjader, p. 82; italics appear in the original quotation.

Rufus, like Laios, Oedipus' father, first sins when he ignores his conscience, for though Rufus sensed the materialism ". . . still present here in the form of a faint and antique flavor . . . he could not possibly bring himself to dislike [the house]. For it involved beauty" (pp. 10, 11). Within the attractiveness of the scene is a warning of paganism, in that the double circle of the arbor closely resembles the ruins of the pagan temple at Stonehenge--and Solon Barnes will inherit this curse of paganism from his father. The mansion will more actively work toward the destruction of Solon's children since they associate its beauty with the attractions of the world, and Solon cannot circumvent his fate because each testing of his values, in the forms of temptation and through the tragedies of his children, brings Solon closer to his reversal. His fate becomes unavoidable when he returns to the house after his father's death.

Besides the fact that each has inherited his father's house, Oedipus and Solon suffer an injury which seems fated to cause their premature deaths, yet each survives to fulfill his destiny. Oedipus' father commands that a thong be laced through his son's ankle when Laios learns that Oedipus is destined to kill him, and Laios decides that a death by exposure would place the guilt upon the gods, thereby absolving him of all responsibility. Rufus, too, contributes to his son's injury, for Solon, as a child, travels into the wilderness with his father to gather wood, and on one trip, Solon

severely cuts his ankle with "a small ax given him by his father," nearly dying from exposure, for the "wound which instantly needed cleansing and dressing" (p. 19) is not treated for several hours. The resulting infection threatens Solon's life, but he survived as a result of his mother's care and her prayers, and this injury becomes part of Solon's fate since Justus Wallin, Benecia's father, first notices the Barnes family, at church, as he learns of the wound. Wallin, contemplating delivery of his favorite testimony--that money is a sacred trust from God--has his reverie interrupted by Hannah Barnes, who tells of the healing strength of prayer, which she feels had restored her son's life. Justus, much impressed, invites the Barnes family to his home, later promotes Solon's career in a Philadelphia bank, and eventually selects Solon as a worthy suitor for his only child. As a result of Wallin's sponsorship, Solon will compromise his father's business philosophy by adopting that of his future father-in-law, "that money or trade was a creation of the Lord . . ." (p. 40). Thus, the foot injury, which threatens death, contributes to Solon's fate in that it becomes the impetus for a symbolic "murder" of his father.

Solon's movement away from the influence of his father to that of Justus Wallin is gradual. Rufus, unaware that his house and its richness present active temptations to a life of materialism, strives to lessen the adverse effect by hanging mottoes on the walls of various rooms, and the one which he



places in Solon's bedroom states: "'The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof'" (p. 26), a motto which Solon will amend with Wallin's view. Rufus's customers, both Quakers and non-Quakers, "found him both as a man and a trader quite attractive, obviously honest, and anxious to make a modest profit, but no more" (p. 27), while Wallin proves to be a man sensitive to the criticism leveled by the Society of Friends at those Quakers who show too much interest in profit. Though he is "not at all impressed with the durability of wealth," he accumulates as much as he can, and though "he had truly sought to deal equitably with everyone," Wallin earns more money and social status than Rufus (p. 39). Solon rejects his father's less selfish view of profit to follow Wallin's example, an exchange foreshadowed in two ways: in the obvious similarity in names and in their mutual concern for Benecia. Solon means "a law-maker," and Justus phonetically implies "justice," the product of laws. Both men love Benecia, and Justus chooses Solon as her future husband by encouraging their interest in each other. Solon spends as much time in her home, as he courts her, as he does in his own, and he finds the Wallin house far more impressive than Thornbrough. "Entering the Wallin house for the first time", the Barnes family . . . were greatly impressed by what they saw . . . massive carved mahogany tables and chairs, parqueted floors strewn with rugs and animal skins, and large ornate vases filled with flowers and grasses . . . a servant appeared

offering silver plates . . . a procedure which astonished and disconcerted the entire . . . family" (p. 51). Wallin, who plans a business enterprise in Dukla, decides to employ Rufus and Solon as agents, to provide the community with insurance, protection against acts of God; with mortgages for earthly mansions; and with loans to advance profits. Father and son welcome Wallin's offer, and their new jobs lead to the eventual transfer of the son's loyalty. Although Solon enjoys his new position, he suffers from a troubled conscience, for he recognizes that the wealth of the Wallin family directly contradicts the ethics of the Quaker faith which stresses simplicity and plainness. However, Solon refuses to judge them, for "who was he to demand . . . that they alter their manner of living in order to make it conform with the Friends' Book of Discipline? For here he was . . . [with] a salary of fifteen dollars a week . . . where else could he, at his age, obtain such a position?" (p. 56).

Flattered by Wallin's high opinion of Solon, Rufus ignores the danger; on the other hand, Hannah fears for their son and dreams that Solon is riding a handsome black mare which leaps and twists once the young man is in the saddle, finally tearing Solon violently from his seat and throwing him, arms akimbo, over a fence, "where he lay, apparently severely wounded" (p. 61).<sup>21</sup> Gerber interprets the dream as a pre-cognition of "Solon's struggle to tame the materialistic

<sup>21</sup> Friedrich, p. 188, says that Rufus Jones relates the dream as fact in his book, A Boy's Religion From Memory.

forces in the world, to subordinate them and sensuality to the religious will."<sup>22</sup> The dream does represent a significant hint of the conflict between spiritual and materialistic forces, and Dreiser uses it to signal Solon's abandonment of his father's principles for those of Justus Wallin since Benecia resembles the mare with her "blue-black and glossy" hair and graceful carriage (p. 37). If Solon's love for her had been less, he could have fought more vigorously against temptation. A second horse reinforces the link between the Wallins and Solon when Justus persuades Rufus "to replace his ancient buggy and horse with a new vehicle and mare, a suggestion which Solon and Rufus could not help but approve, as Wallin offered to defray all costs . . ." (p. 56). Wallin's money, in all situations, successfully entices father and son, and, once Benecia and Solon have expressed their mutual love, Solon is firmly committed to his father-in-law's doctrine. Their declaration is followed shortly by a physical separation of Rufus and his son, who goes to Philadelphia to work in Wallin's bank; Rufus, from this point in the novel, is mentioned very seldom. His sole remaining significance in the story occurs at his death when he bequeaths Thornbrough to Solon and his sister, and Solon immediately buys her share in order to retain full ownership. Also pertinent to Solon's detachment from his father is the fact that Wallin controls his future, for Justus will not announce the couple's

<sup>22</sup> Gerber, p. 169.

engagement until Solon has advanced sufficiently in the bank. Just as he misjudges Wallin's greed for profit as a virtue, Solon misinterprets his role in commerce as he moves upward in the hierarchy of the bank, defining "everything in terms of divine order. He continued to be impressed by the surroundings in which he worked, but even more so by the wealth the building housed. . . . These funds, in his eyes, were a sacred trust" (p. 90), an echo of Justus's stated view of money. Solon has replaced his father's business ethics, and thereby, his father, with Wallin and his philosophy.

Dreiser ends the first part of the trilogy of Solon-Oedipus with a return to the wedding introduced in the prologue, a ceremony which ends with a pagan symbol, "an un-Quakerish shower of rice and old shoes" (p. 100). Solon marries a woman who is both wife and mother, for "his ardor was tempered by a yearning, voiceless desire to be mothered by this girl whom he loved so fervently, and Benecia seemed to understand his feelings" (p. 101). In the second part of the novel, which develops the years of their marriage, Benecia's role as a mother is more fully defined than her part as Solon's wife, and just prior to the birth of their first child, Hannah Barnes dies, leaving Benecia sole performer of the mother role. Subsequently, five children are born to the couple, each one in turn rejecting the training of the Quaker home. Dorothea marries "Sutro Court, son of a street-railway magnate, . . . [and] her wedding was to be as socially impressive an affair



A god of plague and pyre  
Raids like detestable lightning through the city . . .  
Yet we come to you to make our prayer  
As to the man surest in mortal ways  
And wisest in the ways of God . . .

find us a remedy, . . .<sup>23</sup>  
No man questions your power to rule the land.

Oedipus' resolution to relieve the misery of his people is his initial error in judgment in the play. He learns that the murderer of Laios must be punished to lift the plague, and he vows to punish the guilty man and, thus, condemns himself. In his similar experience, Solon renders service to the oppressed; he keeps careful files on bank customers ("all ages of our people") with "details of marriages, deaths, failures, capitalizations, and recapitalizations" (p. 106), and Barnes watches over his farm and animals. His faith, too, is tested by a plague, to which his mother falls victim, a "plague of influenza which swept the entire eastern section of the country" (pp. 106, 107). Only the birth of his first child, Isobel, unattractive though she may be, eases the sorrow which Solon suffers at his mother's death. Thus, Dreiser almost paraphrases the cited lines from Sophocles' prologue in the enumeration of Solon's activities, and, like his Greek counterpart, Solon Barnes is convinced that he can be a guardian and a savior of the community; he, too, is responsible for his later suffering.

Solon's flaw is his pride in his ability to make judgments.

<sup>23</sup> Sophocles, "Oedipus Rex," Dudley Fitts and Robert Fitzgerald, Tr., in Tragedy, Ten Major Plays, eds. Robert O'Brien and Bernard F. Dukore (New York: Bantam Books, Inc., 1969), pp. 9, 10.

In addition to being extremely moralistic, Solon judged everything and everybody by the light of standardized principles and conventions . . . he had concluded that only men of true worth were entitled to aid . . . Solon eyed them all carefully. . . . A man's character was also important. Did he go to church regularly? Was he frugal, plain in his manners and way of life? Did he dress simply but neatly? Did he live in a respectable neighborhood . . .? Was he an orderly, honest man, a law-abiding citizen? All these considerations were of the utmost importance to him in judging people (p. 106).

In two separate incidents involving robbery, Solon's standards prove painfully inadequate as accurate assessments of individuals, for, in the first, Solon, responding to a call for help, manages to capture the victim, a respectable man of the community, and in the second, a robbery involving embezzlement of bank funds by Walter Briscoe, son of a Quaker, Solon has hired the young man because he fulfills all of Solon's standards. He fails to recognize a warning to himself which is implicit in Briscoe's alibi--that his stern father and his narrow home life drove him to seek a "freer, happier existence" (p. 117), and he remains blind to the situation in his own home wherein two of his children, Etta and Stewart, will steal to escape their stern father and narrow home. Preferring to rely on his own judgment to evaluate all situations, Barnes blindly ignores the many warnings of his impending tragedy.

Dreiser's frequent mention of Solon's eyes symbolizes his spiritual blindness and resembles Sophocles' continual references to Oedipus' eyes as proof of his inability to see the truth. Solon's "frank gray eyes" first commend him to Benecia (p. 41), and later, when courting her, Solon manufactures

a rescue of Benecia during a game of crack-the-whip. Benecia, at first shocked by his deception, accepts him as her savior after the testimony of his pleading eyes (p. 63). In addition to several overt references to Solon's eyes, Dreiser poignantly demonstrates Solon's moral and spiritual lack of vision, for, when Barnes' children are born, he refuses to see their failures or the conflicts that engulf them, and his judgments grow more rigid as the children mature.

. . . in dealing with men he sought only such as were above reproach . . . men whose public and private conduct were above suspicion. The great thing about Divine Providence, so far as he could reason it out, was to marry, have children, and raise them in decency and in the fear of the Lord. To do less was to trifle with evil, and when . . . the social fabric had broken down . . . it seemed to him that earlier errors on the part of those who should have been married and raised children properly, or who, having married, had failed in their duties as parents, must be to blame . . . In the main, if one could go far enough back, one would find . . . the sins of the fathers visited upon the children, even unto the third and fourth generation (pp. 167, 168).

Though Solon rejoices "that by constant counsel with the Inner Light he had been able to guard the actions of his own children," in the end, his blindness to their needs and to their actions aids in destroying them as he drives them away from his rigid moral system.

Dreiser reveals Solon's self-deception through contrasting appearance with reality through the opinions of Solon as they are voiced by his children. For example, though they love him, Isobel and Etta remain strangers to their father. Isobel, timid because she is physically ugly, thereby unable to compete



for social acceptance, outwardly complies with her father's views while she inwardly yearns to escape her sense of inadequacy, and Solon accepts the compliance, never realizing her agony. Isobel does not break away from her father's control until Solon nears death. Etta, on the other hand, finds escape very early when she learns of the power of dreams. Mrs. Tenet, a non-Quaker neighbor, tells Etta the "story of a wonderful fairy named Berylune who with a wave of her wand made all things beautiful" (p. 130), a statement which recalls Dreiser's description of theatrical illusion in A Book About Myself as "a wand-commanded fancy" (ABAM, p. 174). After hearing the tale, Etta frequently rocks in her little chair and imagines that she becomes Berylune, and, secretly pleased by Etta's fantasies, Benecia does not enlighten her husband when she learns what has distracted their daughter. Solon remains unaware of any threat until Etta, as a young adult, attempts to persuade him to allow her to attend college in the West. Solon hesitates in his decision, taking forceful action only upon his discovery that she has been reading Sappho's love poetry, and after destroying the book, he forbids her leaving home, an edict to which Etta responds by stealing and pawning her mother's jewels, an inheritance from Benecia's mother, also a non-Quaker, and using the money to join Volida La Porte, the original owner of the book.<sup>24</sup> Barnes cannot convince Etta to return to her family, for she

<sup>24</sup> McAleer, p. 154, states that Volida's name, which signifies flight and escape, foreshadows Etta's action.

chooses to remain with Volida, and, later, after the two girls relocate in New York, Etta meets Kane, poses for him, and eventually becomes his mistress. Again a family member uncovers her secret life and hides the truth from Solon; in his effort to avoid jeopardizing his own social ambitions, Orville, who has discovered her adultery, tells no one except Dorothea, who also wants to hide the truth so that her society wedding will not be sullied by the scandal.

Orville, too, turns from his father, for whom he has "built up an apocryphal notion . . . as a powerful, inaccessible citizen of the world who was to be admired and respected but not really loved except in a filial prefuntory way" (p. 168). This opinion echoes Orville's response to God. As Lehan states, Orville is "one who is motivated by a conservative desire for money and social prominence,"<sup>25</sup> and while Orville turns away from his father's views in his actions, he maintains a façade of acceptance "in a filial prefuntory way." Solon the father, like God the Father, is too distant to be approached. Solon's blindness and rigidity force his son to reject unconsciously the God which his father advocates, and Orville drifts away from the Quaker faith, an act foreshadowed when the boy, while in school, spends "more time cultivating useful friendships than in serious study, although he managed to pass his examinations and get creditable marks" (p. 148). Solon does not look beyond the grades to discover that Orville has turned to false gods since his son still pays lip service to his father's God to escape exposure as a worshipper of Mammon.

<sup>25</sup> Lehan, p. 231.

A fourth child, Dorothea, "because of her superficial viewpoint, felt that her father was fairly companionable and a 'dear' because she could usually get around him" (p. 168), and she manages to evade her father's faith by poring "over pictures of actresses and society women . . . dream[ing] of the day when she, too, would be photographed and famous" (p. 156). Solon never discovers her secret vice and fails to heed his instinctual sense of danger when his daughter asks to visit his cousin, Rhoda, who has married out of the Society of Friends and has embraced materialism openly as the only way of life for her. Dorothea, partially lost to Quakerism already since she wears simple dress "whimsically" as "calculated efforts to attract attention" (p. 176), makes her first significant step away from her father's guidance when she accepts Rhoda's loan of a blue chiffon dress, embroidered with silver threads, since Dorothea knows "she would have been miserable and unhappy in one of her own" (p. 187), and she dons the worldly dress to attend the dance at which she meets her future husband, a man who is not a Quaker. Blind to Dorothea's superficial desires, Solon cannot understand why another child rejects his faith.

The greatest disappointment for Solon is Stewart's active rebellion. Stewart, who feels "something tender in his father . . . hidden deep away, like a jewel in a mine . . . ." (p. 168), has the closest emotional identity with Solon and makes the greatest mistakes when Solon's guidance proves

faulty. Stewart's name, which implies guardianship of another's property, reflects the action of Rufus, whose stewardship initiated the decay of the family's ideals, and, therefore, the name warns of the curse of the house and of the sins of the fathers which are visited upon the children. The name also carries with it a sense of a second word, "stew," to boil or seethe, and "stew," a brothel, perhaps an indication that the boy's passionate nature will promote his self-destruction. In Stewart's case, Solon ignores many warnings inherent in the boyhood pranks of the "fair-haired youngest" (p. 131), such as when Stewart, six years old, suggests to "Etta and several neighbor children that they remove their clothing and paint themselves as Indians and roam the forests" (p. 132),<sup>26</sup> a scene significant as an indication of Stewart's atavistic and pagan instincts. Solon believes "that he and Benecia had done everything in their power to keep their children pure in thought and deed" (p. 133), but the boy's instincts prove stronger than the moralistic sermons to which "Stewart listened meekly and repentantly . . . and soon forgot" (p. 133). The removal of his clothes signifies Stewart's easy shedding of moral responsibility. Despite Solon's claim of great love for the boy, he is blind to the true nature of his son, for "Barnes never quite realized it", being so conservative and timid emotionally . . ." (p. 143). Nor does Solon acknowledge

<sup>26</sup> Tjader, p. 160, recalls that Dreiser wrote several versions of "this little drama of Naked Indians" because he felt the incident of primary importance in Stewart's story.

the significance of Stewart's fascination for the color and sound of a parade which causes the boy to jump, scream, and clap his hands with delight; his sparkling eyes and flushed cheeks indicate that the boy "wanted to march on with them, keeping step to the thunder of the drum" because "he had seen a bit of fairyland." Solon "was astonished at Stewart's enthusiasm" (pp. 142, 143), which denied the Quaker teachings, and he "did not quite realize that while he might be able . . . to control . . . outward behavior, it was not possible to control the minds of his children" (pp. 168, 169). Later, as the boy matures, Solon fails to notice that Stewart is "most intent on pleasure, and at fourteen was possessed of an avid curiosity as to anything which was forbidden by the rules and regulations imposed on him" (p. 169). He loves games and stories about the Wild West, again an indication of his primitive instincts. A friend, Cosmo Rodeheaver (perhaps signifying the cosmos of sensuality in the theater, which Dreiser calls a "super-cosmic realm" [Dawn, p. 362] and foreshadowing the negative influence of Rhoda who helps a second Barnes child to defy his father), introduces Stewart to a new pleasure, for "this Cosmo was a bookish lad and just bursting into an appreciation of sex." Cosmo shares "erotic passages or pornographic tidbits" (p.169) with Stewart, and Cosmo expands Stewart's education even more when he suggests that they attend a burlesque show on the pretense that they will be visiting a friend's farm.

The show was a crude affair, with a meager company of girls marching around the stage in tights and a couple of red-nosed comedians shouting vulgar jokes, but to Stewart it came in the way of a brilliant revelation. One of the girls especially he remembered for a long time . . . . For days afterward he was in a kind of ecstasy. Gazing out of the window of the schoolroom over green fields, or walking home along tree-lined country lanes, he saw this girl, dancing over the fields, running in the woods, bathing in the glistening eddies of a stream, or whispering to him in the secret chambers of his mind. And the girls in his classroom took on a meaning that they had never had before. The prettier ones he ravaged in his thoughts (p. 170).

Stewart's aroused sexuality fills all nature with images of his secret desire, a sign that he will, finally, allow sensuality to dominate all his instincts. Unaware of his son's change, Solon becomes concerned only when a neighbor reports seeing Stewart as the boy entered the theater. Angry, for "there is no such thing as a good theater," Solon scolds Stewart and makes him promise not to lie, an oath which the boy makes "in a gloomy, depressed, and uncertain way; he did not feel that he could keep the promise" which his father has extracted from him (p. 171). Obviously, Barnes' sense of the adequacy of his own judgment, which he attributes to the inner light of Quakerism, blinds him to the truth in each confrontation with his youngest son.

Solon demonstrates an additional lack of perception when he sends Stewart to a "quasi-religious" school (p. 243), at which the boy, no longer under his father's scrutiny, completely breaks away from the influence of Solon, who has been partially obeyed because he is loved. Eventually the youth turns to cars, the theater, movies, shops, restaurants, cards, cigarettes,

games, and girls (pp. 244-246). Bemused by Stewart's eager[ness] for life, Solon resolves that "he must try to understand his children, even though he could make no compromise with what he knew to be right" (p. 249), and, alarmed at his son's frivolity, Solon limits Stewart's allowance, an act which provokes him to steal from his mother's purse and from his friends, and to accept financial aid, freely given, from Rhoda, who maintains that one cannot "give up music, and dancing, and theaters, and books, and motion pictures, and fit into the world of today" (p. 253). She creates a ready alibi for Stewart to leave school in pursuit of his pleasures, for he receives her permission to say that he will be visiting her home, a new freedom which results in his participation in an escapade which culminates in the rape and accidental death of Psyche Tanzer.<sup>27</sup> When Stewart commits suicide, Solon at first persists in his blindness as he views the body of his son.

So they had brought him out of the depths of the hell of so-called pleasure, from eyes that sparkled with flames that were not of virtue, from lips that were red, but not with the hue of innocence, from bodies that wove, swaying through the dizzying rhythms of the dance--from voices that mocked and cursed, that raved against virtue and innocence--from the theater, the saloon, the dance hall, and the brothel--even so he imagined. His son!

<sup>27</sup> Tjader, pp. 179, 180, states that Stewart's story, like Clyde Griffiths', was taken from a newspaper account of the murder of a girl by the sons of wealthy men who sought to make her acquiesce in their demands by giving her a narcotic which, with her weak heart, killed her. "This frightful coincidence of the drops and the weak heart was the sort of thing Dreiser would brood over for hours. It was so merciless, so Greek, in its arousal of pity and fear." One cannot fail to note the Greek name, Psyche, hardly a common one for a girl who has "limited capabilities," and is the daughter of a drunken carpenter and a "slatternly mother" (p. 262).

His son! Yes, life had done this to his son . . . his own--his boy. . . . Suddenly this thought came to him: What if, in so urgently seeking to sway him toward the right, he had, after all, failed to do all that he might have done--his full duty by him! (pp. 297, 298).

With Solon's first glimmering of recognition, he turns to prayer and asks for help, just as Oedipus consults the gods when he begins to fear that he is the murderer who must be punished. Each man is dissuaded by his wife from acceptance of the truth. Jocasta says to Oedipus, "Set your mind at rest," and she convinces him that the oracle is false;<sup>28</sup> Benecia counsels Solon, "Thee has done all that a father should, always" (p. 299), and they return to bed. However, the irreversible process of recognition of error has been put into motion.

Solon's reaction to Stewart's death unites the family once more, but with a difference. Isobel, aware of a change in her father, urges Etta to return home since their mother is ill and their father morose over Stewart's death and Benecia's failing health, and Etta returns because she, too, has been disillusioned by her life. Kane has abandoned her, and "new plays, concerts, interesting restaurants," fail to lift her depression. When Etta first sees Solon, she notices immediately, "his eyes! Where now was the really commanding moral conviction which had characterized them throughout most of his dealings with life, as well as with his erring children?" (p. 313). Solon, his vision impaired by "a gray, sightless veil," is now ready to see truth. Like Oedipus, Solon cannot see the inner

<sup>28</sup> Sophocles, p. 28.



light of truth until he can no longer enjoy external sight.

Solon's fuller understanding comes in the garden at Thornbrough where Solon learns of God through nature. With his dimmed vision, he notices "a long-stalked plant reaching up about four feet, extending a small twig that bore a small bud," and "eating the bud is an exquisitely designed green fly . . .," a sight which Solon interprets as "the wisdom and the art of the Creative impulse" and which fills him with a "kind of religious awe and wonder" (pp. 316, 317). Again, in the garden, Solon understands God when a small snake seems to comprehend from Solon's gentle reassurances that he means it no harm, and Solon realizes his role as part of God's total universe (pp. 318, 319). Released from its association with paganism, the garden becomes an Eden wherein Solon conquers the serpent with love and gains an instinctive sense of life and its purpose. He recognizes that his insincerity in his faith and in his worldly life has caused the misdirection of his children, and he learns that "good intent is . . . a universal language," not a knowledge of good and evil but of love; Solon achieves a true humility when he abandons his old moral judgments to discover "the need of love toward all created things" (pp. 318, 319), after which he rediscovers the Quaker faith to be ". . . no religion limited by society or creed but rather, in the words of Woolman, 'a principle placed in the human mind . . .'" (p. 328). With a purer inner light, Solon's influence on his daughters is positive, for Etta grows

"to understand Isobel for the first time" (p. 321) and agrees to take full responsibility for the care of the house and her father, thereby releasing Isobel, "with her lovely temperament," to seek happiness through the love of a good man (p. 321). Only in his example of understanding love does Solon actively guide his family, for, though weakened by cancer, Solon finds sustenance in love. "He seems so much better, when . . . he is actually worse" (p. 330); his new perception of truth teaches that the "love and unity" of nature is "nothing fitful or changing or disappointing . . . but constant . . . everywhere the same, in sunshine or in darkness . . ." (p. 331). Thus, Solon dies with a renewed faith in God, as a symbol of hope for mankind, and his recognition of his faulty values allows him to transcend self-pity, fear, and moral stringency to become the bulwark of faith; purged of materialism, self-interest, and religious dogma, Solon, on his deathbed, asks, "What has become of that poor old man who was dying of cancer? . . . whose son killed himself" (p. 332).

The spiritual ending of the novel, as has already been stated, disturbs critics more than any other aspect of the book; Gerber calls it "Job-like," indicating that Solon's miraculous change is not believable; this critic interprets the ending to be Dreiser's final reconciliation with his father's religious zeal.<sup>29</sup> Boynton asserts that Dreiser has no talent

<sup>29</sup> Gerber, p. 169.

for romantic prophecy,<sup>30</sup> while Trilling states that he is unable to reconcile Dreiser's mysticism with his personal materialism.<sup>31</sup> Many critics are unable to accept Solon's redemption and salvation. In actuality, Dreiser's conclusion has little to do with his father or his own materialism. He combines two forms of dramatic expression, the Greek drama and the English morality play, both designed to convey spiritual renewal, and the resolution of the novel becomes plausible in light of the theatrical traditions which shape it.<sup>32</sup> As he transcends self-pity and loses his fear of death, Solon experiences the catharsis which Aristotle maintains is the purpose of tragedy, and because Dreiser's allegorical adaptation of the Greek drama, Oedipus Rex, also contains morality play elements which add dimension to the theme of the novel, the strange ending, so unlike those of Dreiser's earlier books, becomes credible.

The morality play, a dramatized sermon, depicts the life span of its protagonist, who represents all mankind, whose drama displays the struggle for his soul, a battle waged by personifications of abstract virtues and vices, and the usual

<sup>30</sup> Percy Boynton, America in Contemporary Fiction (New York: Russell & Russell, Inc., 1963), p. 149.

<sup>31</sup> Trilling, p. 142.

<sup>32</sup> In Dawn, p. 325, Dreiser says that he began reading Christopher Marlowe's works while still in high school and felt that they were of great value to him in later years. Allusions in the Cowperwood trilogy to the play Dr. Faustus indicate Dreiser's familiarity with this drama which incorporates the morality tradition to develop Faustus' internal conflict.

pattern of the play outlines the temptation, the fall, the redemption, and, finally, the salvation of the hero just before his death. The sermon in The Bulwark teaches that love is the most important value in life, for through love man understands nature and God; love must evolve beyond its physical, maternal, or paternal aspects to embrace all forms of life. Solon, reaching God when he learns to love, is redeemed when he conquers the serpent in the garden and is saved when he approaches death. Personified virtues and vices battle for his soul; although not all have been explicated in this thesis, each character's name represents a human quality,<sup>33</sup> and worldly temptations, in the form of clothes or the theater or other lures, reach out to ensnare Solon. Far too many indications of the morality play tradition appear in the novel to be ignored, and Dreiser's ending is in keeping with the dramatic conventions which he has incorporated into his story of a twentieth-century Quaker. Dreiser attempts to make Solon a universal figure, not merely as the personification of the struggle of Man to find laws by which he may govern his life, but as a representative of many historical periods. He is an extension of antiquity as Oedipus, a reflection of medieval man in the morality play, and a man

<sup>33</sup> Among those names not heretofore discussed are: Dorothea, a Greek name signifying "God's gifts"; Orville, of Latin derivation, meaning "gold"; Etta, German for "independent"; Isobel, Hebrew for "the gift of Baal"; Benecia, from Benedicta, "the happily married" and "benefit"; Hannah, the German version of Joan or Jane, indicating "God is gracious"; and Rhoda, a Greek name for "rose," or, in German, meaning "protection." Each character's situations and desires, as established in the novel, are embodied in his name.

his own time in the imagery from the modern theater, which Dreiser uses to represent lies, worldliness, false values, and sensual pleasures, the vices against which Solon's virtues rebel. Although Solon wins his battle against social evils, his son, Stewart, does not, for his death stems from the deception of the fairyland of the stage, a world of imitation and sham. Stewart's youthful prank, the drama of the naked Indians, indicates his sensuous nature; he cannot resist the attraction of a bright and noisy parade which invites him to join in the pleasures of a worldly life; and he allows the sexual impressions of a burlesque show to overshadow all of nature. Stewart willingly deceives his father to seek gratification of his primitive instincts. Thus, the examples of modern theater represent only decadence and deception, the message of the flesh as opposed to the meaning of the spirit which is evident in the two older forms of drama.

It is evident that Dreiser's artistry has developed through the years, particularly in his use of theatrical imagery to convey his theme. From his early novels, which parody the melodramatic theater and occasionally mirror the Elizabethan stage to evoke a sense of tragedy, Dreiser moves, in An American Tragedy, to the twentieth-century contribution to the drama, the movies, which are, in reality, an extension of the melodramatic traditions. In The Bulwark, Dreiser no longer strives with conscious effort to work visible

theatrical props into his novel since such artificial devices are less essential to Barnes' story. Dreiser's final novel adheres closely to the pattern of classical tragedy, praised by Aristotle, for it is the imitation of a serious action; its hero is a man of high station, whose pride leads to erroneous decisions and to his reversal; and Barnes' recognition of his guilt allows him to transcend human limitations to find the true value of his life. Thus, through the use of several dramatic forms, the Greek, the morality play, and the modern theater, Dreiser produces the most poignant expression of dramatic tragedy of his entire career.

## VI. THEATRICAL IMAGERY IN DREISER'S NOVELS; A PARTIAL RESOLUTION

This study of Dreiser's use of theatrical imagery has shown a progression of his artistry from his melodramatic presentation of events in Sister Carrie, 1900, to his final achievement of tragedy in The Bulwark, 1945, and has revealed a gradual evolution of Dreiser's philosophic view of love as life's primary value, from an expression of love as physical instinct to an interpretation of love as man's link to divinity and eternity. As Dreiser's use of theatrical imagery becomes more subtly pervasive in his plots, it clarifies and focuses his theme--that materialism provides illusory ideals which serve only to engender discontent, and with the imagery from the theater, he develops an awareness of the tragic results of man's denial of love as an expression of his value.

The author's developing skill becomes apparent in his use of theatrical imagery which nearly dominates Sister Carrie and which is conspicuous by its lack of importance in Jennie Gerhardt, 1910. Dreiser strives to provide tragic overtones through his references to Hamlet in both novels, but the allusions to Shakespeare's play appear somewhat strained, although in Carrie motifs from Elizabethan drama add dimension to the structure of the novel. Both of his first two books convey a blurred view of the waste of life as a tragedy because his heroines seldom rise above the melodramatic

stereotypes which form them, even though Dreiser does distort the models from which he draws his characters. Since Dreiser's theatrical imagery appears superimposed on his fictional world in these early novels, the tragedy more closely resembles pathos, and he falls short of achieving sufficient stature for his heroines or their lovers. However, Dreiser does succeed in dramatizing the demoralizing effect of materialism on mankind, but his interpretation of love as man's one redeeming value is less well-defined. Love is too earthbound in these novels because Carrie's love is selfish, and Jennie's combines aspects of physical, maternal, and fraternal instincts. The final effect is that both women remain too closely tied to their immediate worlds to evoke an understanding of love as an eternal value. In these first two books, love appears largely as an expression of man's sexual instincts.

In The Financier, 1912, The Titan, 1914, and The Stoic, 1947, Cowperwood, too, is a figure straight from melodrama, the stereotype of a nineteenth-century businessman who wastes his life in the building of a financial empire which cannot survive his death. Cowperwood gains no lasting value from his absorption into the superficial dreams of the Gilded Age. However, in the trilogy, Dreiser more effectively employs his metaphor of the theater to dramatize the worthlessness of Cowperwood's goals, and, again, alludes to classical drama in his references to Euripides, to Shakespeare's Macbeth, and to Marlow's Doctor Faustus, in an attempt to raise



Cowperwood above his own time by personifying him as the embodiment of several recognized tragic heroes. Unfortunately, the dramatic allusions do not sufficiently elevate Cowperwood's stature. Like Isadore Berchansky, Dreiser's psychopathic protagonist in The Hand of the Potter, Cowperwood's actions and his lack of love do not arouse empathy, and he remains a character far too shallow to be capable of a strong expression of universal values. At times, however, Cowperwood does become an expression of Macbeth's ambition, of Faustus' delusion that he can usurp the power of God, and of Euripides' dramatic view that man creates his own fate, and through the imagery from classic theater, Cowperwood's story occasionally approaches tragic proportions however much it may fall short of great tragedy.

Perhaps because Dreiser abandons a contrived use of classical dramas and builds Clyde Griffiths' tragedy from imagery derived from the movies, the twentieth-century contribution to dramatic tradition, his most widely-praised novel, An American Tragedy, 1925, conveys a well-structured picture of the plight of modern man as he pursues phantoms in his attempt to give meaning and value to life. Movie imagery never dominates the action because Dreiser only hints at his sources--film techniques and movie plots--to provide an unobtrusive symbol for Clyde's self-delusion which is formed from optical illusion. The immature young man seeks a reality as exciting as the life portrayed on the screen,

and his desires lead to his death, a fact never realized by the youth who believes so firmly in his dream world. Clyde wants love, but he rejects it when he kills Roberta to attain the worldly success promised by his dream love, Sondra. She, in turn, ignores Clyde when his crime threatens her social position so that love, in this novel, becomes part of the illusion. Dreiser does not consciously make Clyde a classical hero, but he evokes a sympathetic response to his protagonist's dilemma as Clyde expresses the yearning of all men. Clyde's delusions are obviously the method by which he destroys himself, and, thus, his death exemplifies the tragedy of modern man who struggles to attain the promises of the American dream, ideals which are denied by the truth in American society.

Only in his final novel, The Bulwark, published twenty years after An American Tragedy, does Dreiser achieve a profound view of the great power of love. Solon Barnes, the Dreiserian protagonist who most closely approaches the stature of a classical tragic hero, is, in my view, Dreiser's most successful character, a good man who suffers a reversal because he is too blind to recognize that he has severely limited himself when he adopts worthless social values. As Barnes learns the true significance of love, his catharsis provides Dreiser's strongest expression of its power as the greatest value and highest virtue of life. Portrayed as a twentieth-century Oedipus, Barnes suffers his fate as the result of his efforts to evade it, and he is a twentieth-century

Everyman of a modern morality play, who learns that selfless love, removed from worldly considerations, physical gratification, and selfish purpose, gives man insight into the nature of God. Barnes finds redemption in the divine qualities of love from which he develops an understanding of his own nature and gains a knowledge of God. Although elements of the morality play are evident in all of Dreiser's novels, especially in the names of characters which foreshadow their fates, only The Bulwark succeeds as a dramatized sermon. Through the dramatic forms and literary traditions from which Dreiser has drawn, he provides his interpretation of life as valuable only when man understands himself and, through love, respects all life.

Theatrical imagery, never adequately isolated as a strength in Dreiser's writing, serves a twofold purpose--it illuminates his views, and, more importantly, establishes a basis for evaluation of his achievement as a writer. His novels have been examined from several points of interest over the past seventy years, but, as yet, no critic has accounted for Dreiser's intent in each of his novels, and the wide variation in judgments applied to his work has tended to obscure his artistic stature. Above all, critical analyses seldom provide understanding of the reasons why his novels, often damned with ambiguous praise, continue to attract ever-increasing critical interest. Generally, interpretations which have proposed to explain Dreiser, have

centered on scientific, philosophical, or literary influences on his novels; on biographical data; or on assessments of sympathetic motives on the part of the author, and have not accurately evaluated his total impact on the broad spectrum of American fiction.

Perhaps the primary source of the difficulty in determining Dreiser's skill lies within his own penchant for temporarily adopting differing philosophies, ideas, and theories, as they interested him, and his incorporation of these concepts into whichever book he was currently writing, even to the point of plagiarizing when he felt that newly-discovered information expanded his own theme, a habit acknowledged by all of Dreiser's biographers. But such a use of outside material is not merely copying since Dreiser combines the results of his extensive research and study of art, literature, and science with his observations of the world around him. His writing contains a use of symbols and images which develop his own philosophy, panoramic settings which provide realism, many individual characters who are attractive despite their often unattractive objectives, structural devices and organization which enhance theme--as well as a distressing plethora of verbal barbarisms which delight Dreiser's enemies and appall his admirers. Drawing as he did on such diverse materials, Dreiser defies easy categories. No brief critical treatment of his novels, either singly or en masse, can completely explore the total effect

of the many facets of the novels; therefore, most of such critical discussions, at best, seem only fragmentary. From Dreiser criticism thus far emerges the conviction that the only consistent feature, discernible in all the novels, is recurring imagery, especially the imagery from the world of the theater discussed in this thesis. Such imagery not only reflects a character's pursuit of his dreams--the worthless goals which destroy him--but, also, in images which recall established dramatic traditions, contributes to an understanding of the inevitability of the tragic consequences of self-deception. In addition, theatrical imagery, as it develops in the novels, suggests partial insight into many stylistic defects, illustrates the importance of dramatic influences on his fictional world, and provides a timeless backdrop against which Dreiser projects his response to man's need to know the purpose of his existence.

The main significance of this study of Dreiser's use of theatrical imagery may well be in the light it sheds on the continuing controversy over the Dreiserian style. His difficulties may well be exaggerated out of proportion. Ever since Stuart P. Sherman's attack, in 1915, critics who praise Dreiser seem to consider it an obligation to point out that Dreiser's writing is strong despite its faults, but such critics obscure his merit when they discuss his style as being as bulky as a hippopotamus, or as craggy and magnificent in its roughness as a mountain, or when they describe Dreiser as

a great shaggy monkey pounding heavily on typewriter keys, or as a terrible craftsman who succeeds in spite of himself. The ambiguity of such defenses does little to expunge the impression left by less friendly critics who cite specific flaws, such as Dreiser's repetitions of words like "chic" or "trig," or when they enumerate examples of flowery, stilted sentences, replete with faulty grammar. One explanation for such language is Dreiser's interest in the theatrical techniques of the popular theater in his time, which he, as a young man, felt was an "education" (ABAM, p. 25). The specific effect of the melodrama on his writing has been discussed in Chapter II, in the evaluation of his use of theatrical imagery as it influences the diction in his first two novels, Sister Carrie and Jennie Gerhardt. His heroines' monosyllabic and trite dialogue is consistent with their lack of education, and, in contrast, to interpose his observations of the dilemmas of his heroines, Dreiser uses flowery diction, the backbone of the melodramatic productions, to present his interpretation of their problems. Furthermore, the flat dialogue in all his novels provides a clue to the verisimilitude of his fictional characters whose voices reflect their backgrounds. To create irony, Dreiser presents, in ponderous language, the worthless dream worlds which his characters envision. In later novels, he uses repetition to display the poverty-stricken vocabulary and limited experience of such characters as Clyde Griffiths, whose movie dream world abounds with words like "chic," which

expose the triteness and inadequacy of the world portrayed on the screen. Dreiser's use of language to enhance situation and theme is not perfected until he completes The Bulwark in which few of his earlier "flaws" are present. In that late novel, Dreiser shows that he can use uncluttered language to emulate in the plot of his novel the Greek model whose traditions dictate unity of action with all unnecessary detail eliminated so that attention is focused on the tragic action. The lucid smoothness of language in his last book suggests that the unpolished sentences, inane dialogue, and complex syntax so evident in Dreiser's earlier works are part of his attempt to dramatize truthfully the world as he saw it.

Other critical complaints against Dreiser deplore his continual search through scientific and philosophic texts from which he hoped to uncover empirical facts to explain life. Unfortunately, some critics have concentrated too heavily on his use of philosophy or theology or psychiatry or mysticism or science, and too lightly on the importance of influences derived from dramatic traditions which provide a valid, and unchanging, clue to Dreiser's interest and his intent. The influences of earlier dramatic works become important in determining what Dreiser attempts to reveal in his novels, which he always conceived of as dramas. Though Dreiser's plays are poorly written, his books are dramatic in his effective characterizations; in his use of theatrical props, devices and techniques; and in his references to

existing plays to reinforce his themes. Theatrical history, particularly of the period contemporaneous with his first books, highlights the themes, structures, style, and effects of each novel, and references to older dramas, whose histories expand the situations in Dreiser's stories, provide a broader range for judgment of depicted events. Thus, since Dreiser's use of dramatic imagery changes only in the maturity of its effect, never in its meaning, such imagery deserves far more critical attention than it has received to date.

In contrast to his use of theatrical traditions, Dreiser's use of philosophy, or other borrowed influences, does change, and his changing views provide considerable ammunition for unfavorable attacks. For example, among the hypotheses put forth to defend or dispraise Dreiser, one which retains its popularity is an interpretation of his thought as naturalistic, of his characters as puppets who act as a consequence of capricious natural and social forces which exert pressures on them. Conversely, critics who deplore Dreiser's naturalism complain when they cannot see a naturalistic view in all of his novels. Dreiser's use of imagery from the world of the theater refutes the theories which assert that characters submit to forces beyond their control; each one of Dreiser's major characters chooses his fate: Carrie actively seeks out the stage as a place which will fulfill her desires; Jennie, who wants to sacrifice herself for her family, avoids total tragedy only because she loves all nature and is able to



ignore the lure of the world of illusion through accepting her reality; Cowperwood willingly plays deceptive roles to obtain his insubstantial goals and receives as his reward a lonely tomb which resembles a prison. Clyde Griffiths, as well, is instrumental in deciding his own fate for he goes to any length, even murder, to participate in the dream world which he conceives from models of life provided in the movies, a theatrical world developed in optical illusion. Solon Barnes, who rigidly sets his own standards, destroys his family because he deceives himself in his refusal to acknowledge that he has worshipped the gods of materialism. Therefore, the forces which affect Dreiser's characters are of their own manufacture. Though nature and society both have some external influence on Dreiser's major characters, the author never commits himself totally to the philosophy of naturalism; and, the "chemisms," which many critics interpret as primary evidence of Dreiser's use of this philosophy, disappear after Carrie. After that the novelist is more subtly able to include theatrical imagery in his works to provide awareness of the fact that each of his characters is motivated by internal urges, not by external forces. Consequently, critics who treat Dreiser's works as naturalistic often limit his purpose and compromise his appeal, for Dreiser's novels do not always comply with proposed theories.

In other discussions which seek to praise but actually

serve to limit Dreiser, whether consciously or unconsciously, some critics consider his primary value to be his role as a spokesman for his age, an accurate recorder of the events and frustrations of his time, but again, these critics try to apply an all-encompassing label to categorize Dreiser's work; in these discussions, he is frequently called a social determinist. This view is less detrimental to an evaluation of his accomplishment as a writer, for Dreiser does deplore his age, one in which superficial values encourage man's willingness to pursue illusion and to reject reality. To create a renewed sense of man's true purpose in life, which Dreiser sets forth in each of his novels as man's capacity to love, Dreiser uses the values of his age to demonstrate humanity's ineffectual search for personal satisfaction in sexual gratification and covetous desire for material objects, in order to provoke a response in his audience which will cause it to replace such fleeting, materialistic goals with the love which is man's only enduring possession. Though Dreiser writes of his own time, and expects his audience to identify with that time, he wants also to move beyond the boundaries of a particular era since he believes that modern man's groping for an understanding of himself and his fate has been a universal concern. Dreiser uses theatrical imagery to expand the constrictions implicit in setting a novel in a singular time and place by projecting universal concerns against a screen of dramatic techniques from all ages of man:

the Greek theater, the medieval and Elizabethan stage, the late nineteenth-century melodrama, and the modern movies--a wide sweep of the history of man, to effect the timelessness which he desires for his plots. Though less successful in his attempts to focus on all time in his earlier fiction, Dreiser's final work achieves this broad view in the theatrical allegory which runs through the story. Dreiser mirrors Barnes' distress in the conflicts between twentieth-century materialism and the ideals of a medieval morality play, to promote the hero as a figure who struggles with the same problems as Oedipus, the legendary king, and, thus, Dreiser creates a multi-faceted reflection of history, as if modern man were standing in a hall of mirrors viewing himself as a continuous series of the same image. Such a use of theatrical imagery provides a metaphor for illusions which reveals modern man as a pawn of his own empty dreams and superficial desires and evokes a view of his place in eternity from which he can understand the insignificance of his present condition and reassess his concept of what is most important in life.

Dreiser's statement, then, emerges from the specific imagery from the theater world which illustrates his view of the role of each generation. Although the modern theater receives harsh treatment from Dreiser in his later novels, he never abandons his respect for the values shown in older dramatic forms, which first appear in Carrie and continue until the end of The Bulwark, for these dramas present man

as dignified by providing a sense of his capacity for heroism in the face of what he sees as the impersonal control of a capricious fate. In addition to evoking a vision of humanity in all historical time, the theatrical traditions color, mold, and transform Dreiser's more mundane heroes into men of greater stature who represent more than just their own time or their isolated problems; his characters stand as an admonishment to man to accept immediate life as a value in itself. When he submits to a world built on illusions, he suffers as a victim of his misdirected values, and he turns to false gods which not only intensify his dilemma but deter him from a full understanding of himself. Dreiser's juxtaposition of dramatic techniques--the modern stage, the universal figures and ideas from earlier dramas which have endured from antiquity--establish what he sees as worthwhile goals for mankind: to know himself and his immediate world; to understand his natural instincts; to recognize his role in eternity, a place which he shares with all other men in all other ages; and to learn that the development of his capacity to love all forms of life will bring him closer to a knowledge of the Divine Consciousness which directs nature. Dreiser's theatrical imagery enriches his fiction and provides a testimony to his constant belief that positive and enduring values do exist in life.

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