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Clothing in An American tragedy: a "True picture of life"

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CLOTHING IN *AN AMERICAN TRAGEDY*:

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MASTER'S THESIS

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Introduction

Theodore Dreiser is considered by many to be the father of American Naturalism. Well-known American authors writing at the turn of the 20th century, Steven Crane, Jack London, Frank Norris, and others, followed in Dreiser's footsteps to broaden the landscape of American fiction. Dreiser opened the door to a new kind of literature that gave prominence to close representations of life over beautiful language and conventional or "moral" subject matter. The primacy of Dreiser in the American literature landscape at the time is most markedly expressed in Sinclair Lewis' 1930 Nobel Prize acceptance speech, in which he said,

> to me, as to many other American writers, Dreiser more than any other man, marching alone, usually unappreciated, often hated, has cleared the trail from Victorian and Howellsian timidity and gentility in American fiction to honesty and boldness and passion of life. (n.p.)

Writers like Sinclair Lewis considered Dreiser the author who opened up the field of literature to more realistic and challenging presentations of American life. In contrast to prior romantic novels that highlighted morality and promoted an idealistic picture of American society, both Realist and Naturalist authors sought a more accurate depiction of American life in their novels. As a pioneer of the naturalist movement Dreiser was also reacting against the novels by authors of the Realist movement like William Dean Howells and Henry James. Dreiser and other Naturalist authors felt the Realist movement was too optimistic about a person's ability to control his or her own life and in reaction endeavored to show how social, cultural, and biological forces determined many of life's outcomes. Dreiser's novels are directly related to his own and family experiences or

stories taken from the newspaper headlines of his time and highlight the circumstances surrounding the characters that determined their fate. In addition to the factual basis for his plots, Dreiser's "books are crowded with exact observation…worked closely into the grain of narrative – about the customs and class structure of American society" (Howe 143). Beyond representing real people and situations, Dreiser presented American society in ways that revealed its core and challenged idealistic beliefs about class mobility and opportunity.

One unique observation that Dreiser makes in his novels, and especially in *An American Tragedy*, in order to reveal and challenge the class hierarchy of American society, is the changing place of clothing as a status symbol in the industrialized, consumerist economy of the early 20th century. Throughout *An American Tragedy*, Clyde and others see nice clothing as a sign of class status and a necessity for belonging in a high social class. This assumption that clothing accurately reflects social class is, however, undermined throughout the novel, reflecting the historical reality of the industrial age, where clothing was becoming more affordable, easier to obtain on credit, and less distinguishable between social classes. The characters' continued reliance on clothing to distinguish between classes in industrialized American society constitutes one of the main areas of tension and a major catalyst for plot development in *An American Tragedy*.

Dreiser interweaves the reality of the changing clothing industry into the novel in intricate ways. His presentation of changes occurring in the clothing industry shows realistic details of American industrialization. Dreiser also uses the fluidity of clothing as a status indicator to symbolically represent Clyde's artificial and consumerist identity

formation. Finally Dreiser juxtaposes the fluidity of the clothing industry against the rigid class structure of American society to critique idealistic views of opportunity in American society and egalitarianism. Looking at *An American Tragedy*'s presentation of clothing and the clothing industry with an awareness of the historically significant changes to clothing and fashion at the time is the key to understanding the realism, symbolism, and cultural critique of the novel. Dreiser's use of the ongoing changes to the status of clothing in the novel reveals in a new way the genius behind Dreiser's work and is one reason why *An American Tragedy* has become a masterpiece that has outlasted its critics.

Literature Review: The Dreiser Controversy

Sinclair Lewis's Nobel Prize speech acknowledgement of Dreiser does more than simply illustrate Dreiser's contribution to American literature; it also illuminates the disparate reception of Dreiser's work by readers and critics. While Lewis views Dreiser as a great novelist who opened the door to a new kind of literature, reviewers and literary critics have spent the last century or more with divided opinions on the quality of Dreiser's works and their place in the canon of American Literature. Much of the early reception and discussion of Dreiser's work focused on the political and moral implications of the themes in his novels. As the era of New Criticism came to prominence in literary circles in the 1940s and 1950s, the attention shifted from the political and social background of Dreiser and his novels to the writing style itself. Dreiser did not fare well under the close scrutiny of new critics who decided his writing lacked literary merit.

The major debate surrounding Dreiser has been between critics of his unpolished, unconventional writing style, critics of his political and philosophical viewpoints, and defenders of his novel's faithfulness to a true picture of American society. From the beginning of his career Dreiser was subjected to reproach and censure for the content and immorality of his novels. When Dreiser attempted to publish his first novel, *Sister Carrie*, in 1900, it was rejected by the established publisher Harper's. An even newer publishing firm, Doubleday, Page and Company, attempted to backtrack on their contract to publish *Sister Carrie* when Mr. Doubleday found the "story immoral and badly written" (Henry 434). After Dreiser fought to have the novel published as agreed, Doubleday, Page and Company did not advertise it, and in turn it did not sell well. It was also attacked by many reviewers and critics shortly after publication (Pizer, *Legend* 451). This rocky reception

of *Sister Carrie* was a reflection of the boundaries Dreiser had pushed in reimagining a novel's content and purpose. It also foreshadowed the criticism and controversy that would follow Dreiser for the rest of his literary career.

In response to the moralist criticism of *Sister Carrie*, Dreiser entered the literary debate himself in his 1903 essay "True Art Speaks Plainly." In the short essay, Dreiser wrote that "The extent of all reality is the realm of the author's pen, and a true picture of life, honestly and reverentially set down, is both moral and artistic whether it offends the conventions or not" (470). In this piece, Dreiser establishes and endorses a lens through which the reader is meant to interpret his works. He asks readers to compare his fictional presentation of life with reality rather than looking at his novels strictly as works of art. This lens was subsequently accepted by many critics and challenged by others, setting up a critical debate that has lasted through the decades.

One of the most widely cited and earliest criticisms of Dreiser was published in 1915 by Stuart P. Sherman. Sherman's scathing criticism of Dreiser's writing is a prime example of denunciations based on disagreement with the deterministic viewpoint presented by his novels. Sherman rejects Dreiser's assertion that his books reflect reality, saying, "Mr. Dreiser simplifies American life almost beyond recognition" (69). Sherman goes on to attack not only Dreiser's writing, but the whole movement of American Naturalism, saying, "A naturalistic novel is a representation based upon a theory of animal behavior. Since a theory of animal behavior can never be an adequate basis for a representation of the life of man in contemporary society, such a representation is an artistic blunder" (72). As is evident, Sherman takes up Dreiser's argument that his works represent a faithful picture of reality and challenges what he sees as philosophical and

stylistic failings in Dreiser's writings. Sherman's essay is emblematic of philosophical objections to Dreiser's early works.

Friend and fellow author H.L. Mencken wrote a defense of Dreiser directly in response to Sherman in 1917. Mencken acknowledges some merit in the criticism of Dreiser but accuses Sherman of being offended "not actually [by] Dreiser's shortcomings as an artist, but Dreiser's shortcomings as a Christian and an American" (76). He also encourages a critical viewpoint that gives room for the changes to literature brought about by American Naturalism:

> All the rubber-stamp formulae of American fiction were thrown overboard in these earlier books; instead of reducing the inexplicable to the obvious, they lifted the obvious to the inexplicable; one could find in them no orderly chain of causes and effects, of rewards and punishments; they represented life as phenomenon at once terrible, and unintelligible, like a stroke of lightning. The prevailing criticism applied the moral litmus. They were not 'good'; ergo, they were 'evil'. (80)

H.L. Mencken argues that the books should not be measured on the grounds of morality but, like Dreiser, he advocates judging the works on their truthfulness and reflection of reality. In this line of argument, both Mencken and Dreiser promote a move away from romantic and idealized stories favored in the literature of the past, and advocate for novelists to have the license to write about the world as they see it.

This exchange between Sherman and Mencken indicates the early formation of critical perspectives that can be traced throughout much of Dreiser-related criticism. In one camp are critics who, like Sherman, are politically and morally offended by the

content of Dreiser's novels as well as the ineloquence of his writing style. In another camp are those who, like Menken, concede to some criticism of Dreiser's style of writing, but defend his politics and the truthfulness of his picture of American life.

Early critics such as Paul Elmer More, T.K. Whipple, Lionel Trilling, Donald J. Adams, and John Crowe Ransom, tended to be highly critical of Dreiser's content and style. These critics were writing in the first half of the twentieth century and were contemporaries of Dreiser. Many of them combined criticism of Dreiser's style and his content. In 1917 More wrote that "the English of Mr. Dreiser…is of the mongrel sort to be expected from a miscegenation of the gutter and the psychological laboratory" (65). Likewise, Whipple's 1928 criticism of Dreiser claimed "His style is atrocious, his sentences are chaotic, his grammar and syntax faulty; he has no feeling for words, no sense of diction…worse than his fancy for straying is his habit of amassing what is unimportant and insignificant" (71-2). Each of these earlier criticisms exemplifies critics who explicitly objected to Dreiser's writing style while also implicitly attacking the content and viewpoint of Dreiser's works.

By the 1940s, Dreiser's apparent success as a novelist had to be acknowledged in the criticism, leading critics to grudgingly note Dreiser's contributions, while still denigrating his style and content. Adams exemplifies this aspect of the Dreiser criticism when he writes, "his role in the development of American fiction was historically an important one, and it would be folly to minimize it…but if Dreiser contributed much to the widening of our literary boundaries, if he brought depth as well as scope to his writing, he also failed completely to bring it to elevation" (54). He continues,

> Nor was it simply by his execrable craftsmanship, his stumbling, muddled, heavy-footed prose, that Dreiser failed as an artist. He could not think, and his lack of clarity and logic was not compensated for, as it sometimes is, by the power of intuition. . . .[H]is thinking is as heavy and confused as his prose. (55)

Adams represents a strong wave of Dreiser criticism that admits to Dreiser's importance in American literary history but maintains a negative viewpoint on his writing.

In a now-famous essay Lionel Trilling attacks Dreiser's works, while also accusing critics of allowing politics to cloud their critical judgment. In his 1950 critique "Reality in America" he wrote, "in the same degree that liberal criticism is moved by political considerations to treat James with severity, it treats Dreiser with the most sympathetic indulgence. Dreiser's literary faults, it gives us to understand, are essentially social and political virtues" (139). Trilling also highlights Dreiser's content in relation to his writing. He argues that

> when he thinks like a novelist, he is worth following – when by means of his rough and ungainly but no doubt cumulatively effective style he creates rough, ungainly, but effective characters and events. But when he thinks like, as we say, a philosopher, he is likely to be not only foolish but vulgar. (142)

While Trilling admits to Dreiser's works being effective, he connects bad philosophical content with bad writing style in a way that is different from most of the previous Dreiser critics.

The rising recognition of Dreiser as an important and influential writer, illustrated in the concessions of Adams and Trilling, prefigured a major change in the trends of Dreiser criticism that would be seen in the 1950s and beyond. The second half of the century features a much more positive view of Dreiser's works. An essential tipping point, cited by various later critics, is found in Saul Bellow's 1951 article, "Dreiser and the Triumph of Art." In this essay, Bellow posits that "His admirers grant that Dreiser was a great novelist who wrote badly. But it is very odd that no one has thought to ask just what the 'bad writing' of a powerful novelist signifies" (146). Bellow goes on to argue that "The majority of modern novelists with their care for the poetry of detail, and in their craving for stability, have not made much progress toward the greatest contemporary facts" (147). Bellow's idea that Dreiser's unconventional and inartistic writing style actually contributes to his powerfulness as a writer instead of inhibiting it opened up new ways to interpret Dreiser's works for future literary critics.

The second half of the 20th century ushered in defenses of Dreiser's writing style based on the idea that this style has a purpose and function that earlier critics missed. Alexander Kern, Julian Markels, Ellen Moers, and Irving Howe all defend Dreiser's writing style. Most of these critics support the claim by Bellow that Dreiser's writing style, although unconventional and sometimes unpolished, is essential to the presentation and truthfulness of the content of the novels. Closely following Bellows, Kern writes, "even the crudeness of Dreiser's thought may have formed the basis for a significant literary achievement" (161). He goes on to accept that "The mere badness, the awkwardness of Dreiser's prose, is obvious" (162), but argues that "character in a novel has meaning only in context, and in supplying this context Dreiser is a master" (165).

In 1961 Markels makes the case that Dreiser's writing style is integral to the truth and power of the content of his novels in his article, "Dreiser and the Plotting of Inarticulate Experience." He writes that our knowledge about the world through Dreiser "arises from a rhythm in the sequence of Dreiser's episodes rather than from anything that can be communicated by a graceful style. It is the rhythm of inarticulate human experience, undifferentiated and hence by definition without style" (434). Markels makes a strong argument for the importance of Dreiser's style. Rather than just accepting that Dreiser has a rough writing style, he sees the inarticulateness of the writing reflecting the inarticulateness of the characters in the novel.

Moers echoes Markels' argument in her 1963 essay "The Finesse of Dreiser." Like Markels, Moers develops the idea that Dreiser's writing style was not a matter of inability, but rather that it reflected the reality for the characters that Dreiser had drawn in his novels. She writes, "from the contrast between day-by-day life as it was lived by his brothers and sisters, and life as it was played out in popular melodrama, he devised a literary style that gave form, and even heroism, to the inarticulate" (154). She also argues that "Dreiser was a master of the use of senseless speech to establish character" (157). Both Markels and Moers draw parallels between Dreiser's writing style and his portrayal of his characters. They find Dreiser's writing style to be an important and purposeful device in successfully developing his unique characters.

In 1964 Howe also wrote forgivingly of Dreiser's style in a slightly different way than Markels and Moers. While he does not go so far as to argue that Dreiser's writing style contributed to the meaning of his content, he argues that his literary "faults are

interwoven with large creative powers, and it can be argued that for the powers to be released there had first to be the triggering presence of the faults" (142).

While much of the direct debate over the merits of Dreiser's writing style has waned over the years, critical interest in Dreiser and his writing has continued. Many critics in the late 20th and early 21st centuries have left the debate over writing for more modern and post-modern interrogations of Dreiser's works within the historical and social context of Dreiser's life and society. Despite this shift in focus from the writing to the content, Dreiser criticism inevitably makes reference to the long debate over the importance of writing style. Many later critics also answer Saul Bellow's lingering query, "what the 'bad writing' of a powerful novel signifies" (146). In focusing on the content rather than the presentation, they illuminate where the power of the novels lies.

Critics of the 1970s, '80s, and '90s took on the task of thoroughly dissecting Dreiser's major novels, looking for what gives the novels their truthfulness and power. In doing so, many aspects of the characters and societies presented in the novels have been investigated. One prominent area of interpretation that has been addressed more recently by critics is the intersection of American consumerism and personal identity in Dreiser's depiction of American society (Ellen Moers, Donald Pizer, Philip Fisher, Michael Spindler, Rachel Bowlby, Walter Benn Michaels, Paul Orlov, Clare Virginia Eby and Joseph Karaganis). Generally, these critics use their critical analyses of Dreiser's works to advocate for the continued study and reading of Dreiser's novels and to endorse Dreiser's writing style and content in response to the history of criticism against him.

Pizer writes that "One of the principal tasks in the criticism of *An American Tragedy* is to unravel the major thread in this logic – to attempt to describe the ironic

interweaving of character, event, and symbol which constitutes the novel's theme and form" (*Novels* 238). Pizer's charge can be fulfilled by tracing the realistic and symbolic use of the clothing and fashion industry throughout *An American Tragedy* to show Dreiser's merit as a writer of realistic and naturalistic fiction. While prior critics have discussed the symbol of clothing in the novel, few have recognized how the details of the changes occurring in the clothing industry at the time contribute to a deeper understanding of Dreiser's realistic portrayal of industrialization, development of Clyde's character, and criticism of the rigid American class system.

History Review: The Changing Clothing Industry of the Early 20th Century

An integral part of understanding the power of Dreiser's novels and his use of clothing as a symbol is a historical understanding of clothing's role in the society he wished to critique. Clothing was uniquely useful as a symbol for Dreiser's representation of American consumerism because of the changing economic realities of textile factory advancement, simple fashion trends, and increased access to credit. The late 19th and early 20th centuries were a time of great change in the clothing industry. These changes, and the lack of recognition of them by characters in *An American Tragedy*, are important to understanding the rise and fall of Clyde Griffiths.

One of the most important changes that occurred around the time of Dreiser's writing of *An American Tragedy* in the clothing industry was a continued sophistication of manufacturing techniques in producing textiles and cutting clothing from patterns. Rob Schorman writes that "In the last half of the nineteenth century, mass production took hold at various speeds in various industries until by the end of the century consumers were confronted with…an avalanche of factory produced goods" (26). Furthermore, Amy T. Peterson and Ann T. Kellogg discuss the implications of greater industrial production of textiles in detail. They note that "mass manufacturing on the new cutting, pressing, buttonhole, and hemming machines…allow[ed] fashionable clothing to be produced at price points that could be afforded by all socioeconomic classes of society" (156). Like many industries, the price of clothing was directly affected by innovation in manufacturing processes that made production of clothing faster and cheaper, resulting in better quality clothing.

In conjunction with advancements in manufacturing, the clothing industry was also affected by changes in fashion preferences of the higher classes. Peterson and Kellogg write that in the 1920s, near the time *An American Tragedy* was written and published, the fashion was a "silhouette and fit [that] were simple and required minimal engineering of pattern pieces to create high-quality, attractive, well-fitting garments"(156). They also write that "Formal suits with top hats, tails, and fitted trousers were not congruent with the new youthful social scene. Tuxedo coats and dinner jackets paired with trousers and vests…provided dashing alternatives to past conservative styles" (263). Schorman also addresses changes in preferences of formal attire leading into the turn of the century saying, "By the 1890s, the sack suit – a garment very similar to the modern business suit – had become acceptable for all occasions, displacing an older code of etiquette which required appropriate use of sack coat, frock coat, cutaway and tails according to the formality and nature of the occasion" (39). Thorstein Veblen notes in his 1934 book a trend in which men began to choose comfort over showy fashions:, "there is a tendency perceptible, in the development of men's dress especially, to discontinue methods of expenditure and the use of symbols of leisure which must have been irksome" (186). As more simple and informal clothing became fashionable, people from lower classes and with less wealth could participate in the fashion trends more easily. This trend combined with the affordability of factory made clothing to make clothing a less stable indicator of wealth and class status.

Both developments in production techniques and fashion preferences further contributed to a closing of the gap in quality between ready-made clothing, which could be afforded by lower- and middle-class individuals, and custom-made clothing, which

was limited to those of the upper class. Schorman describes the spread of "men's ready-made clothing" as it grew in the late 19th and early 20th century from $48 million in 1850 to $485 million by 1910 (30). He also notes that the contemporary clothing industry "took every opportunity to distance" itself from the "lower-class beginnings in sea-port 'slop' shops" by "emphasizing that its clothing was 'equal to custom-made' or better" (35). Kristin Hoganson discusses the role of fashion in closing the gap between higher and lower-class women: "Although French fashion had upper-crust connotations, working class women were well attuned to it…and distressed status-conscious reformers by imitating the dress of wealthier women" (61). She also writes that "Fashion enabled working-class, immigrant, black, and rural women to appear like ladies, or at least upwardly mobile, and in some cases effect their mobility" (62). Veblen discusses the changing gap in clothing by noting that "the ability to pay is put in evidence by means which require a progressively nicer discrimination in the beholder" (187). Changes in the clothing industry had begun to make it more difficult for people to discern social status by looking at the clothing of individuals.

Another major factor contributing to the evolving place of clothing in American consumerism was the greater availability and reliance on credit beginning during the time Dreiser was writing. Lawrence B. Glickman discusses the growing prominence of installment buying in the 1920s in his article "Rethinking Politics: Consumers and the Public Good during the 'Jazz Age'." Martha Olney also discusses the growing use of credit, describing how "The 1920s mark the crucial turning point in the history of consumer credit. . . . In the 1920s it first became common for merchants to assume that a customer was buying on credit rather than with cash" (320-1). With growing use and

availability of credit, lower- and middle-class individuals were able to buy consumer goods, such as clothing, without a high upfront cost, further lowering the barriers to buying high-quality clothing.

Together all of these major developments in clothing and consumerism during the early 20th century had a dramatic effect on the overall accessibility of decent clothing for the average person and for the cultural place of clothing in the class system. Each of these changes is represented in the plot of *An American Tragedy*. Clyde is able to afford decent ready-made clothing on a modest budget, using credit whenever necessary. He is also able to associate himself with a higher-class social group on his working man's clothing budget and can be mistaken for his wealthy cousin, despite the vast difference in their circumstances. In fact, changes in the clothing industry represent the realistic representation of society, the major theme of identity, and the primary criticism of American society, highlighting Dreiser's writing technique, which weaves realistic details into the symbolic development of the novel's plot and purpose.

Chapter 1: A "True Picture" of the Clothing Industry

Deep realism and authenticity to American culture and society in Dreiser's novels are integral to their innovation and success in American literature. As Robert Penn Warren writes,

> We feel in this book…the burden of a historical moment, the moment of the Great Boom which climaxed the period from Grant to Coolidge, the half century in which the new America of industry and finance capitalism was hardening into shape and its secret forces were emerging to dominate all life. In other words, *An American Tragedy* can be taken as a document, both personal and historical, and it is often admired, and defended, in these terms. (132)

One way in which the document of the novel can be examined for authenticity is by looking at the details of American Society. Dreiser's depiction of the early 20th century clothing industry in *An American Tragedy* illustrates how Dreiser's works reflect a realistic and nuanced portrayal of actual American society. Throughout the novel, Dreiser intricately involves details of the clothing market and clothing manufacturing in a way that reveals the accuracy of Kern's praise of Dreiser's "picture of the manifold complexity of institutions" (165). Dreiser incorporates the changing institution of fashion and clothing into the characterization and plot of the novel in ways that reveal his sensitivity to the impact of such changes. The novel contains representations of industrial and manufacturing developments, fashion expectations, and buying on credit in various instances throughout while highlighting the implications of those changes in society.

An American Tragedy shows industrial and manufacturing processes by including the Griffithses' collar factory as an important and detailed setting within the novel. While Clyde's early working life is relegated to the service industry, his move to Lycurgus transitions him from the urban service-driven economy to the suburban manufacturing industry. In addition, families depicted in the novel in connection with wealth are the owners of factories, such as the Cranstons and Finchleys, who "built large factories on the banks of the Mohawk River" (149). More specifically, the first mention of Clyde's wealthy uncle, Samuel Griffiths, is that he was "a shrewd, hard businessman" who had "a large factory in Lycurgus for the manufacture of collars and shirts" (17), a living even more closely aligned with the developments and industrialization of clothing manufacture.

When Clyde moves to Lycurgus to work at his uncle's collar factory, Dreiser gives in depth descriptions of the mechanisms and processes of the collar factory as Clyde experiences it. During Clyde's first visit and tour of the collar factory, he is "somewhat diverted…by the sights and sounds of the great manufactory itself" (183). He visits the shrinking room where he will be working and observes the "enormous drying racks or moving skeleton platforms, boxed, top and bottom and sides, with hot steam pipes" and "movement…accompanied by an enormous rattle and clatter of ratchet arms which automatically shook and moved these lengths of cloth forward from east to west" (185). Later, when Clyde is promoted to the stamping room assistant manager position, Dreiser details that part of the collar-making process as well:

> This was the stamping room – a separate chamber at the west end of the stitching floor, where were received daily from the cutting room above

> from seventy-five to one hundred thousand dozen unstitched collars of different brands and sizes. And here they were stamped by a group of girls according to the slips or directions attached to them with the size and brand of collar. (227)

These descriptions of the manufacturing of collars in Samuel Griffiths' factory represent Dreiser's characteristic attention to the specific details of American life and his familiarity with the industrial processes that were changing the clothing and fashion industry during the period.

Dreiser also makes reference to the economic developments of the clothing industry when the Griffiths family is introduced in detail and Samuel Griffiths is said to have spent "the past four days…attending a conference of shirt and collar manufacturers in Chicago" to discuss "price-cutting and upstart rivals in the west" (146). This statement reveals the reality of increasing competition in the clothing industry and the changes necessitated by continuing reductions in cost and worth of the product, a problem for Samuel Griffiths' business.

The social implications of lowering the cost of clothing is also referenced in relation to Mr. Griffiths' collar factory in a discussion between Clyde and another youth at a party in Lycurgus. In this instance one of the upper-class youths of Lycurgus, Mr. Sells, asks Clyde about the collar business: "I've always wondered just what, outside of money, there is to the collar business. Gil and I used to argue about that. . . . He used to tell me that there was some social importance to making and distributing collars, giving polish and manner to people who wouldn't otherwise have them, if it weren't for cheap collars" (321). Gil's sentiment that clothing is an important part of building people up

from lower social classes is ironic because of his harsh attitude towards Clyde and others of the lower classes. Despite the irony, this secondhand reference to Gil's statement acknowledges the impact of the cheapening clothing industry and how upper-class owners of factories interpreted and justified the changes within their industry.

In addition to showing developments in manufacturing of clothing, Dreiser also incorporates details that show fashion trends becoming less formal and, therefore, easier to replicate for lower-class workers. In the first book of the novel Clyde gets a job as a hotel bell-hop. This position is generally occupied by lower-class young men like himself. Despite the relatively humble job, the boys working at the hotel are able to dress relatively well and can afford clothing that resembles and imitates those in the higher classes. An example of this phenomenon is Clyde's admiration of his co-worker, Doyle. His clothing and appearance are described through Clyde's perceptions:

> His shoes and collar were so clean and trim, and his hair cut and brushed and oiled after a fashion which would have become a moving-picture actor. From the first Clyde was utterly fascinated by his taste in the matter of dress – the neatest of brown suits, caps, with ties and socks to match. He should wear a brown-belted coat just like that. He should have a brown cap. And a suit as well cut and attractive. (50)

Despite being a mere bell-hop, Doyle's style of clothing is sufficiently good looking to convince Clyde that he should imitate that same style. In doing so Clyde "outfitted himself with a new brown suit, cap, overcoat, socks, stickpin and shoes as near like those of his mentor as possible" (56). After outfitting himself with his bell-hop's wages, his family is "not a little astonished and even amazed by the change. How could Clyde have

come by all this grandeur so speedily? How much could all this that he wore now have cost?" (56). The ability of Clyde and Doyle to cloth themselves well from their menial service jobs and the astonishment of the family at Clyde's ability to afford his clothing show the disconnection between the reality of the clothing's cost and the perception of that clothing. Even though the clothing is inexpensive enough for Clyde to afford, it looks and seems highly extravagant to those around him because they cannot decipher the true value of the clothing Clyde wears.

Even Clyde's uncle, Samuel, who is part of the upper class, overestimates Clyde's station in life upon seeing his clean-cut uniform at the Union League Club where they meet for the first time. Samuel describes Clyde to his son Gilbert by saying, "'Well he hasn't much of a job, I must say. . . . He's only a bell-hop in the Union League in Chicago, at present, but a very pleasant and gentlemanly sort of a boy, I will say. I was quite taken with him'" (157). In addition, Samuel sees "those young men who served the guests of such an institution as this, were, in the main, possessed of efficient and unobtrusive manners. Therefore to see Clyde standing before him in his neat gray and black uniform and with the air of one whose social manners at least were excellent, caused him to think favorably of him" (173). Clyde's neat appearance in his uniform and his good manners overcome his low position at the hotel in Samuel Griffiths' mind. He does not deem Clyde to be a low-class kind of person because of these factors, despite the fact that Clyde is working as a low-paid bell-hop.

Changing fashion trends are also addressed in reference to the Cranstons' and Finchleys' ostentatious fashion senses. The established families in Lycurgus are said to consider them "a thorn in the flesh" because they "were setting a rather showy, and hence

disagreeable, pace to all of the wealthy residents of this region. They were given to wearing the smartest clothes, to the latest novelties in cars and entertainments" (149). These families were willing to participate in and develop ever-changing standards of fashionable dress. These rapidly changing standards are more difficult for those with less wealth to keep up with, placing a new barrier to entry for the less wealthy, but they also cause a certain amount of confusion in more conventional established families of wealth. This phenomenon can make some of the wealthy struggle to discern actual wealth and social status in clothing from showy imitation.

During Clyde's time in Lycurgus, he is able to dress in ways that confuse the perceptions of his social standing. Clyde can afford clothing that helps him look like he has a higher social class despite his low level in the factory. Not long after arriving at Lycurgus, Clyde is invited to dinner at the Griffithses' home and "At once he began to think of the need for a dress suit, or at least a tuxedo and trousers. Accordingly the next morning…he managed to find a coat, trousers and a pair of patent leather shoes, as well as a white silk muffler for the money he had already saved. And so arrayed he felt himself safe. He must make a good impression" (213). With the affordability of the clothing that Clyde could get with just his savings and the less formal standards that allowed for a tuxedo to be acceptable at the dinner, Clyde was seen by Mrs. Griffiths as looking "so neat and generally presentable, so much like her own son that she was little startled at first and intrigued on that score" (215). Mr. Griffiths also "Measuring Clyde…finding him very satisfactory in appearance…now that he saw Clyde in an ordinary tuxedo with a smart pleated shirt and black tie" (216). Despite Clyde's modest income at the factory, he is able to impress the upper-class conservative relatives with his

taste in clothing. They see him more as an equal to their own children and especially resembling their son Gilbert, which is a big indication of the importance and confusion in the perception of clothing considering the contrast of Clyde's impoverished upbringing to Gilbert's affluent one.

In addition to showing the manufacturing and cost changes in the clothing industry, *An American Tragedy* also pointedly shows how credit was becoming a popular way to buy clothing in the time period. For the first time in history credit was becoming widely available to those who needed it to afford more expensive goods. Clyde takes full advantage of this development by regularly using in-store credit or layaway procedures to buy himself clothing. In addition to lowering costs, Clyde is also able to outfit himself well as a bell-hop because of buying "on-time." In response to his parents' worries about the extravagance of his clothing Clyde explains "as if to soften the blow, one of the boys at the hotel had told him of a place where he could procure quite all the things that he needed on time" (54). He further persuades them "His clothes were not too fine, by any means – his mother should see some of the other boys. He was not spending too much money. And, anyhow, he had a long while in which to pay for all that he had bought" (56). The length of time to pay for clothing is an integral way Clyde excuses his parents' perceptions of his extravagant clothing. His parents in turn are surprised at the easy way with which Clyde can procure credit for these types of goods.

Clyde uses credit for buying his own clothing and also depends on credit when it comes to buying a coat for his girlfriend, Hortense. After discussing the coat with Hortense, "Clyde heaved a sigh of relief. After all, it wasn't two or three hundred. He began to think now that if she could arrange to make any reasonable down payment –

say, fifty or sixty dollars – he might manage to bring it together within the next two or three weeks anyhow" (114). Although Hortense is unable to convince the shop keeper to sell her the coat on an "easy payment" plan, she does come to a kind of layaway agreement where she can pay "twenty five or thirty dollars on account" and Mr. Rubenstein explains that he will "take the coat out of the window and lock it up for you. No one can even see it then. In another week bring me the balance or in two weeks. Then it is yours" (116). This negotiation between Hortense and the shop-keeper highlights the changing means of buying clothing. It is not assumed that a person will and must have cash upfront for more expensive clothing purchases and is instead acceptable for them to make payments on layaway or on credit payment plans. This shift in buying clothing allows for people of less means, like Hortense and Clyde, to buy clothing that might otherwise be unattainable to them.

The many changes that were taking place in fashion at this time are clearly represented throughout *An American Tragedy*. Dreiser's attention to these details is an important aspect of his writing style. While Whipple contends that Dreiser has a "habit of amassing what is unimportant and insignificant" (72), Warren writes that "The creation of the character of Clyde is begun by a scrupulous accretion of detail. . . . Dreiser's method of presenting the character is far deeper and more subtle than that of mere accretion. The method is an enlargement and a clarifying, slow and merciless" (133), and Howe describes the success of "exact observation…worked closely into the grain of narrative – about the customs and class structure of American society" (143). The discrepancy between early and later critics' views show the differing interpretations of Dreiser's close observations. Regardless of the positive or negative spin, Dreiser's

acknowledged attention to the details of society, and in this case, to the details of an evolving clothing industry in *An American Tragedy*, validates Dreiser's own claim in "True Art Speaks Plainly" to "a true picture of life, honestly and reverentially set down" (Pizer 470). Dreiser's incorporation of industrial, social, and economic changes in the way people produce and consume clothing is a strong example of his ability to inscribe subtle but important developments of American society and culture into his writing.

Chapter 2: Clyde's Clothing and Identity

In addition to the historical accuracy of Dreiser's representation of the clothing industry, he uses clothing's unreliable indication of social status throughout *An American Tragedy* as a symbol of the major theme of Clyde's unstable identity. The presence of clothing in the story is more than a technique of realism; it also reveals Dreiser's ability to incorporate symbolic meaning and development into the novel and in the characterization of Clyde. Clothing is closely tied with the most important theme of the novel, the theme of identity. The mastery with which Dreiser uses the reality of a changing clothing industry as a symbol of building a fluid identity bolsters his claim of being a great novelist.

Issues of identity are discussed extensively by critics of *An American Tragedy* and are seen as one of the main catalysts for the plot of the novel. Critics such as Fisher, Spindler, Orlov, Eby, Shapiro, and Howe are among many who carefully study the development of Clyde's identity or, more appropriately, the lack of identity in Clyde's character. Critics agree that one of the main tensions of the novel is produced by Clyde's attempt to find or create his identity in unconventional and often unhealthy ways. While *An American Tragedy* is essentially a coming of age novel about an urban youth moving from adolescence into adulthood, Dreiser complicates the traditional narrative genre by obscuring the idea of identity and presenting a character whose identity is heavily or wholly influenced by consumerist desires of modern American life in a time when traditional indicators of status such as clothing are in flux.

Critics largely discuss the development of Clyde's identity in terms of social interactions of imitation and performance. Fisher highlights Dreiser's method of fusing

Clyde's personal identity with social interactions and group identification. He argues that Clyde's identity is bound up in social performance and co-performance, saying, "No role exists unless it is honored…by the eyes of others who must, in order to validate my role, not simply approve or permit, but enact a complementary role. They must become co-performers" (734-5). In addition to performance, he also emphasizes the importance of group identification as constituting identity in the novel. Fisher writes that

> Collective identity in the novel is more substantial than individual identity. Being 'one of' the Griffiths or 'one of' the Green-Davidson bell-boys or 'one of' the prisoners condemned to death, is a more precise matter than being Asa Griffiths or Ratterer or even Clyde Griffiths. . . . Experiencing oneself as 'one of' this or 'one of' that is the primary way of constituting a self in the novel. (737-8)

Spindler likewise examines social aspects of Clyde's self-identification in terms of imitation of others and evaluation by others. He argues that "Imitation is his key mode of development," saying, "Clyde is far too adaptable to his surroundings, taking on chameleon-like the moods, values, and styles which he sees around him" (66-7). Spindler also notes that Clyde's "identity is tightly bound to the social images of himself which he sees thrown back from other people. This closely mirrors Fisher's interpretation of Clyde's identity that "literally he is not yet anyone at all. . . . He gets his 'self' moment by moment as a gift from the outside" (735). Both Fisher and Spindler discuss the necessity of social interaction and recognition as an integral part of Dreiser's portrayal of self-identity, but neither emphasizes the importance of clothing as a means of evaluation

in these social interactions, even though it plays a major role in the way the social judgments are made.

Eby and Orlov continue to focus on the social manner of identification but give more prominence to clothing and appearance as the means by which socially constructed identities occur. Eby emphasizes clothing while confirming the viewpoint of Fisher and Spindler by writing that "Clyde Griffiths is no one without fancy clothes; he remains no one if Gilbert, Sondra, and others fail to see him and confirm who he is" (135). Eby puts the necessity of fancy clothing prior to social estimation and links clothing to the social interactions. Orlov argues for the outward appearance as a major part of the social identification process as well, saying Clyde's "thoughts reveal an assumption that he has absorbed from society's values – that the self is equivalent to its outward shell, and thus the meaningfulness of a person can be determined by judging his appearance" (106). Orlov argues the point even more strongly, going as far as to say that "Clyde thinks that is it possible to fabricate a new being by wearing certain costumes (literally and figuratively) and thus qualifying for a role within the peer group that enjoys all the pleasures denied to the present 'unacceptable' Clyde" (110). As Eby and Orlov make clear, clothing plays an integral part in Dreiser's development of the theme of identity due to the social nature of identity formation in the novel.

What is missing from the views of Clyde's identity represented by these critics is a discussion of the complication of clothing constituting identity in the industrial society where clothing costs and fashions are changing at a rapid pace. It is obvious that Clyde knows the importance of clothing for imitating the upper class, but the issue of clothing and appearances as a means of creating an identity is more complicated because clothing

is becoming a less accurate representation of class status but is still regarded as a good indicator of class by the characters in the novel. Clyde's use of the unreliable status symbol of clothing to create an identity is indicative of Clyde's own fluid and unreliable character.

While it is standard to think of clothing as a reflection of a person's identity, style, and class, Dreiser takes this view to an extreme by having Clyde believe clothing is not just a reflection of a person's identity but actually constitutes the person's identity. In the opening scene of the novel, people passing by the corner church service are at once judging the character of the family by "the impractical and materially inefficient texture of the father, whose weak blue eyes and rather flabby but poorly-clothed figure bespoke more of failure than anything else" (Dreiser 8). Likewise, Clyde himself is revealed to be embarrassed by his clothing and equipment as compared to other boys around him: "the matter of his clothes and his physical appearance had begun to trouble him not a little – how he looked and how other boys looked. It was painful to him now to think that his clothes were not right" (18). This prominence of clothing as part of introducing Clyde and the rest of his family indicates its importance and foreshadows the symbol of clothing as identity throughout the novel. As the novel progresses, each character is introduced similarly through his or her clothing and through the assumptions or judgments that accompany that clothing.

Clyde's preoccupation with the importance of clothing as part of his socially rendered identity is evidenced throughout the novel. In fact, "before he had ever earned any money at all, he had always told himself that if only he had a better collar, a nicer shirt, finer shoes, a good suit, a swell overcoat like some boys had!" (19), and "once he

did attain it – was able to wear such clothes as these – well then was he not well set upon the path that leads to all the blisses?" (29). Here Dreiser demonstrates Orlov's assertion that Clyde believes that clothing makes up an integral part of a person's identity as well as their chances at success.

Clyde's attention to clothing intensifies when he moves to Lycurgus and wants to tie his identity with the Griffiths family and distance himself from the blue-collar workers of the factory. He harshly judges the workers in the shrinking room thinking, "their spare and practical manner of dressing struck dead at one blow any thought of refinement in connection with the work here," and later,

> those by whom now he found himself immediately surrounded at the factory were not such individuals as he would ordinarily select for companions. . . . They wore such clothes as only the most common laborers would wear – such clothes as are usually worn by those who count their personal appearance among the least of their troubles. (194)

Despite the fact that Clyde is assigned to work in the most labor-intensive portion of the factory to start, he continually denies identification with the factory workers and aspires to identify with the more prosperous individuals and families in Lycurgus. In order to portray this denial of factory-worker identification, Dreiser portrays Clyde avoiding social interaction with most of the people in his boarding house as well as dressing more nicely and buying new clothes to wear outside of the factory.

Clyde's aspirations are clear when he is finally invited to the Griffithses' home for supper and "At once began to think of the need of a dress suit, or at least a tuxedo and trousers" (213). Clyde is soon justified in his attention to his appearance when his attire is

viewed positively by the Griffiths family. Mrs. Griffiths finds that Clyde "looked so neat and generally presentable" and Mr. Griffiths thinks Clyde is "very satisfactory in appearance. . . . Now that he saw Clyde in an ordinary tuxedo with a smart pleated shirt and black tie…[he] was inclined to think him even more attractive than before" (216). In this scene Clyde begins to identify himself with the Griffiths family. Despite their knowledge of his financial limitations and his position as a laborer in the factory, his family connection and ultimately his ability to dress like a gentleman impress the Griffithses and make them consider him as more of a member of the family.

After the initial visit to the Griffiths' family home, Clyde continues to dress nicely and connect himself with the Griffithses if possible. The success of Clyde's attempts to look gentlemanly and be part of the Griffiths family is shown when Samuel Griffiths promotes Clyde from laborer to manager:

> Reaching the shrinking department about noon, he observed for the first time with some dismay, Clyde in his undershirt and trousers working at the feeding end of two of the shrinking racks. . . . And recalling how very neat and generally presentable he had appeared at his house but a few weeks before, he was decidedly disturbed by the contrast. . . . [T]he sight of Clyde here, looking so much like Gilbert and in an armless shirt and trousers working among these men, tended to impress upon him more sharply than at any time before the fact that Clyde was his nephew, and that he ought not to be compelled to continue at this very menial form of work any longer. (225)

This episode that gets Clyde a better job at the factory is telling because Clyde has successfully convinced his uncle through nice clothing and gentlemanly manners that he is indeed part of the Griffiths family rather than a menial laborer. The importance of clothing in this decision is apparent when Samuel Griffiths thinks, "There must be some little place in one of the departments where he can be fitted in as the head of something… and where he can wear a decent suit of clothing" (226). Since Clyde is now identified with the Griffiths family and looks so much like Gilbert, Samuel Griffiths feels Clyde must work somewhere where his clothing will match his social standing and present him and the family in a positive light.

In his new position, Clyde continued to encourage those who worked with him to associate him with the Griffiths family and the upper class. The women working under his management at the factory thought, "since Clyde was almost always the only male present – and in these days in his best clothes – they were inclined to fix on him. They were, indeed, full of all sorts of fantastic notions in regard to his private relations with the Griffithses and their like" (237). Likewise, throughout the whole of the relationship with Roberta, Clyde encourages Roberta to believe he is part of a higher social class and to identify him with his upper-class family. When Roberta wants Clyde to marry her and start a family with her after she becomes pregnant, Clyde thinks, "The assumption that he, of all people, might prove an escape from drudgery for them both, was a little too much. It showed how dreadfully incomplete was her understanding of his true position in this world" (416). Roberta's incomplete understanding of Clyde's position comes from his constant identification with and imitation of his extended family and others of their social standing. Clyde dresses and acts like part of the upper class despite not having

money. In reality Clyde is from a very similar social standing as Roberta but has successfully hidden this fact from Roberta and many others.

Like Roberta, the wealthy upper-class young woman Sondra has very little clear understanding of Clyde's position as well. Despite the Griffithses' warnings to Sondra that Clyde did not have equal social status with them or her, Sondra reasons that "after all…he was Bella's and Gilbert's cousin, and looked prosperous" (308), and, "His clothes and his manner, as well as a remark he had dropped, to the effect that he was connected with the company in some official capacity, seemed to indicate that he might be better placed than she had imagined" (309). By presenting himself in nice clothing and acting like a member of the higher class, Clyde is able to associate himself with people of that class without being found out. His imitation of and resemblance to Gilbert further help his intentions of being part of the upper-class social scene of Lycurgus. As he becomes part of their world, even the members of the higher social class are unable to discern Clyde's true social standing and wealth.

Clyde's ability to shift his identity to imitate the upper class is dependent upon clothing's importance in the idea of identity and the fact that clothing's place as a social indicator is becoming less straightforward. Early in the book, Clyde comes to the belief that clothing is the essential way in which a person is identified. This belief tends to serve him well when he is able to imitate the Griffithses' social set well enough to associate himself with them and confuse their understanding of his real monetary situation and upbringing. Clothing, and the fact that people depend on clothing to reveal a person's status in society, is the key to Clyde's success in Lycurgus. He is hired by his uncle because of his gentlemanly appearance in the Union League uniform, he is promoted

from menial labor at the factory because his uncle has seen how nice he can look and wants him to be able to dress professionally at work, and he is taken up by Sondra because she mistakes him for Gilbert and decides by his clothing that he must not be too unfortunately placed socially. Clothing, therefore, plays a central role in each of the major advances both socially and professionally that Clyde makes in Lycurgus.

Clothing is the most important symbol of Clyde's fluid sense of identity, which works largely because of the recent industrialization of the clothing industry. Clyde is able to purchase clothing throughout his stay in Lycurgus that allows him to present himself in whatever way benefits him the most. Clyde truly believes that wearing nice clothing makes him who he wants to be, and in many ways, characters in the first two books of the novel confirm this belief. Dreiser's use of the ambiguity of clothing throughout the novel, a symbol of Clyde's changing and unstable sense of identity, shows his ability to tie together and make sense of the complex notion of identity in the novel using the subtle reality of the changing American society.

Chapter 3: Clothing and a Critique of Class Mobility

While Dreiser successfully uses the changing clothing industry as a symbol of Clyde's lack of identity, he also uses clothing's ambiguous role as a class indicator in the wider criticisms of social and cultural realities in America. Clyde's lack of identity and clothing's symbolic meaning in his identity formation are part of Dreiser's naturalist refutation of the pervasive idea of social mobility in American culture. Despite Clyde's abiding belief in the transformational properties of clothing and his constant attempts to use clothing to associate himself with the upper class of Lycurgus, Clyde is unable to truly gain access to the benefits of upper-class society. Clyde's story emphasizes the folly of his belief in the power of clothing and reveals the lack of true social mobility in American culture. Dreiser juxtaposes the apparent openness presented by easier access to better clothing against the harsh social biases that lead to Clyde's downfall to highlight the rigidity of the social structure in American society.

Dreiser shows the folly of Clyde's belief that he can use clothing and appearances to associate himself with the upper class, and therefore gain access to their lifestyle, by portraying the rigidity of the class structure as part of Clyde's ultimate demise. Clyde imitates the look of an upper-class socialite but he is unable to fully integrate himself into their world because he does not have the money and connections to back up his façade. Dreiser specifically writes in *An American Tragedy* that "the line of demarcation and stratification between the rich and the poor in Lycurgus was as sharp as though cut by a knife or divided by a high wall" (249-50). Clyde's attempt to move between classes puts him in a liminal area where he belongs to neither the upper class nor the working class and cannot benefit from either association. His desperate attempt to present himself as

part of the higher class causes him to encounter expectations of that status that he cannot support without the family connections and money of the upper class. Evidence that Clyde is not actually able to gain entrance into the upper class with its benefits are in the fact that Clyde has to be mistaken for Gilbert for access to the socially elite group; Clyde cannot secure an abortion for Roberta; and Clyde cannot rely on a top lawyer or effective defense strategy during his trial. These instances show the limitations of Clyde's gains in social status and are a foundation for his tragic downfall.

Critics have often noted the juxtaposition between *An American Tragedy* and the popular Horatio Alger books of the time. Many critics have examined the critique Dreiser makes of the Horatio Alger myth that encouraged the view that America had an open class system in which any individual with talent or drive could move from the lower to the higher class. Orlov even calls it "critical commonplace that *An American Tragedy* can be regarded as a bitterly ironic inversion of a Horatio Alger story" saying "Dreiser's novel is a powerful indictment of the American success-myth embodied in the works of Alger" ("Plot as Parody" 239). *An American Tragedy's* disputation of the Horatio Alger myth can be seen in the way Clyde's belief in imitating the higher social class with clothing backfires and reveals the unyielding social hierarchy of American society.

Pizer, Spindler, and Michaels have discussed in depth the lack of class mobility displayed in *An American Tragedy* with a focus on how the Griffithses' morality perpetuates the division between the upper and lower classes. Pizer writes that "The work ethic of the Griffithses, beneath its apparent endorsement of an open-society, serves principally to perpetrate a rigid social hierarchy" and that the Griffithses view "class differences as reflecting sharply defined moral differences" (245). Spindler likewise

argues that in Lycurgus' elite social groups "There is the emphasis on 'material manufacture'; moral value is placed upon a disciplined and abstemious life; and the class hierarchy is legitimated by a belief in predestination adapted in such a way that economic success is taken as the confirmation of virtue, and failure, conversely, as the stigma of moral fault" (*Class and the Consumption Ethic* 139). Finally, Michaels writes, "The Griffiths associate good 'character' with 'material manufacture,' but piece work is the mark of a blue-collar laborer. A certain distance from piece work marks the white-collar worker, a distance the Griffithses extend beyond the factory walls" (89). Each of these critics addresses the problem that the upper class and more conservative families in Lycurgus hold a strong bias suggesting that wealth and poverty are reflections of moral superiority or inferiority. Those in high social circles in Lycurgus, such as the Griffithses, hold a moral belief system that denigrates people like Clyde who have neither family connections nor ties to production or manufacturing industries. This bias allows them to justify their own place in the social hierarchy and to perpetuate the class structure that benefits them.

The moral expectations the Griffithses put on Clyde are the beginning of his downfall. As he longs to become part of the upper class, he correctly observes that he must distance himself from working-class people, but since he does not initially have access to the upper-class social group, he becomes lonely without any social interaction. Furthermore, after being promoted to manager he is directly forbidden from socializing with blue-collar employees when Gilbert says,

> Before we place any one here in any position of authority, we have to be absolutely sure that they're going to behave themselves as gentlemen

> always. . . . If a young man, or an old one for that matter, comes in here at any time and imagines that because there are women here he's going to be allowed to play about and neglect his work and flirt or cut up, that fellow is doomed to a short stay here. The men and women who work for us have got to feel that they are employees first, last and all the time – and they have to carry that attitude out into the street with them. (232)

The division between the management and the workers at the Griffithses' factory is evidence of social barriers, couched in moral terms, as discussed by Pizer, Spindler, and Michaels. The combination of no social connections and this forbidding of making connections with factory workers is the first step in Clyde's demise.

While critics have established the problem Clyde faces due to the stringent class distinctions made by the Griffithses and others of their status, they have failed to discuss how the changing clothing industry affected Clyde's social rise and fall in Lycurgus. Even though Clyde does an exceptional job imitating the look and attitude of an upper-class member, he is never truly accepted. When Clyde visits the Griffithses' home for the first time, Mr. and Mrs. Griffiths are impressed by his appearances in his tuxedo, but they still maintain a distance and even warn the wealthy young friends of Bella that he is not part of their social set. Mrs. Griffiths describes Clyde to Sondra and Bertine by saying, "Mr. Griffiths is a nephew of ours from the West who has come on to see if he can make a place for himself in my husband's factory. He's a young man who has to make his own way in the world and my husband has been kind enough to give him the opportunity" and Clyde immediately recognizes this as "a notice to him that his social position here was decidedly below that of the Griffiths or these girls" (222). Even though the girls find

Clyde attractive and cannot distinguish between his social position and their own based on his appearances, Mrs. Griffiths distinctly informs them that Clyde is not wealthy enough for their attention.

In order to gain access to the elite social group of Lycurgus, Clyde needs a stroke of luck, in the form of Sondra mistaking him for his wealthy cousin, Gilbert. Clyde's ability to dress and imitate Gilbert helps him gain access, but Clyde's entrance into the social circle of Gilbert and Sondra is still dependent upon Sondra's initial mistake and subsequent rebellious sponsorship of Clyde within the group. In the middle of the scene depicting Sondra's mistake, Dreiser reaffirms the rigidity of the social structure of Lycurgus by explaining that despite Sondra and Gilbert not getting along well, "so tightly were the social lines of Lycurgus drawn, so few the truly eligible, that it was almost necessary and compulsory upon those 'in' to make the best of such others as were 'in'. And so it was that she now greeted Gilbert as she thought" (304). Furthermore, after Sondra has accidentally picked Clyde up, Dreiser painstakingly reveals that her motivation for inviting Clyde into her social circle is to annoy Gilbert; she thinks "It would serve him just right if Clyde were taken up by someone and made more of than he (Gilbert) ever could hope to be. The thought had a most pleasing tang for her" (307). While Clyde can look and dress like Gilbert and even be mistaken for Gilbert by the social elite of Lycurgus, he cannot gain access to them through clothing alone. He must have a connection with a person within the group who will invite him in and support his claim to be there. Since the Griffithses will not offer this to Clyde, he is only allowed in when Sondra decides to take on this role herself.

After gaining entrance into the elite social group of Lycurgus, Clyde struggles to maintain the appearance of belonging. His ability to use clothing in imitation of the upper class helps him get into the group, but once he is invited in, clothing will no longer suffice. The first issue that arises for Clyde is one of background. At the first outing with the upper-class social group, he hears the others discussing colleges and "could not understand. He had scarcely heard of the various colleges with which this group was all too familiar. . . . Because of this, he at once felt out of it" (318). Later, in the scene when questioned about his family connections and background Clyde "did not feel that he could admit the truth in connection with his family at all. So he announced that his father conducted a hotel in Denver – not so very large, but still a hotel" (323). These interactions show how little impact clothing had in actually making Clyde like the upper-class members. He still must fabricate family and social connections to feel accepted as part of that group.

In addition to Clyde's own feelings of not belonging, his lack of true upper-class connections is highlighted in the episode of his and Roberta's attempts to terminate the pregnancy. In this specific sequence of events, Dreiser emphasizes the fact that Clyde is unable to obtain an abortion where more wealthy and connected individuals would have been successful. Clyde cannot ask for help from his new friends because,

> while the youths of this world at least were dashing here and there, and because of their looks, taste and means indulging themselves in phases of libertinism – the proper wild oats of youth – such as he and others like himself could not have dreamed of affording, still so far was he from any

> real intimacy with any of these that he would not have dreamed of approaching them for helpful information. (375)

Despite the fact that Clyde's situation is not unheard of, and that these young men are likely to know means of extracting themselves from the situation, Clyde's tenuous position in the social group and lack of real connection to the upper class mean that he does not have access to their knowledge and capabilities.

In response to his lack of true connections, Clyde turns to Orrin Short, "the young man conducting the one small 'gents' furnishing store in Lycurgus which catered more or less exclusively to the rich youths of the city" (389). Short is a natural choice for Clyde because by providing him with clothing as well as "tips as to dress and style" (398), Short has, in Clyde's estimation of clothing, provided means of access to the upper class and its advantages in the past. Just as with Clyde's clothing, Short provides a tip but it does not result in actual access to the abortion. Short reiterates the understanding that such a procedure is limited to the connected upper class when he relates that the doctor had taken care of a situation like this one "but she was of pretty good family too, and the fellow who took her to him was pretty well-known about there. So, I don't know whether this doctor would do anything for a stranger" (393). Short understands that doctors generally only offer such a service to families with money and influence, of which Clyde and Roberta have neither.

Interestingly, in the visit to the doctor to get the abortion, Clyde's clothing becomes an additional obstacle that reveals his lack of social status. As he thinks through the prospect of approaching a doctor, he decides that

> To go himself was simply out of the question. In the first place, he looked too much like Gilbert Griffiths, who was decidedly too well-known here. . . . Next, it was unquestionable that, being as well-dressed as he was, the physician would want to charge him more, maybe, than he could afford and ask him all sorts of embarrassing questions. (385)

Ironically, if Clyde were Gilbert Griffiths, being well known would most likely be a benefit rather than a liability and money would be no object. The major problem for Clyde in obtaining an abortion for Roberta is that he is imitating the upper class with his clothing, but he is not actually a full-fledged member of that class.

This cycle in which Clyde does not have access to the benefits of the upper class, and instead his appearance of high social status actually causes him harm, is repeated in the unfolding of Mason's investigation and Clyde's trial. Pizer notes Clyde's image as "the city seducer…in the minds of the people of Cataraqui County" (266) and the negative impact this has for Clyde on the outcome of the trial. Dreiser makes a point of contrasting Clyde's urban stylishness with the rural people of the area in the investigation and trial. Throughout this time onlookers continually misapprehend Clyde's true position in society to his ultimate detriment.

During Mason's investigation of Clyde, multiple witnesses identify Clyde as an outsider based on his clothing. Some men who saw Clyde in the woods the night of Roberta's death tell Mason they had "encountered a young man, whom they took to be some stranger making his way from the inn at Big Bittern. . . . He was a smartishly and decidedly well-dressed youth for these parts" (501). Additionally, the Captain of the steamboat Clyde rode describes him as a "good looking chap. . . . Very spry and well

dressed, more like a young society man than anything else" (507). These descriptions serve to demonstrate the vital difference the people of the region see between themselves and Clyde based on Clyde's upper-class appearances. Despite Clyde's tenuous social status in reality, he is labeled as a rich society man, which serves to alienate him from the people involved in and surrounding his trial.

This alienation continues into the trial, where the prosecutor and jury present a distinct bias against Clyde for his perceived wealth. Upon first meeting Clyde and seeing Sondra, Mason reflects, "Naturally, as he saw it, a man of this Griffiths' connections would seek to use a girl of Roberta's connections thus meanly and brutally and hope to get away with it" (556). Likewise, the jury is described as "such men – odd and grizzled, or tanned and wrinkled, farmers and country storekeepers,…all convinced of Clyde's guilt before ever they sat down" (639). In this situation, Clyde's appearance of wealth is a distinct drawback for him. He is instinctually appraised by the people judging him as an immoral libertine from the city because of his upper-class appearance.

Finally, in addition to the bias of the trial participants against Clyde, his connections with the Griffiths family hurt him where they generally would be assumed to have helped him. Parallel with the abortion episode, Clyde's lack of strong social connections leads to his inability to procure what would normally be available to the upper-class citizen: a solid defense strategy. Mason's first thought on encountering Clyde and his social set is that "about him was such a scene as suggested all the means as well as the impulse to quiet such a scandal as this. Wealth. Luxury. Important names and connections to protect no doubt" (555). Mason's concerns reveal the influence wealth

traditionally has on the justice system. People of high social standing are regularly able to manipulate the system to avoid prosecution and/or punishment for their crimes.

Clyde's connections, of course, are insufficient to garner such support. The wealthy Griffiths family chooses to distance themselves from him rather than fully support his defense. When hearing the charges against his nephew, Samuel Griffiths exclaims, "'I hope he isn't guilty. And I want every proper step taken to discover whether he is or not, and if not, to defend him to the limit of the law. But no more than that'" (587). In deciding how to proceed, the Griffiths family is advised that

> there were criminal lawyers deeply versed in the abstrusities and tricks of criminal law. And any of them – no doubt – for a sufficient retainer, and irrespective of the primary look of a situation of this kind, might be induced to undertake such a defense. And, no doubt, via change of venue, motions, appeals, etc. they might and no doubt would be able to delay and eventually effect an ultimate verdict of something less than death, if such were the wish of the head of this very important family. (589)

Despite the availability of such lawyers, the Griffithses decide to furnish Clyde a local lawyer whose main job it was to "see that all blatant and unjustified reference to the family on the part of the newspapers was minimized" (589). While the Griffithses did provide a lawyer for Clyde, the main objective of this lawyer is to defend the family against negative publicity rather than to defend Clyde successfully in court. Had Clyde been an actual member of the upper-class society, he would have been much more likely to receive a lawyer who defended him against the charges rather than just defending the family's name in public.

Taking this predicament even further, Dreiser describes how the Griffiths family name being the first priority of Clyde's lawyers rendered them incapable of presenting the best case for Clyde's innocence. He writes that the lawyers "decided that perhaps the easiest and safest defense that could be made…would be that of insanity or 'brain storm' – a temporary aberration due to love" (607). This defense is immediately abandoned partly because the implication "reflecting on the Griffiths' blood and brain, was sufficient to alienate both Samuel and Gilbert to the extent that they would have none of it" (607). In this instance Clyde's upper-class connections do not assist him in the legal system as would be expected, but rather cause him to be inadequately represented by his lawyers.

These instances where Clyde successfully presents himself as part of the upper class, only for that perception to backfire on him, represent Dreiser's effective method of revealing the rigidity of the American class structure. While Clyde can afford clothing that promotes the belief in him and others that he is part of the upper class, in reality he cannot access the benefits of the upper class simply by imitating those in it. In this way, despite Clyde's ardently held belief in the power of appearances, nice clothing cannot transform Clyde from a poor missionary's son to a successful member of the social elite. In fact, American society is more likely to punish Clyde's attempts to move between social classes than it is to reward or promote such attempts. This reality, presented by Dreiser, is in strict opposition to the personal empowerment narratives of the Horatio Alger myths and the American dream myths persistent in American society.

Conclusion

While the Naturalist movement gave way to Modernism and Postmodernism, Dreiser remained a canonized American author. The debate over Dreiser's technical failures, morals, and politics has mostly faded, and recent study of Dreiser largely focuses on the gold mine of historical realism and cultural criticism presented in Dreiser's novels. After 90 years of social, industrial, and political development since Dreiser's publishing of *An American Tragedy*, the novel's indictment of American consumerist identity and rigid class structure are still applicable and informative in modern American society.

Modern advancements in textiles and clothing manufacture have continued to narrow the gap in the quality of clothing between lower- and upper-class society members. Today, decent clothing is available for almost anyone and clothing of the upper class is distinguished only by the most discerning connoisseurs of famous fashion designers. Clothing manufacture has all but disappeared in American industry through outsourcing, but clothing consumerism remains a major factor of the American economy. Additionally, the consumer credit industry has only continued to boom, making many purchases, including clothing purchases, more available to all Americans. Likewise, Dreiser's portrayal of clothing as a symbol of consumer-based identity and ironic emblem of social immobility are relevant to American society today. Both notions, clothing as a representation of one's identity, and class immobility, are largely part of current mainstream American culture.

The continued relevance of Dreiser's themes points to the bigger achievements of Dreiser as a novelist despite the early criticism of his writing style. Dreiser skillfully integrated the realistic details of the changing 20th-century clothing industry into the

novel to subtly identify and confront some of the unchallenged philosophies of American society in the 1920s. Dreiser's adept use of symbolism and detail to exhibit underlying themes and critiques of enduring American social issues illustrates his true genius and justifies his continued place in the American literary canon.

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