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Lynching as an American Tragedy in Theodore Dreiser

CONSIDERING HOW OFTEN THE WORD “TRAGEDY” APPEARS IN THEODORE Dreiser’s writing, there has been little serious scholarly attention paid to its role in his impressive body of work. This essay is an attempt to examine several writings by Dreiser, from earlier pieces he wrote as a freelance journalist in the 1890s to his monumental work, *An American Tragedy* (1925), in order to explore his idea of tragedy and what significance it had to his development as a novelist. Dreiser’s tragic vision, I suggest, may have been instigated by the prodigious rise of lynching after the Civil War through the early twentieth century. According to the statistics Arthur F. Raper cites in *The Tragedy of Lynching*, in the United States from 1889 to 1932, 3,745 lynchings (of whites and African Americans) occurred. During the said period, the peak year with 255 total lynchings was 1892, and the largest number of African American victims per year was 155, reached in both 1892 and 1893 (480-81). After the turn of the century, Raper observes, the number of lynchings decreased, and “lynching [became] more and more a Southern phenomenon, and a racial one” (25).¹ Against this backdrop, “Nigger Jeff” (1901/1918), one of the earliest short stories Dreiser wrote in the midst of the epidemic of lynching, assumes particular importance as a result of his literary endeavor to forge an American tragedy with lynching as its pivot. “Nigger Jeff” begins as a young reporter, Elmer Davies, is sent to cover a possible lynching in the rural community of Pleasant Valley, located in a state abbreviated as Ko., a thinly disguised Missouri, where Dreiser himself worked as a young newspaperman. Davies discovers that a farmer’s daughter, Ada Whitaker, allegedly has been attacked by a black man and that her father, Morg Whitaker, and

¹The data Raper used for “Table I: Lynchings, Whites and Negroes—1889-1932” (480-81) are secured from *The Negro Year Book, 1931-1932*, which carried a compilation of newspaper reports of lynching prepared by the Department of Records and Research, Tuskegee Institute. No data for the years before 1889 is available. As James McGovern states, in so far as “All data on lynching is approximate because it represents reported lynchings only” (2), Raper’s book, “a sociological treatment published in 1933, is still the classic interpretation” (3).

brother, Jake, are leading a mob in pursuit of the suspect in order to lynch him. To carry out his assignment as a reporter, Davies has to follow the hastily collected posse as if he himself were “(perforce) one of a lynching party—a hired spectator” (82). That he is concerned about his own complicity in the lynching is remarkable. As Jonathan Markovitz notes, “In important ways, the power of spectacle lynchings actually increased as their frequency declined, since modern communication technologies made it possible for images and narratives of lynching to be disseminated to ever-larger audiences.” Markovitz continues, “Because representations of lynching worked to extend and magnify the surveillant functions and the terror of the mob, they should be understood not as entirely separate entities from lynchings themselves but as key components of the power of the practice” (xxvii). As he engages in sending dispatches from the actual spot of the crime, Davies must deepen his sense of complicity not only as spectator but also as witness. After the incident, he is again depicted as being anxious: “The whole procedure seemed so unreal, so barbaric that he could scarcely believe it—that he was a part of it” (102-03).

The black man, Jeff Ingalls, however, is apprehended by a local sheriff, Mathews, who wants to protect him until legal measures can be taken. The mob gathers in front of the sheriff’s cottage, threateningly demanding Jeff, but in due time Mathews drives away the crowd led only by young Jake who is “not sufficiently courageous himself, for all his daring, and [feels] the weakness of the crowd behind him” (92). Davies is pleased to find that he has got “the story of a defeated mob,” with the sheriff being “his great hero” (93). Shortly after Davies finishes writing his story, however, the mob returns. Now joined and led by Morg Whitaker, the mob eventually overpowers the sheriff and succeeds in hanging Jeff from a bridge. Davies is shocked at the white men’s brutality and the horrific atrocities inflicted upon Ingalls. As Davies observes, “The crowd gathered about now more closely than ever, more horror-stricken than gleeful at their own work. None apparently had either the courage or the charity to gainsay what was being done” (102). The psychological impact of the incident upon the reporter comes into focus toward the end of the story, as Davies puzzles,

Why should any one have to die this way? Why couldn’t the people of Baldwin or elsewhere have bestirred themselves on the side of the law before this, just let it take its course? Both father and son now seemed brutal, the injury to the daughter and

sister not so vital as all this. Still, also, custom seemed to require death in this way for this. (103)

Seeing Mathews later, he notes that the sheriff “took his defeat as he did his danger, philosophically. There was no real activity in that corner later. He wished to remain a popular sheriff, no doubt” (106-07). Davies’s sorrow and exasperation culminate in meeting Jeff’s family in their cabin and viewing Jeff’s body. Told by Jeff’s sister that he had come back home to say good-bye, Davies is overwhelmed by his mother’s lamentation.

Dreiser drew from his own experience as a newspaperman for the subject matter of “Nigger Jeff.” Once as a young reporter, he had to witness and report about the lynching of a black man. He mentions this experience in his autobiography, *A Book About Myself* (1922), if only for contrast to the sarcastically depicted frivolity of his own infatuation with Sara White, his future wife. He nonchalantly writes: “A negro in an outlying county assaulted a girl, and I arrived in time to see him lynched, but walking in the wood afterward, away from the swinging body, I thought of her—and life contained not a single ill. Such is infatuation” (271). The newspaper article Dreiser is supposed to have written about this lynching case remained unidentified for a long time. T. D. Nostwich, a Dreiser scholar, established that two news stories about the incident published in the St. Louis *Republic* on January 17 and 18, 1894, were penned by Dreiser, and he includes them in *Journalism: Newspaper Writings, 1882-1895* (249-58). There are significant differences, though, between Jeff Ingalls in the short story and John Buckner in the newspaper accounts. Regarding these differences, Nostwich writes,

Students of Dreiser’s narrative technique will be interested in how he altered elements of the original version to suit his fictional ends, making Jeff a more sympathetic figure than Buckner, enlarging the roles of some of the people who were involved, diminishing those of others, and omitting virtually every trace of the racist rhetoric that disfigures his *Republic* account but that seems to have been almost obligatory in 1890 news stories about such cases. (“Source” 176-77)

By making the victim of lynching more sympathetic, Dreiser succeeds in transforming a sensational report into a tragic work of fiction.

Although victims of summary, extralegal executions by vigilantes were neither limited to African American males, nor were allegations against the victims limited to rape, black men suspected of rape were the stock targets of lynching. Perhaps the black-man-as-a-rapist

narrative was the effect of what Jacqueline Goldsby in *A Spectacular Secret* calls “lynching’s ‘cultural logic’” (5), which formed during Reconstruction. In the further development of America as a modern nation state between 1880 and 1920, “the violence was part of a cultural milieu” (24), as Goldsby contends, and “Challenged by . . . heretical New Women and damnable emancipated blacks—white men could recover their lost sense of authority through violence” (56). Dreiser confronted such a cultural malady of American society through “Nigger Jeff,” which he wrote in 1899 and first published in a magazine in 1901, the year Mark Twain wrote but did not publish his essay “The United States of Lyncherdom,” which was finally posthumously published in 1923 (Budd 1006). On the other hand, “Nigger Jeff” was republished with some revisions in 1918 as a piece in Dreiser’s short story collection *Free and Other Stories*. Against the contemporary lynch mobs’ rampages, it must have been a challenge for a writer to depict lynching critically.

In the closing passage of “Nigger Jeff,” a new awareness dawns on Davies as he realizes “that it was not always exact justice that was meted out to all and that it was not so much the business of the writer to indict as to interpret.” At the end of the story, Dreiser has Davies exclaim “feelingly, if triumphantly, at last. ‘I’ll get it all in!’” (111). It is true that a reporter as a disseminator of the power of lynching could take on characteristics of an accomplice of the horrible practice, but, on the other hand,

modern technology—the news services, the photographs and films that could be taken, and the travel facilities that could be used by reporters and cameramen—had decisively removed the advantage of anonymity from those bent on mob action. . . . While the absence of effective opposition within the local community had once encouraged lynching, the new national community created by the media now provided an effective inhibitor. (McGovern 141-42)

“The business of the writer,” Davies finds out at the last stage, must entail playing the role of “inhibitor,” even though he admonishes himself to “interpret” rather than to “indict.”

The crucial moment for Davies’s inspiration comes when he witnesses Jeff’s weeping mother in the Ingalls’ cabin. Interestingly, John Buckner’s mother is also mentioned, if only briefly, in the newspaper account: “Through the broken panes of a miserable log window the pale, cloud-broken moonlight cast its sheen and shadow on the gaunt form of the dead, while near it, in a dark corner, wept the mother of the erring

boy alone" (Dreiser, *Journalism* 253). The weeping mother Dreiser represents in his newspaper report as well as his short story is an important element of the formula, both in balladry and sentimental novels and stories, that traditionally served as a device for coping with horrible crimes.

Moreover, Dreiser uses the word "tragedy" or "tragic" to denote lynching in both the short story and the news report. Where in one part of Dreiser's newspaper article lynching is referred to as "the tragic enactment of unwritten moral law" (*Journalism* 252), in "Nigger Jeff" the word appears no less than five times. The notion of tragedy that includes the figure of a weeping mother had long been a familiar contrivance employed in the titles of ballads about sex-related crimes such as "The Berkshire Tragedy" and news stories about sexual crimes. Time and again in both his nonfiction and his fiction, Dreiser resorts to this venerable convention to write about violent crimes, including rape, murder, and lynching.

Although certain scholars complain that the vernacular habit of using the word "tragedy" as a euphemism for disaster has muddled the concept of tragedy as a literary form, its popular sense cannot be too strictly differentiated from its classical sense. Raymond Williams, in *Modern Tragedy*, argues that we do not need

to be impatient and even contemptuous of what they regard as loose and vulgar uses of "tragedy" in ordinary speech and in the newspapers. . . . [Instead, we must ask,] what actual relations are we to see and live by, between the tradition of tragedy and the kinds of experience, in our own time, that we ordinarily and perhaps mistakenly call tragic? (14-15)

It might well seem to Dreiser that the helplessness of lynching victims, particularly the targets of the populace's anger aroused by alleged sexual crimes, takes on the sense of inevitability that tragedy might generate.

After seeing and writing about the lynching he encountered in the 1890s, Dreiser's concern about lynching continued to manifest itself not only in "Nigger Jeff" but also in his later writings, as if Davies's determination to carry out "the business of the writer" had prescribed Dreiser's development as a novelist. In a revealing passage from *A Hoosier Holiday* (1916), a book about an automobile journey to his home state of Indiana, Dreiser came to know about the lynching of Leo Frank, a young Jewish man in Atlanta, Georgia, who was charged with attempted rape and the subsequent murder of a thirteen-year-old girl,

Mary Phagan. Today, many people believe Frank was wrongly convicted due to rampant southern anti-Semitism; he was sent to prison, whence he was abducted and lynched by a group of armed white men.

The case attracted national attention, and when the news reached Dreiser while traveling, it gave him occasion to raise an outspoken criticism of the lynch mob in the South:

This seemed another exhibition of that blood lust of the South which produces feuds, duels, lynchings and burning at the stake even to this day and which I invariably relate to the enforced suppression of very natural desires in another direction. . . . But this sort of thing always strikes me as a definite indictment of the real native sense of the people. Have they brains, poise, judgment? Why, then, indulge in the antics and furies of children and savages? (237)

If lynching became, to quote Raper again, “more and more a Southern phenomenon, and a racial one,” the public generally came to see it as an act of exorcising the community of racial and sexual fears. The lynching victim was irrelevant; what was important was the act of lynching itself, a ritual process meant to restore order to the community. It did not matter whether those victims of lynching actually committed an offense or what offense was committed. “Although the impression was widely held that most of the Negroes lynched had been accused of raping white women,” John Hope Franklin observes in *From Slavery to Freedom*, “the records do not sustain this impression” (323).² Insofar as lynching is the white man’s practice of exercising sexual as well as racial domination over the black population, however, the rape myth and fear of miscegenation are central to lynching’s “cultural logic.” “Racial violence,” Dora Apel contends, “was rooted in both race and gender anxieties that criminalized sexual relations between black men and white women and feared the enfranchisement and education of African Americans that might further such relations and destabilize the white-dominated power structure” (2). Stephen J. Whitfield suggests, “Among the ideals that were to be questioned [for an incisive critique of lynching entangled with race and sex] was the need of [white] males to protect [white] females from the dark temptations of sexuality outside the sanctity of matrimony” (109-10), for the need to protect females also implies the need to control them.

²“Table II: Accusations Against Persons Lynched—1889-1932” (482-83) in Raper’s book corroborates Franklin’s observation: the number of accusations of “rape” plus “attempted rape” amounts to no more than 878 of the total of over 3,700 lynchings.

While race and sex were closely linked in lynching, the focal point of Dreiser's concerns about it, possibly prompted by the sense of difficulties in his own marriage and sex life over time, seems to have gradually shifted from a sole focus on racial oppression to associations with class and sexual crimes regardless of race. Anomalous curiosity about sex crimes can be construed as a projection of the general public's own fears and obsession: for instance, the reading public's lurid curiosity about them, sensational media coverage of lynching to the point of morbidity, and particularly the lynch mob's indulgence in violence and subsequent mutilation of corpses. In regard to his fascination with the fate of sex criminals, Dreiser seemingly shares this morbid propensity with the public, but his concerns were perhaps based on his awareness that, along with social advancement of women, the rise of consumer hedonism and popular culture was closely tied to the emerging recognition of the power of sexuality.

The Hand of the Potter, a play published in 1919, is another product of Dreiser's fascination with the sexually as well as racially or ethnically oppressed. According to the entry written by Frederic E. Rusch about this play in *A Theodore Dreiser Encyclopedia*,

Dreiser based much of the action and many of the characters in *The Hand of the Potter* on newspaper accounts of the murder of twelve-year-old Julia Connors by twenty-four-year-old Nathan Swartz in the Bronx in 1912, the behavior of Swartz's family before the Grand Jury called to bring an indictment against him, and the circumstances surrounding Swartz's suicide while police were searching for him. (177-78)

The composition of the play is detailed in the introduction to *The Collected Plays of Theodore Dreiser*, edited by Keith Newlin and Frederic E. Rusch. They make it clear that "Dreiser began work on the play in the fall of 1916" (xx), but that "Precisely why Dreiser began thinking about the Swartz-Connors case at this time is unknown" (xxii). The inception of the play roughly coincides with the publication of *A Hoosier Holiday* and Dreiser's revision of "Nigger Jeff," included in *Free and Other Stories*, two other works that highlight sex crimes.

From the standpoint of H. L. Mencken, it was an inopportune time for Dreiser to attempt to publish and stage a drama about sexual deviancy. As Newlin and Rusch elucidate, in 1916 Mencken was working very hard to help Dreiser fight censorship on charges of obscenity in *The "Genius,"* his autobiographical novel (xxvi-xxvii). Mencken feared that

the publication of *The Hand of the Potter* would mean that all his efforts would come to nothing; therefore, when he was privately shown the draft, he wrote a letter to Dreiser vehemently objecting to its publication (Riggio 281–83). Nevertheless, Dreiser persisted in completing the work, defending his controversial play in his letter to Mencken in the following terms:

You write as if you thought I were entering on a defense of perversion—trying to make it plausible or customary. If you would look at the title page you would see it is labeled a *tragedy*. What has a tragedy ever illuminated—unless it is the inscrutability of life and its forces and its accidents. (284)

The play's protagonist, Isadore Berchansky, is a young out-of-work Jew, whose self-hate makes him insist to his brother, "But I'm not goin' to use that name Isadore any more. It's a kike name. People laugh at it. I'm Irving from now on" (195). In a display of violence and sexual deviancy, Isadore assaults and murders an eleven-year-old girl. Isadore is held at bay by the police while he cowers inside a tenement house. He is much like Jeff Ingalls, who is "in the darkest corner of the cellar [of the sheriff's cottage], hearkening no doubt to the voices and firing of the revolvers [of the lynch mob] outside" ("Nigger Jeff" 91). Driven to hysteria, Isadore blurts out:

I can't stand it! It's the red ones [meaning some sort of hallucinations that Isadore has in a fit]. It ain't my fault—it's theirs. I can't help myself no more. They make me do it. [*He grows savage, vigorous. His shoulder jerks.*] Well, I won't die, either. [*Throws down the tubing.*] Why should I? It ain't my fault. I ain't done nothin' much, have I? I couldn't help it, could I? I didn't make myself, did I? (262)

Despite his denouncement of unfairness and delusion by the media, the police, and the public at large, Isadore commits suicide in the room by asphyxiating himself. After his death, Dennis Quinn, an Irish reporter, speaks in his defense, by arguing in part, "People judge these fellies solely by their acts, when as a matter ave fact they aahnt to take into account the things which make up their natures an' dispositions. This felly could no more help bein' what he was than a fly can help bein' a fly an' naht an elephant" (275).³

³Both Isadore's self-justification by the excuse that he did not make himself and the animal images Quinn employs for the defense have the hallmarks of the literary naturalism Dreiser espoused.

In Act III the case comes before a grand jury to decide whether Isadore is guilty or not. The process of taking testimony is represented at some length, and during the last stage Isadore's father, Aaron Berchansky, is called to the witness stand where Miller, the Assistant District Attorney, severely interrogates him. Aaron Berchansky confesses, "My son did it. He killed her!" before admitting, "I told him vot to do! He should kill himself, I told him!" (257). He says in passing, "Dey try an' teach us. Dey say ve are old fashion'—vot dey call 'not up to date'" (210). In the play, Dreiser portrays Isadore's parents as more or less pious Jews, and implies that the sexual repression and deviancy afflicting Isadore is related to parental religious conservatism. Isadore's father is similar to Dreiser's own father, whom he represented in his autobiographies as not only an impoverished German immigrant but a fanatic Catholic who drove his sons and daughters to rebellion and delinquency; Dreiser knew firsthand how oppressive a pious father could be.

In *The Bulwark*, the novel Dreiser had been working on since 1914, though it was not published until posthumously in 1946, Stewart Barnes's suicide in the local jail after his involvement in a sex crime is depicted as a result of his resentment of the restrictions placed on him by his Quaker father, Solon Barnes. As Newlin and Rusch argue, in 1914,

As Dreiser studied newspaper accounts of Nathan Swartz's father at the indictment hearing, he must have been struck by the similarity between him and Solon Barnes. Like Solon, Samuel Swartz was a good man, who, along with his family, was suffering deep sorrow and despair over the actions of his son. Here, too, was a tragedy. (xxiv-xxv)

In the published version of the novel, Stewart, facing the judicial investigation, though not subject to racial discrimination, is no less helpless than Isadore "because of public opinion, which [is] always violently aroused by crimes of this character" (293) and due to his fear of his father's reaction. Just before Stewart kills himself, Dreiser uses indirect discourse to highlight his psychological turmoil: "So oppressed was he by these thoughts that he could see no way. Let a jury decide what it might, he could never escape the jury of his own mind, of his father's mind: the judgment of the Inner Light" (293-94). It bears noting that this concern about the jury, which enters into the picture in *The Bulwark* as well as in *The Hand of the Potter*, echoes back to an earlier essay Dreiser wrote as editor of *E'vry Month*.

E'vry Month was the piano music monthly edited by Dreiser after he was hired in the mid-1890s by Howley, Haviland, and Company, one of the most successful Tin Pan Alley publishers of the day, on the recommendation of Dreiser's brother Paul Dresser, a songwriter. "In order to disguise the fact that he was the magazine's only writer," Dreiser created many pseudonyms (Barrineau xx). As "The Prophet," Dreiser wrote "Reflections," a long column about the general topics featured in every issue. The column in the July 1896 issue includes in part a critique of America's jury system:

They are constantly working to reform and improve the jury system, when, as a matter of fact, the system cannot be improved. It is old and established, and has reached the limit of its usefulness, so that the only thing to do in the matter is not to reform but to abolish. Never was there another relic of the feudal ages so fortunate in retaining the blind, unreasoning support of the people, nor was there ever anything so utterly subversive of the rights it was invoked to maintain.

The jury system, as exemplified in actual daily practice throughout the United States, in courts of every degree of decorum, is a rank and outrageous mockery. (118)

Dreiser's hostility to the judicial system of the United States occasionally cropped up in his works as disparaging depictions. His earlier disdain for the system is exemplified in "Delaware's Blue Laws," a magazine article he wrote as a young freelance journalist and published in 1901. In the piece, Dreiser scathingly criticizes the continued practices of public lashing and pillorying, adding trenchantly: "It is generally declared by those in authority throughout the state that the law is justifiable because it reaches and controls the negro" (260). His distrust of the jury and the judicial system in general is not unfounded. If the jury comprised only white citizens, for instance, a black defendant, as numerous legal historians have shown, would have had enormous difficulty in obtaining a verdict of "not guilty" in a criminal court case. The result could be a "legal lynching."⁴

Another of Dreiser's publications that similarly deals with sex crimes and the law is *Hey Rub-A-Dub-Dub* (1920). An extraordinary salmagundi, it contains an essay titled "Some Aspects of Our National Character," offering Dreiser's observation that "Almost daily [the black

⁴Timothy V. Kaufman-Osborn and other "new abolitionists" who contribute to *From Lynch Mobs to the Killing State* examine methodically legal lynching. George C. Wright's "By the Book: The Legal Executions of Kentucky Blacks" illustrates vivid examples of legal lynching.

man] is burned alive somewhere in America, and for all but indifferent crimes" (43). Another essay, "Neurotic America and the Sex Impulse," is a diagnosis of the "deep-seated neurosis relating to [sex]" affecting the nation. Dreiser cites psychological symptoms which include the "profound and even convulsive interest in any case involving a sex crime or delusion (Thaw, Leo Frank, Billy Brown, Carlisle Harris, Nan Patterson, Durant; or any negro rape case in the South)" (126). It is striking how closely Dreiser ties lynching and sex crimes to deep-rooted psychological neuroses coded as national characteristics.

In due course, Dreiser wrote what many critics consider his masterpiece, *An American Tragedy* (1925), a narrative about a sexually oppressed and repressed young man, Clyde Griffiths, who is indicted for murdering his pregnant sweetheart, Roberta Alden, in New York State's Adirondack Mountains. When the police take him into custody, "a crowd of at least five hundred—noisy, jeering, threatening" assembles around an upstate county jail in which he is held. Dreiser depicts the throng's viciousness:

There had been hard and threatening cries of "There he is, the dirty bastard! You'll swing for this yet, you young devil, wait and see!" This from a young woodsman not unlike Swenk in type—a hard, destroying look in his fierce young eyes, leaning out from the crowd. And worse, a waspish type of small-town slum girl, dressed in a gingham dress, who in the dim light of the arcs, had leaned forward to cry: "Lookit, the dirty little sneak—the murderer! You thought you'd get away with it, didn'tja?" (616-17)

Hearing the roars of the crowd, Clyde cowers in the jail, "thinking: Why, they actually think I did kill her! And they may even lynch me!" (617). This New York State setting solidifies lynching as no longer definable as "a Southern phenomenon."

While Clyde is not racially marked like Jeff Ingalls or Isadore Berchansky, he is no less poverty-stricken, a feature emphasized all the more because of the contrast with his rich cousin, Gilbert, who ironically looks just like Clyde. If Gilbert had committed a sexual transgression, he would not have been executed any more than the attorney for the defense of Clyde, Alvin Belknap, who once got away with "his own youthful escapades" (641). The outcome in that instance was that "for a thousand dollars and expenses necessary to house the pregnant girl in Utica, [his] father had finally extricated his son" (639). What is more, Clyde's parents are pious as well as poor. Even if they are neither Jews

like Isadore's parents nor Quakers like Stewart's, they are no less deeply religious, being self-ordained, street-preaching missionaries. Here Dreiser presents another correlation between parental religious rigidity and sexual repression. Nevertheless, Dreiser renders Clyde representative of the average American, "true to the standard of the American youth, or the general American attitude toward life" (26), though his limitations are accentuated through judgmental remarks such as "to say the truth, Clyde had a soul that was not destined to grow up" (189).

Notably, in an article published in 1935, "I Find the Real American Tragedy," Dreiser discusses the Edwards-McKechnie case, which created a sensation because of its similarity to the plot of *An American Tragedy*. The novel is based on the Gillette-Brown case tried in 1906. Like Chester Gillette, the real life model for Clyde, Robert Allan Edwards was convicted of the murder of his pregnant girlfriend, Freda McKechnie, and executed by electric chair in 1935. In the essay, Dreiser observes about the Gillette-Brown case: "Not Chester Gillette . . . planned this crime, but circumstances over which he had no control—circumstances and laws and rules and conventions which to his immature and more or less futile mind were so terrible, so oppressive, that they were destructive to his reasoning powers" (12). To some readers, this line of defense may smack of naturalistic determinism. Nevertheless, Dreiser defines "circumstances" not as indifferent nature but as influences of human relationships, when he boldly defends an ordinary youth, a convict of a sex crime, by expressing compassion:

in spite of these conditions and circumstances which were plainly to be seen by anyone who could see, the boy was fearfully denounced, tortured with public obloquy and even hatred. It was suggested that he be lynched, and once the case was given to the jury he was quickly convicted of murder and sentenced to death. (12)

"I Find the Real American Tragedy" evinces Dreiser's frame of mind during the shift from naturalism to communism, for he strives in the essay to make sense of the crimes in terms of poverty and wealth:

[Such a type of crime] seemed to spring from the fact that almost every young person was possessed of an ingrowing ambition to be somebody financially and socially. In short, the general mental mood of America was directed toward escape from any form of poverty. This ambition did not imply merely the attainment of comfort and the wherewithal to make happy one's friends, but rather the accumulation of wealth implying power, social superiority, even social domination. (5)

From Dreiser's point of view, in America where "Fortune-hunting became disease" (6), an ordinary young man like Chester Gillette, Robert Allan Edwards, or Clyde Griffiths, if possessed not by an "*anti-social* dream" but a "*pro-social* dream" (10), should not be executed. "In part I blame America and its craze for social and money success" (7), Dreiser writes, subsequently avowing:

I wanted to ferret out. . . . the untoward and possibly unjustifiable compulsions of society and life itself which came upon him through the medium of the conventions, notions and taboos of the region in which he dwelt, compulsions which possibly brought out through him a crime of which he was more the victim than the perpetrator. (17)

Denying that the American judiciary and the jury system in particular are equipped to pass judgment on impoverished youths who commit criminal transgressions, Dreiser declares:

the murder was not one which could either wisely or justly be presented to an ordinary conventional, partly religious, and morally controlled American jury and be intelligently passed upon. Rather I concluded that there were too many elements of a social and economic, as well as moral and religious, character to permit a jury (themselves the representatives, one might even say the victims, of these same financial conditions and social taboos) to judge fairly the guilt or innocence of the alleged murderer. (9)

In the concluding passage, he writes: "Actually the law in regard to love situations of all kinds should be altered. Instances such as this should not come before twelve calm ordinary men and women out of the streets of life, who themselves at the time are not such victims. It is not equity" (73-74). This is perhaps why *An American Tragedy* presents a detailed account of how the jury for the trial of Clyde Griffiths is selected: "five entire days consumed" (688) for it. As suggested above, if the verdict a defendant is to receive depends on a jury composed of members selected from a local population prone to inveterate vigilantism, a court trial would be futile, degenerating into what contemporary civil rights activists often call "legal lynching."

As Rebecca N. Hill documents in *Men, Mobs, and Law*, the concept of the "legal lynching" was formulated by the ILD (International Labor Defense, a Communist front) to enable them to fight the Scottsboro case. In 1931, in Scottsboro, Alabama, nine young black men were convicted of raping two white women and sentenced to death by an all white jury. Vehement protests arose both nationally and internationally. Dreiser,

then serving as chairman of the National Committee for the Defense of Political Prisoners, a subordinate organization of the ILD, contributed to a pamphlet on the Scottsboro case titled “Dreiser on Scottsboro,” denouncing “Alabama lynch terrorists” (Hill 232). In “Speech on the Scottsboro Case,” a developed version of his statement for the pamphlet, Dreiser argues that the trials in Scottsboro were “only slightly above a lynching in the ordinary sense of the word” (141). The significance of Scottsboro was that it brought about a major turnaround in the history of both the anti-lynching and labor-defense movements. Hill maintains that by “making the actions of the state and the ‘respectable community’ rather than ‘mob violence’ the target of attack,” the ILD’s Scottsboro project was different from previous anti-lynching activism because its “legal lynching” concept “put it outside the traditional ‘anti-mobbism’ of the progressive anti-lynching movement but within the logic of the radical ‘police-mob continuum’ identified by Ida B. Wells” (230).

In *An American Tragedy*, Dreiser depicts the American judiciary system, which ultimately sentences Clyde to death, as highly suspect and prone to exercising legal lynching. Dreiser meticulously details the “police-mob continuum” evoked by the lynch mob surrounding the jail, the lengthy process of the selection of the jury, and the political and personal biases of Orville Mason, the District Attorney, and Alvin Belknap, the counsel for the defense. He also shows the sensational treatment of the case by newspapers and the lurid presentation of the crime in court. Clyde’s discontent regarding the unfairness of the American judicial process is summed up when he expresses his feeling at the last stage before execution through free indirect speech:

There was a system—a horrible routine system—as long since he had come to feel it to be so. It was iron. It moved automatically like a machine without the aid or the hearts of men. These guards! They with their letters, their inquiries, their pleasant and yet really hollow words, their trips to do little favors, or to take the men in and out of the yard or to their baths—they were iron, too—mere machines, automatons, pushing and pushing and yet restraining and restraining one—within these walls, as ready to kill as to favor in case of opposition—but pushing, pushing, pushing—always toward that little door over there, from which there was no escape—no escape—just on and on—until at last they would push him through it never to return! (866)

The imagery here reiterates the tragic fatalism of lynching in “Nigger Jeff”: “It was like some axiomatic, mathematic law—hard, but custom.

The silent company, an articulated mechanical and therefore terrible thing, moved on. It also was axiomatic, mathematic" (103).

Now on death row, Clyde hears "some religious chant into which [his fellow inmate, a young Jewish man] fell when his mental tortures would no longer endure silence" (849). The inmate declares, "I have been evil. I have been unkind. I have lied. Oh! Oh! Oh! I have been unfaithful. My heart has been wicked. I have joined with those who have done evil things," and so on. Clyde simply listens to these lamentations "on his cot, his thoughts responding rhythmically to the chant of the Jew—and joining with him silently—" (849), as if he, being so inarticulate, cannot otherwise give words to his own tragic feelings. Although he is neither an African American like John Buckner and Jeff Ingalls nor a Jew like Leo Frank and Isadore Berchansky, Clyde's emotional and psychological connection to a condemned racial or ethnic minority revealed just moments before his execution indicates his genesis as a victim of lynching in Dreiser's literary imagination. *An American Tragedy* proves to be a novel about a poor young man who barely escapes from an extralegal execution by a lynch mob, but eventually is to be executed through legalized lynching as a perpetrator of a sex crime.

The abominable practice of lynching, whether extralegal or legal, continued well after World War II, as is exemplified by legal lynching cases entailing allegations of rape such as the executions of the Martinsville Seven (1951) and Willie McGee (1951), as well as outright lynching cases such as the murder of Emmett Till (1955). Seeing that the percentage of African Americans and people from lower classes among all executed convicts is disproportionately high, it is doubtful even today whether legal lynching has vanished. Moreover, perhaps in response to a newly raised awareness of the actualities of capital punishment, the study of lynching in the United States has increased in recent years, resulting in a wave of publications about the subject. This scholarship can play a part in making us recognize that Dreiser's writing is relevant in dealing with the ramifications of lynching as an ongoing American tragedy.

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