

A Study of *An American Tragedy*

By Junichi Nakamura

I

Clyde Griffiths was brought up in a poor family. His parents, who conducted a mission or spoke on the street "being wrapped up in the notion of evangelizing the world"¹ were impractical in training their children for future, and gave Clyde no practical or professional training. Clyde, moreover, had been made conscious of the fact that the work his parents did was not satisfactory to others,—shabby, trivial. And always he was thinking of what he would do, once he reached the place where he could get away. He was plainly "pagen rather than religious." (I, 5)

Clyde was "as vain and proud as he was poor" (I, 14), and when he began to work as assistant to a soda water clerk in one of the cheaper drug stores of Kansas City at the age of sixteen, his ideal was to be like some of the gallants who came to the store and wear a suit with ease and air like theirs and talk to a girl after their manner. And in the company of vulgar Hortense Briggs and others, he felt that there was "youth and geniality and freedom and love of life." (I, 73)

Clyde's was "a disposition easily and often intensely inflamed by the chemistry of sex and the formula of beauty." He was starved where sex was concerned, but he was "girl-shy" as well as "girl-hungry." He felt wild when he was attracted by Hortense, a girl not a little coarse and vulgar—a very long way removed from the type of girl of dream. He wished he wouldn't be such a fool but he could not help it. When he was asked by his mother to lend her a little money to help his sister who was in distress, he lied, although not without suffering a pang of commingled self-commiseration and self-contempt and realizing how low and mean he was. Yet he could not bring himself to think of losing Hortense. He had to use the money to buy a coat for this woman, and at the same time he felt that he

wouldn't stand for getting her the coat and then get nothing in return—never!

At first pleasure offended and depressed him, seeing as he did that it ran counter to all he had heard and been told to believe. But he became insanely eager for all the pleasures and at the same time he had a nervous fear of consequence. For him there was nothing wrong with the sex relation in itself; the difficulty lay "in the consequences which followed upon not thinking or not knowing."

(I, 100)

Gradually he learned about life. When his sister Esta eloped and was deserted later with a baby, he realized how tough life was and how queerly things went. And while serving as bell boy at the Hotel Green-Davidson he seemed to have "grown wiser, more assured, less dubious of himself, inclined to go his own way." (I, 88)

During the three years of privations following his escape from Kansas City after a motor-car accident he developed "a kind of self-reliance and smoothness of address such as one would scarcely have credited him with." (I, 165) He eagerly wished to get into some work where he could rise and be somebody—not always remain a bell-hop. Under the influence of the club in Chicago and various personalities who came there, he had taken on a most gentlemanly reserved air. He felt different from what he really was—more subdued, less romantic, more practical. And when he came to Lycurgus to work in his rich uncle's factory he told himself that he must be careful. His looks were really agreeable and more appealing than most and was pleasing and affable enough to be accepted by Lycurgus society. Moreover, he served well at the factory. Yet, "because of so strong a chemic or temperamental pull that was so definitely asserting itself, he could no longer keep his eyes off" Roberta Alden, of whose department he was the supervisor. And when Roberta suddenly abandoned herself to his desires, he felt for the first time in all his feverish years, that at last he was a man of the world—one who was truly beginning to know women. Proudly he

thought that the notion that he was either unsuccessful or ill-fated where girls were concerned was false and that he was after all and despite various failures and inhibitions a youth of the Don Juan type.

Clyde's reaction to Roberta's pregnancy was to get out of the trouble as cheaply as possible. He showed no sense of responsibility, and he hoped to have an abortion performed cheap, even free. There was neither true love nor nobleness in his character. And he felt that the demand on Roberta's part to marry him would spell complete ruin for him: the loss of Sondra Finchley, a young lady of one of the leading families in Lycurgus; his job, and his social hopes and ambitions in connection with the Griffiths. All his dreams could be easily tumbled about his ears. And his reaction was—never, never let this happen. It made him cautious and for the first time in his life caused tact and cunning to visualize itself as a profound necessity. Clyde sensed inwardly and somewhat shamefacedly all of this big change in himself.

Never did Clyde forthrightly and courageously or coldly face the thought of killing Roberta. The police found out that Clyde was, as a plotter of crime, probably the most arresting example of feeble and blundering incapacity they had ever met. He seemed to Kraut very boyish and weak—“clean of feature, rather innocent as to eye, well-dressed and well-mannered—not at all the savage and brutal or murderous type he had expected to find.” (II, 144) And when he read in the prison Sondra's letter saying that although she was never to see him again, she was not without sorrow and sympathy and wished him freedom and happiness, he felt that it was the end of that wonderful dream, for which he had sought so desperately to disengage himself from Roberta—even to the point of deciding to slay her. And his words were, “I have sought to murder. Oh! Oh! Oh! and for what? A vain—impossible dream!” (II, 385) He realized that he had been trapped by a vain dream of wealth, beauty, and the peculiar social state to which he most aspired. And

so we may conclude with Belknap that mental and moral cowardice inflamed or at least operated on by various lacks in Clyde's early life, plus new opportunities such as previously had never appeared to be within his grasp, had affected his "perhaps too pliable and sensual and impractical and dreaming mind." (II, 327)

Clyde inherited "a certain emotionalism" from his father. And when he was overpowered by strong feelings, he felt a little sick and weak—almost nauseated. However, towards the end of his "brief and eager career" (II, 394) he became stronger, with more courage and character showing in his face and eyes.

What impresses the reader is that Clyde, with all his yearnings, is so typically human. He himself cried finally, "Would no one ever understand—or give him credit for his human—if all too human and perhaps wrong hungers—yet from which so many others—along with himself suffered?" (II, 400) His agony while seeking Hortense's love, repentance after finding out Roberta's pregnancy² and his cry before the final judgment³ are a few of the good examples of this. Dreiser himself wrote that he had many letters from people who said, "Clyde Griffiths might have been me."⁴

II

In spite of her guarded up-bringing, and the seeming religious and moral fervor which at times appeared to characterize her, Esta, Clyde's sister, was merely a sensuous, weak girl who did not by any means know yet what she thought. The "necessity of thought had been obviated by advice and law, or 'revealed' truth, and so long as other theories or situations and impulses of an external, or even internal, character did not arise to clash with these, she was safe enough. Once they did, however, it was a foregone conclusion that her religious notions, not being grounded on any conviction or temperamental bias of her own, were not likely to withstand the shock." (I, 16) At the age of eighteen Esta suddenly eloped with a man, was deserted, and came back to her mother pregnant.

Roberta Alden was, in part, at least, "a reflection of the religious and moral notions there and then prevailing, —the views of the local ministers and the laity in general. At the same time because of a warm, imaginative, sensuous temperament, she was filled—once she reached fifteen and sixteen—with the world-old dream of all of Eve's daughters from the homeliest to the fairest—that her beauty or charm might some day and ere long smite bewitchingly and so irresistibly the soul of a given man or men." (I, 250) She had been brought up in a poor family, but, because of her innate imagination, she was always thinking of something better, in other words, she was always dreaming, wishing "If I'd ever had a chance like some girls—if I'd ever been anywheres or seen anything! (I. 370) She intended to have some practical training, too.

Roberta felt lonely, because even church people made discriminations. At the same time, she realized that no one of those in the factory in whom she was interested would be interested in her—at least not with any legitimate intentions. However, when she saw a new superintendent in Clyde, she immediately fell in love with him. Clyde, too, was at once taken with her, because distinctly she was above the average of the girls in the room. Within her was an "overmastering urge of repressed and feared desire now knocking loudly for recognition." (I, 297) And because of so strong a chemic or temperamental pull that was so definitely asserting itself, Roberta could not keep her eyes off Clyde, just as the latter could not keep his off her.

After a while, however, when she found herself pregnant and Clyde's interest drawn more and more to Sondra, she was disillusioned and had to say, "To think that all that was should come to this." (I, 407) When she realized that her dream was broken, she wanted to save face and not to regain his love. She became stubborn and tortured Clyde, thus hurrying him to desperate remedies.

Sondra Finchley enjoyed men's attention on her. She was a woman of pride and overflowed with vanity and self-conceit; she could not brook the slightest trace of ego in another. She approached Clyde with a keen desire for retaliation on Gilbert Griffiths, who she thought did not pay due attention to her. Clyde appealed to her for varying reasons which she could not quite explain to herself. She knew that he might not be anything socially or financially, but he was interesting to her. Her love was the kind that was expressed in her baby talk: "How is my pheet phing?" (II, 19) or in such words as these: "I never loved any one before, but I do love you, and, well, I won't give you up, that's all," (II, 33)

Yet she had to think hard not to attract too much attention and unfavorable comment to herself. Therefore, after Clyde was found guilty of Roberta's drowning, she did not dare to profess her love of him, under the influence of the immense prejudice and horror expressed by the world.⁵

Elvira Griffiths, Clyde's mother, had "a kind of hard, fighting faith in the wisdom and mercy of that definite overruling and watchful power." (I, 4) But she had once been a country girl and had been led to the evangelical work only by her husband. Her force and determination, although they were strong, were blind or erroneous.

She was respected by Clyde; her force and earnestness, as well as her sweetness, appealed to him. Sometimes she received letters of apology from Clyde containing five or ten dollars. She tried hard for Esta and Clyde, yet she was not an ideal mother. She probably did what she believed as nearly as possible but was not without defects. Perhaps she was best shown in her posture of praying, at the time of the execution, for the soul of her son, whom she still tried to visualize as in the arms of his Maker.

Dreiser's view of humanity and Christianity may be best seen in his manner of characterizing Elvira Griffiths.

III

In Lycurgus social discrimination was twofold. It was a taboo to have anything to do with foreigners, for they were, it was said, ignorant, low, immoral, and unAmerican. Also line of demarcation and stratification between the rich and the poor were as sharp as though cut by a knife or divided by a high wall.

The typical of the superior class was seen in Clyde's cousin, Gilbert Griffiths. At the age of twenty-three he was vigorous, self-centered, and vain. He was brisk in manner and impatient. He thought that his social position was perfectly secure, and was utterly scornful of anything but commercial success. At the same time he considered himself and his family the most important part of the local society, in the movements of which he was deeply interested. He was always conscious of the dignity and social standing of his family in the community and regulated his action and speech accordingly. He was considered the most desirable of all the young eligible bachelors in Lycurgus.

Samuel Griffiths, Gilbert's father, who brought Clyde to Lycurgus, had no intention to pay any social attention to Clyde. Neither the father nor the son could tolerate the socialistic theory. They believed that "there had to be higher and higher social orders to which the lower classes could aspire." (I, 180)

The whole Griffiths family were not very sympathetic with Clyde. The family's position in Lycurgus was more important than their poor relative. The high class in Lycurgus were not inclined to look upon Clyde as one who might aspire to marriage with any of their daughters, because it was whispered about that Clyde's means were very slender. Yet, to those who were of the same class as he or lower in position Clyde seemed to be a snob, which he potentially was, if he could have but won what he desired. He was inclined to stand off and look very superior. And his aloof and condescending manner was translated by his companions as "class" and "connection."

Roberta realized that her contacts with Clyde were those between the classes and that they were banned. In Roberta's easy and quick availability Clyde wondered whether there was not something which if not exactly dangerous in so far as his future in Lycurgus was concerned but was not quite satisfactory,—too quickly intimate. And later, when he was urged by Roberta to marry her, he felt that he could not marry her in the face of his high family connections in Lycurgus. In the trial that followed Roberta's drowning Clyde was, in the country-born people who were gathered, a young man belonging to the superior class who sacrificed a poor girl for a society girl. Sondra Finchley's name was kept secret and reported as Miss X.

IV

Religion was an obsession with Dreiser. We wish he would let go of street preaching of a shabby-looking family, perhaps the most miserable phase of Christian faith, but he would not. Simple factory people went to church, but they were not always soothed and comforted; Roberta felt lonely because she found discriminations in the church which she attended for sympathy and solace.

Dreiser also pointed out the religionist's blind and dualistic way "in disassociating God from harm and error and misery, while granting Him nevertheless supreme control."

The end is tragic. Clyde was in doubt and not convinced, although he managed to say to his mother "...you must believe that I die resigned and contented. It won't be hard. God has heard my prayers and he has given me strength and peace." (II, 405) On the morning of the electrocution the mother praged in agony trying to visualize her son in the arms of God. Rev. McMillan, who had shouted in triumph believing that he had succeeded in saving Clyde's soul, was gray and weary, and walked desolately and even a little uncertainly. He walked and walked hours before he could present himself to Clyde's mother.

The above is Dreiser's comment on Christian faith. His attitude toward Christianity was rather negative. He exposed the weakness of Christians, yet, he did not denounce them. Some slight sympathy is felt, although the picture is very dark. In this novel we feel some strength of faith only in Clyde's mother.

V

An American Tragedy is a tragedy of broken dreams. Dreams were held by several characters : for Clyde's parents it was to evangelize the world ; for Clyde it was to attain wealth, beauty and high social position ; for Roberta it was about the same as Clyde's. There is no doubt that Clyde Griffiths is the central figure. In this case the American tragedy is that of a young American of fleshly turn—who was made the victim of his vain dreams.

NOTES

¹

T. Dreiser *An American Tragedy*, 2 Vols. (Boni and Liveright, 1925) ; I, 11.

Quotations from this work will be shown hereinafter by the page number in parentheses attached immediately after the quotation.

²

"Oh, why had he ever been so foolish and weak as to identify himself with her in this intimate way ? Just because of a few lonely evenings! ... If only he could have waited." (II, 12)

³

"Will you get the Governor to change my sentence before the final moment to life imprisonment? ... I will drive out all sinful thoughts. I will be different. Oh, yes, I will if you will only spare me. Do not let me die now—so soon. Do not." (II, 402)

⁴

F.O.Matthiessen, *Theodore Dreiser* (William Sloane Associates [1951]), p. 191.

⁵

The unsigned letter which she finally sent to Clyde read as follows: "Clyde—This is so that you will not think that some one once dear to you has utterly forgotten you. She has suffered much, too. And though she can never understand how you could have done as you did, still, even now, although she is never to see you again, she is not without sorrow and sympathy and wishes you freedom and happiness." (II, 383)