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Dreiser's Real American Tragedy

KATHRYN M. PLANK

In the early 1930s a series of events led Theodore Dreiser to write several articles explaining the historical background of *An American Tragedy*. Dreiser had based much of the novel, which was published in 1925, on Chester Gillette's murder of Grace Brown in 1906. In 1931 the New York Supreme Court ruled against Dreiser, who had complained about Paramount's film version of the novel. The court held that *An American Tragedy* was the story of Chester Gillette and therefore was in public domain. That same year, Elisha Kane, a professor at the University of Tennessee, was accused of drowning his wife. Supposedly a copy of *An American Tragedy* was found in his hotel room. Kane was acquitted, but in 1934 and 1935 two more murders were noted by the press for their resemblance to the crime depicted in *An American Tragedy*. Newspapers commonly referred to them as the "American Tragedy" murders and invited Dreiser to comment on the cases. In 1934 he wrote a series of articles for the *New York Post* on the trial of Robert Allen Edwards, and in 1935 he wrote another article in the *Los Angeles Examiner* on the Newell Paige Sherman case. Together, these four events raised two important questions about *An American Tragedy*. Had Dreiser merely copied the story of Chester Gillette for his novel? And was the novel responsible for the "American Tragedy" murders which occurred afterward? Partly in answer to these questions, and partly to capitalize on the renewed interest in his novel, Dreiser wrote several articles explaining the composition of *An American Tragedy*. In addition to the newspaper articles on the Edwards and Sherman cases, he also wrote two versions of an unpublished article titled "American Tragedies."¹ Later he re-

¹Two versions of "American Tragedies" exist in the Dreiser papers at the University of Pennsylvania: Manuscript B, the original article with a carbon copy; and Manuscript A, a

vised "American Tragedies" and used it as the introductory portion of "I Find the Real American Tragedy," a much longer article on the Edwards case published serially in *Mystery Magazine* from February to June 1935. In these articles he discusses the philosophical and historical sources of the novel.

Because it outlines the sources of *An American Tragedy*, "I Find the Real American Tragedy" has become a major document for Dreiser critics studying the composition of the novel. Dreiser's article clarifies and elaborates the themes of the unpublished "American Tragedies" manuscripts and of the published newspaper articles, drawing from them a paradigm of the socially and economically motivated murder—such as the one depicted in *An American Tragedy*. In "I Find the Real American Tragedy" Dreiser states that the numerous murder cases he studied form a specific pattern, which he describes as "That of the young ambitious lover of some poorer girl, who in the earlier state of his affairs had been attractive enough to satisfy him both in the matter of love and her social station. But nearly always with the passing of time and the growth of experience on the part of the youth, a more attractive girl with money or position appeared and he quickly discovered that he could no longer care for his first love" (6). Dreiser supports this pattern by listing the "many related cases which had occurred before" (9), suggesting that the kind of crime depicted in *An American Tragedy* was a national phenomenon. By describing the details of some of these other murders, Dreiser establishes a pattern which supports his conclusion that Clyde Griffiths was a victim of a society that demanded success without giving him the means of attaining it. With this argument Dreiser answers the questions regarding the relationship between *An American Tragedy* and these historical cases. Since the Gillette case was only one example of a specific kind of crime, Dreiser argues, the novel is not a report of one case but a portrayal of a sociological phenomenon. The more recent murders were only two more manifestations of this pattern. According to Dreiser's argument, *An American Tragedy* is not journalism or fiction but is instead social criticism, detecting and illuminating a serious fault in American culture.

heavily revised version. Chapter 8 in Helen Dreiser's *My Life With Dreiser* follows Manuscript B almost exactly.

Understandably, Dreiser critics have accepted the model in "I Find the Real American Tragedy," basing their studies on the "type" of murder which so clearly structures it.² The novel is assumed to be based on historical events which Dreiser, as a former journalist, had investigated. However, close study of the composition of "I Find the Real American Tragedy" reveals that the article should be regarded as an extension of the fiction of the novel, not as historical research. The first drafts of the article, the "American Tragedies" manuscripts, were written by Dreiser in anger and haste. After the Edwards murder in 1934, he responded to charges that he had indirectly caused this murder by referring for the first time to a long tradition of similar murders. The style of the surviving manuscript is informal, with Dreiser inventing this tradition of crime as he writes. He is unsure of the details of the cases, of names and dates, and acknowledges possible errors—"he seduced a poor young girl, a nurse, I believe, but I am not sure." Later he writes, "A certain young Orton or Orpenor—I forget which" ("American Tragedies" B 7, 8). Furthermore, Dreiser's clippings file reveals not an organized survey of "a certain type of crime," but a scattered collection of interesting murders involving insurance fraud and insanity, sex crimes and revenge, and even hexes and witchcraft. Dreiser is not recording the results of years of study, but is spontaneously pulling names from his memory to create what he needs—a pattern of similar crimes.

"American Tragedies," never published, is an important artifact in the post-publication history of *An American Tragedy*. The ideas of this article, written in anger and defensiveness, were the basis for a myth which would eventually be accepted as fact. Dreiser recognized that this myth reinforced the theory behind *An American Tragedy*, so he refined his ideas in a second version of the article and developed them further in "I Find the Real American Tragedy," adopting a more confident tone in this final version. The cases he hastily seized from his memory in "American Tragedies" were reshaped to form a definite pattern in "I Find the Real American Tragedy." Consequently, when Newell Paige Sherman was convicted in 1935 of drowning his wife, Dreiser refers confidently to the tradition of crime as if it were a long-established fact. The myth Dreiser had created had taken on a reality of its own.

²For example, see Elias 221; Moers 195–201, 210; Fishkin 100, 112–17.

However, these are not a series of “chillingly similar crimes” (Fishkin 117), but a varied collection of murders with only occasional similarities. Dreiser did not derive the pattern from a study of the murders; rather, he imposed the pattern upon them. The murders described in Dreiser’s articles are very different from their historical counterparts. Dreiser alters the cases to fit the pattern of motivation he had already established, a pattern that supports his own theories about American society. The real sources of the paradigm—Dreiser’s own life and his observations of American society—are deeply rooted and complex. The crime in the novel is truly the creative product of the author’s philosophy and experience. In order to add a sense of historical verifiability to the social and economic forces that he offers as the motivation for crime in *An American Tragedy*, Dreiser creates a tradition of similar crimes. Although this tradition is not factually accurate, it is a valuable extension of the novel. The errors in “I Find the Real American Tragedy” are not evidence of a careless researcher, but of an imaginative writer who borrows from history to support his fiction. It reveals that Dreiser depended less on historical events and factual details than many people have argued. Evidence of inaccuracies may prevent scholars from continuing to use it as verification of Dreiser’s reliance on historical fact, but the article is still valuable (perhaps even more valuable than before) when seen as a fictional creation. It is the pattern Dreiser creates through this fiction, and not the historical truth, which illuminates the themes of *An American Tragedy*.

Dreiser creates this pattern by altering the facts of a number of historical murder cases. As Dreiser indicates, his interest in sensational public murders began over thirty years before the publication of *An American Tragedy*, when, as a young reporter in St. Louis in 1892, he heard about a perfume dealer in that city who had murdered his lover. Dreiser claims in 1935 that this case was followed by more than seventeen similar murders, and that “between 1895 and this present year there has scarcely been a year in which some part of the country has not been presented with a crime of this type.”³ He then proceeds to discuss several of these crimes, demonstrating how they fit his pattern.

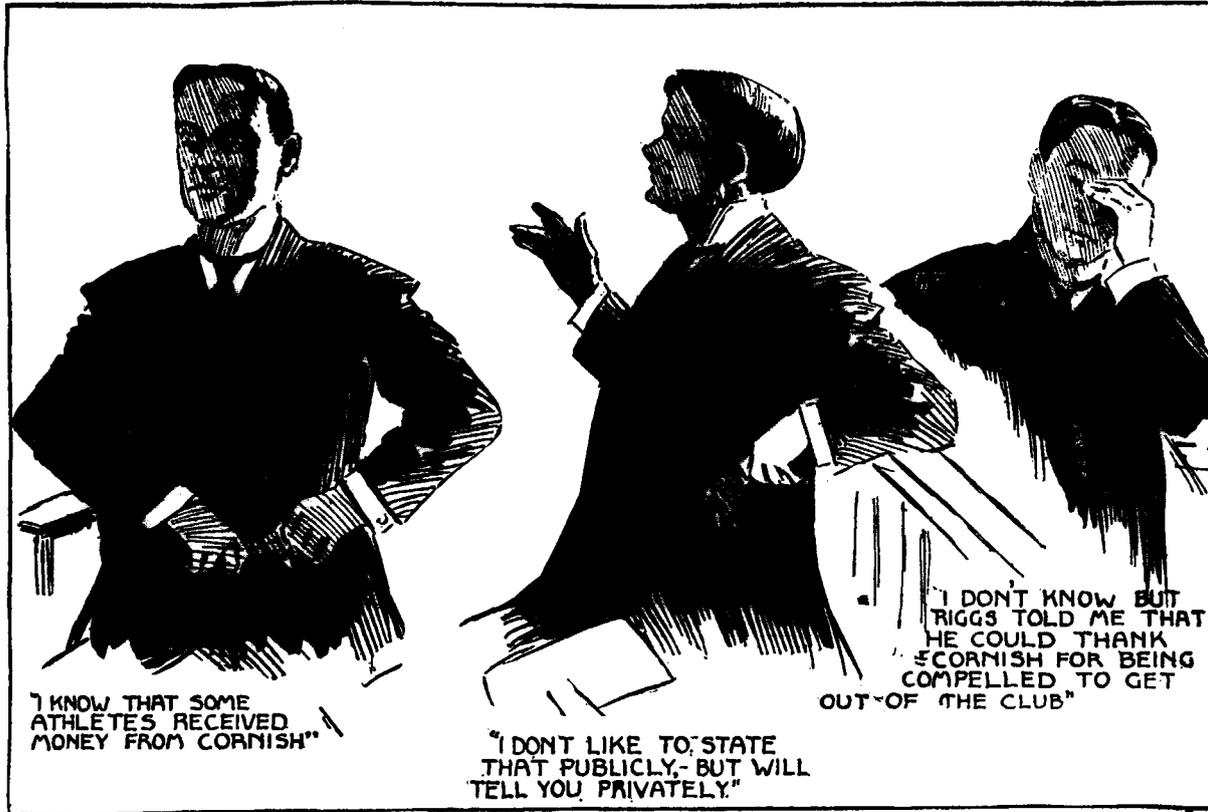
³“I Find the Real American Tragedy” 7. The number of cases varies in different articles. Since Dreiser names only a relative few, the number of cases that he actually studied is uncertain.

Of the cases mentioned in "I Find the Real American Tragedy," Dreiser seems to have investigated most closely the trial of Roland B. Molineux in 1899–1902. The Molineux case, which filled newspapers for four years, was at least as well known as the Gillette murder. The New York papers regularly carried several pages of daily stenographic reports, even as the proceedings dragged on to include a lengthy inquest, several hearings before the grand jury, and two trials with long weeks of repetitive testimony by handwriting experts. On 14 January 1915 Dreiser began writing *The "Rake"*, a novel based on the Molineux case, which was in many ways his first attempt at *An American Tragedy*. After gathering clippings from the *New York World* Dreiser completed six chapters of the manuscript before abandoning the project. Because of the sheer volume of evidence generated by this complicated case, Dreiser scholars have often reduced it to the story of a man who kills his rival for "the charms of an actress," a simplification which can be made to fit Dreiser's pattern (Swanberg 178). While such a story may have been the intended plot of *The "Rake"*, the actual case is much less easily defined, and even less easily presented as a direct source for *An American Tragedy*.

The Molineux case centers around the Knickerbocker Athletic Club, where Molineux was a member and an officer.⁴ The victim was Mrs. Kate Adams, the fifty-two-year-old aunt of Harry Cornish, physical director of the club. On 28 December 1898 Mrs. Adams swallowed cyanide of mercury, disguised as a sample of bromo-seltzer that had been mailed anonymously to Cornish. Mrs. Adams's death brought about renewed interest in the sudden death of Henry C. Barnet, another club member, who had died of diphtheria a month earlier after he too had received a sample of a patent medicine in the mail. Cornish, the intended recipient of the medicine which killed Mrs. Adams, blamed Roland Molineux, a chemist and color maker in a paint factory. Two years earlier, Molineux had complained about Cornish's management of the club, and Cornish had retaliated by spreading malicious rumors about Molineux, causing Molineux to resign and join another club. The prosecution, claiming that Barnet had had an affair with Molineux's wife, Blanche Chesebrough Molineux, attempted

⁴Facts of the Molineux case have been derived from reports in the *New York Times* 29 Dec. 1898–19 Nov. 1902, and from reports in the *New York World* 29 Dec. 1898–March 1900.

MOLINEUX RECALLS TROUBLE WITH CORNISH.



Depiction by newspaper artist of Molineux on the witness stand.

to prove that Molineux had committed both murders. He was tried and convicted of the Adams murder but was later acquitted in a second trial. After his release Blanche divorced him. Later he suffered from mental illness (spending time at Muldoon's Sanitarium, where Dreiser had recovered from his own illness in 1904) and died of paresis fifteen years later.

In writing *The "Rake"* Dreiser eventually found that the Molineux case did not provide an historical basis for the kind of crime he wanted to portray. Molineux was a young socialite who had already achieved the kind of success for which Clyde is willing to commit murder. His mother was "of an excellent family," and his father, "brave, heroic General Molineux," was "reputed to be a millionaire or nearly so," and was respected and revered by the public, the press, and even the prosecution.⁵ Molineux's manner reflected his background and position; he was "so suave, so well balanced, so perfectly master of himself" (*New York World* 28 Feb. 1899: 3). He charmed the public, who greeted his acquittal with an ovation and carried him home in a triumphal procession. With family, money, education, and popularity, Molineux had already realized Clyde's ambitions. He could not very well have served as the model of the striving young man who murders to achieve such ambitions. Although a novel based on a case as sensational as Molineux's would probably have attracted a wide audience, it did not provide Dreiser with a vehicle for his ideas about society, marriage, ambition, and murder.

Although Dreiser found that the Molineux case did not conform with the ideas he wanted to express, he later cites it as evidence of those very ideas in "I Find the Real American Tragedy." Curiously, however, despite all his work on *The "Rake"*, in "I Find the Real American Tragedy" Dreiser does not discuss the Molineux case. He merely notes, "In 1907 or 1908 the Roland Molyneux case of New York City"—thus misstating both the name and the date (8). In the earlier article, "American Tragedies," he supplies a slightly more detailed but still erroneous account: "He—somewhat differently, sought to poison a male rival who had taken his best girl away from him, but by accident, killed a woman whom he did not know—the housekeeper of his rival,

⁵*New York World* 28 Feb. 1899: 3; *New York Times* 15 Feb. 1900: 12; *New York World* 28 Feb. 1899: 3.

who took the poison by mistake and died instantly" ("American Tragedies" B 11). Such major errors in describing a case Dreiser had studied so closely and had begun to write a book about are puzzling. Faulty memory does not seem to be a sufficient explanation. Since Dreiser omitted all discussion of the case from the final draft of "I Find the Real American Tragedy," one possible conclusion is that he knew, both from his troubles in writing *The "Rake"* and from the changes he had to make in describing the case in "American Tragedies," that the Molineux case would not fit his paradigm convincingly. Instead, Dreiser retreats to merely a passing mention of the case that at one time was to be the basis of *An American Tragedy*.

In discussing some of the other murders, however, Dreiser gives longer descriptions in order to fit them into his paradigm, although most of them are in reality as dissimilar to the crime in *An American Tragedy* as is the Molineux case. The first case that he names as a source for the novel is that of Carlyle Harris, who was executed in 1893 for the murder of his wife, Mary Helen Neilson Potts.⁶ In February 1891 Helen Potts died of an overdose of morphine, presumably contained in the sleeping pills that Harris, a medical student, had prescribed for her. Harris and Potts had been secretly married, under false names, the previous February. During the summer of 1890 Helen Potts's uncle, one Dr. Treverton, performed an abortion on Helen and accused Harris of making two unsuccessful attempts to abort this same pregnancy. Helen's mother, the only one who knew they were married, wanted to make the marriage public. Shortly before Helen Potts died, Harris finally promised to acknowledge the marriage, which he had kept hidden because it might have endangered his status in medical school.

The Harris case bears a superficial resemblance to the murder in *An American Tragedy*: a young man is convicted of murdering his lover (in this case a secret wife) who has become pregnant. But beyond this framework, there are few similarities. In "I Find the Real American Tragedy" Dreiser alters his account of the case to make it resemble *An American Tragedy* more closely. According to

⁶Facts of the Carlyle Harris case have been derived from Boswell and Thompson; from *The Trial of Carlyle W. Harris for Poisoning His Wife, Helen Potts, at New York*; and from reports in the *New York World* 2 Feb. 1891–31 May 1891.

Dreiser, Harris "seduced a young girl poorer and less distinguished than he was, or at least hoped to be. No sooner had he done this than the devil . . . presented Carlyle with an attractive girl of much higher station than his own, one who possessed not only beauty but wealth" ("I Find" 7). Based on this plot, Dreiser blames Harris's mother "for her urgency and insistence on what was the proper type of life for him," and he blames America for "its craze for social and money success" ("I Find" 7). Dreiser depicts the case as a simple conflict between "Miss Poor" and "Miss Rich," a crime arising from the American dream of success at any cost ("American Tragedies" B 7).

But the actual case does not fit so neatly into Dreiser's pattern. Harris, like Clyde Griffiths, had been poor in his youth and had been forced to leave school and begin working to support his family (Ledyard 9). But Harris succeeded where Clyde failed. Harris did not need to resort to murder to achieve success; he succeeded within the rules of society. With the financial assistance of his maternal grandfather, Harris entered the Columbia College of Physicians and Surgeons, where he demonstrated his ability by winning first place in a competitive examination for an appointment to Charity Hospital. Furthermore, Harris's marriage to Helen Potts actually improved his prospects for the future. Harris's father was an alcoholic incapable of providing for his family, but Helen's father was an upper-middle-class railroad engineer. In addition, Helen's mother had promised to give Harris and Helen \$5000 for a trip to Europe after he completed medical school.

In view of these facts, the prosecution was never able to establish a convincing motive for the murder. Since Helen Potts was destined to inherit a fairly large amount of money, and Harris would most likely become a successful physician, money was not a plausible motive. Neither was the pregnancy a problem, for the abortion had been performed successfully several months prior to the murder. The other young woman, "who possessed not only beauty but wealth" ("I Find" 7), was in reality an actress of questionable reputation named Queenie Drew, with whom Harris had had a brief affair. Although she was also from a wealthy family, Queenie was not a serious threat to Helen Potts. She freely participated in her affair with Harris and seems not to have expected him to marry her. The prosecution attempted in vain to find

another woman who could have replaced Helen in Harris's desires, but no motive was found to explain why Harris would want to murder Helen, who was by all accounts beautiful, intelligent, and financially secure.

Although he met Harris's mother, Hope Ledyard, in 1894, Dreiser was probably only casually familiar with this crime.⁷ However, as recently as 1915 he would have been reminded of the problematic lack of motive in the case. The newspaper reports of the Molineux trial in both the *Times* and the *World* compared the current case to the Harris poisoning several times. On the same page from which Dreiser copied information about cyanide of mercury for *The "Rake"*, the *World* reporter asked Francis C. Wellman, the district attorney who convicted Harris, to comment on both cases. Wellman emphasizes the lack of motive: "We never could discover the motive for taking the life of Helen Potts, because he was poor and was offered support and a European medical education at the hands of her father if the marriage were made public, and there seemed every reason why he should accept the proposition" (*New York World* 8 Jan. 1899: 2). Although Dreiser very likely read this statement, he contradicts it in his own account. In fact, Dreiser takes advantage of the lack of motive to supply his own. Whereas the prosecution could not discover the reason behind the murder, Dreiser invents a motive of ambition and desire. It is this motive, of course, which is important in establishing the roots of *An American Tragedy*; the actual case is merely used as a name for the fictionalized version of the crime which Dreiser describes in "I Find the Real American Tragedy."

Dreiser alters the motive in another case to provide an historical parallel for Clyde's crime. In "I Find the Real American Tragedy" he mentions a case in San Francisco in 1899. Although he gives no more details, in the revised version of "American Tragedies" he says that one of the murderers he studied "lured a girl to a belfry and was hopeful that her body would never be discovered! In that case, circling buzzards and carion [sic] crows exposed the crime" ("American Tragedies" A 3). This description, in conjunction with the reference to a murder in San Francisco, points to the case of Theodore Durrant, whom Dreiser also mentions in *Hey Rub-A-*

⁷"I Find the Real American Tragedy" 7. Frances McCreedy Harris, author of children's stories and books on homemaking and child rearing, used the pen name of Hope Ledyard.

Dub-Dub (126). Although Dreiser added the buzzards and crows, this 1895 murder was lurid and bizarre enough to have captured the fancy of the young journalist in New York. On 13 April 1895 a group of women entered the Emanuel Baptist Church to decorate it for Easter services, only to find the horribly butchered body of Marian Williams in the church library.⁸ The young woman had worked as a domestic and was an active member of the church. While searching the church, police discovered the strangled body of Blanche Lamont, another church member, who had been reported missing ten days earlier. Since the day of her disappearance, Lamont's body had been lying undetected in the belfry of the church, stripped nude and laid out with some care and respect in the position of a body during an autopsy. Suspicion fell almost immediately on Theodore Durrant, a young medical student and secretary of the Young People's Society of the church.

Dreiser apparently found in Durrant an interesting demonstration of his belief in the failure of conventional religion to suppress sexuality. Both girls were noted for their extremely high morality and sexual innocence. Durrant, who knew the women through their participation in the church, had a reputation as spotless as those of his victims. He had "a moral character so high that he chose most of his companions from the Sunday school of which he was assistant superintendent. Tobacco, liquor, profanity and vulgarity were vices in which he never indulged" (*San Francisco Examiner* 15 April 1895: 4). Yet this model of Christian virtue also had a less righteous reputation in other circles. Fellow students commented on his tasteless boasting about sexual conquests and about his visits to brothels. The two sexually naive, religious young women had unexpectedly incited a violent, uncontrollable passion in this seemingly upright young Sunday school teacher.

Appropriately, Dreiser cites the Durrant case in *Hey Rub-A-Dub-Dub* when discussing the nation's "profound and even convulsive interest in any case involving a sex crime or delusion" (126). Since no other motive could be found, and since Minnie Williams had been raped shortly before she was strangled and stabbed, the prosecution charged that Durrant murdered Blanche Lamont when

⁸Facts of the Durrant case were derived from reports in the *San Francisco Examiner* 13 April 1895–13 Dec. 1895; and from reports in the *New York World* 30 April 1895–2 Nov. 1895.

she would not submit to his sexual advances. In support of this theory, another woman testified that Durrant had tried to lure her into the church to conduct a "medical examination." The newspapers depicted Durrant as a monster and said he suffered from "psycho mania sexualis" (*San Francisco Examiner* 16 April 1895: 2). The public reacted violently against this "fiend" of sexuality. The verdict of guilty was received with an "inarticulate, half savage, half rejoicing cry from the body of the room" (*San Francisco Examiner* 2 Nov. 1895: 1). The simultaneous horror and fascination provoked by this case proves Dreiser correct: "Our conviction is apparently that sexuality is essentially wrong and debasing," he writes, "and yet we do not really think so, as our intense national interest in every phase of sex proves" (*Hey Rub-A-Dub-Dub* 131).

However interesting a study of social psychology or sexual repression this case may be, it is not a good example of the type of crime in *An American Tragedy*. Durrant's violent lust, which leads to rape and brutal, bloody murder, is very different from Clyde's rather naive sexuality. Furthermore, money was not a factor in these crimes. Blanche Lamont, a student in a normal school, was of approximately the same class as Durrant; she "was not an heiress about whom dark plots might be hatched" (*San Francisco Examiner* 13 April 1895: 8). Minnie Williams, who was forced to work when her parents divorced, could be construed as the "Miss Poor" of the paradigm, except that Durrant was not trapped by her—he barely knew her. He was engaged to Flo Upton, but she was a governess, not an heiress, and was not likely to raise the social position of a future dentist enough to warrant murder. Dreiser does not offer a description of the case in any of the articles, but he includes it in his list of similar crimes. By placing this murder within the pattern, he implies that it is a source for the crime in *An American Tragedy*.

Dreiser does discuss in more depth the case that was the basis for another attempt at *An American Tragedy* after the failure of *The Rake*. He reports in "American Tragedies" that he had written six chapters of a book based on Clarence Richeson's murder of Avis Linnell before he decided to base his novel on the Gillette case ("American Tragedies" B 9). This time he was working with a source which closely resembles the murder he would finally depict in *An American Tragedy*. Clarence Richeson was a minister in

Avis Linnell's hometown of Hyannisport, Massachusetts.⁹ He was a friend of the Linnell family, and eventually he and Avis Linnell became lovers. Later, Richeson was transferred to a more prestigious church in Boston, where he became engaged to Violet Edmands, the daughter of one of his wealthy parishioners. Yet he continued to see Avis Linnell, who had also come to Boston in order to attend the New England Conservatory of Music. Eventually she became pregnant, and on 14 October 1911 she died of cyanide poisoning. When her connection with Richeson was revealed, the police discovered that on 10 October he had bought cyanide, supposedly to kill a pregnant dog, and that he had had lunch with Linnell the afternoon she died. Although Richeson at first denied the charges, he finally confessed "that he had wronged an innocent girl, and that he had finally murdered her that he might satisfy his own selfish and proud desires by marrying another" (*New York Times* 7 Jan. 1912: 1). In his confession, Richeson describes a motive that fits, fairly closely, the model Dreiser sets forth in "I Find the Real American Tragedy."

Not only does Richeson's crime resemble *An American Tragedy*, but Richeson himself is a likely model for Clyde Griffiths. Richeson, whose good looks gained him the attention of a young heiress, physically resembled the pale, dark-eyed Clyde. Richeson was also abnormally nervous, subject to nervous "fits" that could incapacitate him both physically and mentally. He personifies Dreiser's theories on sex and morality, for he was apparently unable to control either his sexual impulses or the guilt accompanying such desires. In prison, out of remorse and guilt for a murder resulting from his sexuality, he tried to castrate himself with a jar lid. He immediately called for help, and doctors were able to save his life, but, according to the *World*, only by performing "an operation that left the man emasculated" (*New York World* 21 Dec. 1911: 7). "Alienists" spent several days examining Richeson as his attorneys unsuccessfully tried to prove insanity in order to prevent execution. The image of Richeson as a "mentally weak" man who was forced to murder in order to realize his financial and sexual ambitions is strongly reminiscent of the depiction of Clyde Griffiths (*New York Times* 3 Jan. 1912: 8).

⁹Facts of the Richeson case were derived from reports in the *New York Times* and the *New York World* 18 Oct. 1911–24 May 1912.

Clarence Richeson and Clyde Griffiths are not the same man, however. Richeson was not wealthy, for example, but neither was he a product of poverty like Clyde. Dreiser asserts that Richeson "was a man of poverty-stricken background" (*Los Angeles Examiner* 23 July 1935: 2), but in fact, Richeson's father was "a substantial, though not wealthy farmer" in Virginia and "one of the most prominent residents of the county" (*New York Times* 21 Oct. 1911: 1). Richeson, unlike Clyde, was also relatively well educated; he had attended both William Jewell College and Newton Theological Institution. Furthermore, Richeson's affair with Avis Linnell was only the last in a series of similarly awkward situations. A few years earlier, three women had forced him to resign his post at a Kansas City church after they discovered that they were all three engaged to him simultaneously. Members of his church in Hyannisport accused him of exercising hypnotic powers over women, and the newspapers claimed that he was engaged to a total of nine women. Even allowing for the inevitable exaggerations of the press in a sensational case, the evidence still suggests that Richeson was not a naive youngster trapped in an incomprehensible situation. He was instead a thirty-year-old man with a history of sexual adventuring. Still, Richeson's case, alone among those listed by Dreiser, follows fairly closely the model of American crime set out in "I Find the Real American Tragedy." Dreiser does not say why he abandoned his novel on a case that fit his intentions so well. Whatever the reason, he left the Richeson novel unfinished and a year or two later began to write *An American Tragedy*.

Another example which Dreiser cites in "I Find the Real American Tragedy," the case of William Orpet in 1916, also resembles some aspects of the plot of *An American Tragedy*. Orpet, a junior at the University of Wisconsin, was accused of poisoning Marian Lambert, a high school student in Lake Forest, Illinois.¹⁰ Orpet was engaged to marry Celeste Youker when Marian told him that she was pregnant. She either mistakenly believed she was pregnant, or else she claimed to be in order to prevent Orpet from marrying Celeste Youker. On 9 February 1916 he secretly left Madison, Wisconsin, and met Marian Lambert by prearrangement in the woods near Lake Forest, bringing with him a bottle

¹⁰Facts of the Orpet case were derived from reports in the *New York Times* and the *New York World* 13 Feb. 1916–16 July 1916.

that he later said contained a placebo of molasses and water to calm Marian's anxieties about pregnancy. In the woods, Orpet, who claimed to know that Marian was not in fact pregnant, told Marian that he still intended to marry Youker. Orpet later stated that after he turned to go, Marian swallowed cyanide crystals that she herself had brought to the woods. The prosecution claimed that the bottle Orpet brought actually contained liquid cyanide, which he offered to Marian Lambert as an abortifacient. Since both persons had easy access to cyanide—Orpet at the greenhouse of the estate where his father worked, and Lambert in her high-school chemistry class—both stories were plausible. However, when the defense proved that the cyanide from the greenhouse could not have been the cyanide that killed Lambert, their argument that Lambert was depressed and suicidal succeeded, and Orpet was acquitted.

Although this case again involves the murder of a pregnant (or seemingly pregnant) girlfriend, it does not fit the major premise of "I Find the Real American Tragedy." Even if one assumes that Orpet did murder Lambert, one cannot automatically attribute the crime to social or economic pressures. Orpet was not rejecting a poor girl in favor of a rich one: both Lambert and Youker were members of his own class. In fact, he had grown up with both young women. Youker, a chemistry teacher at a normal school, was of no higher social station than Orpet, who was attending a university. Likewise, Lambert was no poorer than Orpet, for her father, superintendent of the Kuppenheimer estate, held a position identical to that of Orpet's father, who was superintendent of the McCormick estate. In "I Find the Real American Tragedy" Dreiser presents us with the prototype of the American fortune hunter, who will resort to murder if an impediment such as a pregnant girlfriend stands in the way of his aspirations. This theory is the basis of Dreiser's model of murder which these historical crimes are supposed to reflect. The Richeson case is a fair example of the model, but the Orpet case is not. If Orpet did murder Lambert, he did not do so for money or for social status.

The murder case closest in time to the composition of *An American Tragedy* occurred when Dreiser was beginning work on the novel. Although Dreiser does not specifically mention Harry New in "I Find the Real American Tragedy," he does discuss this case in "American Tragedies." This murder, which occurred in Los

Angeles, would probably have caught Dreiser's attention, for he and Helen Richardson were living there during the trial in late 1919. Furthermore, New was the illegitimate son of Harry S. New, a United States Senator from Dreiser's home state of Indiana, which Dreiser had visited just prior to the time of the murder. The paragraph discussing the New murder in "American Tragedies" shows that Dreiser must have followed this latest case of a young man killing his lover.

On 4 July 1919 Harry New drove up to a Los Angeles police station with the body of Freda Lesser, the daughter of a German spy, in his automobile.¹¹ He had shot her at Topango Canyon and then had driven around aimlessly for four hours, trying to decide what to do. Freda Lesser, like Marian Lambert, mistakenly thought she was pregnant. New and Freda had planned to be married on 5 July, but apparently she had wanted to postpone the wedding and have an abortion. New tried to persuade Freda to marry him immediately, and when she refused, he shot her. New described the matter very simply when he brought the body to the police: "We didn't understand each other . . . and so I shot her and here I am. There she is too" (*Indianapolis Star* 6 July 1919: 1). When he was arrested, New told the police that he was the son of Senator New, who, he claimed, had divorced his mother many years before. Senator New immediately denied any marriage; later he admitted that he had had an affair with New's mother thirty years earlier. He knew about his son and had paid for him to go to college.

In "American Tragedies" Dreiser states that New did not know the identity of his father until after he had become involved with Lesser: "Then came my old friend the devil or Mephistopheles and soon New was surprised to learn that his father was going to do something for him—give him money to help him get up, etc. But just at that time the girl was pregnant. A poverty marriage was ahead of him as Doctor Mephistopheles had most carefully planned. Was he going to marry and be nobody when he could stay single and do so much better?" ("American Tragedies" B 9). This description conforms approximately to Dreiser's model in "I Find the Real American Tragedy," with a rich father replacing the

¹¹Facts of the New case were derived from reports in the *Indianapolis Star* 6 July 1919–24 Dec. 1919, and from reports in the *New York Times* 6 July 1919–30 Jan. 1920.

rich young woman. In actuality, however, New had always known his father's name, had received financial support from him, and had even grown up believing that his parents had been married at his birth. He was not facing an unexpected chance at wealth and success; he knew his position when he asked Freda Lesser to marry him, and he knew that his opportunities were not likely to change. Furthermore, he was not another young man trying to escape marriage. Even Freda Lesser's mother admitted that her daughter was the one who wanted to postpone the wedding, while it was New who was pressing for marriage. Owing to the lack of any rational motive, the crime was blamed on New's unbalanced mind. He was therefore convicted only of second-degree murder and escaped execution. Once again, Dreiser uses the framework of this case, supplying his own motive in order to defend his novel. Since a full account of the case exists in all the versions of the article until the final published account, one can guess that, perhaps here too, as in the Molineux case, Dreiser knew that the facts would not support his paradigm and therefore he did not include this case.

The actual cases, then, when considered together, do not form any kind of pattern. Although some share common elements, they are not a series of similar crimes. They are simply cases with which Dreiser was familiar and in which he was interested. When he began to explain the sources of *An American Tragedy* he called upon these cases for their historical reality, but he rewrote them to create the pattern he needed as a background for his novel. In "American Tragedies" he tries to revise each case so that it has the same motive as the murder in the novel, but later, in "I Find the Real American Tragedy," he describes only the three cases—those of Harris, Richeson, and Gillette—which most closely fit the pattern, leaving his reader to infer that the other cases mentioned also follow this pattern. Except for being able to name actual, historical cases, Dreiser is not interested in the real circumstances of the crimes, but in the paradigm he is creating. This paradigm, which foreshadows *An American Tragedy* so well, is his own invention, added to these other cases in 1935 in order to unite them as a documented sociological trend.

"I Find the Real American Tragedy" and the other articles written in 1934 and 1935 lead to a greater understanding of *An American Tragedy*, although not in the way that Dreiser intended.

Dreiser's account of studying a series of similar murders is false, but his method of creating fiction from historical fact in "I Find the Real American Tragedy" parallels the method of composition of *An American Tragedy*. Dreiser used the Gillette case as a framework for a fiction which expresses his own themes and ideas in the same way that he altered the other cases in order to create an historical background for the novel. After the failures of *The "Rake"* and the Richeson novel, Dreiser finally found in the drowning of Grace Brown a murder which he could use to express the ideas about American society which he had been developing over many years.

John F. Castle has analyzed Dreiser's use of this case in his dissertation, "The Making of *An American Tragedy*," and more recently Craig Brandon has investigated the Gillette-Brown murder in *Murder in the Adirondacks*. Both Castle and Brandon demonstrate that Dreiser used the details of the Gillette case, borrowing the characters, plot, and setting of the actual murder. Dreiser also lifted entire passages from the account of the trial in the *New York World*, quoting directly from the attorney's speeches and Grace Brown's letters and incorporating verbatim Chester Gillette's final written statement. Although Dreiser copied these details, he created the larger issues of his novel imaginatively. The sociological conditions that cause Clyde to commit murder are fictional additions to the actual crime.

By expanding the range of social classes present in the original story, Dreiser created the "dreadful economic, social, moral and conventional pressures" that lead to the murder ("I Find" 11). The actual Gillette case includes neither Clyde's great poverty nor Sondra's great wealth. Gillette's parents were middle-class members of the Salvation Army, not destitute street preachers.¹² Unlike Clyde, Gillette also had the advantages of attending college and learning a trade. At the other extreme, Gillette's uncle was not nearly so wealthy as is Samuel Griffiths in the novel. Gillette's Cortland, the Lycurgus of *An American Tragedy*, was not the glittering world of the Jazz Age but rather the middle-class society of church socials. The closest equivalent to Sondra Finchley was Harriet Benedict, a student at the normal school in town with whom

¹²Facts of the Gillette case are derived from Castle, Brandon, and reports in the *New York World* 14 July 1906–1 August 1906.

Gillette had no more than a casual relationship. The vision of wealth that leads Clyde to murder was not present for Chester Gillette.

Without this financial conflict, the Gillette case lacks the universal implications of *An American Tragedy*. Gillette was not a victim of society as Clyde is. He was an enigmatic character who laughed and chewed gum during the trial, who hung photographs of pretty girls in his cell, and who gave flip, sarcastic answers to the prosecutor's questions (Franz 92, 94; Castle 92). In order to provide a comprehensible structure for the crime, Dreiser created a motive that reflects a larger concern than merely the case of one young man and his pregnant girlfriend. As Brandon states, "In transforming a careless and thoughtless pleasure seeker like Chester into a victim of society and his own dreams and ambitions, Dreiser used more imagination than history and had to leave out key facts" (344). Using his knowledge of various philosophical and psychological theories, as well as his own experience, Dreiser constructed a pattern of economic and social motivation for Clyde's crime. As Dreiser's comments during the Paramount case reveal, this paradigm of motivation, and not the Gillette case, is for him the subject of the novel.

Dreiser's account of the other murders in "I Find the Real American Tragedy" underlines the importance of the novel's indictment of society. The factual inaccuracies of Dreiser's descriptions in "I Find the Real American Tragedy" are more than mere carelessness. Dreiser has fictionalized these murders, just as he did the Gillette case, in order to prove his social theory. As Dreiser states in his newspaper coverage of the Edwards murder in 1934, he was concerned not with the factual details of the case, but with the psychology of the crime (*New York Post* 2 Oct. 1934: 1). In truth, he meant a psychology which he had himself devised long before he began to study the Gillette case. While this psychology may not actually have its roots in the murders listed in "I Find the Real American Tragedy," it is even more important as an expression of what Dreiser saw wrong in American society. He borrowed the details of the Gillette murder to provide realism for his story, but he created the whole apparatus of motivation in *An American Tragedy*. The paradigm in "I Find the Real American Tragedy" is not just a summary of historical facts; it is Dreiser's creation of history to explain America. And his fictional history reflected

reality so well that it outlasted the true facts. The pervasiveness and longevity of the myth Dreiser created in "I Find the Real American Tragedy" fulfills Abraham Cahan's statement in 1926: "A work like Dreiser's is not merely true to life. It conveys the illusion of being Life itself" (3).

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