

1991

Introduction to The "Rake"

Kathryn M. Plank

Otterbein University, KPlank@otterbein.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.otterbein.edu/fac_ctl



Part of the [American Studies Commons](#), and the [Modern Literature Commons](#)

Repository Citation

Plank, Kathryn M., "Introduction to The "Rake"" (1991). *Faculty Scholarship*. 7.
https://digitalcommons.otterbein.edu/fac_ctl/7

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Center for Teaching and Learning at Digital Commons @ Otterbein. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Scholarship by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Otterbein. For more information, please contact shickey@otterbein.edu.

Introduction to *The "Rake"*

KATHRYN M. PLANK

On 14 January 1915 Theodore Dreiser began to write *The "Rake,"* his first attempt to fictionalize a famous murder.¹ Dreiser had planned on writing such a novel for many years and had collected clippings of murder cases, including the case of Roland B. Molineux, which had occurred in 1899–1902. Molineux was a chemist in New York who was accused of sending poison to Harry Cornish, physical director of the athletic club to which Molineux belonged. Cornish and Molineux had quarreled over club procedures. Molineux was originally convicted for the murder of Cornish's aunt, who ingested the poison intended for Cornish, but he was acquitted after a second trial.² After gathering clippings from the *New York World* and reacquainting himself with the case, Dreiser began to write *The "Rake"* and completed six chapters before abandoning the project. Although the novel was never finished, it has become an important document for Dreiser scholars because it has been recognized as an early version of *An American Tragedy*. The plot of *The "Rake"* differs from *An American Tragedy* in many ways, but it reveals Dreiser working out some of the ideas which he would later refine in the novel.

Dreiser's use of historical fact as the foundation for his fiction in *The "Rake"* sheds light on his method of composition in *An American Tragedy*. He carefully pasted clippings from the *World* on the same paper on which he was writing *The "Rake"*. He also painstakingly hand-copied many pages from the newspaper reports.

¹I am following Pizer in suggesting that the first manuscript entitled *The "Rake,"* written in 1901 or 1902, was an early autobiographical version of *The "Genius,"* separate from the second *"Rake"* in 1915 (Pizer 364n.).

²For more details of the Molineux case, see "Dreiser's Real American Tragedy" in this issue.

Dreiser's research was sporadic and unorganized by a scholar's standards, but it was useful to him nonetheless. Many of the clippings and copies describe important events in the case, such as Cornish's and Molineux's testimony at the inquest, Molineux's arrest after the inquest, and the opening statement of the prosecution in the first trial. The descriptions of corpses, poisons, and courtroom proceedings would probably have been used by Dreiser to give *The "Rake"* the same kind of factual realism that he later created in *An American Tragedy*. The copied pages also include descriptions of life and procedures at the Knickerbocker Athletic Club. By writing out such details, Dreiser might have been trying to familiarize himself with an unfamiliar world.

Just as many facts taken from Chester Gillette's murder of Grace Brown appear in *An American Tragedy*, many of the details in *The "Rake"* are taken directly from the Molineux case. Anstey Bellinger, the protagonist, is a chemist and color-maker in an agate-ware factory and thus possesses Molineux's knowledge of and access to chemicals. The name Bellinger is borrowed from Mrs. Bellinger, a minor figure in the Molineux case who is mentioned in one of the clippings. Anstey's father, Colonel Bellinger, is a Civil War veteran modeled on General Molineux, a highly visible figure at the trial. Colonel and Anstey Bellinger are members of a yacht club and an athletic club; Anstey wants to join the House Committee of the athletic club, the same committee to which Molineux belonged. As the story progresses, Anstey, like Molineux, is depicted as an able athlete and a stickler for club rules. Finally, the description of Victor Quimby, the club's physical director, strongly resembles the sketches of Harry Cornish published in the *World*, sketches which Dreiser clipped and saved with the extant manuscript. Although the manuscript ends before the plot is really developed, the possibility for conflict within the club is introduced, suggesting that Dreiser meant to recreate the events at the Knickerbocker Club with some faithfulness.

However, Dreiser had trouble, in his manuscript, reconciling the Molineux crime with the kind of murder he wanted to portray. What survives are not consecutive chapters but are instead a series of attempts to approach the story. The character of Anstey Bellinger is modeled on Roland Molineux, but as Dreiser begins to have difficulty maintaining this characterization, Anstey becomes

The Rake -

Incident of the girl who became blind down after she
 the friends (historical - Chapter 3)

Incident of the girl who gave him a note (from
 Thursday - Chapter 14)

Incident of the boy who wanted to marry her + she
 was with the boy

Incident of the boy who had his wife in the prison
 Chapter 1 of the book - unexplained

Incident of the boy who had his girl blind

Incident of the boy who had his girl blind
 down for reasons of...

Incident in history, possibly for his father + how
 the child was raised.

Incident of the night of mourning - she wanted

Incident of how the father lost his girl away.

(J.T. Kennedy + Mother)

instead an early prototype of Clyde Griffiths. As Thomas Riggio notes, Dreiser is "unable to solve the problem of how his hero can be at once an outsider and a member of the local country club" (Riggio 37). Dreiser wants to write about a young man whose social ambitions lead to murder, but he is working with a character who has no obvious need for such ambitions. Dreiser endows Anstey with some of Clyde's motivation by having him yearn for "an elegance and refinement which his family's social position did not truly warrant." Yet Dreiser, who had seen real poverty both in his own life and in his newspaper work, could not sympathize convincingly with the mildly straitened finances and social discontent of this upper-middle-class clubman.

Dreiser departs from a factual account of the Molineux story and introduces plot elements and themes which will reappear in *An American Tragedy*. Anstey alternates between the confident, accomplished clubman and the pale, nervous young factory employee in search of sex and money—or, in other words, between Roland Molineux and Clyde Griffiths. In chapter 3, Anstey is looking for an heiress to marry but meanwhile has secret affairs with servant girls. Later he becomes interested in Celeste Martzo, a young rich girl very similar to Sondra Finchley, and Dreiser predicts, "This was the beginning of a definite interest in her which, however, was destined to end disastrously." It is worth noting that this turn in the plot is not derived from the Molineux case. Instead it seems to foreshadow a dilemma similar to Clyde's. As *The "Rake"* strays from the Molineux case, it reveals more about the novel Dreiser wants to write, but for which he has not yet found a murder case to act as a suitable medium.

The "Rake" is not successful as a piece of fiction. In trying to depict the temptation and destructiveness of the American dream while still reporting the Molineux case accurately, Dreiser was straining to tell two antithetical stories in one narrative. The two elements do not cohere, and, despite all his research and creative effort, Dreiser was as yet unable to express in fiction the paradigm that was forming in his mind. He therefore abandoned *The "Rake"*.

The surviving manuscript at the University of Pennsylvania reflects the unfinished nature of this narrative. The following text should not be considered as completed work, but as an early draft, much like the drafts of *An American Tragedy* published in the 1975

volume of the journal *Prospects*. The manuscript reveals much overlapping and repetition, signs that Dreiser was still feeling his way into the narrative. Some chapters are not numbered or put in order, and three chapters are unfinished. Two fragments accompany the text, the first of which is obviously from *The "Rake"*, but the second of which appears to be a section of "color" about Brooklyn which Dreiser must have planned to use in a later chapter. This second fragment, definitely from another manuscript, is written on different paper stock. Its relation to *The "Rake"* is not clear, but Dreiser saved it with the other materials so it is included here.

The following text is a substantive transcription of the surviving drafts at the University of Pennsylvania. Seventeen words have been added in brackets for intelligibility, and obvious slips of the pen have been corrected. Chapters have been arranged (and numbered, when necessary, within brackets) in what appears to be correct order. The original drafts are filled with strikeouts and revisions, but only final readings have been presented here. A diplomatic transcription is available at the University of Pennsylvania. The manuscript is also filled with misspellings and faulty punctuation; these have been corrected with a light hand. British or archaic spellings, such as "unskilful" and "younder," have been preserved.

The tendency to improve phrasing has been resisted. However, to some extent the text published here is still misleading, since it presents a more finished appearance than the manuscript warrants. Obviously these are not fair copies; they are early drafts, and Dreiser did not intend them for publication. It might be argued that the better course would be to refrain altogether from emending orthography and punctuation. This would certainly reflect more accurately the state of the holograph, but it would also impede reader comprehension and further use of these texts by Dreiser scholars. The texts have therefore been emended for intelligibility as described above.

Works Cited

- Pizer, Donald. *The Novels of Theodore Dreiser: A Critical Study*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1976.
- Riggio, Thomas, ed. *American Diaries 1902-1926*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1982.