ANTI-CALVINISM IN THEODORE DREISER'S SISTER CARRIE AND AN AMERICAN TRAGEDY

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"Anti-Calvinism in Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* and *An American Tragedy*" is a thematic study of the two novels by critical analysis, highlighting those persons and events which serve to prove the thesis that Dreiser's novels contain philosophies contrary to Calvinism. While the study develops around *Sister Carrie* and *An American Tragedy*, in order to pursue the idea, it is necessary to discuss Calvinism and Dreiserism.

John Calvin, a French Protestant reformer of the 1800's, brought to light a religious dogma which emphasizes the doctrines of predestination and salvation solely by God's grace. Besides these two points, three others - total depravity of man, particular redemption, and final perseverance - compose what has come to be known as the Five Points of Calvinism. Central to the idea presented in this paper is Calvin's doctrine of predestination which presents God as the sovereign ruler over mankind, doing as He chooses, and man as an organism with no free will.

To further the study of anti-Calvinism in the two novels, it is necessary to view the deterministic philosophy of Theodore Dreiser. The doctrine views man's life as ruled by a sequence of causes, or by fate, independent of his will. The external force of rule is society; the internal force, a biological substance Dreiser called "chemisms."
Theodore Dreiser and John Calvin have both had a significant impact on America. Calvin's theories came to America through Puritanism, establishing a moral code that exists in some areas today. Three hundred years later the novelist Dreiser came along as a representative of the schools of realism and naturalism. His straightforward manner in presenting the lack of moral ethics shocked most of America. The two men hold one theory in common—that man's destiny is controlled by outside forces over which he has no direct influence. In Dreiser's case these forces are bio-chemical and environmental; in Calvin's case, God's eternal master plan.

For the purpose of systematic organization, the paper is divided into three chapters. Chapter One contains an explanation of Calvinism and Dreiserism. The second chapter deals with a critical examination of *Sister Carrie* and *An American Tragedy*. In Chapter Three is the conclusion that the two novels are void of religion, or contain a religion contrary to the one taught in the doctrine of John Calvin. The novels represent the agnostic, deterministic, and bio-chemical world of Theodore Dreiser rather than a world ruled by a Sovereign God. It is the world of Calvin that will be viewed first in Chapter One.
Chapter 1

THE CONCEPTS OF DREISER AND CALVIN

Calvinism is a theology based on the teachings of John Calvin. The doctrines of John Calvin include basically faith over good works, the Bible as the basis of all Christian teachings, and the universal priesthood of all believers. The most characteristic thought in his theology concerns the mystery of the grace of God, who redeems sinners although they are unworthy of redemption and incapable of meriting it. The believer, thus, is the undeserving recipient of faith, of sonship and of membership in Christ's body as a sheer gift of the Holy Spirit. The man of faith has been chosen by God for salvation and may not boast of contributing either his own decision or any good works to procure eternal life.

Calvinism is defined through five main points: predestination, particular redemption, man's moral inability, invincible grace, and final perseverance. Predestination declares that God in a past eternity in the freeness of His grace from a foreseen fallen world chose out those whom He decreed to save. The doctrine of particular redemption affirms that those and those alone who were predestinated by God were given to Christ as His sheep, or as the members of His mystical body, and redeemed by Him. Man's moral inability asserts that man as a fallen creature is entirely unable, by any merely moral acts which man may do, to merit or attain salvation. The doctrine of invincible grace teaches that God's grace is the first and supreme factor in the salvation
of man, that it is solely by Divine grace that the heart is predisposed, the will renewed, and a spiritual nature created in man whereby he becomes a new creature in Christ Jesus. Last of all, the doctrine of final perseverance declares that every one elected by God in His predestinating purpose, redeemed by Christ in and through His work upon the cross, and regenerated and possessed of by the Spirit of God, will, notwithstanding whatever slips or falls there may be, surely arrive home in Heaven and enter into possession of that inheritance which is reserved for the people of God.¹

The cornerstone to all of Calvin's reasoning is the sovereignty of God. Calvinism asserts that the sovereignty of God is supreme, that he has absolute and undisputable authority over all creation, that nothing can lie outside of, or be viewed as not being subjected to the sovereignty of His will, that He is not only the Creator and Upholder but the Disposer of all events from the beginning of time to its close.² A good definition of sovereignty, based on Scripture can be found in the works of Arthur W. Pink:

The sovereignty of God. What do we mean by this? We mean the supremacy of God. To say that God is sovereign is to declare that God is God. To say that God is sovereign is to declare that He is the most High, doing according to His will in the armies of Heaven and among the inhabitants of earth, so that


²Ibid., p. 64.
none can stay His hand or say unto Him, "What doest thou?" (Daniel 4:35). To say that God is sovereign is to declare that He is the Almighty, the possessor of all Power in Heaven and in earth, so that none can defeat His Counsels, thwart His purpose or resist His will (Psalm 115:3). To say that God is sovereign is to declare that He is Governor among nations (Psalm 22:28), setting up Kingdoms, overthrowing empires, and determining the course of dynasties as pleaseth him best. Such is my God.  

The entire system depended on the supreme existence, and sovereign grandeur of God. God is to be regarded as head of the system, and the chief part of it:

God, the great Creator of all things, doth uphold, (Hebrew 1:3) direct, dispose (and govern all creatures, actions and things), (Daniel 4:34-35) from the greatest even to the least, (Matthew 10:29-31) by His most wise and holy providence (Proverbs 15:3), according to His infallible foreknowledge, (Acts 15:18) and the free and immutable counsel of His own will.

It may be generally asserted that nothing is of the nature of true virtue in which God is not the first and the last. God is the author, the director, the supreme fact of every man's life.

A natural consequence of this doctrine of God's sovereignty was the assignment of man to an inferior role in the universe. God is the source of all good; man as a sinner is guilty and corrupt. By nature he is in a deplorable

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and undone state in the highest sense. "God imputed the
guilt of Adam's first sin to all his posterity."\(^5\) God
created man upright but he is no longer so. He is a sinner
dead in trespasses and sin. All the good man does cannot
remove the sin. Punishment for this sin is death, physical
death and spiritual death which results in an eternal
separation from God. The virtue of man depends on his
belief in God as the essence of Being, in whom all goodness
is constituted.\(^6\) Man is, therefore, passive in both the
physical and spiritual aspects of his existence.

According to Calvin, man has no freedom. Man has no
freedom because he was bound by God's master plan. "God sees
the end from the beginning and controls all his creatures and
all their actions so as to guarantee the planned results."\(^7\)
Man could not choose because his choice was predetermined.
The human will was caused to act under Divine grace. He is
one who responds rather than one who initiates; but man is,
in no sense, a mere machine, nor can God be regarded as "the
Author of sin, but the Author of free beings who are them-
selves the authors of sin."\(^8\) Because man fell, his will
belonged to Satan; thus, he could not choose to do good. The
fall of man resulted in the enslaving of his will; therefore,
it is impossible to accord to man a free will.

\(^5\)Ibid., p. 73.
\(^6\)Clark, op. cit., p. 98.
\(^7\)Ibid., p. 62.
\(^8\)Warburton, op. cit., p. 76.
Man is free only within the limitations of his nature. Man, as a moral creature, standing under the moral government of God, is responsible for his moral actions and, in so far as actions of his nature are concerned, he is in possession of a moral ability:

Man is under law and is bound by that law in its relationship to his moral life. In this sense, therefore, man is morally responsible.\(^9\)

The moral law mirrors man's sin. Law is the standard of life by which man should live. All men have a natural knowledge of God. His condemnation is legitimate. Perfection in the face of the law is found only in accepting the grace of God through faith.

Aside from the immutable grace that saves the sinner from Hell, or redeems him to Heaven, there is a common grace that falls on all men. This grace allows the non-elect of God to succeed in business ventures, retain good health, produce good gardens, enjoy a life free of major disaster, and be partakers of scores of other experiences taken for granted. While God permits the non-elect to receive his grace, He also grants His elect trials and tribulations, given to strengthen and reveal the sinner's faith in God.

Man, once he has accepted Christ as Lord, and although he is aware that his good deeds matter none in his salvation, strives to do those things which are favorable in God's eyes. He aims to keep the law even though it is impossible:

\(^9\)Ibid., p. 143.
The Calvinistic system, deprecate it as men may, does not teach that man can live just as he chooses and yet be certain of Heaven because he holds the doctrines of Calvinism, or lays a claim, on whatever ground it may rest, that he is one of the election of grace.\textsuperscript{10} Calvinism is only demonstrated by the transforming of those doctrines into life and practice. "The grace of God does not prevent sinning but puts an end to the reign of sin and doubt."\textsuperscript{11} Man no longer walks with the world. God is sovereign in his life; therefore, he has a new life, a new will, new thoughts and new desires.

God rules in the life of man, making him willing to serve God, turning him from the world to live a life as moral as possible for a sinner, determining every event in his daily affairs. This control over the life of man can to some degree be compared with the deterministic philosophy of Theodore Dreiser. This comparison will be made clear in the following discussion of Dreiser's philosophies.

Theodore Dreiser, a realist of Twentieth Century America, believed that the writer should apply scientific objectivity and precision in his treatment of life. Truth was to be found in life itself. Dreiser saw life as a whole, the evil and the sordid included. He gave a detailed and detached description of the America of his time. "Dreiser

\textsuperscript{10}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 195.

saw American society expanding as if to burst, wealth rising like mercury in a glass, bitter shambles of revolt, the fight for power."¹²

A grim view of life fills Dreiser's literature. His view was strongly influenced by his own life. Dreiser's family was disordered and poor. Poverty bred in him a desperate need for the appearance of wealth. Money displayed a reality and a symbol of man's desires. Money not only meant success, it meant color and light of life - a life Dreiser did not know for some time.

Dreiser's father, a Catholic, held strong religious convictions. The son found it harder and harder to accept his father's teachings:

If I go of a Sunday (to church) which I rarely do, I can hear regularly that there is a Christ who died for men, and that He was the son of the living God who liveth and reigneth world without end. I have no quarrel with this doctrine... But I am one of those curious persons who cannot make up their minds about anything.¹³

He found the childhood teachings of ethical idealism and religious orthodoxy to be incomplete. "Dreiser gave the impression that he was aware all was not right with the world, and that perhaps God was not in His Heaven."¹⁴ He saw that


the good were not always rewarded for being good; the bad were not always punished. He saw no apparent scheme of moral law in the world. "In the sense of feeling no certainty as to underlying laws of life, he is an agnostic,"15 "I am not for saints, guardian angels, Buddhas, Christs, perfect gods all."16 By middle age, Dreiser had become a fanatical anti-religionist, a self-confessed agnostic.

For Dreiser there appeared to be a gap between the old ethics and religious standards being preached and the actual practices of the people. He felt people were living in hypocrisy, putting on false fronts. A fundamental dichotomy between appearance and reality, between professed and actual convictions of his fellow Americans existed. He was indifferent to common preachments, had an inability to accept Christian maxims, and refused to do lip service to creeds.17 Dreiser brought a moral, ethical, and religious agnosticism to his novels.18

Man had a place in society. Dreiser, following the deterministic philosophy, saw man as helpless to change the course of his life:

Man has fumbled and stumbled, dying by billions in one erroneous way, or another, until at last, by mere chance apparently, he has stumbled upon one helpful fact or another.  

Men and women were put in the midst of a great world and became manikins played with by forces which they can never control and to which they are unusually unable to adjust themselves:  

The theory at the heart of Dreiser's work is that of human responsibility. He appears to believe that men's destinies are due fundamentally to no fault of their own, but that through some chemical quality in their composition they are pushed and pulled about for ends of which they are unaware.  

Dreiser has convictions that existence is entirely without meaning, that the determining forces of life are physio-chemical actions and reactions, and that the business of living divides mankind into the strong and the weak, not into the good and the bad as would be the case if life had a moral purpose. The weak meet their doom at once, and the tragedy of their existence is their passive acceptance of fate. The strong may escape for a time, but finally chance fails them.  

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19Dreiser, op. cit., p.247.  
Dreiser's determinism is biological and social. Man is motivated by "chemisms" of which he is not always aware. He is working and operating in social laws as they effect the human fate. "Man is a pathetically, or comically, impotent creature of his environment, the butt of undignified jokes played upon him by tricks of his own chemistry."\(^{22}\)

Dreiser holds that the events which set in motion these forces proceed from pure chance. Man's happiness and woe are the result of "casting dice with fate."\(^{23}\) The man of personality knows that time and chance happen to all men.\(^{24}\)

To Dreiser man was bound up in the complex of a growing, industrialized, mechanized and impersonal America; yet man was unconscious of his serfdom. Society was corrupt, not man. American society was not conducive to building character or strength of will. Since man did not have the will to change his course of life, Dreiser did not judge him. "Men were forced against their will into grooves of conduct which are unsuitable to them."\(^{25}\) Forces within, or without, eventually led to a course of conduct discordant with society's laws and traditions, since these were corrupt.

Dreiser wrote of the things he knew. His characters came from a life of poverty, and heredity always figured


\(^{23}\)Blankenship, op. cit., p. 539.

\(^{24}\)Dreiser, op. cit., p. 108.

\(^{25}\)Squire, op. cit., p. 100.
importantly in shaping them. They were harried by a desire for personal affirmation. The characters grappled for money; they lacerated themselves climbing to success; they wanted things they could never obtain. "Step by step individuals clawed their way upward, rising by means fair or foul,"26 The more they wanted, the more impulsively they would react, Dreiser felt like they could not help violating the practices of social order because of some chemical forces within themselves.27 He had difficulty seeing that human life has any meaning or values.

Now that the discussion of the two views is completed, a more detailed contrast can be made. The point of similarity ends with the fact that both Calvin and Dreiser are determinist. Calvin's predestinarian views give the controlling power to Almighty God. His doctrines make man devoid of a free will and show man depraved and immoral and punished by death for his sins. The deterministic philosophy of Dreiser has bio-chemical overtones. Man in this doctrine has no free will, but is controlled by his environment and his chemistry. Man is not held responsible for his actions. There is no punishment for his transgressions. The effect of these views on Sister Carrie and An American Tragedy can be see in Chapter Two.


Chapter 2

A CRITICAL SUMMARY OF SISTER CARRIE AND AN AMERICAN TRAGEDY

A critical summary of *Sister Carrie* and *An American Tragedy* is essential to bring to surface the characters and events which show that Calvinism and Dreiserism are dissimilar. The critique will come mainly through the views of Dreiser, but will be accompanied with references to Calvinism. The main contrast will follow in Chapter Three.

Carrie Meeber, eighteen years old, was just another poor girl headed for the big city. Her training was the typical moral training of the typical American family of the working class of the period. It was very strict and full of the taboos that were deemed socially expedient. The young girl was dissatisfied with her surroundings. She wanted some kind of new life materially better than the one she was leaving. So Carrie, refusing to accept her poverty, ended up in Chicago.

By opening with a sermon, Dreiser hinted early in the novel as to what was to become of Carrie. "When a girl leaves her home at eighteen, she does one of two things. Either she falls into saving hands and becomes better, or she rapidly assumes the cosmopolitan standard of virtue and becomes worse."28 Near the end of the novel, he said:

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Not evil, but longing for that which is better, more often directs the steps of the erring. Not evil, but goodness more often allureth the feeling mind unused to reason.29 Carrie took up the false values of society. She was then forced to constantly strive for something better because simple human perceptions are perverted. Carrie was moved from place to place, situation to situation, through no willing of her own. To John Calvin, the force is not a mysterious one; the force is God, ruler of the Universe.

When Carrie first arrived in Chicago, she was faced with the same poverty that faced her in Columbia City, Wisconsin. Her sister's apartment was shabbily decorated. She was unable to find a job that paid well. Her working companions did not appear to be any better than all the people with whom she had been previously acquainted. "She felt the drag of a lean and narrow life."30

On the train from Columbia City to Chicago, Carrie had conversed with a stranger, a traveling salesman, named Drouet. One day as she walked on the streets of Chicago, he called to her and took her to lunch. At this point Carrie made the first real decisive step. She took money from Drouet. Carrie started down a path that she, her family, and her world regarded as morally wrong.

Only a small time elapsed before Carrie moved into a flat furnished by Drouet. Here Dreiser and society disagree. Dreiser paints Carrie's career as growth and not

29Ibid., p. 417.
demoralization. Dreiser did not judge Carrie for so freely giving her virginity, but society did, especially the Victorian society of the 1890's. *Sister Carrie* glorifies a heroine who had sinned and prospered. "The novel was immoral because the heroine did not suffer the wages of sin."31 Carrie was judged, though, by a society that felt all people should live a moral life. In Calvin's world, she would have been condemned, not only by her fellow man, but by a God who requires a perfect existence in man.

Carrie, completely filled with society's material values, was never satisfied. Her dissatisfaction became more and more apparent when she met Hurstwood. He represented more success than Douret. His dress was a little finer; his manners had a little more polish:

She was relatively content in this situation until George Hurstwood appeared on the scene, and Carrie began to compare the two men. Hurstwood, strong, solid, well-dressed, and possessed of a sense of his own importance, was the manager of a famous saloon. He had an unsatisfactory home life with a socially ambitious wife and children, and he was immediately attracted to Carrie. Not realizing that Hurstwood was already married, Carrie offered little resistance when Hurstwood began courting her.32

Her glimpse of the world he seemed to represent grew.


"Carrie was willing to sell herself to the highest bidder."33 She recognized the immorality of her action in the remark, "I'm getting terrible, I don't seem to do anything right."34 Carrie replaced Drouet in order to better her situation; and her association with Hurstwood, a married man, did not give her the desired acceptance in society. Yet, according to Lehan, there is no relationship in the novel between what one does against society and what happens to him.35 Neither Hurstwood nor Carrie is subject to the laws of morality. While they both sin, one profits, and the other suffers from the course of events. According to Calvin, the punishment for sin is death and separation from God. Trails and tribulations viewed by man are not punishment from God; they are means of strengthening faith.

At this point, one should take a look at Hurstwood and his position in the standards of society. In the beginning, he had said, "A man can't be too careful,"36 Hurstwood worried about a preservation of a clean respectability. His feeling for Carrie forced him to commit adultery. After his wife left him, he made one more step against society which led to his doom. He took some money from his employer's safe. The safe accidentally closed and


34Sister Carrie, op. cit., p. 105.

35Lehan, op. cit., p. 76.

36Sister Carrie, op. cit., p. 79.
he was left holding the money. Thus, Hurstwood took the money by sheer chance and so became a victim of cruel fate. With Carrie at his side Hurstwood became a common thief on the run. His employers had him traced, and a deal was made; but Hurstwood could never return to Chicago:

Hurstwood's passion for Carrie was not the sole reason for Hurstwood's undoing. A man cannot escape from himself, from his own character. Hurstwood's tragedy begins when he abandons his social role in Chicago. 37

He was unable to find his place in New York because "luck" turned against him in his struggle for survival. While Carrie, by boarding the Chicago train became as much a victim of fate as Hurstwood, she did not lose. He sank so low that eventually he was forced to ask Carrie for financial aid, and finally committed suicide. "Hurstwood was Dreiser's first specimen of moral disintegration." 38

Carrie realized a change in Hurstwood - his dullness and his poverty. Even though Carrie and Hurstwood were married, she found need to replace him:

Carrie was hardly a thoughtful woman, and her feelings were almost exclusively concerned with the material aspects of living. Her craving for pleasure was so strong that it was the only stay of her nature. 39

His low condition repelled her. She was not satisfied:

37Kazin. op. cit., p. 186.


Hurstwood and Carrie are walking the high wire in this precarious material world. One looks down and loses his balance; the other keeps her eyes on the tether ahead.40

She took a job on the stage and an apartment with a girlfriend. Carrie reached the height of stardom; yet, she was not satisfied. "Carrie's fate is undisclosed. She had not yet reached the limits that would reverse the pendulum swing of her career."41 Carrie's dissatisfaction with her current state of affairs is seen through the symbolic motion of the rocking chair. And so Carrie rocks, ever moving but never reaching her goal.

Carrie could advance, gain luxury and finery, do what she wanted to do, give expression to her feelings only through a path of sin, according to the religionist. In her desire to achieve success, she was forced to go against the established traditions of her day. By the law of survival she was right and fortunate; by the law of religion and society, bad. Dreiser had difficulty distinguishing between what is "social" and what is "sinful." Actually sin hardly enters in.

Consistent with the views of Dreiser presented in Sister Carrie are those displayed in An American Tragedy. In An American Tragedy, one sees the chronicle of Clyde Griffiths, raised in a poverty-strewn and religiously fanatical Kansas City background. Clyde's parents, "the sort of people

40 Gerber, op. cit., p. 61.
41 Lehan, op. cit., p. 61.
Dreiser always called 'religionist,' people whose testimony to the Word of the Lord is overt, perpetual, and boring. Were street evangelists who guarded their children and tried to instill in them religious and moral fervor. Both mother and father insisted, as do many religionists, in dis-associating God from harm and error and misery, while granting Him supreme control. Clyde was ashamed of his position:

The sterile moralism of his parents cannot provide him with the strength to resist his environment or a principle by which to overcome it.

He appeared to resent and even suffer from the position in which he found himself. "Plainly pagan rather than religious life interested him, although as yet he was not fully aware of this." Clyde was attracted to beauty and pleasure. Thus the theme of the story is the interaction of religious and industrial environment on a character - a study of a young man who is caught between his early religious training and a secular world of material values. An American Tragedy accepted the principle that the environment is responsible for individual personality - a society that operates on the wrong

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principles will train individuals who do wrong. The Calvinist feels that wrong principles are a result of sin in Adam. Man is evil because of his nature, not because of any influence of society.

Clyde observed the "escape" of his sister Esta. Seemingly Esta had been characterized by a religious and moral fervor. Her going pointed out to him that all was not right at home, that mission work was nothing and that religious emotion was not anything either. He could not judge his sister in the same moralistic light that his parents did. Clyde became more and more the pragmatic observer of life. He viewed his surroundings in terms of the practical results. Clyde was forced to contrast what his father preached about the goodness of God to what the world seemed to offer the Griffiths - the bounty of the Almighty had not exactly flowed toward them.

Clyde's yearning for wealth and success was first vaguely realized in his job as a hotel bellhop at the luxurious Green-Davidson Hotel. During his stay at the hotel, there were elements of the good life of pleasure, and material well-being for Clyde, from clothes, food, recreation, and his first girlfriend, Hortense, to outings with the other bellhops. The few pleasures Clyde enjoyed here created in him the desire for a better existence. He became more and more aware of the dreary and spare living conditions at home. "Yet he had no traits whatsoever to redeem his mediocrity." 46

46 Geismar, op. cit., p. 354.
These were the first real signs of Clyde's attempt to escape his home environment:

So standard had Clyde's life been up to this time and so eager was he for almost any form of pleasure, that from the first he listened with all too eager ears to any account of anything that spelled out adventure or pleasure. Not that he approved of these types of adventures. As a matter of fact at first it offended and depressed him, seeing as he did that it ran counter to all he had heard and been told to believe these many years.47

Little by little he was drawn into the different appealing world that led to his second move.

The second act into the life of adventure and pleasure came when he was confronted with the law. Joy-riding with other bellhops and their girls, they ran down a child. In the impact and the aftermath of the accident, Clyde realized that to escape scandal and possible ruin he would have to run. Opposed to his previous conditioning with regard to the mercy and justice of God, or man, he sized up his situation and did not stay to face things (as conventional morality would have urged).

After he escaped, Clyde settled in Chicago. He went to work at the Union League Club, where he became acquainted by chance with his Uncle Samuel Griffiths. He was offered a job in his uncle's collar factory in Lycurgus, and started in the basement learning the shrinking process.

Eventually with a promotion to authority, Clyde was denied association with the factory workers, especially female employees. There was a certain social impropriety in one fraternizing with a lower class. But Clyde was not really accepted in any class. He turned to Roberta Alden, a new employee, and an intimate relationship developed. Clyde had broken another moral law.

At this point it was not Clyde but Roberta who was faced with the possibility of social unacceptability. She was forced to acknowledge that she was pregnant. Like Carrie Meeber, she had set out from her life of poverty in search of something better. Against her better judgment and her childhood teachings, she submitted to Clyde's illicit advances. Roberta knew that Clyde did not want her and also that she could not go home. Her desire to achieve some material success had led her to break society's code and had left her completely alone.

Clyde could not be absolved of blame. His desires to climb the social ladder had been met to some degree. He kept company with a society girl, Sondra Finchley, but he would never have a chance to succeed in the business where he tried so dreadfully hard to please everyone. His worst traits of character are simply the attempts to justify himself to these people and be what he supposes they want him to be—obedient, faithful, pleasant, and prompt.
Roberta had been a passing fancy. The need came for her to be replaced for she stood in his path of success. "He could not and would not let her do this to him. His life would be ruined." 48 Clyde realized that if an abortion was not possible, he would have to marry Roberta or kill her. Both abortion and murder were illegal. His attempts to arrange an abortion were fruitless, so Clyde was forced to contemplate murder.

The plan, inspired by a news item, centered around an accidental drowning. Mixed emotions filled Clyde's mind. He knew it would be wrong but he saw no other way. He rowed the boat onto the lake, but he was unable to commit the act. Then, by chance, came the accidental overturning by Roberta, and her drowning by default. Clyde's guilt came in failing to save her.

As was the case with the joy-rider, Clyde could not face the consequences. He ran but was discovered. His trial was a conflict between religion and godlessness. Clyde had resisted established authority - the law and God. Society had punishment for breakers of the law:

Clyde is condemned by a society that believes in absolute justice but lives in a society in which money has created a double standard of justice. 49 God would punish those who did not accept Him and His sovereign power:


49 *Lehan*, op. cit., p. 168.
Robert's father said, "If there is a God, He will not let such a scoundrel as this go unpunished! Oh, no! He will not! I have yet to see the children of the righteous forsaken or their seed begging for bread."  

Guilty before God because he thought murder and guilty before man because of his transgression of sexual morality, Clyde was never sure he could accept the eternal "fires":

Was he truly saved? The time was so short. Could he rely on God with that absolute security which he had just announced now characterized him? Life was so strange. The future was so obscure. Was there really a life after death... Was there?

Conventional religion had provided no lasting comfort to Clyde, and he went to his death in agonized doubt:

Mama, you must believe that I die resigned and content. It won't be hard, God has heard my prayers. He has given me strength and peace. But to himself adding: "Had He?"

Clyde could not accept the conventional religion of simple faith:

Clyde's young religious training tells him to bear up under their adversities and have faith that the Lord will provide. The Lord does not provide, and it is borne upon Clyde's consciousness that the religious precepts of his father are worthless in the world of fact.

50 An American Tragedy, op. cit., p. 16 3-14.
51 Ibid., p. 809.
52 Ibid., p. 809.
He exemplifies the deterioration of the Calvinistic doctrine of salvation by faith alone, a faith, though, that does not exclude good works.\textsuperscript{54}

Clyde's fate had been predetermined by forces beyond his control. One of the strongest forces was found in his impoverished home. The values of society forced Clyde to strive for success. "All of society conspired to persuade him that his goals are admirable perhaps even scared."\textsuperscript{55} To gain these ends he abandoned the pieties of his fundamentalist upbringing and sacrificed a tender young woman. False values blinded Clyde to the reality of law and God.

\textit{Sister Carrie} and \textit{An American Tragedy} hold consistently to the philosophies of Theodore Dreiser presented in Chapter One, and holding to Dreiser's views are definitely anti-Calvinistic. The following chapter contains the detailed analysis of these contrasting views.

\textsuperscript{54}Geismar, op. cit., p. 355.

\textsuperscript{55}\textit{An American Tragedy}, op. cit., p. 821.
Chapter 3

A CONCLUSION

John Calvin's God is supreme in His power, and He works all things after His will. There is nothing unexpected with God, nothing is unforeseen by Him:

Having created the world, God remains its Absolute master, takes interest in it, intervenes in it at every moment and abandons none of His power to the blind play of natural laws such as to chance.56

The Providence of God, according to Calvin is seen in the ordering of the various events which concern each in his own daily life. God controls all events not just the good as was the belief of Asa Griffiths and his wife.

The materialistic determinism adopted by Theodore Dreiser reduces everything to measurable, verifiable matter and motion. It denies values, and free will disappears, for if determinism is universal, man cannot be held morally responsible for his actions. "No one is really responsible for anything."57 This deterministic philosophy is marked by an immense and open-eyed curiosity that ended in agnosticism.58 Dreiser's universe is godless and disordered.

"Dreiser sees the life of man, not as a simple

56Wendel, op. cit., p. 177.
57Kazin, op. cit., p. 122.
58Parrington, op. cit., p. 354.
theorem in Calvinism, but as a vast adventure, an enchantment, a mystery.\textsuperscript{59} Man is one heroic warrior against a legion of the commercial and Puritan world. Religion is represented as an illusion capable of deceiving only those blind to life's realities. "He thinks religion and morality are nonsense, religionists and moralists are fakes, and tradition is a fraud."\textsuperscript{60} "Dreiser's world is destitute of religion; an insipid tribal moralism has replaced the love of God."\textsuperscript{61} The characters in \textit{Sister Carrie} seem to have no religion. In \textit{An American Tragedy}, Clyde's parents are "renegade Baptists,"\textsuperscript{62} Religion, even as it exists, is shown failing.

According to Calvin, man's will is free only as far as forces outside are concerned. He does not have a choice. He is bound by a sovereign plan of an Almighty God. Man is sinful through the fall. "Since the fall, it became certain that man has had no free will and could not do good without the help of God."\textsuperscript{63} Man is therefore a slave to sin. Belief in God turns back the will. Men themselves are not good; it is only that God grants them special gifts.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{60}Charlotte A. Alexander, \textit{Theodore Dreiser's Sister Carrie} (New York: Monarch Press, Incorporated, 1965), p. 82
\item \textsuperscript{62}Moers, op. cit., p. 296.
\item \textsuperscript{63}Wendel, op. cit., p. 189.
\end{itemize}
Dreiser said that "we are not privileged to say that God, or the Creator, wishes us to do thus and so. We can only say that changing conditions compel us to, or prevent us from doing thus and so." He holds that while man has a will, he does not have a free will because his fate is governed by those internal forces within him, "chemisms," and those external ones of his environment. Dreiser was obsessed with the theme of man's limits:

The scene with Clyde in the woods - ready to run at one moment, ready to return to camp at the next - is a representative moment because it reveals the way the will is pulled in two directions and negated by counter impulses.

Clyde and Carrie are practically void of free will. They follow a course nearly effortless as possible, offering no resistance to any lure that seems at the moment to offer sensory pleasure.

Dreiser's man was a pawn, played not by responsible gods but by impersonal, mechanical and chemical forces.

In Dreiser's world man is a mechanism, his pitiful existence determined by factors of biology, and social environment. The plight of each individual human soul is at the mercy of chance and of forces beyond his control. The individual may be subject to the inexorable laws of both human and physical nature, laws he cannot escape although

65 Lehan, op. cit., p. 150.
he may not fully understand them. "Clyde did not fully understand the deterministic nature of his own background." Accident becomes a part of the inevitable sequence of events. Fates cannot be divorced from character, character cannot be divorced from forces which shape and determine it, and these cannot be divorced from accidents. Chance seemed the final ruler of all things.

_Sister Carrie_ depicts characters caught in the forces of chance and environment:

-Man remains a puppet of these forces, a mere wisp of wind which cast a few leaves up and many down thus producing wild extremes of fortune.

The novel was a story of three people caught in these "winds of chance" and circumstance. Carrie's success, or failure, depends upon a good or bad luck. It would be a mistake, according to Dreiser's philosophy, to believe that Carrie had charted her own course. "Dreiser warns against illusions of the self-made individuals." An overwhelming sense of chance seems to dominate the novel. Carrie's seeing the newspaper ad, meeting Drouet again, her acting in her first stage experience, discovering of the romance by Drouet and Mrs. Hurstwood, Hurstwood's happening to the money, and Carrie's meeting with both Vance and Ames were all by chance.

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67 Lehan, op. cit., p. 74.
68 Ibid., p. 165.
69 Ibid., p. 165.
70 Gerber, op. cit., p. 52.
71 Ibid., p. 70.
What happened to Clyde happened not only because of the drives with which he had been naturally endowed but because of the influences which mold him and the direction from which the indifferent "winds of chance" happen to blow. Accidental events also seem to dominate An American Tragedy. Examples are found in Clyde's job at the Green-Davidson Hotel, the auto accident which caused him to leave town, his meeting his Uncle in Chicago, Roberta's finding of the job when a friend saw the sign, Roberta and Clyde's meeting on Crum Lake, friends seeing Roberta with Clyde causing her to move, Clyde's being a victim of Sondra's plan to make Gilbert jealous, and Roberta's drowning when the boat tips. Of course, Dreiser's deterministic philosophy allowed for indifference to the will of man making chance, fate, or accidental happenings rulers in the lives of his characters.

With Calvinism there is no chance. God, before the foundation of the world, conceived a master plan. According to the Bible even the hairs of one's head are numbered. He has supreme control over all events, not merely those related to one's spiritual life.

Evil was no problem to Dreiser, but he did not treat it in theological terms. He followed the philosophy of personal idealism which expresses faith in the innate goodness of man. To him the evil was social.

Dreiser did not affix guilt; he did not condemn.

72 Matthew 10:30
Responsibility for crime supposes a conception of the human mind and will which bio-chemistry contradicts. Biological fatalism is the heart of Theodore Drier's philosophy.73

The sense of moral responsibility was absent almost entirely. Motivating Dreiser's thought was the belief that men and women are not responsible for their own behavior. "Man is the butt of undignified jokes played upon him by tricks of his own chemistry."74 According to Hartwick, Dreiser's men are only chemical compounds, ignorant, and futile amid a web of natural forces which are both good and evil.75 Man was in reality bound to a universe in which some principle outside held the whole together, and his will only appeared free. Calvin, of course, said that this outside force is God.

In regard to ideas concerning marriage, Dreiser said, "We either accept the current religionistic or moralistic theory, or we do not."76 His characters are at the mercy of hypnotic, incomprehensible desires for sexual conquest. "His (Clyde's) was a disposition easily and often inflamed by the chemistry of sex."77 Clyde is more driven by sex than other men because of a chance arrangement in his body


74 Hazard, op. cit., p. 280.


77 Purdy, op. cit., p. 255.
chemistry. Clyde's life followed a path of corruption and immorality because his demands for material and sexual satisfaction exceeded his respect for the moral and social laws which restrained evil.

The religionist sees passion as sin, or weakness; an individual who requires more than one union to express his emotional necessities is either a lunatic or a criminal. 78 "Clyde Griffiths is a moral coward and weakling." 79 Clyde sinned morally through his involvement with Hortense, his trips to the whorehouse with his friends, and his intimate relationship with Roberta.

Dreiser presented a picture of human and social conditions. Society possessed a conventional standard whereby it judged all—all men should be good; all women, virtuous. Dreiser's work, though, reflected the indifference toward the tradition of reward and punishment. Sister Carrie overthrew everything society accepted. "It might have had a success de scandale." 80 Sister Carrie and An American Tragedy ignored, or defied, the Calvinistic views on morality since one should strive to do only that which brings glory to God. Dreiser's men and women did not always suffer in this life

79 Hartwick, op. cit., p. 91.
for transgressions of the social and moral code:

The central truth about man is that he is an animal amenable to no law but the law of his own temperament, doing as he desires, subject only to the limitations of his power. 81

The same circumstances that leave Drouet and Carrie apparently untouched send Hurstwood and Clyde to destruction. Dreiser treated moral taint as irrelevant to one's career. Dreiser had learned from his own life that the good were not always rewarded. His family, religious and morally good, suffered immensely.

Followers of Calvinism believe that man's punishment is not necessarily an outward trial; punishment for sin is separation from God throughout eternity. God's common grace falls on all men so that tribulation may never outwardly affect one. While common grace may leave an immoral person virtually untouched, God may grant trials to His people in order that their faith may be strengthened and their submission to a sovereign God evident to all.

Dreiser's non-judgmental attitude toward his characters stemmed in part from his distaste of prevailing conventions and proprieties in his own life. "The only evil in what is ordinarily considered sinful comes from the codes which call it evil, rather than the deed itself." 82 He and his characters presented an attitude of indifference toward

81 Alexander, op. cit., p. 79.
82 Walcutt, op. cit., p. 270.
the conventions of reward and punishment. "Carrie not only escaped punishment; but Dreiser did not even regard her as sinful." 83 "Central to his thought was the belief that any individual system of ethics...must spring from a person's actual experience with forces both inside and outside himself. ..." 84

Why did Carrie and Clyde rebel against their childhood teachings, their place in society, and the moral standard of their day? Carrie and Clyde sought the same kind of end—success and advancement. "He was interested always in the power of society to mold, to create, to smash at will." 85 Dreiser contended that society with its materialistic values forced man to reach for success; and his success was measured by money and material possessions. Money spoke in loud, clear tones of authority:

Ambition, yearning, aspiration these all revolve around this problem, the role of money. He had related social causation—the basic social and economical factors that play a causal role in society—to individual patterns of destiny. 86

Man under these conditions was blinded to the realities of his world. The fantasies came to oppose the actualities;


85 Gerber, op. cit., p. 59.

86 Kazin, op. cit., p. 187.
their sense of duty and morality battled the deep-rooted desire for pleasure and success. The fantasies and the pleasures eventually won, and so many turned to all the things he, his family and his society knew to be wrong.

Calvinism said that man by nature is rebellious; the rebellion is a result of man's fall in Adam. No matter how hard man tries to please God, his efforts are fruitless since that perfection is found only in God. Man knows that his deeds are evil because the "law" reveals sin.

According to Dreiser, man was not born sinful, but it was society that was corrupt. "He disbelieved that men are born sinful." The society stifled man's will to resist the "evils." Such a society was more likely to produce seduction, adultery, crime, selfishness, and passivity than to build good character. "Carrie is passive rather than active; pushed rather than pushing." Dreiser's characters fail to accept society's code of ethics and instead adopt its false values.

Theodore Dreiser was a self-confessed agnostic. His attitude toward God and morality carries over to his characters. The persons in Sister Carrie showed no evidence of believing in any supreme being. Clyde Griffith's parents are religious, but not Calvinistic because "their god" works only good and has no part in evil. Clyde seems, at least

at the end, to acknowledge God although he never turned
to Him or accepted His sovereignty. The novels are a
vision of Calvin's God abandoned. God is not accepted as the
Sovereign, and man does not take his rightful place as a
sinner.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


