The line of descent from the nineteenth century American epic to the twentieth century is a large gap to fill. Cooper's subject matter, the struggle for power in the Western frontier, in The Last of the Mohicans, was truly an epic subject. The association of the plot with an actual historical event further magnified its dignity and added to the sense of greatness. Melville transferred the scene from land and wrote an "epic of the sea". A conspicuous tendency in the nineteenth century American epic novel is the return to ancient motifs: the valour and gallantry of warriors in the novels of Cooper and Simms and the revenge against a monster in Moby Dick. Melville's great masterpiece has undoubtedly had great impact on the American epic novels of the twentieth century. He was the first to endow a local activity like whaling with heroic qualities; thereby paving the way for American posterity to put such common place subject matter to epic use. The sense of despair which is prevalent in Moby Dick, has been inherited by the twentieth century American epic novel. Most of the epics set in the modern period, The Wasteland The Cantos, U.S.A., to name a few, have an aura of disillusionment,
and in this light it is interesting to note that Dreiser, too, must have felt that the events and values of twentieth century America were largely inimical to the creation of an optimistic epic. It becomes necessary to admit that just as cultures change, so must the idea of epic, if it is to reflect accurately the concerns and feelings of its time. For example, Dos Passos, in *U.S.A.*, while recording the history and values of his time, reveals that era to be one of dehumanization, repression and insincerity. It would be naive and unrealistic to expect him to have tacked on to *U.S.A.*, a melioristic, 'things will be better tomorrow' ending. The conclusion of the epic also must arise naturally from the work itself in order to be credible.

For Dreiser, the form that the epic must take when it is modified by the techniques of naturalism is not "the various fighting westward" recommended in "A Neglected Epic", but rather the rigid social stratification prevalent in American society of the early twentieth century. The America of the nineteen twenties is no longer the land Whitman celebrated, the place in which man is free to develop himself materially and spiritually. The growth of industry and business, the first World War and the subsequent

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period of idealistic disillusionment, led the common man to an increasing dissatisfaction with his lot. The class and economic discrepancy between the Negro and the deacon, the rich factory owners and the working class was very pronounced. The humane aspects were over shadowed by the idea that brotherhood and love do not put food in the mouths of the poor labourers. Dreiser is deeply concerned with these realities, with oppression, human callousness and insincerity in a land whose very name, was once synonymous with freedom, equality, brotherhood and material abundance for all. For Dreiser, only the epic novel could allow sufficient breadth to include the complexity and contradiction of the American experience, to permit speculation of how and why things are as they are and to perhaps offer tentative or definite, resolutions to redeem the times. Dreiser, according to Becker was the one who, with a battering ram for a pen according to some, broke down the walls of convention, hypocrisy, and puerile illusion that obscured the acts and the very nature of men. His efforts and his example liberated a whole generation of writers who, after the first World War, subjected American lives and institutions to a closer examination than they had ever had before.  

Though the modern epic writer is concerned with the same characteristic ideas, those of theme, of hero, language, time and history, his treatment of them is likely to be more convoluted, more intellectual and more sophisticated in keeping with the demands of time. Dreiser realized that America was rapidly becoming a nation where truth is more terrifying than fiction. He believed that novelists could not write about life as it was, rather, they wrote about it as somebody else thought it was. His goal was truthfulness in the treatment of materials. He recognized the tragic dichotomy in American culture, the gap between the haves and have nots. *An American Tragedy* depicts the corruption of the promise of America by self-seeking individualism, greedy materialism and a widening discrepancy between the rich and the poor.

"In America at the time of Theodore Dreiser's birth there were thousands of children being born under the same handicaps of poverty and physical disability that were Dreiser's lot from the fates." Dreiser had experienced the miseries resulting from the inequalities of the existing organized society. The real origins of Dreiser's literary trends lie in his personal background. He has been called a naturalist, and this tendency is noted in most of his works.

which have autobiographical streaks. His youth was passed in poverty stricken circumstances. His parents were neither materially successful, nor had they any position in society. The deprivation of money and status made Dreiser hanker after them in the course of his life. He also shed away the religious beliefs which he thought were an impediment to his parents progress in the world. The novel at its best is perhaps the inevitable development of the epic form. Dreiser, like Wordsworth looks back to his early years as the shaping influence of the years of come.

Class relations in the United States of the early nineteen hundreds had great impact upon his mind and were of vital importance for influencing most of the themes of his narratives. He noticed the invidious demarcations between one class and another and also the distinctions within a class as well. Social stratification is a glaring aspect of modern American society. Wealth, though of great value for American society was meaningful only as a means to satiate the quest for status, which in turn, implied a class system. One economic class was isolated from another, and the wealthier also seemed enigmatic for the young. It was the dream of every young American to penetrate these stratified levels and gain wealth and status. One of the most feasible solutions would be through marriage. "The patently false but widely accepted American notion that an ambitious boy may rise to
wealth with comparative ease seemed to Dreiser a primal
cause of such crimes"^4, as the murdering of one's sweetheart
who would be an impediment to the road of success. It was
in the nineteen-twenties that in the United States the rate
of such crimes rapidly increased. Newspapers and magazines
were flooded with stories about various brutalities. At
the lower level crimes associated with passion and drownings
were common place events. These incidents were of interest
to Dreiser and he ventured to show how these crimes were
related to the American Dream of success. In his story of
crime, capture, politics and court scenes, Dreiser set a
novelistic model which was capitalized upon by later writers.
In this respect Dreiser has affinity with Petrarch and
Boccaccio as they brought changes in the epic form. Petrarch
in his poem Africa changed the theme from the soul's journey
towards its heavenly home to that of the politics of this
world. In An American Tragedy Dreiser dealing with politics
and various social implications created an epic novel. "The
fiction of Theodore Dreiser has often been praised for its
fidelity to the facts of ordinary experience, its massive
accumulation and arrangement of incidents, and its criticism
of bourgeois America."^5 Praising this aspect of Dreiser,

^4Philip L. Gerber, Theodore Dreiser (New York: Twayne Press,
1964), p.120.

^5William L. Phillips, "The Imagery of Dreiser's Novels," PM
LA, 78, No.5 (December, 1963), p. 572.
Sherman remarks "It should be clear to say that courage in
facing and veracity in reporting the facts of life are no
more characteristic of Theodore Dreiser than of John Bunyan."

The Naturalism of the early twentieth century was
leaning toward the communist wing in American politics. This
streak may be discerned in Dreiser as he turns to socialism.
He was of the belief that instead of individuals attacking
social traditions, more would be accomplished if men united
to confront them. "An American Tragedy is naturalistic
because normal social pressures make Clyde's downfall inevitable.
The reader's being led to wonder about the rightness of the
social order, is, like his doubts about the social value of
Coperwood, an activity subsequent to the aesthetic experience
of the tragedy itself. Dreiser the artist deals with things
as they are. Dreiser the socialist demonstrates the evils
of our society in a way that may lead the reader sometime to
think about correcting them." Dreiser criticizes various
abuses and writes about institutions which need reforms,
that is, the shortcomings of certain magistrates; he holds
up the mirror to hypocrisy's face and its consequences, and
snobbery which so often goes hand-in-hand with money.


7Charles C. Walcutt, *American Literary Naturalism: A Divided
Stream* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1955),
p. 211.
Dreiser started writing *An American Tragedy* in nineteen hundred and fourteen. Around this time there were a number of cases in which a pregnant sweetheart was murdered in order to accomplish a materially beneficient match. He fictionalized the famous Chester Gillette-Brown case of nineteen hundred and six. Grace's body was found in Big Moose Lake, which is in upper state, New York. Chester was the nephew of a rich owner of a skirt factory. His parents were religious missionaries. He had run away from home at the age of fourteen. After taking up a few odd jobs, he had accidentally met his uncle, who took to him, seeing a striking resemblance between Chester and his own son. The uncle gave Chester a job in his factory, where he met Grace. She belonged to a poor farming family. After Chester and Grace became lovers, she became pregnant and Chester sent her away to her parents and never bothered to answer her pleading letters, till she threatened to reveal all to his uncle. Chester, had meanwhile become more interested in Harriet, who was the daughter of a rich lawyer. Under threat, Chester agreed to meet Grace at the Tabor House in De-Buyter, from there he took her to Utica and then to Big Moose Lake, where Grace's body was found. The jury pronounced Chester to be guilty of murder in the first degree.

Through the juxtaposition of newspaper columns and thumbnail biographies Dreiser was able to in *An American Tragedy* maintain a remarkably detached, objective view of
the case, the achievement of such a feat is worth admiration. Clyde Griffiths is the son of a Methodist Evangelist, who goes from place to place, holding meetings in street corners and singing hymns to supplement the meagre family income. Clyde's mother has greater fortitude than his father and advises her children to have faith in God even in their adversities. But, Clyde thinks otherwise. He thinks that in a world where wealth is of vital importance, religious views and dependence on God are useless and unrealistic. "This contrast between the expectations of his parents, who represent the naive tradition of evangelicalism in American life (a tradition that had its manifestations in the nineteen-twenties in Billy Sunday revivalism, gospel missions, and fundamentalism of the sort made famous in the nineteen hundred and twenty five Scopes Monkey Trial) and the disappointments of Clyde, who represents the twentieth century materialistic impulse, continues throughout the rest of the book." Clyde takes up job in a posh hotel in Kansas City and is introduced to the life of luxury, glamour and extravagance. His sister runs away from home with a man who deserts her. She is pregnant and Clyde's mother needs money to maintain her, but Clyde declines to help as he had promised to buy Hortense a fur coat. The rejection of his mother's appeals in order

to use the money to seduce Hortense foreshadows his failure to stand by Roberta, later on. Later, Clyde runs away from home after a road accident in which one of his friends kills a child. He goes to Chicago and gets a job as bellhop in the Union League Club. Here by chance, he meets his uncle who is a rich businessman in Lycurgus, New York. His uncle, Samuel Griffiths offers him an opportunity to make a start in his factory and then work his way up. He is able to attain the post of manager of a department in which there are twenty five girls working. Here he sees Roberta Alden and falls in love with her. After courting her and ultimately making love to her, Clyde is introduced to the upper levels of Lycurgus society. Sondra, a girl belonging to a higher class shows interest in Clyde and evokes in him hopes of marrying her. He wants to desert Roberta but cannot as she is with child. He plans to take her rowing on a deserted lake, overturn the boat so that she drowns. At the last minute, he is unsure of his decision, but an accident makes the boat capsize. Roberta drowns and Clyde does not go to her aid, even though he knows she cannot swim. He runs away and joins his rich friends and tries to establish an alibi. But, very soon he is traced and arrested. Then start the trial and courtroom scenes. In the end Clyde is proved guilty of murder and sentenced to death. Had Dreiser presented his material simply as the
Chester case, it would have been mere newspaper reporting. However, the sheer mass of detail on Clyde's boyhood in Book I opens up the possibilities of what could happen in a given set of circumstances. Dreiser is not merely narrating the experiences of an individual, he is not merely engaged in a personal Odyssey, but is reconstructing an epic of a whole generation of American youth at a period of momentous change in their country's history, culture and outlook. He explored the social problems as well as the psychosis of contemporary America.

Dreiser made certain changes from the Gillette case in his novel. He changed the date of Roberta's pregnancy from late March to early February in order to prolong her misery and allow greater pressure on Clyde. Even the dates of the trial were shifted to an earlier date to enable Dreiser to treat artistically the theme which exposed the dishonesty and selfish motives of the lawyers. The entire murder trial becomes a means of political advancement for the District Attorney and the Coroner, hardly concerning the guilt or innocence of Clyde. We find great authenticity in Dreiser's depiction of characters who seem to be working in the interest of the public, but are really catering to their own selfish motives. The two lawyers, Belknap, who was one of Clyde's lawyers and the District Attorney, Mason, are both competing for the same office. Therefore, Mason, is in a way campaigning in court and Clyde's being sentenced
to death will pave the way for his political victory.

In the manner of the Iliad, An American Tragedy pictures not only man's private struggles, but also a whole phase of man's political and social life.

Mason's political opportunism is a hinderance to justice, Drieser seems to be saying that the truth is often overlooked in passing judgements. Legally, Clyde is not guilty. The jury does not know the truth of what exactly happened as there was no eye-witness. They presume his guilt on the basis of certain clues and prove him legally at fault. McMillan, who Clyde confides in, knows the truth and finds Clyde morally guilty, but being ignorant of the law he declines to help Clyde prove his legal innocence. "Yet both the jury and McMillan seize upon Clyde's clear cut moral guilt to find him legally guilty, as one ignores the law and the other the truth. Clyde's legal guilt thus contains the major theme that the complexities of human desire and the ambiguities of moral responsibility cannot be adequately understood by a society which judges men on the basis of moral expectations and absolutes." 9

Not only is there injustice, there are different standards of justice for the rich and different for the poor. "While

Clyde and Roberta, being poor, have their lives stripped naked to the public glare, the Finchleys can escape in anonymity to Narragansett; Sondra, through the influence of wealth and power, remains known only as 'Miss X'; she is shielded from the newspapers, played down by the trial attorneys. Notwithstanding the distribution of guilt among the many, back of the scenes, powerful forces, both economic and political, are at work determining who shall be exposed, who protected - and money and position are the major determinants.¹⁰ Thus, we see that Dreiser, presents details of the trial and the various forces operating present the corrupt legal system, the functioning of law and the double standards within the system. The novel being based on the famous Gillette case rises far above a mere enumeration of facts to enter into the realm of epic universality by a depiction of the legal functioning. Socio-political and socio-economic problems have been tackled with rare skill and effectiveness. Besides, being a nationalist, Dreiser is also a universalist in the sense that these problems are equally prevalent in other parts of the world. "Only in the melodramatic trial, which captures his imagination in much the same way that trials fascinated Mark Twain, do we get anything like the minute

¹⁰ Philip L. Gerber, p. 144.
verisimilitude for which Dreiser has been admired."¹¹ Dealing with such vital issues gives the novel an amplitude and inclusiveness; an epic work should have the ability to deal with many sides of life.

Dreiser blames man for the evil self-interest which decides the fate of man. He asserts that these motives are as evil and criminal as the actual act of crime. Although he includes theology in his material to achieve amplitude so necessary for the epic writer, he implies that even religion does not offer a solution as it is shown shallow and meaningless. A typical scene in a church in Lycurgus is a "semi-religious, semi-social and semi-emotional affair. Here the adults gossip and the youngsters flirt and there is no sanctity left. In the novel, religion is represented as elusive and deceives those who are blind to the realities of life. Both Mrs. Elvira Griffiths and McMillan are unaware of the attractions of wealth and status. Religion has much to say of faith in God and destiny in the hands of Providence, but cannot satisfy hunger and want. It is the failure of religion to enforce


¹² Theodore Dreiser, An American Tragedy (New York: The Modern Library, Random House Inc, 1956), pp. 222-223. All other quotations from the novel are from this edition and will be indicated by the initials AAT, and a page number in parentheses.
goodness that is responsible for a large portion of evil present in society. It is not one man's struggle, it is against all evils, metaphysical dogmas and anti-human prejudices. Dreiser depicts the helplessness of the poor as when Clyde's parents face their material problems with the pious exclamation, "God will show the way" (AAT, p. 18). Dreiser has power and amplitude as he has focussed his attention on the ever widening awareness of raw youth and also a large area of human spirit and has shown great skill in displaying differing temperaments.

The fact that Clyde's murder trial takes place at a time when elections are to be held shortly in that district is just a matter of chance. The area where he is tried is one of the most conservative, and this again is a matter of chance. All along, in the novel, we see the role of chance; Clyde's meeting with his uncle, his being attracted to Roberta with her particular family background, his meeting with her on the lake, his meeting with Sondra and Sondra's refusal to marry till she comes of age all indicate the element of chance. The vital role played by chance to further the action of the plot is reminiscent of Fielding's Tom Jones. Chance factors allow changes in the outer environment of Clyde and interacting with inner desires allow the seeds of murderous thoughts to germinate. Dreiser laid stress on biological factors also. The emphasis on hereditary or biological factors is
brought out by Dreiser's use of words like "chemisms" and "psychic sex scars." "Clyde is shown worked by, or part of a biological reaction that is as natural, impersonal, and resistless as the combination of hydrogen and oxygen—in Dreiser's artless art the word "chemistry" is a conscious and effective choice,.... Clyde is more driven by sex than are other men because of a chance arrangement in his body chemistry; without the protection of chance event or disposition of other elements in his makeup he will be led outside the social pale in search of sexual satisfaction. No force exists to prevent this from happening, once the reaction has started, any more than one exists to halt molecular combination." \(^{13}\) Dreiser believed that although natural sources, "whether biological or social, were the source of racial progress, they often crushed the individual within their mechanistic processes."\(^{14}\) From the beginning of the novel we are made aware of the influences of early experiences as factors contributing to the inflexible mind of a criminal. "Did anybody ever give a more exact,


penetrating and dramatic account of how the idea of crime can invade a mind and gradually anesthetize the whole moral system of the criminal? This insight into the working of the human mind gives the novel a deep psychological level as he deals with suppressed motives leading to the brewing of crime. This is reminiscent of ancient epic writers like Statius and of Dante who dealt with wide range of human motives and feelings in The Divine Comedy and The Thebaid. The scenes which show us the functioning of Clyde's mind reveal Dreiser as an expert psychologist. An American Tragedy represents the materialistic world of the early twentieth century to which people were exposed and its effect on their mind. In the words of Pizer, Dreiser is, "a subtle fictional craftsman creating out of the imagined concrete details of a life an evocative image of the complex texture of that life." The scene at the end of the book between Clyde and McMillan is truly an epic scene. Michaud calls it "worthy of Dostoievski."

17 Regis Michaud, p. 120.
However, *An American Tragedy* is much more than a murder trial with its legal, moral and psychological implications. It is specifically about America. Dreiser's references to automobiles, movies, dancing and popular music imprints a sense of the twenties in the mind of the reader. Dreiser was the first American novelist to show men, boys, girls and women in the process of earning a living under industrialism. Warren says that apart from the echo of Dreiser's personal struggle "We also feel, in this book, the burden of a historical moment, the moment of the Great Boom which climaxed the period from Grant to Coolidge, the half century in which the new America of industry and finance capitalism was hardening into shape and its secret forces were emerging to dominate all life." The double relation of epic to history on the one hand and to everyday reality, on the other, emphasizes two of its most important original functions. Like *Don Quixote*, *Joseph Andrews* and *Tom Jones*, *An American Tragedy* is large scale. They are all epics in the sense of being expansive, rambling works. They are masterpieces both of sustained narrative and of the art of digression. Becker says that "just as Henry Adams said that life took an extravagance

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with the railroads, Dreiser knows that he must have the
table to indicate a true extravagance, adding the
allurement of motion to the allurement of material
things. 19

Throughout the novel we are made aware as to why
for most ambitious young men belonging to middle class
families it is a tragic America. Matthiessen writes
"Dreiser's central thought in putting the word American into
his title was the overwhelming lure of money-values in our
society, more nakedly apparent than in older and more
complex social structures. And just as the flame was more
bright and compelling, so were its victims drawn to it
more helplessly. 20 As regards the wide disparity between
the economic groups in America, Clyde discovers that, "the
lines of demarcation and stratification between the rich
and the poor in Lycurgus was as sharp as though cut by a
knife or divided by a high wall" (AAT, pp. 274-75). High
society is revealed before Clyde as a world," where quite
everyone who was anything at all knew everyone else, the
state of one's purse was as much, and in some instances
even more, considered than one's social connections. For

19 George J. Becker, p.123.

20 Quoted by Charles Shapiro, Theodore Dreiser: Our Bitter
Patriot (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Univ. Press,1962),
p. 91.
these local families of distinction were convinced that not only one's family but one's wealth was the be-all and end all of every happy union meant to include social security" (AAT, p. 394). Even socially secure families experience the same fears as those experienced by the lower social classes. After the murder we realize that Samuel Griffiths and his wife are more concerned with their loss of social status than with Clyde's fate. The wealthy Griffiths are angered and feel insulted. Gilbert says that because of the deed of the "little beast" their family name has been socially marred and has "cost them their position here in Lycurgus society" (AAT, p. 632). They are indifferent to Clyde and "would like most of all to blockade the door of their inner sanctum and abandon Clyde to his fate, but social pressure demands that they make at least the gesture of obtaining an attorney for him. They are paradoxically obliged to defend the boy and to cut themselves off from him simultaneously."21 Thus Dreiser's characters are not made to live in a social vacuum which was usual in the works of older novelists. In An American Tragedy Dreiser explores the phenomenon of individuals being shaped by society. Clyde's epic struggle is directly related to his age, to the system of beliefs and to the way of life it bears witness to.

21 Philip L. Gerber, p. 143.
The contrast between Asa Griffiths' family and Samuel's is large, economic and social, but the children in both families feel the need to rebel. In the poor family the children flee, Esta elopes and comes back in disgrace, whereas Clyde does not return. In the wealthy home the children grow up into class conscious snobs who lack the good sense of their father. Just as Moby Dick is the story of man asserting his will against natural forces, the result of the revolt against natural environment in Ahab's case and against the social environment in Clyde's case is the same—fatal. The poor Griffiths portray a middle class moralism, even the rich Griffiths are not devoid of a certain moral standard. The effect of both moralities is seen working on Clyde. The morality of his parents drives him away from home, but the morality of the rich Griffiths places impediments to his social acceptance revealing a rigid social hierarchy. Thus, Dreiser portrays a complete picture of the existing social classes in America. Each class has its fears, particular moral standards and between them constitute the American social hierarchy.

This theme of social hierarchy is further elaborated by the similarities shown between the Green-Davidson Hotel and the factory of Samuel Griffiths. Even though the Hotel allows licentiousness and the factory adheres to rigid rules, yet they both function to serve primarily to make the wealthy wealthier and more powerful. Clyde believes that the Hotel
is a "Glorious.... institution." The hotel represents a microcosm of American society. The hypocrisy, corruption and deceit prevalent in the hotel show Clyde that this is the way to gain success and wealth. In the hotel there is an accepted hierarchy according to which the tips are to be shared. By contrast, the factory adheres to rigid discipline and here there is no way of making easy extra money. This proves more dangerous for Clyde. Here any kind of sexual laxity would prove offensive, at the hotel, sexual deceit, homo-sexuality, and the visiting of whores was accepted. Here sex was more a symbol of achievement, part of the American Dream and not an expression of love. Dreiser has blatantly dealt with sex as aspect of his characters and story to show how it has been cheapened. However, "Even sexuality, which often moves through Dreiser's world like a thick fog, is here diminished and suppressed through the power of social will.... Apart from an interval with Roberta in which he yields to her maternal solicitude, Clyde's sexuality never breaks out as an irresistible force; it is always at the service of his fears, his petty snobbism, and his calculations."22 An American Tragedy is about man

in society and "its earth and sun are not agents of renewal but rather that unchanging destructive, social matrix out of which come not one but many lost generations, so long as wealth, class, desire, and weakness and strength are part of our lives."\(^{23}\)

An American Tragedy is "also a kind of parable of our national experience."\(^ {24}\) As a major epic of the American imagination, it is comparable to The Great Gatsby. Like the latter it seeks, "to deflate the American dream of success by showing how directly that dream is related to socially destructive acts."\(^ {25}\) Like Hemingway, Dreiser presents before us the deceit and catastrophic effect of such dreams as the faith in moral abstractions and the illusions related to the gaining of wealth via matrimony. In keeping with the epic tradition we find An American Tragedy gigantic in scope and ambition.

Clyde's end is not meant to be the end of the American tragedy. The continual process of tragedy is implied in the similarity in the phrasings of the prologue and the epilogue. An American Tragedy begins in "the commercial

\(^{23}\) Donald Pizer, The Novels of Theodore Dreiser, p. 280.

\(^{24}\) Irving Howe, p. 146.

\(^{25}\) James Lundquist, p. 87.
heart of an American city" (AAT, p. 15), and we are introduced to a family of street preachers. In the end, Mrs. Griffiths with Russell, Esta's illegitimate son by her side, "a dark-haired child, in some ways resembling Clyde, who, even at this early age, as Clyde had been before him, was being instructed in those fundamental verities which had irritated Clyde in his own childhood" (AAT, p. 670). Russell is introduced to us, like Clyde, on a beautiful summer's day, but who knows he too may share Clyde's fate and may be tried on "another miserable, black and weary night. And then another miserable gray and wintry morning" (AAT, p. 715). It is not specified that the same tragedy will befall Russell, but, Dreiser implies that such tragedies will continue as long as Americans continue to hanker after riches. Neither Mrs. Griffiths nor society really understands how and why Clyde's fate was such. Thus, such crimes and tragedies continue to be committed. Such tragedies occur commonly in America, and express an "archetypal American dilemma" in society where wealth is so attractive a social symbol and the stratification so rigid. Pointing this out, Dreiser achieves, particularity and universality at the same point, achieving an important epic dimension, which has been stated by Tillyard, "It is when

26 Donald Pizer, The Novels of Theodore Dreiser, p. 203.
the tragic intensity is included in the group consciousness of an age, when the narrowly timeless is combined with the variegatedly temporal, that the epic attains its full growth.*27

Another means by which Dreiser conveys tragedy and suffering is via the complex pattern of imagery in An American Tragedy. The imagery evokes a sense of the agonies of hell. There is "a voice from the lowest hell to which a soul can descend - complete and unutterable despair" (AAT,p. 814), the thought of another "crawling up and down his cell on his hands and knees, kissing the floor, licking the feet of a brass Christ on a cross" (AAT,p.828), a prisoner's unsuccessful attempt at suicide, in an atmosphere saturated with "curses - foul or coarse jests - or tales addressed to all - or ribald laughter - or sighings and groanings" (AAT, p.825).

Dreiser presents vivid images of hell and damnation through traditional religious imagery. The best example of this is found in Dreiser's comment upon the prison scene that "at its best (it) was a kind of inferno of mental ills - above which - as above Dante's might have been written - 'abandon hope - ye who enter here'" (AAT,p. 824). The imagery used to describe "the shrinking room" of the shirt factory where

Clyde works evokes a vision of hell. It is underground reached by "descending a flight of steps at the end of the third hall "(AAT, p. 205). The hugeness of the "enormous basement" is emphasized by referring to things moving in it "from east to west" and from "north to south" and not from wall to wall. It is described as being uniformly white, "four long rows of incandescent lamps,... (are) row after row of porcelain tubs on troughs, lengthwise of the room, and end to end" (AAT,p.205). The room is filled with the white material from which collars are made, the "webs" being processed. The production room is full of steam, and the workers are "clothed only in armless undershirts, a pair of old trousers... and with canvas - topped and rubber-soled sneakers on their bare feet" (AAT,p. 206), who working silently amidst the steam seem ghostly. The place's deathly atmosphere is further accentuated by narrating the work that goes on:

for the length of this room, all of a hundred and fifty feet in length, were enormous drying racks or moving skeleton platforms, boxed, top and bottom and sides, with hot steam pipes, between which on rolls, but festooned in such a fashion as to take advantage of these pipes, above, below and on either side, were more of these webs, but unwound and wet and draped as described, yet moving along slowly on these rolls.... This movement... was accompanied by an enormous rattle and clatter of ratchet arms which automatically shook and moved these lengths of cloth forward

in the centre of the room were enormous whirling separators or dryers (AAT,p.205).
In 1921, Dreiser wrote about the use of Dantean imagery to express subjective states, "here (Manhattan) are also Hell, Heaven and Purgatory of the Soul, which Dante would have found.... He would have gone beyond mere realistic description and shown us the half-monstrous proportions of our city like a giant sphinx with wings."28 Related to the images of Hell is the imagery of death. At the Big Bittern, the death imagery conveys death as a friend and comforter:

And as they glided into this, (a small bay at the south end the lake), this still dark water seemed to grip Clyde as nothing here or anywhere before this ever had - to change his mood. For once here he seemed to be fairly pulled or lured along into it, and having encircled its quiet banks, to be drifting, drifting - in endless space where was no end of anything - no plots - no plans - no practical problems to be solved - nothing. This insidious beauty of this place! Truly, "it seemed to mock him" (AAT, p.527).

"Dreiser combines narrative elements and chains of imagery that produce what Warren has called 'the movie in our heads', an unforgettable progress of unfolding scenes."29 The image of the boy Clyde looking up at the 'tall walls' of the world is the key image of the novel


29 James Lundquist, p. 103.
conveying Clyde’s ambitions and desires. Dreiser after giving us a close look at Clyde in Book I and II, reverts his camera to a distance in Book III from where we are presented with a panoramic view "with all the entailed questions of psychological veracity and subtlety, of symbolic densities and rhythmic complexities" bestowing upon the work epic verisimilitude.

The imagery of *The Arabian Nights* is reflected throughout Dreiser’s novel, directly or indirectly. As a twelve year old boy, Clyde is shown to have "a certain emotionalism and exotic sense of romance" (AAT, p. 22). At Clyde’s trial, his Defence Attorney explains his attraction to Sondra as "A case of the *Arabian Nights*, of the enscorcelled and the enscorcellor......................
A case of being bewitched,... by beauty, love, wealth, by things that we sometimes think we want very, very much, and cannot ever have" (AAT, p. 734). In the death house Clyde is given a copy of *The Arabian Nights* by a man condemned to death. Dreiser also mentions Alnashar at one point "a close reading of Dreiser's novels reveals complex patterns of imagery, sometimes the result, apparently, of conscious manipulation and sometimes of an unconscious compulsion to say things in particular way.... and they contribute to the

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ultimately rich effect of Dreiser's novels.  

An American Tragedy is a novel of artistry, in its theme, style and structure, "The action of the novel moves like a series of waves, each surging forward to a peak of tension and then receding into quietness, and each, after the first one reenacting in a more complex and perilous fashion the material of its predecessor. Clyde in Kansas City, Clyde in Chicago, Clyde alone with Roberta in Lycurgus, Clyde on the edge of the wealthy set in Lycurgus - these divisions form the novel until the point where Roberta is drowned, and each of them acts as a reflector on the other, so that there is a mounting series of anticipations and variations upon the central theme."  

Through the experiences of Clyde, Dreiser is able to outline a whole background of culture and like The Aeneid, An American Tragedy speaks fully for its age. The novel is economically structured, every event is related to the central crisis of Roberta's murder. Book I deals with Clyde's childhood and environment, Book II is about Clyde's life is Lycurgus, his affair with Roberta, his hankering after Sondra ends with Roberta's death, Book III deals with

32 Irving Howe, p. 149.
the trial and execution of Clyde. By making the last two books of the novel specifically the story of the murder, Dreiser is able to have his action single and unified. Doubtless this unity is characteristic of tragedy, which can occur in a naturalist's world and give a principle of organization to what might otherwise be a dreary, meaningless, and tangled life.\textsuperscript{33} An American Tragedy like The Aeneid and Paradise Lost contains plots that lead with logic to the climax.

The language of the novel is enriched by imagery, rhythmic diction and use of psychological dilemma to express Clyde's pain and anxiety. As time passes after Roberta's pregnancy, Clyde has still not been able to find a solution to the problem, resulting in a psychological dilemma. In order to describe his mental agony, Dreiser says that Clyde's face reveals, "a nervous and almost deranged look - never so definite or powerful at any time before in his life - the border-line look between reason and unreason" (AAT, p. 487). Clyde's anxiety is conveyed through the technique of indirect discourse which allows us to share his pain and frustration. For example, when Roberta becomes pregnant, Dreiser presents Clyde's fear that Roberta will demand marriage, "But that would be wild of Roberta to expect him to do that. He would

not do it. He could not do it.

One thing was certain. He must get her out of this. He must! But how? How?" (AAT,p.415). In the climatic portions of Book II and III and especially when Clyde faces death, this technique is extensively used since it aptly portrays the depths of Clyde's feelings and makes the reader identify with those feelings. This identification is made possible by the use of rhythmic prose, and a powerful poetic style, especially in the passages narrating the loneliness of Clyde and his intense desire for better times. In the words of Irving Howe, "Dreiser surrenders himself to the emotional life of his figures, not by passing over their delusions or failures but by casting all his energy into evoking the fullness of their experience. And how large, finally, is the sense of the human that smolders in this book!... Dreiser's passion for detail is a passion for his subject; a passion for the suffering of men. As we are touched by Clyde's early affection for Roberta, so later we participate vicariously in his desperation to be rid of her. We share this desire with some shame, but unless we count ourselves among the hopelessly pure, we share it."34

The epic effect in An American Tragedy is also achieved through the inclusiveness and symbolic effect of the scenes and various institutions. The novel begins and

34 Irving Howe, p.151.
ends with street preaching scenes that emphasize the conflict between wealth and religion. Another use of subtle symbolism occurs in the death row section where Nicholson, a lawyer who is prosecuted for killing his client to gain control of his property, presents two books Robinson Crusoe and The Arabian Nights to Clyde. Like Crusoe, Clyde too is isolated and like Alladin, he is entranced by wealth and splendour.

A not so subtle symbol is the bird. When Clyde comes for the second time to Big Bittern he sees from the train a flock of birds flying toward the distant woods. This is of symbolic significance as the woods they fly to is Big Bittern suggesting Clyde's flight and inevitable fate "As Clyde's fate is inextricably connected with Sondra, so is the bird itself." Sondra writes to Clyde that one morning when she was riding "a bird flew right up under Dickey's heels" (AAT, p. 470). At Twelfth Lake, Sondra was "poised bird like" (AAT, p. 482) in flight and a little later we read of her coming and going "like a bright coloured bird" (AAT, p. 590). Clyde is followed throughout the novel by the symbolic bird. In Book I before the car accident in Kansas City, we find "a flock of crows rose and winged direct toward a distant wood" (AAT, p. 139). Later Clyde is

haunted by the wier-wier bird. When he first sees it, it was flying "into some darker recess within the woods" (AAT, pp. 494-95). After the murder, just before Clyde is arrested, he wonders whether to run or not, "the while vesper sparrows and woodfinches sang" (AAT, p. 597). The significance of the various references to birds has been aptly summed up in the words of Lehan, "The bird, of course, is a romantic symbol, a visitor from a transcendent realm, its song the voice of nature itself, Dreiser adds a gothic quality to the symbol, making the bird reflect a demonic element inherent in both nature and in Clyde's 'darker' self, its cries anticipating Roberta's death cry and Clyde's end."

After being convicted by the jury Clyde is put in the death house which is a symbol of modern society. It follows rigid rules and all the condemned seem to share their heart rending terror of death:

There was a system—a horrible routine system—as long since he had come to feel it to be so. It was iron. It moved automatically like a machine without the aid or the hearts of men. These guards! They with their letters, their enquiries, their pleasant and yet really hollow words, their trips to do little favors, or to take the men in and out of

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the yard or to their baths - they were iron, too - mere machines, automatons, pushing and pushing and yet restraining and restraining one - within these walls, as ready to kill as to favor in case of opposition - but pushing, pushing, pushing - always toward that little door over there, from which there was no escape - no escape - just on and on - until at last they would push him through it never to return!" (AAT, p. 866).

The life at prison with all its restrictions may be compared to Clyde's life in a society which imposed restrictions. The door of the electrocution chamber is ironically similar to the door of the mission of Clyde's childhood days. Thus we see that most of the scenes and actions are symbolic and give the novel its epic density.

To the theme of the American Dream is related the theme of the Golden West. By the end of the nineteenth century, the frontier had disappeared and its place was taken by the alluring cities as a symbol of quest. However, in An American Tragedy the western forest remains as a figurative aspect of the quest. Dreiser's vision of the West was like Thoreau's who believed in exploration of the true West which lies in each man's soul. Clyde travels eastward, from Kansas City, to Chicago and Lycurgus. It is a metaphoric journey into the forests seeking the West within himself, but his attempt to make his dream come true is fatal, "The insidious beauty of this place! Truly, it seemed to mock him - this strangeness - this dark pool, surrounded
on all sides by those wonderful, soft, fir trees. And the water itself looking like a huge, black pearl cast by some mighty hand, in anger possibly, in sport or phantasy may be, into the bosom of this valley of dark, green plush - and which seemed bottomless as he gazed into it.

And yet, what did it all suggest so strongly? Death! Death! More definitely than anything he had seen before. Death!"(AAT, p. 527).

Clyde's search for wealth is reminiscent of Jason's quest for the golden Fleece in Appollonius Rhodius's *Argonautica*. We find Clyde fulfilling the action of the epic hero which almost invariably deals with a journey or longing for some far off shores. 37 In Clyde's epic quest we find a union of the nineteenth century hero's search and the twentieth century's as we find Clyde journeys the "Croesus... in the east", in search of wealth and at the same time he moves Westward toward the forest. As he begins his quest in the world of Green-Davidson and enters the "green-marbled doorway" he sees it as "a veritable forest of black marble"(AAT, p. 41-42). Even at the drive before the accident we are made aware of the Westward movement as the boys meet at "West Prospects street," and after picking up the girls, they go on the

"West Bluff Road." After the accident Clyde flees "south and west" his flight ends in Lycurgus where the forests seems to be all around "through the many open windows... could be seen the Mohawk swirling and rippling, its banks carpeted with green grass and in places shaded by trees" (AAT, p.261). A frontier touch is given to the eastern forest in the "annual inter-city automobile floral parade and contest." It is here that Clyde saw "once more the girl who had so infatuated him on sight, obviously breasting a white rose-surfaced stream and guiding her craft with a paddle covered with yellow daffodils - a floral representation of some Indian legend in connection with the Mohawk River. With her dark hair filleted Indian fashion with a yellow feather and brown-eyed susans.... How marvellous to be of that world" (AAT, p.260). Sondra is at once Clyde's dream of the wealth of the Eastern world as well as a kind of angel of the forest.

Writing about the quest, Campbell says, "As the archetypal American hero, Clyde's quest takes him into the forest where his activities define the symbolic nature of his story." Clyde had always desired to take Sondra to Twelfth Lake. He does so and there they ride "along a wonderful woodland trail through the forests to the west which led to Inspiration Point" (AAT, p.481). Dreiser depicts

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the irony of riches displayed against a frontier background when the high society people go camping. The campsite is "like an Indian village" (AAT,p. 591), but the area is "as smooth as any well-kept lawn" (AAT,p. 591). This is in contrast to what camping really is; where everyone lives in tents, hunts, collects food and cooks. Here there are cooks to do the cooking and there are servants for other work as well. The main pastime of the campers are flirting, merry-making and singing in "bright-coloured bathing suits and silken beach robes (AAT, p. 593). The camping excursion takes place after the boat episode and therefore Clyde is unable to enjoy it. Instead he is haunted by the thought of being discovered and thinks of the woods as a means of concealment. When he is caught, Dreiser describes Clyde and the officers leaving the forest, "And so it was that they walked on together now in silence, the tall shafts of the trees in the approaching dusk make solemn aisles through which they proceeded as might worshipers along the nave of a cathedral, the eyes of Clyde contemplating nervously and wearily a smear of livid red still visible through the trees to the west" (AAT,p. 600). Throughout his trial Clyde's fantasies revolve around the idea of fleeing to the forest which is seen as a haven of security and shelter.

The woods have yet another role to play in the novel. Clyde says that he wished to take Roberta to the North Woods in order to request her to release him, whereas he has
actually taken her there with the thought of murder. The long section from Roberta's discovery of her pregnancy till her death in the woods is one of the most tragic sequences in modern American literature. An American Tragedy has also been compared to Othello; "It resembles the dramatic irony of Othello in its effect. In both works we experience the pain and frustration of observing a man and woman go to their deaths despite their relative innocence - the innocence of ignorance, youth, poverty, and fear in Clyde's and Roberta's case - and despite the fact that a single ray of knowledge might save them. So we are fully aware of the destruction facing Clyde and Roberta while they themselves struggle and hope."39 The scenes between Clyde and Roberta are pathetic conveying the tragic prospect of a relationship where love has been replaced by contempt, pity and revulsion. When Roberta says, "To think that all our love for each other should have come to this" (AAT, p. 454), we recall Adam and Eve of the books IX and X of Milton's Paradise Lost. They, too, have suffered and fallen in the eyes of God and have not yet experienced the marvel and divine favour of God. In An American Tragedy, Dreiser "operates imaginatively in the American Eden, ... presents what is perhaps the most explicit depiction of the corrupted Garden," embodying "the conflict at the heart of

American culture between the romantic and realistic frames of mind. This makes *An American Tragedy* the mouthpiece of a large number of people, granting it an important epic dimension which has been stated by Tillyard, "What most makes the epic kind, is a communal or choric quality." An American Tragedy is a deep psychological study of a murderer, in the tradition of Virgil who gave the epic psychological depth. According to Freud the character and nature of an adult is a result of childhood environment and influences. "When, through some physical or environmental handicap, real or imagined, a proud and sensitive child is made to suffer chagrin and embarrassment, his self-love, his ego, his vanity—call it what you will—comes to his defense, as an anodyne to his hurt, and directs his energies toward the accomplishment of some high aim." We are told that at school Clyde is "looked down upon" (AAT,p. 23), and mocked at by other children, and for Clyde "It was painful... now to think that his clothes were not right; that he was not as handsome as he might be, not as

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40 Charles L. Campbell, p. 159.
41 E.M.W. Tillyard, p. 15.
interesting. What a wretched thing it was to be born poor and not to have any one to do anything for you and not be able to do so very much for yourself!" (AAT, p. 27). Dreiser's interpretation of Clyde being influenced and controlled by a psychic wound is vital to his portrayal of Clyde's character. According to the first draft of An American Tragedy in school at Kansas City, Clyde's embarrassment at his parents' street preaching leads him to tell a lie regarding his father's vocation. On the truth being discovered, a fight ensues and one of the boys strikes Clyde who does not hit back. Dreiser points out the importance of this incident as:

A deep psychic wound had been delivered which was destined to fester and fomify in strange ways later on. It convinced him of the material, even the spiritual insignificance of that which his parents did. They seemed, if anything more hopeless and incompetent than ever. It sickened him of this school, and this type of school work, as well as of the type of prosperous youth of better physique perhaps who could thus bluster and brag and insult and show off. At the same time, and by some psychic process of inversion, it gave him a greater awe of wealth and comfort, or at least a keener perception of the protective quality of a high social position in life. 43

The final draft of An American Tragedy reflects the same ideas and Clyde is depicted a lonely and unsatisfied child. Various episodes present a sequence of events suggestive of the abject conditions of a growing and silently rebellious child. Clyde's childhood is spent in poverty and want. Other

43Donald Pizer, The Novels of Theodore Dreiser, p. 214.
factors which have an impact on him are Esta's pregnancy and the demands made on him for financial help. He always "dreams" of a better life when he will attain wealth and position "if only he had a better collar, a nicer shirt, finer shoes, a good suit, a swell overcoat like some boys had!" (AAT, p. 28). He hated the stinking atmosphere of Beckel Street; "the whole neighbourhood was so dreary and run-down that he hated the thought of living in it" (AAT, p. 25). In the words of Gerber, "Clyde even at the age of twelve rebels instinctively from the mission environment. His humiliation deepens each time he is dragged through the street to sing and lecture with the mission group."44 The book is an analysis of a child's mind on an epic scale. Clyde tries to overcome his destiny, he is involved in life's immense possibilities, in spite of the darkness. It is the struggle and involvement that is important. Like a true epic hero he rebels against his elders, against his society. However, it is essential for the hero to go through these experiences of pain and isolation, in order to emerge, an epic character, he is heroic in his loneliness. After breaking away from the family and working in the hotel, "the world for him had

44 Philip L. Gerber, p. 135.
changed entirely" (AAT, p. 52). Working as assistant clerk at a drugstore soda fountain, he realizes the lure of the new world of money and glamour." You bet he would get out of that now, he would work and save his money and be somebody. Decidedly this simple and yet idyllic compound of the commonplace had all the luster and wonder of a spiritual transfiguration, the true mirage of the lost and thirsting and seeking victim of the desert" (AAT, p. 38).

Throughout Book I of An American Tragedy we find Clyde torn between his moral upbringing and his material ambitions. It is Dreiser's genius that allows Clyde to have a virtuous early environment. In these surroundings Clyde is shown discontented and restless. It is the sharp focus on the central figure in his massive isolation that gives the great epics their grandeur and universality. We all become a part of the saga. It is not only the central character who makes the heroic impression, it is also the vast exercise of will that shapes An American Tragedy. Clyde cannot understand why his parents cannot be like other people. Working at the Green-Davidson hotel, he feels, "What a realization of Paradise!" (AAT, p. 49). He realizes that those people who do not follow the moral codes which his parents preach do not suffer because of it. His desires are directly opposed to the beliefs and values of his parents. "He is overawed by the hotel, bored and embarrassed by his family, resentful of his status, suprised into gratitude
for the notice of his betters, and eventually invited passively to withdraw from the crime his victim has all but suicidally collaborated with him in committing. Just as Ahab is representative of all people who are tragically great, Clyde is representative of all men who have no inner direction, who succumb to the dominant forces of society and who are willing to conform at the expense of moral uprightness. Being typical of a class, Clyde may be called an epic character. Clyde is not the only character in the novel who longs for wealth and luxury. There is Hortense who stands longingly before a store window looking at a fur jacket. Then there is Esta revolting against the drabness of existence and running off with an actor. All are poor people lured towards brightness.

Dreiser's key word in describing the character of Clyde in Book I is "sensitive." He uses the term repeatedly, even when referring to his physical characteristics. His hands are "thin and sensitive and graceful" (AAT, p. 397). Clyde we are told had a more "vivid and intelligent imagination" (AAT, p. 22) than his parents, but took his father's "sensitive and therefore highly

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emotional* (AAT, p. 22) nature. It is Clyde's sensitive nature that gives his character a tragic dimension. He is painfully aware and desperately desires a better life. F.O. Matthiessen is right in asserting that the main reason why Dreiser can make us feel touched by Clyde's feelings is that he is aware of how pathetic they really are. Dreiser elicits our sense of identification, for we understand Clyde, his sensitivity, his ambition and so we are concerned with what happens to him. Indeed Clyde's tragedy was the tragedy of the lower middle class in the America of nineteen twenties. It is through Clyde's tragedy that Dreiser bestows epic representation upon his character.

Critics who hold only society responsible for Clyde's misfortunes forget how incompetent he is. Mason refers to him as a "dunce". Dreiser repeatedly points out his thoughtlessness when referring to Clyde as having "no thought" "never had any real plan to do anything" (AAT, p. 732), "just didn't think of it" (AAT, p. 780), like Alnashar, Clyde "had a soul that was not destined to grow up. He lacked decidedly that mental clarity and inner directing application that in so many permits them to sort out from the facts and avenues of life the particular thing or things that make for their direct advancement" (AAT, p. 181). Clyde is presented to us a figure who is controlled by circumstances of various incidents along life's way. He does not rebel actively and like Hamlet his reactions to situations are impeded by a
sensitive nature and moral doubts. He responds by running away from situations to avoid responsibility when he is told about Esta's plight he is "a little sick and resentful" (AAT, p. 109), instead of being sympathetic and helpful. Irving Howe writing about Clyde's lack of assertive will says, "In his puny self he is little more than a clouded reflection of the puny world about him. His significance lies in the fact that he represents not our potential greatness but our collective smallness, the common denominator of our foolish tastes and tawdry ambitions. He is that part of ourselves in which we take no pride, but know to be a settled resident."

He further states, "Clyde embodies the nothingness at the heart of our scheme of things, the nothingness of our social aspirations." 46

Clyde is constantly confronted with dilemmas. He wishes to leave home to enjoy life, but, against this stand the teachings of his parents and his love for his mother. The uncertainty in Clyde's mind before the drowning incident, "to do and yet not do," reminds us of Hamlet's dilemma, "To be or not to be." Clyde the American dreamer is in direct contrast with his nature as a man. His wish for Sondra is "without lust, just the desire to constrain and fondle a perfect object" (AAT, p. 397). He gazes into her eyes, "as might a

46 Irving Howe, p. 147.
devotee into those of a saint" (AAT, p. 398). On the other hand, there is Roberta of "the world-old dream of all of Eve's daughters" (AAT, p. 269). Between Roberta and Sondra features Clyde's dilemma, Sondra representing the American dream and Roberta his inclinations as a man. In the course of the trial Clyde's mother argues that Clyde's crime is forgiveable as he could take the plea that "in the Garden of Eden 'the woman tempted me'?" (AAT, p. 799). However, Mrs. Griffiths, "forgets that Adam's plea was not accepted as vindication. As in the American Eden, there was a frame-up in the Garden: man was meant to fall."47

It is in the last part of the novel that the stature of Clyde is raised from a weak person to that of a calm stoic. When compared to the other prisoners he calmly accepts his fate. Clyde feels that he has not been understood as the judges "had not been tortured as he had by Roberta with her determination that he marry her and thus ruin his whole life. They had not burned with that unquenchable passion for the Sondra of his beautiful dream as he had. They had not been harassed, tortured, mocked by the ill-fate of his early life" (AAT, p. 857). There is an intense poignancy in this plea for understanding. This evokes in the reader a sense of identification with Clyde's desire and the need to be understood. It is indeed Clyde's tragedy that he has been so harshly judged without any sympathy.

47Charles L. Campbell, p. 257.
"He was alone. He had no one who believed in him. No one. He had no one, whom, in any of his troubled and tortured actions before that crime saw anything but the darkest guilt apparently.... How could they judge him, these people, all or any of them, even his own mother, when they did not know what his own mental, physical and spiritual suffering had been?" (AAT, pp. 856-857). Clyde's own mother did not understand his dream "It was as though there was an unsurmountable wall or impenetrable barrier between them, built by the lack of understanding for it was just that. She would never understand his craving for ease and luxury, for beauty, for love—his particular kind of love, that went with show, pleasure, wealth, position, his eager and immutable aspirations and desires" (AAT, p.866). Clyde's quest unlike that of the epic hero of the nineteenth century was not for knowledge, nor for the meaning of his existence, nor for his role in the cosmic sense of things, but for wealth and social class. The quality of the American Dream reveals the tawdry society, which fosters a quest for material wealth.

Dreiser further enhances the stature of Clyde by making him face death courageously. His self-honesty becomes a significant characteristic of his nature in the end and adds to his dignity. As a writer of an epic of true life, Dreiser may be compared to Tolstoy, Fielding and Balzac. His novel is vast, all-inclusive written with sincerity and devoid of all trickery. He poured everything into it - his observation of
manners, characterization of people. He revealed the true motives of men. He exposed American fiction that was suffocated by the petty bourgeois morality. He did not hesitate to write the truth. Dreiser's onslaught on his age is fundamental. He attacks the social system, in all its complexity, whatever seems to him to impede or prevent the flow of generous impulse between man and man and the exercise of natural kindliness and trust.

Ironically, although Dreiser's characters desire money, material possessions and social standing, their ultimate suffering is in their isolation from them. They are passionately motivated in their love affairs, all of which are disastrous because of the interference of psychological, socio-economic and physical factors beyond their control. Clyde is seen as a tragic, lonely figure even before his imprisonment. At his boarding house he is "lonely and hungry for companionship" (AAT, p. 220), he does not mix with the other workers as he fears the disapproval of the Griffiths, he belongs to neither of the social groups. "Before he is tentatively accepted by the upper crust, he is alone in another way, to the worker he is an employer, to the employers a worker, so both worlds are closed to him."\(^{48}\) He is unable to adjust to reality, his dreams remain an illusion and the

\(^{48}\) Strother B. Purdy, p. 260.
torture he experiences due to their non-fulfilment is his tragedy. "Clyde is indecisive like Hamlet. Like Lear he is blind to his own self. And like Othello he is uncertain of his own self-definition. He goes to his death not knowing, who he is, finding no home—even after wandering across half of the continent. Like all tragic heroes his fight ultimately must be seen as the struggle against the illusions Dreiser attacks: wealth, power, love, and, most tragically, the self."49 The most tragic part of the story is that Clyde believes there is a solution to his problems, he foolishly hopes and dreams and the reader realizes his tragic delusion. "Like Oedipus he labors under delusion, although he does not enjoy the same noble fate as his painfully symbolic drama draws to an end."50

Just as An American Tragedy is permeated with symbolic acts and characters there is also an underlying intricate network of popular myths. Clyde's ambitions have been completely shaped by the American myth of success. As a young boy he "was constantly thinking of how he might better himself, if he had a chance; places; to which he might go, things he might see, and how differently he might live, if only this, that and the other things were true." (AAT,p.22). Once Clyde

49 James Lundquist, p. 257.

50 Ibid., p. 97.
meets Sondra, then he hopes that "with a little luck... he might marry Sondra" (AAT, p. 450), and thereby attain wealth and social status.

The American myth of success spells social and material gain through marriage. Dreiser endeavoured to point out that this myth of pursuit of rich girls at the cost of girls belonging to the lower income group led to crimes. In Roberta’s case, the people of Cataroqui County believe that because of Clyde’s "desire to marry a rich girl he had most brutally assaulted and murdered a young and charming working-girl whose only fault had been that she loved him too well" (AAT, p. 616). Since Clyde has not honoured the love of Roberta, another mythic role is implied; that of the city seducer. The myth of the city seducer has greatly influenced the people of Cataroqui County, seen explicity in Roberta’s father’s response when he hears of the factors leading to her death:

And at once, born for the most part of religion, convention and a general rural suspicion of all urban life and the mystery and involuteness of its ungoldly ways, there sprang into his mind the thought of a city seducer and betrayer - some youth of means, probably, whom Roberta had met since going to Lycurgus and who had been able to seduce her by a promise of marriage which he was not willing to fulfill. And forthwith there flared up in his mind a terrible and quite uncontrollable desire for revenge upon anyone who could plot so horrible a crime as this against his daughter. The scoundrel! The raper! The murderer!(AAT, p. 556).
Throughout the trial Roberta is referred to as a "poor little thing" compared to Clyde who has attained a good social status.

The third myth is associated with Clyde as a rich man who deserts his sweetheart. "Clyde is therefore caught between the expectations raised by the absolute morality of these mythic roles; if he is not a genuine nobleman, he must be a city seducer. And so the mythic nature of American life comes full ironic circle in the career of Clyde. Aspiring to high estate but not achieving it, he nevertheless finds himself judged and condemned on the basis of the moral absolutes of the role of the sophisticated and wealthy nobleman which he had sought but not gained." 51

The lawyers who are hired to defend Clyde realize that the law is an expression mainly of the social prejudices, and in order to save Clyde from a harsh judgement they will have to obliterate the myth of the city seducer. He is advised to go regularly to church so that his nobility may be proved and as Jepson remarks it, "ought to appeal to these fellows around here, these religious and moral people, oughn't it?" (AAT,p. 657). The trial is thus mainly a competition between the generous nobleman who had through change of heart, decided to marry the poor girl, and the city seducer myth.

51Donald Pizer, The Novels of Theodore Dreiser, p. 267.
In *An American Tragedy* we find that various myths are unfolded to present a comprehensive picture of the twentieth century American scene and its society. "Dreiser unites the nineteenth and twentieth century versions of the American myth in a comprehensive symbolic vision and proceeds from this to a major statement about American life." Lundquist writes that Dreiser's "technique, his style, and the essentially sentimental power of his imagination work together to produce in *An American Tragedy* a narrative that is at once a folk-epic and a complex work of something other than art - a 'psychology of reality,'" perhaps or a psychology of tragic reality. In a sense Dreiser's epic hero conforms to the archetype having mythic significance for humanity as a whole, although he does not attain full tragic dignity. His very journey from infancy to adolescence affording a panoramic view of life is an epic journey to self-discovery or self-definition.

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52 Charles L. Campbell, p. 251.

53 James Lundquist, p. 104.