AMERICAN TRAGEDIES OF DEHUMANIZATION
A REEVALUATION OF THE SOCIAL PROTEST NOVEL

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ABSTRACT

This thesis attempts to counter some of the major criticisms of novels from the first half of the 20th Century which are written in the tradition of American Literary Naturalism. Focusing on Theodore Dreiser’s *An American Tragedy* and Richard Wright’s *Native Son*, I address the form and structure of these novels, including their use of language, characters, and perspective, and then move on to discuss some of the philosophical implications of these novels and their potential to motivate reform. Finally, I discuss the legacy of social protest novels by examining John Steinbeck’s *East of Eden*. 
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Introduction

Politics and the Era of the Protest Novel

“The American Dream” is a powerful figure in our nation’s conception of identity, our “imagined community” as Benedict Anderson describes it. It is a collective dream, the sharing of which provides one of the most fundamental underpinnings of our capitalist democracy. To question that dream, to criticize its virtue or its efficacy, to put it on trial and accuse it of failure is a move that positions the critic as an outsider to society. This creates both an opportunity and a liability for the author of protest literature: by positioning his or her work as a critique of not only a limited social problem but also the system which breeds, permits, or fails to offer a chance of resolving said problem, the author gains the emotional resonance and controversy inherent to a political and philosophical attack on the system. In short, protest literature is seen as sacrificing the political efficacy of more moderate critiques in favor of galvanic emotional force.

Likewise, protest fiction has long faced intense aesthetic scrutiny, as a large number of critics have raised complaints regarding the form of protest novels, exposés, and writings in the naturalist vein. These critiques are not wholly without merit. Works in the protest and naturalist genres tend to rely on exaggerated depictions of hopeless scenarios which leave the reader without much in the way of plot or characters that they can relate to their own lives. And there lies the greatest criticism of these genres, that they are not lifelike; their characters are too circumscribed by forces beyond their control, too deprived of agency to strike the reader as being real. Or, as June Howard put it, they are “sympathetic” but lack the kind of humanity with which we could empathize (Howard 101).
These complaints have been historically associated with naturalist works, such as those of Stephen Crane, Jack London, and Frank Norris, which have long suffered a second-class status within American literature, although recently scholars such as Gina Rosetti and June Howard have attempted to redeem these authors by defining their place in the progress of progressive literature. All the while, critics have dealt somewhat ambivalently with Theodore Dreiser, who both stands both firmly within the Naturalist school and head and shoulders above his contemporary Naturalists as an artist. Following in Dreiser’s footsteps in many ways, Richard Wright uses naturalist plots through much of his writing. Like Dreiser, Wright has been both greatly praised and heavily criticized—the latter by none less than his own protégé James Baldwin—for his protest fiction. And then there is the case of John Steinbeck, whose naturalist-influenced, socially conscious novels are at once celebrated American classics and critical nonentities. Jackson Benson wrote in his essay “The Favorite Author We Love to Hate,” first published in 1993, that although Steinbeck’s reputation had improved from its nadir in the 1960s, “your chances of reading Steinbeck in an English class in a major university are very low, and in the Ivy League, practically zero” (11). Scholarly articles on Steinbeck, as compared with those on Hemingway and Faulkner, are few and far between.

To a degree, the curious status of Dreiser, Wright, and Steinbeck can be understood as a result of their politics. All three embraced, at least for a portion of their careers, communism; each was at least deeply critical of American capitalism in his best-known works; and each enjoyed popularity during the 1930s and 40s but declined in reputation during the post-War era of New Criticism. More significant than criticism, however, is the way each of these authors has been pigeon-holed into his historical moment, a discursive move which denies the existence of
universality in each work’s message. By limiting the applicability of protest fiction to a bygone era, one can effectively mute the work’s criticism of American society as a whole. At least, as long as we are willing participants in that act of historical isolation.

But we need not necessarily be persuaded so. Dreiser’s work is frequently discussed as belonging to the Naturalist school, and thus born out of the Gilded Age and the economic hardships of the 1890s. Dreiser became a socialist before Stalinism took root in Russia, and before much of the trust-busting and other economic reforms of the teens. Yet An American Tragedy appeared in 1925, the same year as F. Scott Fitzgerald published the much shorter but, in some ways, strikingly similar The Great Gatsby. The latter novel, though clearly a paean to the jazz age, is accorded the status of one of the timeless classics of American fiction. Dreiser has been accused by none less than Lionel Trilling of being stuck in the zeitgeist of a bygone political era in which “liberal, progressive” (referring to what Trilling considered an outdated form of liberal thought) ideas about reality reigned. By casting the Great Depression, in which Dreiser achieved his greatest stature, as a mere interruption in sense, a time when our nation was more receptive to portrayals of the harshness of “reality” than to artistic mastery, Trilling achieves this effect of isolating Dreiser’s work in time.

John Steinbeck has similarly been considered a novelist of the Great Depression who hit his peak with The Grapes of Wrath in 1939. This praise for Steinbeck’s earlier works has been used by critics such as Warren French, who is not in the least bit subtle about the link between Steinbeck’s politics and his powers as an artist: “Steinbeck had trouble during the last two decades—as The Winter of Our Discontent especially suggests—because he still saw human problems in the currently irrelevant terms of clashes between exploiter and victim, the ignoble
and the noble” (French 1, 305). French was one of the major proponents of the idea that Steinbeck’s work was only relevant during the Depression, and that later works such as *East of Eden* (1952) and *The Winter of Our Discontent* (1961) are easily discounted from the canon of “great” literature.

And then there is Wright, whose blistering criticisms of a racially divided society broke through to a largely white audience with such undeniable force as to make African American fiction not only visible, but undeniable, for the first time. Yet *Native Son*, like *The Grapes of Wrath*, suffers from its limiting association with the historical moment which it encapsulates. In distancing himself from Wright, James Baldwin writes that

> The feeling which prevailed at the time of [*Native Son’s*] publication was that such a novel, bitter, uncompromising, shocking, gave proof, by its very existence, of what strides might be taken in a free democracy; and its indisputable success, proof that Americans were now able to look full in the face without flinching the dreadful facts…. Such a book, we felt with pride, could never have been written before—which was true. Nor could it be written today. It bears already the aspect of a landmark (Many Thousands Gone, 29).

Baldwin’s reasons for drawing a sharp distinction between the time of his writing this essay (1951) and that of the publication of *Native Son*, just eleven years earlier, are that he feels that, for one thing, the political climate following the second World War is no longer pervaded by the same revolutionary rhetoric that was common in the society of the New Deal, and for another, Wright’s novel itself has changed the status of race relations from that which it recorded. It is a “landmark” which was completed only to be passed, and has rendered itself obsolete. Thus, once again, it is the passing of an author’s political moment which separates him from access to the reality of the present. According to Baldwin, *Native Son* “was one of the last of those angry
productions, encountered in the late twenties and all through the thirties, dealing with the inequities of the social structure of America” (Many Thousands Gone, 30). Thus it is contextualized as part of a tradition of protest literature that includes black and white authors. But Baldwin is no longer satisfied with the protest novel as a form of expressing the desire for race reform or representing black men in literature. He complains that the heroes of protest novels, as exemplified by *Native Son’s* Bigger Thomas, represent only a stereotype of the “angry black man,” which, although appropriate and effective in the 30s and early 40s, is no longer the kind of representation which can serve his or Wright’s aims, either aesthetically or toward helping the black community. Hence Baldwin gives his former mentor the backhanded praise cited above, the kind which honors a historical achievement at the cost of denying the title of “artist.”

It is important to note that the critical objections to naturalist and protest novels, as they have developed over the past century, are not merely political or philosophical. Even blatantly political critiques, such as Trilling’s essay on *An American Tragedy*, “Reality in America,” have made substantial critiques of the formal elements of these novels (which will be discussed in Chapter 1). Just as we cannot say that politically motivated attacks are without substance, we also cannot discount the influence of the critic’s beliefs on those aesthetic arguments, no matter how well-reasoned or well-considered they are, because we are necessarily evaluating these novels from the standpoint of literary realism. By definition, a novel in the realist tradition (including naturalism) relies for its aesthetic power on its author’s ability to represent something that readers will believe to be true. Our judgment of its form, then, is inextricably linked to our preconscious notion of what reality is. We instinctively reject stories which tell us that reality is
something other than what we picture it to be. If we firmly believe that the American dream is not only a fact but also a fundamental social force without which reality cannot be accurately represented, then we will reject and find unpersuasive a narrative in which that idea is absent or handcuffed by other, more powerful forces. We adhere to beliefs about the world as a matter of faith, and to challenge them, to call them “false consciousness” as Karl Marx does, is to prepare oneself to be summarily ignored. That which we cannot resolve into our own perceptions of social reality is for us unreality. It cannot be approached or moderated because its entire bulk rests upon a flawed foundation, and it thus must be left alone to collapse in on itself. Therefore, our approach to such literature is to try to appreciate these texts for their place in our cultural history, but little more. We read and teach *The Grapes of Wrath* for the same reason we read and teach *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, because it is a valuable perspective on the history of its time, not because we believe it is a good novel.

Not coincidentally, Baldwin’s complaint about *Native Son* is just that: “it is safely ensconced in the social arena, where, indeed, it has nothing to do with anyone, so that finally we receive a very definite thrill of virtue from the fact that we are reading such a book at all” (Everybody’s Protest Novel, 18-9). This feeling of virtuousness, according to Baldwin, excuses the reader from engaging in any socially progressive action to rectify the subject of the protest novel, and at the same time excuses the novel itself for lacking the aesthetic value expected of other types of novels. The basis for this aesthetic claim is the supposed lack of truth, the failure to depict characters and events realistically in favor of sentimentalism. This division is also found in Trilling’s essay, in which he contrasts the sentimental naturalism of Dreiser with the realism of Henry James. Baldwin and Trilling, although they are perhaps not a common pairing,
find common ground in a conservative reaction against the radical, angry politics of the Depression. Although they espouse very different politics, both essayists exist in a world in which political and social progress is seen as advancing, in which the (relatively) moderate progressivism of the New Deal and the slow post-war path toward desegregation have won out, and in which support for a revolution by the Communist Party of the United States (CPUSA) dwindled to virtually nonexistent as the failure of Stalinist Russia to create a utopian state became apparent. The liberal politics that are espoused during this time, then, represent what Irving Howe calls “a post-war liberalism not very different from conservatism” (159).

Therefore, it is all but universally acknowledged in the early 1950s that cries for revolutionary action are sentimental and foolish, if not dangerous.

To New Critics, naturalism was more than merely sentimental, however. It also contained a deep philosophical problem in that it represented a fundamental untruth about humanity: that the forces of nature entirely control man’s actions, and that he thus has no free will. This godless system of mechanistic determinism must have been seen as akin to the sweeping, atheistic judgments about social forces found in the writings of Lenin and Marx. Dreiser’s joining the CPUSA late in life, then, merely confirmed what his conservative critics “knew” about him all along. Already looking down on Dreiser for his political beliefs, conservative critics needed only a short leap to believe that his entire worldview was based on a deep-seeded nihilism. Their reviews, then, often deal in broad, overarching statements about the philosophical purpose of Dreiser’s work, which, according to Robert Shafer is to prove that human actions are no different from the instinctive behaviors of animals. According to Shafer, Dreiser’s “attempt is suicidal,
and the more consistently it is carried out the more completely is Mr. Dreiser forced to divest his creatures and their actions of any distinctively human quality and meaning” (268).

Shafer’s argument also touches on another complaint about Dreiser, which is a source of dispute among later critics: did Dreiser consistently argue against free will, or did he waver in his convictions? Those who favor the latter position, including Trilling, make their next complaint about Dreiser that he failed as an artist because of this inconsistency. Unable to fully commit to his humanity-negating stance, Trilling writes, Dreiser maintained “the vulgarly saving suspicion that maybe, when all is said and done, there is Something Behind It All” (17). Thus, even in embracing a position that approaches the religious belief that (comparatively) conservative critics favor, Dreiser is criticized. Yet if he embraced with conviction the abhorrent anti-humanist position which he is accused of advancing, he receives backhanded praise for aesthetic integrity while being scoffed at for irrelevance. Either way, he is equally damned. Thus we begin to see a picture of an aesthetic sensibility that lauds only those works which assert a reasonably firm conviction in a particular philosophical stance.

Neither Baldwin not Trilling ascribed to such a conservative philosophy, however. Instead, both reject protest novels from the perspective that sympathizes with their authors’ political causes but faults their methods of gaining a popular appeal through sentimentalism. Trilling writes in response to Dreiser’s liberal apologists of the 1930s, who, as he says of historian Vernon Parrington, believe that “there exists an opposition between reality and mind and that one must enlist oneself in the party of reality” (38). This anti-intellectualism, Trilling argues, fuels much of the support for Dreiser’s appeals to emotion and simultaneously excuses any lapses in the intellectual coherence of Dreiser’s works. But in responding to what he
considers an outdated liberalism, Trilling writes as a critic within the tradition of liberal thought: his *The Liberal Imagination* (1950), in which the aforementioned essay was published, condemns conservatism even more harshly, calling it an ideology characterized by “irritable mental gestures which seek to resemble ideas” (1). Therefore, Trilling’s attack on liberal critics derives its ferocity from his recognition of the similarities between their ideologies and his. In the same way, James Baldwin’s criticisms of Wright largely flow from the younger author’s need to distinguish himself from his mentor. His chief criticism of *Native Son* is not that merely that its protagonist, Bigger Thomas, is unreal, but that he is too much a part of a reality which must be banished from the American imagination:

> “Recording his days of anger [Wright] has nevertheless recorded, as no Negro before him had ever done, that fantasy Americans hold in their minds when they speak of the Negro: that fantastic and fearful image which we have lived with since the first slave fell beneath the lash. This is the significance of *Native Son* and also, unhappily, its overwhelming limitation.” (*Many Thousands Gone*, 32)

Baldwin later clarifies that this picture of the angry Negro lives not only in the minds of white Americans, but in the minds of blacks as well: “no American Negro exists who does not have his private Bigger Thomas living in his skull” (*Many Thousands Gone*, 40). It would thus be easy to believe the reality of Bigger; it would be “a lie more palatable than the truth” (*Everybody’s Protest Novel*, 16) to accept the permanent role of the victim. But to do so would be to make “a most remarkable confession” (*Many Thousands Gone*, 38) that black really is worse than white, and this Baldwin (understandably) finds unacceptable. But because Baldwin already wrestles with the latent suspicion that it is true, because that suspicion represents a grain of truth, Bigger is a danger to Baldwin and his intentions as a writer. In the same way, liberal critics who favor a
sentimental fixation on the victimization of the working class represent a threat to Lionel Trilling’s political thinking. Both critics must cast out the enemy within in order to preserve the intellectual integrity and moral correctness of their beliefs from the extreme of chaos and unbridled emotion. As a result, both respond to the critics who champion *Native Son* and *An American Tragedy* as representing the latter forces as much as they respond to the works themselves. Their understanding of these novels is irrevocably colored by the popular interpretations of their respective times.

Although we cannot and should not attempt to separate protest novels from the circumstances of their creation, the passage of several decades does allow us to revisit them with a critical distance from some of their earlier interpretations. For instance, the stereotype of the angry black man has not disappeared, but a great multitude of other possibilities of identity can be found in contemporary American culture, thus weakening the grip of any individual image. In this light, we may see Bigger Thomas as one exaggerated possibility of black identity without feeling that it is the same kind of threat that Baldwin does, one which may choke out the visibility of any other. As for Trilling’s fears, while liberal politics have not escaped the accusation of favoring communism, no actual affiliation of that nature exists in the mainstream progressive movement today. We thus may stand on firmer ground from which to question the virtue of certain aspects of the American dream. We may entertain the questions that Dreiser raises better guarded against sentimentalism, and, in doing so, we may even better appreciate his sentiment.

Protest novels raise complex questions which frustrate our ability to digest and simplify them. For this reason, it is easy to interpret them in the most extreme way possible, aligning them
with the most strident voices of their time (as Trilling does by referencing the historian Parrington). It is also easy to complain that its “answers” to these questions (that is, if we can presume to find answers in the texts) are inconsistent or morally ambiguous, as mentioned above. These claims were particularly favored by the New Critics, whose approach tended to focus more on individual, seemingly contradictory portions of the text than on the complex whole. Yet another area in which we can find this demand for consistency is in aesthetic philosophy. For the moment, I am not referring to problems with inconsistency in the perspective and character development of a novel, although I will examine both of these criticisms, as they pertain to *An American Tragedy* and *Native Son*, in the next chapter. Here, I am interested in the aesthetic purism which asserts that artistic truths must be transcendent and independent of time and circumstance in order to contain universal qualities (e.g. “beauty”). It is a common complaint regarding protest fiction that it is *of its time*, and thus each work is only meaningful so long as the conditions of its production remain constant. Baldwin, as mentioned earlier, makes this claim of *Native Son*. Going a step further, Ralph Ellison criticizes Wright himself for being swayed by his political leanings, writing, “How awful that Wright found the facile answers of Marxism before he learned to use literature as a means for discovering the forms of American Negro humanity” (182). Citing Raymond Williams, Houston Baker accuses Ellison in this essay\(^a\) of bias toward a bourgeois conception of art, which excludes any work whose production can be linked to its role in a capitalist economy (in common parlance, the idea that anything that makes money is a “sell-out”). Because his writing is indelibly marked with the circumstances of its time and its contemporary politics, factors which contributed to the roaring financial success of his debut

\(^a\) “The World and the Jug” (1964)
novel, “Wright and his productions are consigned by Ellison to a simplistic, sociological field of nonart” (Baker 132).

For the purposes of this thesis, I do not claim the ability to make any sweeping judgments about aesthetic philosophy, but I do suggest that our sense of aesthetic value has some relation to the time we live in. I write at a time in which the place of naturalism has received a degree of critical reevaluation through the works of June Howard, Gina Rossetti, and others. It is also a time in which pessimistic determinism is once again a popular mode of discourse, as evidenced by the 2007 Academy Awards show’s domination by There Will be Blood, an adaptation of Upton Sinclair’s Oil! (1927), and Joel and Ethan Coen’s adaptation of Cormac McCarthy’s No Country for Old Men (2005). Furthermore, it is a time in which the art of protest has found new forms of expression, with creators such as Michael Moore blending and subverting the traditionally separate genres of documentary film and satire (e.g. Bowling for Columbine [2002]). Unsurprisingly, many critics have labeled these works as dishonest for seeking an uncomfortable middle ground between fact and fiction, much like the critics of An American Tragedy did decades ago. Nevertheless, the proliferation of these forms offers us the chance to give new consideration to protest novels as occupying a tenable middle ground between art and sociology. Once again, we have a chance to seek new perspectives on literature which challenges our assumptions about art while also challenging our assumptions about political progress and the American dream.

So, let us consider the course of American history, in which, we would like to believe, justice is the norm, equal opportunity the rule, and each exception merely a proof of this rule by

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b With a repertoire including such dark films as A Serious Man (2009) and The Man Who Wasn’t There (2001), the Coen Brothers can be considered true naturalists of our time.
virtue of its historical redress. And what wrongs have not yet been redressed can be deferred to the illimitable future: “it eluded us then, but that’s no matter. Tomorrow we will run faster, stretch our arms farther…. And one fine morning” we will finish Fitzgerald’s sentence. But in the meantime, the irrepressible optimism of the American dream must be seen in its proper historical context. We have seen in the past century periods of prosperity and advances in opportunity and rights alternating with periods of economic and social decline. It is beyond my powers and expertise to call either the exception or the rule (and, I must grant, I am as apt to take the romantic view as any other American), but I have seen in my few decades a period of theoretically perpetual economic growth (excepting, of course, a few “hiccups” along the way) come to a crashing halt due to the same hubris which ran rampant in 1929. At the same time, our political rhetoric has resurrected the essentialism, xenophobia, and prejudice we thought had been left decades in the past. Although these voices certainly do not represent views accepted by the majority, they have nonetheless resurfaced and managed to bring the rhetoric of revolution back into the public discourse. If ever there is a time to revisit literary naturalism and protest fiction, surely it is in this moment of insecurity, which our political leaders have euphemistically branded a “period of uncertainty.” Now that we are perhaps not so predisposed to reject any criticism of the American dream, let us revisit the literature of doubt and uncertainty and see how the great protest novels of years past speak to us today.

In this thesis, I will examine three American novelists writing in the naturalist tradition, Dreiser, Wright, and Steinbeck. Much has been published about each author’s individual aesthetic merits and faults, (although, as noted earlier, there has been far less scholarship on Steinbeck in recent years), and much has been said about the individual strains of philosophy,
political and economic theory, and class and race implications of each author’s body of work, but it is my intention in writing this thesis to examine the common thematic and formal elements of protest fiction in general, as represented by *Native Son* and *An American Tragedy*. Having already discussed some of the broader political and philosophical objections to protest novels, I will spend the first chapter analyzing some of the structural and formal claims that have been made about these novels, tracing their roots in naturalist writing and analyzing the ways in which they inform each other’s interpretation within and without naturalism. In Chapter 2, I will move to some of the broader thematic elements in these novels, addressing the philosophical questions which have been raised by the critics cited above. Ultimately, I aim to reevaluate the place of these novels with regard to naturalism and the canon of American realism. Steinbeck will enter this discussion in the conclusion, in which I will consider *East of Eden* (1952), which Steinbeck wrote well after his great achievement in *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), as a postscript to the era of protest fiction. I will evaluate the later novel, which Steinbeck believed to be his greatest achievement, by examining the ways it reconstitutes the elements of a protest novel into a greater whole, which, I shall argue, attempts to posit a resolution between protest fiction and romantic fiction. After analyzing these two disparate traditions, which Charles Child Walcutt famously described as a “divided stream,” I will argue that naturalism/protest fiction and romanticism are not as different as they seem, and that protest fiction’s rightful place is alongside its more celebrated twin.
Chapter 1: Naturalism and its Discontents

Variations in Form and Structure

American literature rising out of the naturalist tradition has occupied an often disputed or misunderstood place in the history of narrative. Of particular trouble to critics is the relationship naturalism has with realism. Some believe that naturalism is a subgenre of realism, and is thus to be judged by the same expectations and constraints as its parent. This assumption has led critics such as Lionel Trilling to denounce naturalist writings as fundamentally flawed due to their inability to convey a coherent, believable whole. It is then inductively reasoned that the elements of the naturalist novel’s form are all evidences of that incoherence, as discordant figures and colors in a painting conceived without a discernable scheme or purpose. It is easy to see why these novels are viewed in this light: unintelligibility and contradiction are very much part of the aesthetics and thematics of these novels. When Charles Child Walcutt described literary naturalism as a “divided stream,” he used this metaphor to suggest that its authors wrestled with an irresolvable dilemma: faith and hope in scientific and human progress versus the pessimistic determinism used to portray the need for reform. According to Walcutt, any artist who seriously commits himself to raising this question has doomed himself to artistic failure. Regarding An American Tragedy, he argues that although the reader may be motivated to pursue social change, “The force of this social conclusion depends, paradoxically, on the inexorable fatality of the action” (26). In other words, the only resolution for the social problems described by a naturalist novel is in the reader, and thus the work itself is, by necessity, incomplete.
It has also been argued that naturalism is not a genre within realism, but rather alongside realism, and thus to be judged by its own particular merits and formal systems. As June Howard explains it, “Naturalist novels are not failed realist novels, but they are narratives haunted by realistic expectations; and they are narratives that cobble together a variety of strategies for generating coherence and closure and that, therefore, not infrequently foreground their own contradictions” (146). More ardent apologists for the form, such as Irving Howe, have gone as far as to say that these novels should be judged on the basis of the emotional truths which they represent, as these are powerful enough to compensate for any artistic flaws. To Howe, the historical moments of these texts make rational and dispassionate access to the “real” impossible, so that only by focusing exclusively on conveying unbridled emotion can an author do justice to his reality. Although this argument insulates the novels from certain criticisms, it leaves us with a dissatisfying end, in that the novels do indeed become the historical “landmark” that Baldwin discusses: isolated in time, instantly obsolete, perhaps real, but not a part of our reality. This defense also does not speak to the problem of inconsistency that Howard acknowledges among the novels’ aesthetic elements, or between these and the message of the texts.

Rather than making any a priori assumptions about the novels’ cohesiveness or their ability to represent the “real,” I will begin by examining their form in relation to some of the major criticisms of each author’s writing in three areas: use of language, characters, and shifts in perspective. I will also consider how each aspect of form relates to the conventions of naturalism. Despite its long history of having been perceived as a discrete movement in literary history, and despite its easily traced roots, naturalism is a genre whose boundaries have never been well understood or clearly delineated. Certain authors are universally regarded as
naturalists: Frank Norris, Stephen Crane, and Jack London. Others fall in and out of the boundaries depending upon how the line is drawn. According to Howard, one of the more troubling authors to place is Dreiser, who has no clearly identifiable single source for his aesthetics or philosophy, but is grouped with the naturalists on the basis of common stylistic and thematic elements (29). For Walcutt, Dreiser is naturalism par excellence, whereas Donald Pizer calls Dreiser the author “whose work and career most fulfill the received notion of American naturalism,” suggesting that the critics who have been most hostile to naturalism have relied on the same narrow set of assumptions (Pizer 146). In order to build toward an understanding more comprehensive than that which is attained by simply labeling a work “naturalist,” “realist,” or “protest fiction,” I will examine how the form of these novels draws and deviates from naturalist influences.

**Natural and Unnatural: The Language of Protest**

Dreiser, it must be owned, was a builder of awkward sentences. Even his staunchest defenders will admit that his “language is often coarse, flat in rhythm, syntactically overburdened, heavy with journalistic slang” (Howe 1, 43). Dreiser is also known for his “paste gems,” his sometimes painful excursions into poetic diction, although Yoshinobu Hakutani has argued that *An American Tragedy* contains fewer of these than Dreiser’s earlier works (Hakutani 2, 178). But, more than anything else, the novel has been criticized for its bulky, weighty language; it is “huge, inchoate, struggling toward expression” (Trilling 14) and this flaw is easily linked to another major criticism of the novel as a whole: it is a very long. Dreiser builds Clyde’s
character, up from childhood to young adulthood, detailing what seems to be every conceivable factor in motivating him, even compelling him, to commit murder. Clyde is a true believer in the American dream, which we learn from his embarrassment at his shabby upbringing\(^c\), his first exposures to excitement and glamour at the soda shop and the Green-Davidson Hotel, and his growing realization that all that separates him from this better lifestyle—and from a higher position in society—is money. Throughout, Dreiser’s scope is panoramic and his descriptions relentlessly thorough. Having worked as a newspaper reporter before beginning his literary career, Dreiser was comfortable providing his readers with great quantities of detail from a detached, documentary perspective, which is one of the most easily defined elements of naturalist style. June Howard describes this style by using an example of a detail from Dreiser’s first novel, *Sister Carrie*, which she suggests serves no purpose but to be present as a fact.\(^d\) “In naturalism,” she explains, “details are facts, data which when subjected to the proper scrutiny can produce knowledge” (147). In *An American Tragedy*, however, Dreiser seems much more concerned with portraying certain perspectives than he is with providing information for the reader’s own edification.

We can see an example of this devotion to perspective at the beginning of Book 2, when the story shifts from Kansas City to Lycurgus, New York, at the home of Clyde’s uncle Samuel, who is about to return home from a business trip to Chicago. Upon his arrival, Samuel tells his family of his encounter with Clyde, whom he has met in Chicago, and thus also informs the

\(^c\) “During all this time, Clyde was saying to himself that he did not wish to do this anymore, that he and his parents looked foolish and less than normal—“cheap” was the word he would have used if he could have brought himself to express his full measure of resentment” (*An American Tragedy*, 12).

\(^d\) “In the midst of Hurstwood’s flight from Chicago, the action is halted briefly to inform us that Hurstwood makes a call from ‘one of the first private telephone booths ever erected’” (Howard 146).
reader of where Clyde went following the accident in Kansas City. After wrapping up this scene in Lycurgus, Dreiser backs up to give a brief history of Clyde’s experiences over the three years following his flight from Kansas City, and then goes on to narrate from Clyde’s perspective his encounter with Samuel in Chicago, the gist of which we already knew. But by doubling back, Dreiser is faithful to his plan of relating the experiences that display Clyde’s character, as he is able to introduce the tension in Clyde between his desire to advance his own interests and his caution to avoid seeming too eager to profit by his relation to Samuel. This tension comes to define Clyde’s relationship with his uncle after Clyde moves to Lycurgus, and thus it was important for Dreiser to establish its seed. Also important, however, was Dreiser’s need to break from Clyde’s perspective to establish the comfortable dwelling of his cousins as a point of contrast with our protagonist’s lowly upbringings. Hence we get the double narration of the scene in Chicago, in which the outcome, Clyde’s connection with his extended family and forthcoming move to Lycurgus, are already known. The tension in the second telling of the scene lies in the exposition of its details, not its outcome. This is in accord with the structure of the novel itself: we know from the title that the novel is a tragedy, and the exact nature of the tragedy is heavily foreshadowed throughout, and we read to look past the headline to the details.

Of course, this narrative strategy is not unique to naturalism, but it is a particular focus within naturalist writings to draw the reader’s attention to the forces which spell the characters’ ultimate doom. To this, some critics have complained that if one were simply to present the facts of the case, one could do it in much shorter form. If all Dreiser had wanted to do was to explore the reality behind the actual murder which inspired the story, he might have just let the original newspaper article speak for itself, as many critics have complained (Grebstein 314). And the
exact same is said of *Native Son* regarding the murder case of Robert Nixon and Earl Hicks (Kinnamon 123) which were part of Wright’s inspiration. This, however, is a critique of literature itself, from which no realist writing can be insulated. Or, perhaps, it is a critique of realism itself, from which no literature can be insulated. To make a distinction between a naturalist fidelity to documenting realism, which is an ideal, an extreme only approached by the most canonical naturalists, and the writing of artistic literature which takes its inspiration from actual events, is to climb a slippery slope. Furthermore, to argue that Dreiser possessed the ability to *re-present* reality, rather than merely to *represent* it through a particular lens, is to give him too much credit. Despite the massive amount of information which Dreiser has packed into *An American Tragedy*, the reality of the novel is more than the sum of its parts.

One of the most troubling aspects regarding Dreiser’s classification as a naturalist is his narrator’s sympathy for his characters. Critics have historically been at odds over whether “naturalist” should only be applied to texts that treat their subjects with cold detachment, the shocking technique adapted by Crane, London, and Norris. Howard, in *Form and History in American Literary Naturalism*, takes a less rigidly delineated view of the genre, including Dreiser in her study as one of the authors who focuses on naturalist “antinomies” which include optimism versus pessimism (the competing sides of Walcutt’s “divided stream”), materialist determinism versus free will (which Walcutt later added to his definition [Howard 39]), and squalid scenes of the degraded lives of the underclass versus depictions of upper and middle class lifestyles. Although I find Howard’s inclusiveness to be valid, I also suggest that there is a significant difference between works for which one side of the stream is truly external, as Walcutt claims of the side of humanistic optimism, and those in which the stream is repeatedly
traversed by the narrator. Dreiser’s narrator alternates between scenes of squalidness and luxury, and between the detached documentary camera-like perspective, which opens each book and dominates much of Book 3, and free indirect discourse, through which we access much of the principal action of the novel. Let us consider a passage from early in the novel, after Clyde has taken a job at a soda shop, and has begun to notice the girls who frequent it. I select this passage not because it is special in any way, but because it does many of the things that Dreiser does throughout the novel. Also, if we presume that an author is likeliest to spend the most time on the most important scenes, then a scene of relatively minor importance should receive the same authorial attention as just about any other part of the novel, whereas we might expect that a pivotal scene such as Roberta’s murder might have been refined and revised more than the rest. Thus, without engaging in any painstaking research into Dreiser’s writing process, I have chosen a scene which may be regarded as typical of the novel. And yet, this scene is also not wholly unimportant, as it is one of many which Dreiser uses to show us how Clyde’s understanding of the world develops:

“And very often one or another of these young beauties was accompanied by some male in evening suit, dress shirt, high hat, bow tie, white kid gloves and patent leather shoes, a costume which at that time Clyde felt to be the last word in all true distinction, beauty, gallantry and bliss. To be able to wear such a suit with ease and air! To be able to talk to a girl after the manner and with the sang-froid of some of these gallants! What a true measure of achievement! No good-looking girl, as it then appeared to him, would have anything to do with him if he did not possess this standard equipment. It was plainly necessary—the thing. And once he did attain it—was able to wear such clothes as these—well, then was he not well set upon the path that leads to all the blisses? All the joys of life would then most certainly be spread before him. The friendly smiles! The secret handclasps, maybe—an arm about the
waist of some one or another—a kiss—a promise of marriage—and then, and then!” (29)

One of the most striking things about this passage is its high degree of detail, conveying facts and conclusions that are probably beyond Clyde’s perception and comprehension. Sticking to Clyde’s point of view helps Dreiser to avoid ten dollar words, although his occasional slip into higher class diction (as in “the sang-froid of some of these gallants”) may strike the reader as somewhat incongruous with what we expect of Clyde’s unsophisticated thoughts. Still, most of the description is imagery of a kind which we can believe Clyde to have keenly observed, the gestures and posture of belonging to a social club from which he acutely feels excluded. The voice Dreiser gives to these thoughts is more articulate than Clyde’s, no doubt, but, in the narrator’s sympathy, he tells us what Clyde would think if he were capable of articulating it himself.

Still, there is some awkwardness to this idealized indirect monologue. The reference to clothing as “standard equipment” may strike the reader as an instance of ineloquent technical language, which he could easily connect with the scientific focus of naturalism going back to Zola. However, because this comes from Clyde’s perspective, we can also read this as a working class boy’s way of building toward an articulate thought from the basis of his own experience of the world. Dreiser uses metaphors related to machinery and physical tools at numerous points in the novel. At the end of Book 1, as Clyde contemplates fleeing the scene of the accident, the thought of going to prison is described in indirect discourse as “grinding really like a macerating wheel to his flesh” (144). In Book 2, Clyde observes the difference between the rich and poor in Lycurgus “as sharp as though cut by a knife or divided by a high wall” (250). Either cliché
would do the trick here, but it says something that Dreiser felt the need to use both of them. He is building toward the physical image which most precisely captures Clyde’s feeling, even if it is a mixed metaphor or a complete muddle. Sherwood Anderson, in an essay entitled “An Apology For Crudity,” defends Dreiser’s use of lower-class language, saying that “If he be at all sensitive to the life about him and that life be crude, the figure that emerges will be crude and will crudely express itself” (83). For Anderson, this is a distinctly democratic move on the part of an author who really was from a lower class background, who was “brother to his brothers” and who “live[d] as the men of his time live[d] life” (83). And yet, it would be inaccurate to say that, given the options of “crude” colloquialisms and literary artifice, Dreiser consistently opted for the former. According to Trilling, “It is Dreiser who lacks the sense of colloquial diction. If we are to talk of bookishness, it is Dreiser who is bookish; he is precisely literary in the bad sense; he is full of flowers of rhetoric and shines with paste gems; at hundreds of points his writing is not only genteel but fancy” (15).

Taken as a whole, the language of the novel alternately attempts to elevate Clyde’s thoughts to the literary and leaves him mired in a brute, physical world. Whether Dreiser intended to both raise and undercut Clyde with indirect discourse, or he simply was not able to maintain a consistent, discernable scheme for his language, I cannot say. It would probably be too generous to assert that Dreiser’s use of the tawdry and the clichéd masterfully counterbalances his self-conscious literary artifice, but the effect of this combination is to parallel the war between Clyde’s aspirations of upper class status and his roots in the lower class. We could even remove Dreiser’s intentions from this discussion altogether by positing that it is not even his language which we are discussing, but instead what Mikhail Bakhtin calls
heteroglossia, the internalization of the various voices of society as a whole. In this light, the competing languages in Clyde’s head play out a veritable melodrama.

Without going so far, however, we can find one more hint as to what Dreiser did intend in his use of language through his consistent use throughout the novel of thoughts that trail off mid-sentence. We see this at the end of the excerpt above: “and then, and then!” This is the end of its paragraph, and the subject changes in the next line. Later in the novel as Clyde tries to think through the dilemma that results in his plot to murder Roberta, he repeatedly stops at, “and yet—and yet—” or some version of it, as he debates his course of action until Roberta has drowned.

“Was he all wrong? Was it evil to be like this? His mother would say so! And his father too—and perhaps everybody who thought right about life—Sondra Finchley, maybe—the Griffiths, all.

And yet! And yet! It was snowing the first light snow of the year...” (315-6)

and we trail off, again unable to complete the thought. This pattern even creeps into Roberta’s language, in one of the letters read at the trial: “Oh Clyde, Clyde, life is so different to-day to what it was last year. Think—we were going to Crum and those other lakes near Fonda and Gloversville and Little Falls, but now—now” (662). We can thus say that what Dreiser does deliberately and consistently throughout the novel is to draw our attention to the unintelligibility of the characters’ thoughts to their own minds. Whether because they cannot think through to what comes next (as in Clyde’s not knowing where to go after marriage with his fantasy about moving up in the world) or because they cannot face or articulate the terrible truth, they stumble and give up. For all of Dreiser’s scientific accuracy, his tremendous attention to imagery, and his
thorough accounting of the genetic and sociological factors that make Clyde who he is, our protagonist comes up short. There is nothing that we or he can find in his experiences to truly explain or prepare him to understand what motivates him when he is faced with the most difficult decision of his life. Clyde is left with merely the raw instinct of revulsion, both at the possibility of losing Sondra and at the thought of murdering Roberta. All of the information we have learned only provides the illusion of rationality. If this is Dreiser’s intention, then his language does indeed serve this purpose, in that it apes the scientific realism of Zola’s naturalism, and at the same time shows the set pieces to be paper-thin. This also marks a break with the strategy which Howard describes in *Sister Carrie* of relating information merely because of “an interest in sheer fact” (146), perhaps reflecting a disenchantment with the idea that any of us (or, certainly, at least Clyde) can access reality through data alone.

If Dreiser’s language undercuts the facts of the material world with ineffable and uncontrolled emotion, Richard Wright goes a step further, creating a world that is entirely built on emotions. From the first line, the “Brrrrrrriiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiinng!” of Bigger’s alarm clock, we are locked in his perspective, as he is rudely awoken and yelled at by his mother and sister. Before he has finished dressing, he hears his sister screaming that there is a rat in the room, which he must kill. After a brutal fight with the enormous rat, Bigger is again criticized. The effect is thus an unending barrage of stress and hostility, from which neither he or the reader can find respite. This is no accident: Wright is explicit in his essay “How Bigger Was Born” that it was his intention in writing *Native Son* to render its horror even more unrelentingly than he had in *Uncle Tom’s Children*, to make it “so hard and so deep” that his readers “would have to face it without the consolation of tears” (454).
Although Baldwin has criticized Wright for writing from such a limited perspective\(^c\), it is clear that Wright’s approach to the real world is to block it out and make it inaccessible through the fog that clouds Bigger’s mind. This is paralleled throughout the text by the controlling images of “blindness, impaired vision, and ‘seeing’ for the first time” (Nagel 151). In tracking these images throughout Native Son, James Nagel argues convincingly that the novel is “an analysis of ‘perception’ which documents the effects prejudice, alienation, oppression, and isolation have on one’s ability to ‘see’ and ‘be seen’ clearly” (151). Bigger is not seen by the Daltons as an individual, but rather as a type, a class of poor black boy, as Bigger is told in rapid succession that Mrs. Dalton is blind and that she “has a very deep interest in colored people” (47). Likewise, Bigger cannot see the white characters as individuals, and his scenes with them are marked by obscuring images of snowfall and the white vapor of his breath. For Bigger, the color white also represents fear: it is the image of the “white blur” of the “ghostlike” (Native Son 85) Mrs. Dalton standing in the doorway which frightens Bigger into suffocating her daughter, and later it is the horrifying memory of Mary’s white bones which causes him to panic and murder Bessie (Nagel 154).

Wright’s unrelenting narrative pace and his controlling images of whiteness and vision/blindness give Native Son an aesthetic coherence which corresponds with its theme of Bigger’s being deprived of an ability to see himself and the world for what they really are. Because the chief criticisms of the novel have focused on the realism of a character who is blind until he commits murder, I will discuss the believability of Bigger at length in the next section. For now, we can say that at least the language of Native Son is more obviously suited to its

\(^c\) “We are limited, however, to Bigger’s view of them (other characters), part of a deliberate plan which might not have been disastrous if we were not also limited to Bigger’s perceptions.” (Many Thousands Gone, 33)
purpose—and less potentially distracting—than that of *An American Tragedy*. Nonetheless, both novels call attention to the unknown and the unknowable, and thus both differ from the typical naturalist perspective of an all-seeing eye which dispassionately foretells the characters’ doom. Both Bigger and Clyde ask questions and struggle to find answers, but they can only go so far before they run up against the wall of primal, instinctive emotion. Clyde should have the better chance to find his answers, as he has lived a life of relative leisure and freedom, permitting him to observe the world around him. He is always, always watching and trying to learn. “And yet, and yet,” it is not enough. We learn through other characters that he is constantly misjudging his circumstances: as Gilbert observes of Clyde, “He thinks clothes are the whole thing, I guess” (191). Bigger, until he murders Mary, has no chance: he cannot see past the immediacy of his circumstances, the constant demands of him and threats to his existence, and he cannot see past (to appropriate a phrase from Melville) “the sum of all the general rage and hate felt by his whole race” (*Moby Dick*, 156). On that note, let us turn to the problematic construction of Bigger’s character.

**Beyond Brutes: An Exploration of Character**

One of the most easily identifiable features of naturalist fiction is the use of characters who face insuperable forces which inevitably destroy them. Naturalist writings are pervaded by a sense of decay, both physically and sociologically, which transform characters into atavistic “brutes,” as June Howard refers to them, who are not fully human. Howard grounds her study in
a survey of late 19th century sociological sources, which refer to the underclass in the language of primitivism, calling them to “noble savages,” who are treated with both sympathy and fear for their wildness. Howard then goes on to catalog some of the most common ways these characters are depicted in naturalist literature: they are seen as “dumb beast[s]” who are not capable of using language (81), racial or genetic defectives (85), and criminal deviants (86). Although they are clearly marked as Other, these brutes are still not a race apart to the degree that the divide cannot be traversed, as Howard illustrates with the example of Hurstwood from *Sister Carrie*. This mutability leads to a problem for the reader, however, because it appears that in order to accept that a character’s fate is decided by his circumstances, we must also be prepared to acknowledge our own submission in the face of the same circumstances.

The salient criticism of these characters is that in order to depict them as entirely at the mercy of cruel and arbitrary forces, the texts must deprive them of free will (Walcutt 9). However, there is an observable range of personal agency among the characters of different naturalist works. Here we again encounter a difference between the naturalism of Crane and Norris and that of Dreiser and Wright. Crane depicts his titular Maggie as having never had a chance: she is “of” the streets, and cannot possibly escape them. He foreshadows her fate with the image of a flower blooming out of the muck (29). Thus, Maggie is as bound by the natural laws which will pull her down as this flower. According to Howard, Crane’s strategy here is not to posit a pessimistic determinism that can be applied to mankind on the whole, but rather to critique via a dark parody the common perceptions and depictions of the lower class that have been spread through sensationalist literature and the sociological writings mentioned above (Howard 99). Thus, Crane does with character what Dreiser does (as I have argued above) with
language: he has simulated reality, but only to show us its unreality. Dreiser and Wright, on the other hand, treat their protagonists sympathetically, as both require their characters to be seen as real in order for their novels to work effectively as protest fiction. Therefore, the materialistic determinism of naturalism does not suffice to explain these characters’ fates, because it would necessarily deprive them of free will, as Walcutt has complained. In order to avoid this paradox, these characters must consciously choose to give in to naturalist forces, as Hurstwood does, and this is an even greater horror than that which befalls Maggie: “It is the helpless submission to the brutal world of toil that is the terrifying possibility in Dreiser’s work, for if these characters are not unspeakable horrors neither are they fully human” (Howard 102). This is both the great power of *An American Tragedy* and *Native Son* and their great liability, as Howard’s statement sounds very much like one of Baldwin’s: “It is the peculiar triumph of society—and its loss—that it is able to convince those people to whom it has given inferior status of the reality of this decree” (Everybody’s Protest Novel, 19).

For Clyde, the submission to naturalist forces is portrayed explicitly throughout the novel. We see him from a young age act out an understandable narcissism, which causes him to be ashamed at the “shabby and even degrading” (10) life that his family leads and to gravitate toward everything he observes which stands in contrast to that life. He recognizes his own gifts, his unschooled intelligence and his ability to discriminate between the glamorous and the “cheap,” and believes that he is destined to make something more of himself. In other words, he is a devout believer in the American dream. He thus adopts a fatalistic philosophy, taking his good fortunes as evidence of some higher plan for his success. Meanwhile, Clyde’s mother
stands in the background as a foil whose faith in god’s plan makes her unable to understand why so many misfortunes have befallen her:

“Where was her God, her Christ, at this hour when this obvious evil was being done? Why had He not acted for her? How was He to explain this? His Biblical promises! His perpetual guidance! His declared mercies!” (23)

Having inherited his mother’s fatalism but not her religious fervor, Clyde is vulnerable to falling prey to the temptation to go even farther, laying the responsibility for his own amoral behavior on the universe. This is where Clyde truly becomes a brute, for whom personal ambition and morality cannot be resolved clearly, and who fails to articulate his dilemma beyond “And yet—and yet—.”

It is a point of contention whether Dreiser actually means for us to believe, as Clyde does, that it is society that is responsible for Roberta’s death. Although Clyde never reaches the same point that Bigger does in accepting culpability for his actions, his unsatisfying end suggests that to lay all of the blame on society would be too simplistic. Clyde ends the novel wanting to believe in a higher power, but unable to truly find faith before his execution. If we recall the associations Walcutt drew (180) between Dreiser’s lack of faith and his supposed philosophy of materialist determinism, perhaps we can say that Clyde’s lack of faith is a symbol of his inability to accept his own moral responsibility for Roberta’s death. The existence of a Christian god would mean that Clyde has had free will all along, and that the “destiny” which seemed to guide him, the “Way of the Lake,” as he euphemistically calls it (468), was a figment of Clyde’s narcissistic imagination, if not an act of blasphemy. Clyde’s tragedy is that he has misread the
American dream’s promise of equal opportunity: he cannot bring himself to believe in something greater than himself.

Bigger, on the other hand, has never believed in himself. At the beginning of Native Son, we are introduced to his brutish existence in media res. We do not know how he came to be who he is, but we can guess that his day-to-day existence is about as hellish as this day, sans the battle with the rat. He lives in a squalid, vermin-infested one room apartment with his brother, mother, and sister, wherein the males and females must alternately turn away so that the others may maintain some shred of dignity while they dress. Bigger is always short of money, often in trouble with the law, and hounded daily by his mother and sister for his inadequacies. And all of this only reminds him of his failure as a man: “He shut their voices out of his mind. He hated his family because he knew that they were suffering and that he was powerless to help them” (10). Although we are meant to sympathize with Bigger, he is also intended to be shocking, in that he is a character so degraded by his circumstances that he has accepted a life of degradation rather than trying to fight for something better. Bigger’s acceptance of this state also takes on a greater significance than does Clyde’s, as Bigger carries the additional weight of racial prejudice, which serves as a major structuring force in his life, dictating where his family must live and severely limiting the opportunities open to them. For Bigger to accept a subhuman status is to accept the claims of this racist system, and this is what Baldwin finds so unpalatable about him. He is not a human being but

“the monster created by the American republic, the present awful sum of generations of oppression; but to say that he is a monster is to fall into the trap of making him subhuman and he must, therefore, be made representative of a way of life which is real and human in precise ratio to the degree to which it seems to us monstrous and
strange. It seems to me that this idea carries, implicitly, a most remarkable confession: that is, that Negro life is in fact as debased and impoverished as our theology claims” (Many Thousands Gone, 38).

Baldwin is thus concerned not only with the question of Bigger’s believability as a character, but also with the implications for the black community of accepting that such a character can exist. These questions are related, yet separate, and in order to answer the latter, we must give greater consideration to the former than Baldwin does.

Wright explains the creation of Bigger Thomas in his essay, “How ‘Bigger’ Was Born,” citing numerous “Biggers” whom he encountered throughout his life. These “Biggers” are people who, for one reason or another, have chosen to openly defy the laws of the Jim Crow south, without regard for the often violent consequences of their rebellion. Wright cannot be sure just what caused a Bigger to respond this way,

“But there were always two factors psychologically dominant in his personality. First, through some quirk of circumstance, he had become estranged from the religion and the folk culture of his race. Second, he was trying to react to and answer the call of the dominant civilization whose glitter came to him through the newspapers, magazines, radios, movies, and the mere imposing sight and sound of daily American life.” (How “Bigger” Was Born, 439)

The first factor is echoed in one of Baldwin’s complaints about Native Son, that it failed to depict the strength of the black community (Many Thousands Gone, 33). Perhaps denying Bigger of a supportive family, unlike the protagonist of his story “Big Boy Leaves Home,” was part of Wright’s strategy for making his novel more brutal than his earlier writings, as discussed above. But we also know that such men do exist in the world, and not only in the black community. As Wright describes, he came to realize that Bigger Thomas was a very prevalent character in the
1930s, in a world in which Nazism and other extremist movements arose to spread the kind of paranoia and loathing that Wright had experienced growing up in the south: “I could hear Bigger Thomas standing on a street corner in America expressing his agonizing doubts and chronic suspicions, thus: ‘I ain’t going to trust nobody. Everything is a racket and everybody is out to get what he can for himself’ (How “Bigger” Was Born, 445). As I will discuss at length in the next chapter, this was a world in which the only truths were lies, and in this world, people who give up on and even reject the search for truth are not only real, but common enough to be far more than the exception to the rule.

The second factor in Bigger’s personality which Wright mentions relates to the naturalist forces to which he submits, the messages (lies) spread by the media which delineate the possibilities of white and black existence. This is most clearly exemplified in the two forms of entertainment provided at the cinema: one is a news reel about (white) high society, which just happens to feature his new employers, and the other is the film Trader Horn, a denigrating portrayal of tribal society in Africa. The latter holds no interest for Bigger, who ignores the film and instead fantasizes about the glamour of the white society of which he is about to get a glimpse:

“white men and women dressed in black and white clothes, laughing, talking, drinking and dancing. Those were smart people; they knew how to get hold of money, millions of it. Maybe if he were working for them something would happen and he would get some of it. He would just see how they did it. Sure, it was all a game and white people knew how to play it.” (33)

The delusion that Bigger’s new association might pay off for him is far more interesting to him than either Trader Horn or the reality which he and his friends have come to the cinema to
escape. In a twisted way, this is Bigger’s American dream: that he can profit by accepting the role prescribed for him by white society. Without a source of happiness in his life, he revels in his meanness and his baseness. Shortly after the cinema, Bigger and his friends meet up to rob a store, but Bigger lets his anxiety get the better of him and turns on his friends with accusations before they even set out. Bigger feels his manhood threatened by his own fears, and his only recourse is to start a fight, after which Bigger feels a strange mix of emotions:

“He had an overwhelming desire to be alone; he walked to the middle of the next block and turned into an alley. He began to laugh, softly, tensely; he stopped still in his tracks and felt something warm roll down his cheek and he brushed it away. ‘Jesus,’ he breathed. ‘I laughed so hard I cried.’ Suddenly he straightened and walked on with a single expulsion of breath. ‘What the hell!’ He stumbled violently over a tiny crack in the pavement. ‘Goddamn!’ he said. When he reached the end of the alley, he turned into a street, walking slowly in the sunshine, his hands jammed deep into his pockets, his head down, depressed.”

(41)

Bigger is so fully brutalized that he, like the “Biggers” whom Wright has observed violating the Jim Crow laws, does not realize that his source of pleasure is his own self-destruction. He tries to explain away his tears because they belie the only mastery available to him: control of his own body. But even this he does not maintain for long, as he is thrown headlong by a tiny crack in the sidewalk. Images of Bigger losing control of his body recur throughout the text, most notably in Book 2, when Bigger succumbs to the freezing water of the fire hose which is used to dislodge him from the roof where he has fortified himself to escape the angry mob.

So, can we believe in Bigger as a person? We do not actually know much about him that we can either believe or disbelieve, as Baldwin complains:
“It is remarkable that, though we follow him step by step from the tenement room to the death cell, we know as little about him when this journey is ended as we did when it began; and, what is even more remarkable, we know almost as little about the social dynamic which we are to believe created him.” (Many Thousands Gone, 33)

What we do know is the experience of being him, which deprives him of the time and peace of mind necessary to be his own person. It is only in prison, in his meetings with his lawyer, Max, that Bigger is able to begin to relate to someone without his interactions being dictated by fear and hatred. Removed from society, and on the verge of being fully removed through his execution, Bigger begins to understand the humanity in himself which he first sensed after killing Mary. Although committing murder was a necessary step toward Bigger’s enlightenment, it is not simply the case, as Baldwin puts it, that he has “come, through this violence, for the first time, to a kind of life, having for the first time redeemed his manhood” (Everybody’s Protest Novel, 21). The glimmer of understanding that awakens in Bigger is not fully formed before he is captured. He is still a brute, governed by instincts, unable to articulate his thoughts: “Hit him! His lips formed the words as he let it come down with a grunt which was a blending of a curse, a prayer and a groan” (261). He is still depicted as losing control of his body, as when he is hit by the icy jet of the fire hose before his capture. But with Max, he begins to understand himself and how he became who he is: “He knew as he stood there that he could never tell why he had killed. It was not that he did not really want to tell, but the telling of it would have involved an explanation of his entire life” (308). Although he cannot explain himself, his understanding of that impossibility makes him no longer an inarticulate brute. He realizes that for his entire life up until his arrest, he had had no respite from an existence defined by fear and hatred. Unlike Clyde,
who has had the luxury of time to collect his thoughts, to have different experiences, Bigger has essentially been on the run his entire life.

In the end, it is Bigger’s desire to be human which makes him human. It is his ultimately human response to his horror, his former, animal-like existence, which makes him relatable as a character. Although Baldwin tells us that “our humanity is our burden, our life; we need not battle for it; we need only to do what is infinitely more difficult—that is, accept it” (Everybody’s Protest Novel, 22), he is speaking in general, not individual terms. Baldwin takes Bigger as a symbol of his race, and he is, in a way. But it would be too simplistic to call any one character or any one man a symbol for all his race. Bigger is an archetype of a disaffected, angry young man. Wright’s achievement includes creating one of the most powerful articulations of this archetype in modern culture. The prevalence of the “angry young man” as both a character and a force in the consciousness of our minds is a testament to the accuracy of Wright’s vision. More importantly, however, Bigger is intended to be an exaggeration of this type, just as Holden Caulfield is an exaggeration of a rebellious teenager who cannot live among society. If Bigger’s humanity is more threatened than perhaps it should be, that is because this is necessary to Wright’s plan to ask the most difficult question: what would happen if a young man were so thoroughly deprived of humanity that he truly became less than human? What would happen if a nation based on a deeply hypocritical and broken system met its native son? Wright is no nationalist; his title is ironic in that he believes that no one is a true native son of any land, and a man can only become one through reification. Wright makes Bigger the least human, most reified of men, in order to conduct an experiment: “As I contemplated Bigger and what he meant, I said to myself: ‘I must write this novel, not only for others to read, but to free myself of this
sense of shame and fear’” (How “Bigger” Was Born, 448). This he accomplishes because even the least of men, even the most animalistic and reified stereotype of a human creature, even a rapist and murderer can overcome his shame and fear and be redeemed. Even Bigger Thomas has within him the desire to “merge” with society (240), and even he can put this desire above his own hatred and wounded pride and accept responsibility for his crimes. As was the case in An American Tragedy, taking moral responsibility for violence against others is a figure for acceptance of one’s role in his own debasement and brutalization, although Bigger is able to take this step, whereas Clyde was not. Bigger ultimately accepts his death because he has accepted his life:

“When a man kills, it’s for something.... I didn’t know I was really alive in the world until I felt things hard enough to kill for ’em.... It’s the truth, Mr. Max. I can say it now, ’cause I’m going to die. I know what I’m saying real good and I know how it sounds. But I’m all right. I feel all right when I look at it that way....” (429).

Although Wright’s plot and structure borrow much from An American Tragedy, his project is larger in scope (albeit much shorter): he has set out to prove something fundamental about human character, just as Dostoevsky did. Wright replaces Raskolnikov’s cold rationality with Bigger’s crippling emotions, but the result is the same: a reaffirmation of the human spirit against all odds.

In light of this achievement, Baldwin’s criticisms of Bigger seem to miss the larger point. Ironically, Baldwin fails because he sees Bigger as a black man, and not as a man. What Baldwin calls Bigger’s “tragedy,” that he has accepted a “sub-human” status (Everybody’s Protest Novel, 22), is really the prelude to Bigger’s triumph. If this tragedy belongs to anyone, it is Clyde’s, although he doesn’t understand it. Clyde mistakes his early luck (his connection to his uncle, his
good looks, his ease with women) for signs that his success is assured if he just keeps doing what seems natural. He becomes so accustomed to rationalizing his actions that he completely gives over his decision-making to chance, and the question of his moral responsibility remains a muddle to the end. Thus, he begins as a romantic optimist and ends scared and confused as the naturalist forces he believed in betray and kill him. Bigger is a naturalist character in the opposite sense, in that he is scared and bewildered by the forces which oppress him at the start, but he ultimately learns through their effects on him that these only define him as much as he allows them to. For this reason, Hakutani notes the irony that Bigger is saved from Clyde’s fate because he is black, because he has no chance, whereas Clyde sees himself “at the threshold of success and achievement” (Hakutani 2, 173). Dreiser seems to note Clyde’s whiteness as a cultural limitation as well: as Clyde awaits his death, he hears the mournful prayer of a Jew and the blues singing of a black man in the nearby cells (790). For Clyde, there is no such escape, no means of articulating his horror. He can only join in, silently mouthing along with the Jew’s confession:

“I have been evil. I have been unkind. I have lied. Oh! Oh! Oh! I have been unfaithful. My heart has been wicked. I have joined with those who have done evil things. Oh! Oh! Oh! I have been false. I have been cruel. I have sought to murder. Oh! Oh! Oh! And for what? A vain—impossible dream! Oh! Oh! Oh! ...Oh! Oh! Oh! Oh! ...

Jump Cut: The Perspective Problem

“The long speech by Bigger’s radical lawyer Max (again a device apparently borrowed from Dreiser) is ill-related to the book itself: Wright had not achieved Dreiser’s capacity for absorbing everything, even the most recalcitrant philosophical passages, into a unified vision of things. Between Wright’s feelings as a Negro
and his beliefs as a Communist there is hardly a genuine fusion, and it is through this gap that a good part of the novel’s unreality pours in” (Howe 43).

A third major criticism of the form of An American Tragedy and Native Son is their reliance on a sharp break in perspective in the narrative to bring the story to its resolution. In each novel, we are transported from the perspective of the protagonist to that of another character for large portions of Book 3, and in each, this character is the defense lawyer. Some find this jarring; others merely take it as a symptom of weak writing, or a desperate attempt to give voice to what the protagonist’s perspective cannot. Baldwin calls Max’s long speech at the end of the trial “one of the most desperate performances in American fiction” (Many Thousands Gone, 38). Once again, the underlying assumption seems to be that this is unplanned. Perhaps the emotionally charged quality of Wright’s writing has given Baldwin the sense that the work was written spontaneously, and not rigorously planned. However, Wright’s borrowing of Dreiser’s structure (the latter of which is most certainly laboriously planned) suggests that his reliance on Max to give “his” message is more than a fallback. Furthermore, I do not assume that either Max or Belknap truly speaks for either author, even though both characters clearly present at least a version of the lesson that we are to take from the novels. In order to better understand the function of these characters in the texts, we must again consider the ways in which these derive from sources in the naturalist tradition.

Another defining trait of naturalist novels which June Howard discusses is the presence of an enlightened perspective, which stands in contrast to the brute characters in the story. In some works, that perspective belongs only to the reader and the narrator, and these cases at least seem to fit Walcutt’s observation that the lesson of the work, the resolution that we are looking
for, is external to the events of the story. That perspective can nonetheless be found within the novel, through the presence of the narrator-as-spectator, who becomes the thinking character in place of the protagonist (Howard 105). Howard also observes that in some naturalist works, an additional character plays the role of spectator, such as Ames in *Sister Carrie* (Howard 107). The function of this character is to help to enlighten the protagonist and try to redeem him or her from the brute status. So, while Hurstwood submits to the brutalizing effects of his poverty, Carrie reaches the end of the novel on a hopeful note, as a character who is beginning to show signs of agency.

In *An American Tragedy*, Dreiser casts Belknap in a similar role. After gaining Clyde’s trust, Belknap is able to convince his client to pour out his story and then reframes it into his defense. Before Belknap’s arrival, Clyde is evasive and dishonest, refusing to answer questions even when the answers are well known. When he is first interrogated by Mason, Clyde attempts to affect nonchalance, but is quickly broken of the act by the quantity of evidence which Mason cites: “And all this Clyde registered mentally, like a machine clicking to a coin, yet said nothing—merely staring, frozen” (562). This is Clyde at his most brutish and inarticulate. With the coaxing of Belknap, however, Clyde begins to speak again and to hope for his acquittal. Belknap and his partner Jephson then work to formulate Clyde’s defense: that he had never intended to kill Roberta, and that his suspicious actions were merely a result of “cowardice, mental and moral” (670). This is a “plausible explanation” (613) but a calculated lie nonetheless, and one which Belknap must coach Clyde to repeat. At the trial, Clyde acts the part well, but he is eventually broken down by Mason’s cross-examination: “his whole manner, as each and every juror noted, was that of one who was not really telling the truth, who was really all of the mental
and moral coward that Belknap had insisted he was—but worse yet, really guilty of Roberta’s death” (712). Clyde fails to convince the jury because he himself is not convinced, because Belknap’s efforts to have him acquitted teach him only that he deserves to lie:

“You swear that it was an accident—unpremeditated and undesigned by you?”

“I do,” lied Clyde, who felt that in fighting for his life a part of the truth, for that accident was unpremeditated and undesigned. It had not been as he had planned and he could swear to that.” (701-2)

If Belknap is supposed to bring about Clyde’s enlightenment, he fails, perhaps because he, like Clyde, is a romantic. This common trait helps him to relate to Clyde as no one else can, but it also blinds him to what his own partner can see in their client: “As Jephson saw him, he was harder and more cunning than Belknap was willing to believe” (601). Whereas Book 2 shows the tragic success of Clyde’s dream, his hope that his dilemma will work itself out without his doing anything, Book 3 shows the failure of Belknap’s dream, that he can save Clyde with a lie that idealizes his conduct.

The fatal flaw of Belknap’s argument, that Clyde’s mental and moral cowardice make him as likely to be seen as guilty as not, may remind us of the complaint that critics such as Trilling have made about the novel: that its hero is too weakened by the author to make a compelling case for how a real person would act in his situation. It is crucial, then, that this argument is presented by Belknap, and not by the narrator himself. As an enlightened character, Belknap evolves out of the narrator to represent one possible perspective which could not otherwise be given by the kind of restrained narrator who has brought us through Books 1 and 2. The savvy, calculating Mason represents another. Although the sudden introduction of two
lawyers as major characters may seem to present a significant break from the previous books, their function in the text is to shift the mode of discourse from a matter-of-fact presentation of events, which has been shattered by Roberta’s death, to a dialectic about how those events are to be interpreted. Throughout Book 2, Clyde debates with himself about his dilemma; as he plans Roberta’s murder, one side of the argument takes form in his mind as a terrifying genie, “the Efrit of his own darker self” (472). He can only take this debate so far, however (trailing off with “and yet—and yet—”), and thus the lawyers must continue it for him. In this light, the apparent shift in perspective maintains cohesion with the rest of the novel, even if it fails to bring about a resolution in which Clyde can believe.

Unlike the trial in An American Tragedy, the appeal of Bigger’s lawyer, Max, is not dialectic at all: it is a long, uninterrupted soliloquy. This seems to suggest that we do not need to hear from the opposing side; we have experienced it throughout the novel. Wright also takes us in a very different direction with his trial, as Max’s purpose is not to acquit Bigger, but to concede guilt at the start and appeal to the sympathy of the judge in sentencing. Max avoids Belknap’s mistake of denying that his client has agency, arguing instead that because Bigger has been denied life for so long, he deserves a chance to live. Bigger’s enlightenment thus comes in the sense of dignity he gains from Max: “It was not the meaning of the speech that gave him pride, but the mere act of it. That in itself was something” (406). Max is the first person with whom Bigger is able to feel the kind of connection which society has denied him.

But this only gets Bigger part of the way toward being able to assert his agency. In his final interview with Max, he feels the connection broken; Max is distant: “Had Max, knowing that he was to die, thrust him from his thoughts and feelings, assigned him to the grave? Was he
already numbered among the dead? He quivered and his eyes grew misty. Yes; Max had left him. Max was not a friend” (423). Then, in what seems a quintessentially naturalist moment, the clouds part and the room fills with sunlight. The yellow light, which is neither “a white mountain looming over him” like the angry mob, nor “the white blur” of Mrs. Dalton (423), awakens something in Bigger that is not fear or anger, but which makes him feel alive: “He summoned his energies and lifted his head and struck out desperately, determined to rise from the grave, resolved to force upon Max the reality of his living” (423). As Bigger begins to speak, Max only disappoints him, replying with generalities rather than acknowledging his connection to Bigger as a person. At last, Bigger comes to an understanding of himself which horrifies Max: “What I killed for must have been good.... I didn’t know I was really alive in this world until I felt things hard enough to kill for ’em” (429). Nagel observes that in this final scene, the imagery of blindness is transferred to Max, who “groped for his hat like a blind man” (Native Son, 429) just after Bigger’s moment of clarity (Nagel 157). Bigger has taken the final steps toward enlightenment on his own, and we see that Max does not represent a direct access to the truth or to the thoughts of the author. Like Belknap, he advocates for the narrator and reader’s sympathy for the protagonist, but he is ultimately a man with his own limitations.

If, as Charles Walcutt says, naturalism is the offspring of Transcendentalism, then we should expect a naturalist world to contain something comparable to the Transcendental Oversoul. Rather than seeing this spirit as an inherently benevolent force which rises out of a well-designed world, however, the naturalist spirit it is an intelligence that rises out of, and is a representation of, a squalid materialist world of poverty, neglect, and the byproducts of industry. Crane’s narrator in Maggie: A Girl of the Streets is such a voice. He treats the characters with
almost no personal regard, often referring to Maggie as “the girl” at the beginning of a new scene, so as to keep the reader from being able to become attached to her. Maggie is merely a part of her environment, and holds no particular interest for the narrator, who treats her with the same disregard as the rest of her world does. Even Maggie’s death is not seen as an important event: it is reported to the reader after the fact, through dialogue between her brother and mother.

In *Sister Carrie*, Dreiser is similarly aloof, but not so deliberately cold: the title of the novel prepares the reader to see Carrie as a sister, a member of society, at the very least.

This is also the case with Clyde Griffiths: the narrator of *An American Tragedy* is sympathetic in the same way that the reader is expected to be sympathetic. His voice, then, rises out of society, and not out of the physical world. And yet, the society of the novel is often portrayed as callous and unsympathetic, or simply easily swayed by baser emotions, as is Clyde’s jury. The people to whom Dreiser’s narrator appeals, however, are not the masses: it is a more highly educated society, the kind of literate society which would be expected to read the novel. Despite all of the claims of some of Dreiser’s early defenders such as Parrington that the novel is proletarian in spirit, its narration is quite the opposite. And the same is true of *Native Son*: Max’s decision to throw Bigger’s fate on the mercy of the judge, as many critics have noted, represents an appeal to the educated and the elite, at the expense of trying to win over the masses. Although Max has often been mislabeled a communist by critics, he is not identified as such in the novel, and this assumption is made by virtue of his association with Jan (Siegel, 118), this move is both more elitist and more pragmatic than the defense of Clyde by Belknap. Max represents the attempt by an educated society to make sense of Bigger. In this way, he too is an elitist.

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If Crane had taken this effect any further, he might have discarded human characters entirely and been left with something unrecognizable as a novel.
outgrowth of the society of the novel. And, like the Daltons, who are sympathetic to the “problem of the Negro,” he is blinded by his attempt to classify Bigger as a member of a group, rather than seeing him as an individual. Max serves as a counter to Henry Dalton, who defends his practice of keeping rents in the Thomas family’s South Side apartment building at unaffordable levels by citing the law of supply and demand:

“‘I don’t fix the rent scales,’ Mr. Dalton said.
‘Who does?’
‘Why, the law of supply and demand regulates the price of houses.’
‘Now, Mr. Dalton, it has been said that you donate millions of dollars to educate Negroes. Why is it that you exact an exorbitant rent of eight dollars per week from the Tomas family for one unventilated, rat-infested room in which four people eat and sleep?’” (326)

Their quarrel is not over Bigger at all, but whether or not the capitalist system (i.e. the American dream) is just. Although Dalton’s denial of his own agency in the face of economic forces is another naturalist narrative, this is not Wright’s main point, and thus Max’s long, didactic speech is not simply an intrusion of the author into the text. Instead, Wright posits that this debate is already taking place within society, and it is only a matter of time before that debate co-opts the discussion of Bigger’s case. Indeed, the pressure on the District Attorney to tie Mary’s murder to Jan and his communist ideals colors the case before Bigger is even implicated, and even buys Bigger the time to attempt an escape; furthermore, the sociological debate, represented by society’s distrust of communists, is foregrounded early in Book 1 by the cinema news reel which casts Jan in a negative light.

Dreiser too prepares us for the debate that will be acted out in court: Clyde’s entire life story is an exercise in blind faith in the American dream. The class prejudices which we see in
Clyde and the people he encounters in Books 1 and 2 set the stage for the politicized debate which plays out between Mason and Belknap in court. Mason appeals to the jury, all married members of the working class and nearly all religious (638), by painting Clyde as a threat to their notion of class. Mason plays up Clyde’s “shiftless” behavior, calling him a “rolling stone” (641) who believed himself to be better than Roberta in daring to court “Miss X.” Belknap’s defense is based on a proletarian appeal, which fails because the jury does not see Clyde as one of their own. Even if everything else he claims is believable, his credibility breaks down over his supposed inability to rescue Roberta from drowning. The question of Clyde’s agency in this crucial moment is the turning point of the trial, and, despite Belknap’s protests of prejudice against his client, Mason has the moral upper hand. Mason represents society’s demand for justice, which, true to life, may be pursued vengefully and with political ambitions in mind. Rather than distracting from Clyde’s story, the background information regarding Mason’s attempt to capitalize on the trial in an upcoming election merely shows how intrinsic class status and public opinion are to society. To Dreiser, all attempts to rise in society necessitate pushing down someone else, suggesting a predatory sort of Social Darwinism. In his rise, Mason consumes Clyde just as Clyde has consumed Roberta. In this light, perhaps Clyde’s tragedy is that he doesn’t realize that he’s not the biggest or even the smartest fish in the food chain.

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We have thus far seen that despite the apparent inconsistencies in the form and structure of Native Son and An American Tragedy, both novels are more than simply what James Baldwin reductively calls “protest novels,” which are “a mirror of our confusion, dishonesty, panic,
trapped and immobilized in the sunlit prison of the American dream” (Everybody’s Protest Novel, 19). Both of these novels are designed as elaborate forums in which conflicting ideas are brought together in order to expose the flawed assumptions on both sides. Returning to Walcutt’s claim that Transcendentalism is the parent of naturalism, let us turn to Walt Whitman for a defense of this strategy: “Do I contradict myself?/Very well then I contradict myself/(I am large, I contain multitudes)” (Song of Myself, 51). In the next chapter, I will discuss some of the philosophical implications of these contradictions and also examine their power to effect social change.
Chapter 2: Truths, Lies, and Determinism: The American Dream on Trial

Thus far, I have discussed *Native Son* and *An American Tragedy* mainly in terms of aesthetics, and in terms of the experience of reading each novel today; however, one cannot fully appreciate the worlds which these novels represent and protest without taking into account their historical contexts. In this chapter, I will examine the influence of the prevailing social narratives of the American dream (in the latter novel) and racial stereotypes (in the former). As I argued in the previous chapter, the aesthetic principles guiding Dreiser and Wright are those of conflicting but ultimately failed visions. What can (and has) easily be mistaken for confusion is, I have suggested, actually a cohesive system modeled upon a world that offers few truths but many powerful falsehoods. Lies are not exceptions, but rather the laws of the land, and yet these lies often overlap and conflict with one another. The same is true of the themes in each novel: both Wright and Dreiser weave together naturalist determinism and romantic optimism into a complex whole. In disentangling some of these themes, I will search for deeper answers as to the meanings of these texts regarding their status as naturalist works, their moral vision, and their effectiveness as forms of protest. As such, I will address many of the philosophical concerns mentioned in the introduction section.

If there was any consistency in the early lives of Theodore Dreiser and Richard Wright, it was in their instability. For a working class son of German immigrants in the 1890s, and, to an even greater degree, for an African American growing up in Mississippi in the 1920s, the feeling of vulnerability to forces beyond one’s control was a defining characteristic of life. Both authors lived through economic boom and bust cycles in which the livelihoods of millions of Americans
lay at the mercy of seemingly arbitrary fluctuations in the value of gold and in the stock market. Through no fault of one’s own, one could lose an entire life savings in a bank panic (and thousands did). In contrast to the popular Horatio Alger narrative, which suggested that through “luck and pluck” one could rise from “rags to riches,”⁸ the American dream was inaccessible to most white Americans (and black Americans were excluded outright). And yet much of American culture focused on the gentility of the Gilded Age and the lavish excesses of the Jazz age. Social Darwinism and the Eugenics movement rationalized the inequalities in American society by positing that success came to those who deserved it, whether on racial or ethnic grounds, on the basis of the Protestant work ethic, or on moral grounds. Dreiser targeted the last of these directly in his first novel: *Sister Carrie* scandalized readers when it was published in 1900 because its title character, despite being a “fallen woman,” rises from the bleakest poverty to the top of the social order while one of her lovers does the reverse. Above anything else, this reflects Dreiser’s belief in the arbitrary nature of the social forces which determine success or failure (Howard 49).

On a more personal and visceral level, one’s chance at happiness in life could be quickly destroyed by a youthful indiscretion or pure bad luck. Dreiser, as many critics have noted, was strongly affected by the plight of his sister, who became pregnant out of wedlock, “ruining” her. She is generally regarded as the inspiration for the title character of *Sister Carrie*, but we can also see her “sin” repeated in *An American Tragedy*, both by Clyde’s sister Esta and by Roberta. Another, less discussed piece of Dreiser’s family history is the fact that his mother, who was born a Mennonite, was disowned by her family for converting to Catholicism in order to marry

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⁸ It should be noted that the Horatio Alger narrative arose within the cultural legacy of Alger’s writings and is not found in his writings, themselves.
Dreiser’s father (Newlin 106). To Dreiser, whose faith in god was tenuous at best, this would have seemed a petty squabble, not unlike that which separates Clyde’s street-preaching father Asa from the rest of the Griffiths family and results in his being disowned.

Turning to Wright, it is no mystery that to grow up black in the Jim Crow south was to be aware of the constant threat of violence on the part of the white community. Wright’s short stories such as “Big Boy Leaves Home” show how arbitrary the cause for that violence can be: for simply being in the wrong place at the wrong time, two boys are shot and killed, another is tortured and killed, and Big Boy, after a narrow escape, is forced to leave his family and flee for the north. Of course, these murders are not simply retribution for the boys’ trespassing on a white man’s land to use his swimming hole; they are caught, naked, in the presence of a white woman who has stumbled upon them by accident, and are thus assumed to be attempted rapists. Their judgment is immediate and inexorable: although Big Boy tries to explain that they simply want to get their clothes and leave, it is as if his words are unintelligible to the woman, who continues screaming, “You go away! You go away!” (Big Boy Leaves Home, 30). Her companion, Jim, sees enough to judge the scene from a distance, and opens fire before the boys are even aware of him. Here was a society so abandoned to paranoia regarding miscegenation that it accepted as a truism the myth that black men were powerless to resist their sexual attraction to white women. That myth was so intrinsic to American society that Wright would describe white/black relationships as

“So volatile and tense... that if a Negro rebels against rules and taboo, he is lynched and the reason for the lynching is usually called ‘rape,’ that catchword which has garnered such vile connotations that it can raise a mob anywhere in the South pretty quickly, even today.” (How “Bigger” Was Born, 439)
This is a theme which we see in *Native Son* as well, as it is the fear of being accused of rape that causes Bigger to smother Mary to death, and rape is immediately assumed as soon as Bigger becomes the chief suspect.

Big Boy’s attempt to explain himself connects to another important facet of Dreiser and Wright’s respective worlds: the futility of trying to deny or resist the prevailing narratives. *Native Son* and *An American Tragedy* both make use of newspaper headlines which scream their judgments against the protagonists in capitalized print, and their judgment is final: as soon as Bigger sees his name appear in connection with Mary Dalton’s disappearance, he knows that his death warrant has been signed, and that “Those words excluded him utterly from the world” (243). Society’s narratives surrounding both Roberta’s death and Mary’s murder are thus portrayed as forming rapidly and leaving no uncertainty in the assumptions they have made.

Unable to have Clyde’s trial moved far enough away to obtain a jury that has not been tainted by the community outrage against him, Belknap is left with jurors who are “all convinced of Clyde’s guilt,” and yet all “convinced that they could pass fairly and impartially on the facts presented to them” (638-9). The power of popular sentiment is even strong enough to sway the one juror who, because of his own prejudices against Mason, threatens a hung jury. Warned by the other jurors that his vote would be exposed to the public, he quickly scuttles his objections and votes “guilty.” For Bigger, it is easier to go along with society’s narrative than to resist it: as he explains to Max, he had indeed considered raping Mary while she was drunk and unconscious, simply because it was such a taboo:

“Yeah; I reckon it was because I knew I oughtn’t’ve wanted to. I reckon it was because they say we black men do that anyhow. Mr.
Max, you know what some white men say we black men do? They say we rape white women when we got the clap and they say we do that because we believe that if we rape white women then we’ll get rid of the clap. That’s what some white men say. They believe that. Jesus, Mr. Max, when folks say things like that about you, you whipped before you born. What’s the use? Yeah; I reckon I was feeling that way when I was in the room with her.” (351)

Bigger’s decision to conform to this lie is a part of his decision to accept his brute status and become the terrible stereotype which James Baldwin spends two essays decrying. His ability to acknowledge this, however, shows that Bigger is on the path toward reclaiming his humanity. Although he feels like he was “whipped” before he was born, Bigger is beginning to acknowledge his own agency.

Open resistance to society’s narrative is impossible for Clyde and Bigger, but Bigger is at least able to subvert that narrative for a time. His fake ransom note, signed “Red,” throws the police investigating Mary’s disappearance off his trail until, by chance, they discover one of her earrings in the furnace. Bigger’s ruse is cleverly calculated to play off some of the other prevailing narratives of society, pitting their paranoia about communists against their distrust of a black man. This is not originally Bigger’s plan: he stumbles onto the idea after Britten, Mr. Dalton’s private investigator, presses him for details about Jan and reveals his suspicion that Bigger is a Party member. By acting to shift the blame to Jan, Bigger exerts a degree of agency, but he is merely repeating another of society’s prejudicial narratives, telling the police what they want to hear, that Jan gave him a few pamphlets about communism. When he encounters Jan outside of the Dalton house, Bigger is wracked with guilt, but continues to repeat his received hostility toward Jan as his only chance for survival: “he had been under a strange spell,

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h Excepting Mary’s murder, which is an accident, and her beheading, which is an act of desperation
possessed by a force which he hated, but which he had to obey” (172). Bigger is thus able to take little satisfaction in his ploy, as his best effort to fight one lie is merely to repeat another. By contrast, Clyde is not able to rely on any such subversive tactics. All of his careful planning quickly collapses as the investigators easily pick up on his trail, and Mason uses Clyde’s feeble attempts to throw them off, his use of pseudonyms with his own initials and his purchase of a second hat, as evidence that Roberta’s death was planned.

Another narrative in the mix for Bigger is the “Uncle Tom” stereotype, which affects the perception of him held by the Dalton household. When Peggy, the cook, is asked by the investigator if Bigger seems like he’s “intelligent” or “acting,” she responds, “He’s just like all the other colored boys,” and “He’s just a quiet colored boy. That’s all I can say....” (191). Peggy’s honest desire to see Bigger through a lens other than bigotry causes her to efface his existence altogether; in other words, being race-blind has made her completely blind. And the same can be said of Mary, who is ignorant of the danger both to herself and to Bigger when she lets her guard down in his presence.

Bigger is thus put in the position which compels him to kill Mary by a clash of social narratives: Mary’s proletarian sympathies against the paranoia about miscegenation. The conditions which bring about Clyde’s dilemma are similar, although, rather than a clash between two competing narratives, Clyde faces a serious inconsistency inherent to one master narrative: the American dream. The flaw in that dream, as Dreiser sees it, is that its promise is democratic, while its effect is to create deep inequalities. It is that hard work is supposed to help one get ahead, but for most people whose work is truly hard, it only degrades them. And its effect, rather

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1 Which, according to Nagel, is symbolized by Mrs. Dalton’s blindness
than to create an egalitarian society, is to produce an elitist one. Even after working the long hard hours in the sultry basement dyeing room of his uncle’s factory, Clyde unquestioningly repeats this received elitism when he is made supervisor of a room full of girls:

“For the most part, as he saw them, they were of a heavy and rather unintelligent company, and he had been thinking that smarter-looking girls might possibly be secured. Were there none in Lycurgus in the factory world? So many of these had fat hands, broad faces, heavy legs and ankles. Some even spoke with an accent, being Poles or the children of Poles, living in the slum north of the mill.” (240)

Many of the features described here are stock adjectives for the naturalist depiction of the proletariat. But Clyde is not able to see his own position clearly enough to understand that he is not exceptional, that he is neither the biggest nor the smartest fish on the food chain, as mentioned in the previous chapter. Dreiser uses Samuel Griffiths to give us this perspective: throughout Books 2 and 3, Samuel tries to solve the question of what to do with Clyde, given his own conflicting ideologies: his desire to help his nephew and his need to maintain the social order:

“There had to be higher and higher social orders to which the lower classes could aspire. One had to have castes. One was foolishly interfering with and disrupting necessary and unavoidable social standards when one tried to unduly favor any one—even a relative.” (176)

Not only is Samuel convinced of the importance of hierarchy, but his factory is even a model of it: as Mr. Sells explains to Clyde, Mr. Griffiths takes pride in his product because cheap collars “give polish and manner to people who wouldn’t otherwise have them,” and thus provide the appearance of rising in class to those who work and aspire to it (321). Dreiser could not have conceived of a more perfect metaphor for Clyde.
Samuel ultimately decides to give Clyde a chance, but armed with this reasoning, he forces him to start at the bottom, as any other applicant with Clyde’s poor experience and education would, albeit with slightly more generous wages. Later, Samuel tours his factory, and the reality of Clyde’s position sinks in: he sees the foreman talking down to Clyde as he would any other grunt worker, and it strikes him how similar Clyde’s appearance is to Gilbert’s. Reasoning that it is a disgrace to have a Griffiths in such a position, Samuel elevates him to the supervisory role mentioned above. Even this position, however, is a problem for Clyde, as it puts him into contact with Roberta, who is both beneath him and not. As Mason later points out to the jury, Roberta’s background is no poorer than Clyde’s (641). She is physically attractive, and this sets her apart from the other factory girls, but, more importantly, Clyde has no other society to turn to for companionship or love. Because he is poor, he has no chance with the rich set, at least so far as he can tell at this point. Even his own family pays little and infrequent attention to him. And yet, (and yet,) to be seen consorting with the working class would ruin what chances he has of cashing in on his name; he must drop his associations with Dillard because he is too conspicuous to blend in with the crowd, thanks to Dillard’s eagerness to publicize his new friend’s connection to the pinnacle of Lycurgus society. His only chance for happiness in the short term is a secret love affair. After the murder, Samuel reflects on Clyde’s position, and begins to understand how difficult it had been:

“His being left to work in that basement at first and ignored by the family. Left to his own devices for fully eight months. Might not that have been at least a contributing cause to all this horror? And then being put over all those girls! Was that not a mistake? he could see all this now clearly, although by no means condoning Clyde’s deed in any way—far from it. The
wretchedness of such a mind as that—the ungodned and carnal desires!” (586)

Samuel Griffiths is a curiously detached character in the text: he is often traveling or concerned with business affairs, and seems to only appear when Dreiser needs him to make a change on Clyde’s behalf, or, in this case, to hire him a lawyer, but he also provides some of the most direct access to Dreiser’s own thoughts. He, more than any character except Belknap, most fully understands the reasons for Clyde’s dilemma, and their connection to class inequality.

Belknap, by sheer novelistic coincidence, can personally relate to Clyde as no one else can because he himself had gotten a girl pregnant in his youth, and might have been in a similarly desperate situation had he not been rich enough to pay for an abortion. When Clyde makes inquiries of a doctor, who, he has been told, performed the service for a rich family looking to avoid disgrace, he finds that the same opportunity is not open to him. He sends Roberta to meet the doctor with a false (married) name, but she is as unconvincing as Clyde later is in court. She then breaks down, tearfully, and confesses that she has conceived out of wedlock, at which point the doctor’s sympathy gives way to moralizing. Of course, what Belknap knows, and what we know, is that the doctor’s moral qualms would be less of an issue if Clyde had the respectability of a rich man, but in this society, to be without wealth is to be without virtue. For all his elitism, Clyde is romantically egalitarian in his beliefs when his own interests are involved, and he thus fails to see the moral weakness of his poverty.

Dimly aware that a line must be drawn somewhere between rich and poor, between respectability and what he (in indirect discourse) thinks of as the “basement world,” Clyde does not understand that he inhabits that intersection. He is caught in the margins of the American
dream, wrapped in its gaping lacuna, and able to see every point but central hole in which he stands. Houston Baker, Jr. has used the trope of a black hole to describe Bigger’s position in society (Baker 133), and the same metaphor works for Clyde: trapped in the event horizon, he is blind to the singularity which draws him in, and can only watch the same images swirl around him again and again (as the same kinds of events repeat throughout the novel); subject to the time-dilation effects of supergravity, he experiences reality at an exaggeratedly slow pace, and he does not realize the end until, all at once, it comes.

To Wright, the combination of factors that make someone a “Bigger” is not strictly related to social narratives, but they contribute to a person’s willingness to accept some of the most damaging and frightfully prevalent ideologies of the day. He writes Native Son at a time when the European continent is being ravaged by Fascism, Nazism, and Stalinism, all of which remind him of the attitude of the “Biggers” he has met (How “Bigger Was Born, 446). As such, he writes it into Bigger’s character that

“He liked to hear of how Japan was conquering China; of how Hitler was running the Jews to the ground; of how Mussolini was invading Spain. He was not concerned with whether these acts were right or wrong; they simply appealed to him as possible avenues of escape. He felt that some day there would be a black man who would whip the black people into a tight band and together they would act and end fear and shame.” (Native Son, 115)

These “avenues of escape” are ideologies that simplify, that redirect fear and hatred to an “other.” Until Bigger is enlightened, this is the only alternative he can find to the one which denigrates him. Thus Native Son, like An American Tragedy, is a novel about the failure of ideologies and the devastating consequences this has for individuals.
Among critics who have reacted most harshly to *An American Tragedy*, the consensus seems to be that the most important action of the novel is Roberta’s death, and that everything that follows (all of Book 3) is an over-long denouement. Even recent, dispassionate critics such as Yoshinobu Hakutani embrace the view that “Dreiser’s interest in *An American Tragedy*,” as contrasted with Wright’s in *Native Son*, “lies not in the result of crime but in its cause” (Hakutani 2, 171). If we were to judge the story based on George Stevens’s 1951 film adaptation, *A Place in the Sun*, that would seem to be the case: the film is almost without a third act, as Montgomery Clift’s arrest is immediately followed by brief trial and execution scenes. But, from Dreiser’s perspective, the trial may well have been the most important part of the story. The culmination of Clyde’s experiences and upbringing is not the death of Roberta, but the dual trial that plays out at the end: the State of New York vs. Clyde Griffiths and the novel itself vs. the American dream which brought Clyde to this point. Although Roberta’s murder is in some regard a dramatic climax, to regard the buildup of the novel as a justification or an explanation of Clyde’s actions, as Hakutani has done, is, I suggest, to seriously misread the novel. During the murder and the events immediately leading up to it, we see nothing of Clyde’s upbringing, nothing of his moralizing mother or his street-preaching father. We see no reference to Esta or her pregnancy, even though she is clearly connected to Roberta thematically. There is no mention of the Green-Davidson, Hortense, or the accident in Kansas City, and although all of these elements maintain a silent presence in the narrative tension, Clyde is unable to see past his immediate circumstances. He hears only the sound of Roberta’s cries, the voice in his head coaxing him to let fate take over and allow her to drown, and the eerie, mocking cry of the weir-weir bird.

Although Dreiser may have set out trying to explain Clyde’s frame of mind through his life
story, when it comes to the murder, these events merely work to explain how Clyde got to this place and this point in time.

In the trial, however, it all comes back. Every aspect of Clyde’s upbringing returns to haunt him as Mason builds his case that Clyde is a criminal deviant, a person to be rejected by society. At the same time, Clyde must retell his life story for Belknap, because every detail is important to his defense. Thus, having laid the evidence before us, Dreiser constructs the two interpretations that will compete for our verdict: either Clyde is a “bearded man” (735) and thus a villain who is fully responsible for his actions, or he is a “mental and moral coward” who was incapable of committing the crime. Between the two, Dreiser leaves us no doubt of his sympathies, pushing us clearly away from Mason’s prosecution, which is carried out through the worst kind of demagoguery and personal prejudice. Mason is biased against Clyde from the very start: “At once he conceived an enormous personal hate for the man. The wretched rich! The idle rich!” (519), before learning that Clyde actually does not come from the kind of wealth that his cousins do. Then, his attitude remains equally negative, focusing on Clyde’s “shiftlessness,” an unsympathetic way of referring to his moving from place to place in order to secure a better life for himself.

It is understandable, then, that the defense has often been read as Dreiser’s own point of view; the narrator’s sympathy for Clyde and significant focus on his perspective push us to emotionally side with the defense. At the same time, however, we know from the information that the narrator provides us that from a moral standpoint, the defense is wrong. The novel offers us many distractions from this underlying truth. The rich development of Clyde’s world, provided through Dreiser’s thorough documentation of events, provides many possibilities and
allows us to ask many questions. The most obvious point of comparison for Roberta’s death is the automobile accident at the end of Book 1. Clyde is not personally at fault in this incident; at least, he is not the driver of the car when it kills a young girl. However, he is a member of the party, and has ample opportunity to speak up as his friends egg on Sparser to pick up speed in order to get them to work on time. Clyde is also morally in the wrong for fleeing the scene, but we are sympathetic to his situation and see him as just a boy at this point. Our sympathies thus excuse him in part: perhaps, in a moment of panic or weakness, would we not be equally compelled to act out of self-preservation? If we are willing to see Clyde as a bit helpless in this incident, a bit lacking in agency as he is trapped in the speeding car which he cannot control, then Dreiser has succeeded in preparing us for the mindset which he wishes to evoke in Book 2.

In Lycurgus, we again see the circumstances align—as if a trap is being laid—to put Clyde in another morally precarious situation. From his chance encounter with his uncle in Chicago, to his chance encounter with Roberta on Crum Lake, to the exquisite timing of his first being noticed by Sondra, and to the appearance of a newspaper article which maps out exactly how he could make Roberta disappear, everything works to confirm Clyde’s belief that he is destined to succeed. He has put Kansas City behind him and ignored the potential lesson that sometimes, if left to chance, the very worst can happen. Like a gambling addict or a market speculator (of which there were many when Dreiser wrote the novel in 1925), Clyde knows that all will work out for the best. We can even feel a sense of religiosity in this belief through indirect discourse. As Clyde struggles to come to a decision about Roberta, he is haunted by a sort of ritualistic chant, telling him what path he must follow: “The way of the Lake. The way of

\(^1\) Once again, it is Clyde’s resemblance to his cousin Gilbert which makes this possible
the Lake.” (468) Surely it was fate which supplied him with the newspaper that put the idea of an “accidental” drowning into his mind, and which first united him with Roberta on Crum Lake, that he might learn that she cannot swim. Clyde is thus willing to believe that, once again, he is not the one in the driver’s seat. In his mind, he conjures a genie, which hatches the plan.

Although we know that this genie is merely a part of Clyde’s mind, Dreiser’s repeated reference to it as if it is a real and external force, even perhaps as a transcendental spirit which embodies Clyde’s fatalism, distances Clyde from the decision to murder Roberta, as if he is helpless to intervene. Dreiser’s choice of a genie conveys one other important piece of information which we may recognize, but which escapes Clyde’s grasp: the lesson of many an Arabian Night, that one must be careful what one wishes for, lest it come true. Clyde gets exactly what he wishes for: although he lacks the courage or conviction to kill Roberta himself, the boat is upset by accident, and she is thrown into the water and hit on the head by the boat as it overturns. As Roberta thrashes about and cries to Clyde for help, he once again leaves matters to fate, and allows nature to run its course. In a way, because of the moral uncertainty he is left with, Roberta’s accidental drowning is the worst possible turn of events for Clyde, as it leaves him crippled with indecision at the end of the novel and incapable of taking responsibility for or coming to peace with his actions. Although it is Wright who would later turn to French Existentialism, it is Dreiser whose protagonist ends in an existential nightmare.

Through all of Dreiser’s distancing effects—his use of the genie, his shifts to a camera-like perspective, and his creation of Clyde as an inarticulate “brute”—we stay close enough to Clyde to sympathize with him, although not so close as to empathize with him. This is a distinction which Howard makes when discussing Hurstwood’s decline toward the end of Sister
Carrie: “We see him, still sympathetically, but more and more from outside as his point of view” (101). The description fits Clyde as well: his decision to accept his brutalization puts him beneath the reader. Regarding ourselves as thinking individuals, we cannot picture ourselves yielding to fatalism and forsaking our own ability to decide. We must inevitably feel much as Clyde’s jury feels when he tries to explain why he did not rescue Roberta from drowning. His retreat into inarticulate brutishness becomes a bit too hard to believe: “‘I... I wanted to save her’ he mumbled, his face quite gray, ‘but... but... as I said, I was dazed... and... and... and...’” (711). Although, as Howard says, “The disturbing question, ‘Could it happen to me?,’ can never be abolished,” (102) there is more than just “fatality” (Howard 102) separating us from Clyde’s fate. Clyde is carefully designed by Dreiser to be perfectly on the margins of the social narrative and uniquely within and insensible to its inconsistencies. This is somewhat more complicated and nuanced than having a single naturalist force, such as genetics or poverty, or a confluence of such forces working together to spell a character’s doom. In this world, the many forces which contribute to Clyde’s demise do not apply to any large class of people, such as the inhabitants of the Lower East Side slums in Maggie: A Girl of the Streets, who will all be swallowed by the filth in which they were bred. Dreiser’s naturalist forces overlap on a single point, and it is the singular bad luck of our protagonist, and perhaps a few rare, poor souls like him, to fall in to it. At the same time, it is his weakness of will, his true mental and moral cowardice, which causes him to choose to remain blind to his position and to surrender to it.

Like a black hole, Clyde is a singularity, a self-contained system. If his fate is inevitable, as the conventional naturalistic reading would suggest, it is so because Dreiser has created him to show us a worst-case scenario, the fullest and most damning degradation of a capitalist society,
the greatest failure of the American dream, as he sees it. The betrayal of this dream is so poignant not because Clyde is a proletarian grunt worker who never had a chance, and not because he has tasted the highs and lows of society as Hurstwood did, but because he has been its devoted choir boy. Dreiser is not saying that he is Clyde, or that we all are, or that a class of people are, but that the potential for Clyde is inherent to a society based on a flawed ideology. The potential for this novel to reform society is not in our pity for Clyde, as Walcutt suggests (27), or in our justifying Clyde’s behavior and accepting the argument of his defense, but in our ability to see that narratives by which he lives his life represent a dead end. That said, the novel does not end on a particularly hopeful note. Not only does Clyde fail to learn anything before his death, but the enlightened characters around him are, at best, left dimly aware of source of the social problems which made Clyde who he is. Samuel Griffiths, as mentioned above, understands that the conditions of Clyde’s life might have been partly responsible for his crime, but he does not, to our knowledge, question his belief in castes or reform the hierarchy in his factory. Belknap, who recognizes that his own wealth was all that separated him from being in the same dilemma as Clyde in his youth, has no power to effect social change.

The only character who is enlightened at the end of the novel is the one who perhaps seemed most foolish in her outlook from the start, Clyde’s mother. Elvira Griffiths, through her unquestioning devotion to her murderous son, is at last able to bridge the gap between her religion and his materialism. She realizes that “Things—just things—had seemed important to him,” (806), and although her faith has taught her to regard this idea as sinful, she accepts him nonetheless. In the “Souvenir” which ends the novel, we see her with her young grandson (Esta’s bastard), a “fresh and unsoiled and unspoiled and uncomprehending boy” who bears a strong
resemblance to Clyde (813). The boy asks for a dime to buy himself an ice cream cone, a luxury
which Clyde never would have been allowed, and Elvira resolves to “be kind to him, more
liberal with him, not restrain him too much, as maybe, maybe she had— She looked
affectionately and yet, a little vacantly after him as he ran. ‘For his sake’” (814). Here, at last, is
the lesson, and the shred of hope, presented by the novel. Although Dreiser does not expect a
resolution to the inequalities in society or a new, better ideology to replace the American dream,
he does believe in the power of love and family to connect people, to humanize them, to help
them maintain their dignity. I suggest that Dreiser expects us to regard Clyde as a cousin, similar
to ourselves but different in spirit (as Clyde is to Gilbert), just as he posited Carrie as a “Sister”
to us all. If we are able to understand that his failed vision of the world is connected to failures in
the social narratives that we take for granted and see him as a person, then, Dreiser hopes, we
can reach the Clyde Griffiths of the world before they are lost to us and to themselves. But in
order for that to happen, we must allow our romantic sensibilities to partially blind us to their
brutality, as it does for Elvira. To this reader, Dreiser has thus given us one of the greatest (if also
one of the subtlest) articulations of romanticism in the American canon.

*Native Son* asks us to see Bigger not as a family member or a friend, but, oddly, as the
Native Son of our land, the embodiment of the failure of our national ideologies. Economically,
he is the product of the unfair rents created by “supply and demand,” which Mr. Dalton cites as a
(naturalist) force beyond his own control. Morally, he is the product of the same denial of agency
by a society that accepts stereotypes unquestioningly. Because he fits into the cracks between
social narratives, because, by being in the wrong place at the wrong time he was caught in an
impossible situation in Mary’s bedroom, his life itself is a testament to the impossibility of his
being all or any of what he is expected to be. Hence, as Max tells the judge, “His very existence is a crime against the state!” (400). In a world in which he will be defined as a rapist for simply being in the wrong place at the wrong time, in which “reality” is merely a tangle of insidious, hateful, and mutually contradictory lies, he is caught between a terror which compels him to conform to those lies and an innate need to lash out against them. Hence, regarding Mary Dalton, he decides,

“Yes, he had raped her. Every time he felt as he had felt that night, he raped. But rape was not what one did to women. Rape was what one felt when one’s back was against a wall and one had to strike out, whether one wanted to or not, to keep the pack from killing one. He committed rape every time he looked into a white face.” (227-8)

There is no connection between “rape” in this sense and the real crime of rape, which Bigger commits against Bessie. Bessie’s rape and murder receive little attention by the court and the media, serving only as a sideshow to the “main” crime against Mary. Bigger is guilty whether he commits a crime or not, so the difference between real crime and the “rape” he feels at every moment is purely circumstantial. Bigger’s crimes, then, are the products of circumstances, or so he believes. Wright, borrowing from Dreiser, writes this naturalist narrative into his novel as yet another failed ideology, which Bigger must ultimately move beyond.

Bigger, unlike Clyde, does move beyond this dehumanizing lie, and thus Native Son is not a tragedy. Nor does Bigger embrace hatred at the end, adopting a better “to rule in hell than serve in heaven” mentality, as Baldwin suggests (Many Thousands Gone, 41). Whereas Dreiser’s goal is for us to pity Clyde, Wright’s is, as I argued in the previous chapter, for us to feel Bigger’s humanity as it reawakens and drives out the feeling that the natural world is bent on his
destruction. In his final scene, as the sun appears, supplanting the shadows and the terrifying white light, it is no longer clear that we are in a naturalist novel. Rather than bringing about Bigger’s new-found wisdom, the sunlight follows it. This is pathetic fallacy, an element of romantic novels, not the stuff of gritty naturalism. If Wright has wrestled in Walcutt’s “divided stream,” his romantic optimism has won out. Bigger can see the world clearly for the first time, and thus Houston Baker’s metaphor of a black hole is not as apt for Bigger as it is for Clyde.

In terms of the potential for motivating reform, if Bigger can learn, after all that he has been through, then anyone can learn. Wright shows us as well as himself that while the ideologies that lead Bigger to kill are a dead end, they do not necessarily equate to a dead end for the human spirit. Although Bigger is doomed to die, this is only the end for him. We know that his execution is not really a figure for the extermination of his race, as Max paints it to be in court. The potential for the future, as Paul Siegel explains it, is in Bigger’s desire to reach out and “merge” with others, to form a community with blacks and whites (522). His final act, referring to Jan by his first name, is a symbol that he has embraced the potential for friendship of a white man. The novel also gives us a glimpse of the black community that is to come. Although Max’s fiery oration predicts a violent uprising, we get a better idea of what to expect from a vignette that takes place while Bigger is hiding from the police. He overhears two black men talking about him and the race rioting that he has incited:

“‘Lissen, Jim. Ef he wusn’t guilty, then he oughta stayed ’n’ faced it. Ef Ah knowed where tha’ nigger wuz Ah’d turn ‘im up ’n’ git these white folks off me.’

‘But, Jack, ever’ nigger looks guilty t’ white folks when somebody’s done a crime.’

‘Yeah; tha’s ’cause so many of us ack like Bigger Thomas; tha’s all. When yuh ack like Bigger Thomas yuh stir up trouble.’
'But, Jack, who’s stirring up trouble now? The papers say they beatin’ us up all over the city. They don’t care whut black man they git. We’s all dogs in they sight! Yuh gotta stan’ up ’n’ fight these folks.’

‘N git killed? Hell, haw! Ah gotta family. Ah gotta wife ’n’ baby. Ah ain’t startin’ no fool fight. Yuh can’t git no justice pertain’ men who kill....’

‘We’s all murderers t’ them, Ah tell yuh!’ (251)

There is no resolution to this debate, at least, not in the near future. Both sides are equally right and wrong. But this is a productive discourse which raises the participants’ awareness of the failures of both sides and shows the bond between these two men which permits frank discussion. Bigger has never been able to have this debate because he does not feel himself a part of any community. He must, in the end, wrestle with it himself, which he is only able to do after committing two murders. Therefore, the lesson of Native Son is that this discussion must take place within the black community and within the American community at large. This process includes the novel itself, which was enormously successful at igniting conversation. The novel is a testament to Bigger’s existence, and just as Bigger did by simply being in the wrong place at the wrong time, it had the power to change the discourse and expose the lies underpinning segregation. This is not because of the hate it contained, although Baldwin and many others thought so; it is because of its success at connecting the reader with Bigger’s humanity, that they may empathize with his struggle. Ultimately, it is the reader with whom Bigger merges to begin a new community.

We are prepared for this merging—and made (dimly) hopeful for a greater community at the end of An American Tragedy—by the self-referentiality within both novels. The lawyers in both cases make their appeals not only to the judge and jury, but to the reader as well, as Dreiser
repeatedly describes Mason and Belknap as being aware that they are actors in a “show trial” (680). They feel the eyes of the nation upon them, and understand that the debate in which they are taking part is larger than them. Bigger, too, gains some dim awareness that his actions have consequences, that they matter in the world, that there is some outside presence, be it god, or the reader, or only Jan who has the chance to take note of his humanity.

Although one ends with tragedy and the other with hope, *Native Son* and *An American Tragedy* have several key traits in common, enough challenge Hakutani, who states that a comparison between these novels is “of limited value (Hakutani 2, 168). In comparing these texts, we see similar ways of reaching out from the direst of circumstances toward fellowship and greater social equality. Both books expose the failures of the prevailing ideologies of their respective worlds. Both parallel this failure by using naturalist aesthetics and by drawing on naturalist philosophies, but ultimately reject materialistic determinism as another tempting lie. Dreiser replaces this philosophy with nothing, as he does not foresee a resolution to the social forces he discusses as being likely. Perhaps this is because, unlike Wright, he does not speak to or about a specific community, seeing America as vast, impersonal, and homogenous (i.e. white), with only minor variations that establish an inescapable and unbridgeable hierarchy. Wright does not fully flesh out his vision for the future, but he leaves enough hints to suggest that it is a romantic one. Despite his Marxist roots, he acknowledges that economic class alone is not enough to provide the basis for a new community. He takes this a step further than Dreiser, however, in suggesting hope that individuals can come together to discuss the flaws of their ideologies and forge bonds across the racial (and, perhaps, economic) divide.
Conclusion

The Legacy of the Protest Novel

In the previous chapters, I have argued that Theodore Dreiser and Richard Wright borrowed from the structure and thematics of the naturalist novel in order to incorporate these elements into a new whole. Their naturalist protest novels, if they can rightly be called that at all, do more than simply wrestle, back and forth, between naturalism and romanticism in Charles Walcott’s “divided stream.” Although both deal with serious and seemingly intractable social problems, both embrace the romantic in the few glimpses of resolution that they provide. These optimistic conclusions are mainly found on the personal level, in the hope that Clyde’s nephew will not grow up with his same materialistic world view, and in Jan’s awareness of Bigger’s enlightenment (after Max delivers his final message). Their social predictions are still bleak, but then, so are those of many realist and romantic novels. F. Scott Fitzgerald’s great paean to the Jazz Age, *The Great Gatsby*, shows a decadent society which helps to bring about the demise of a hopeless romantic not unlike Clyde. Published in 1925, the same year as *An American Tragedy*, Fitzgerald’s novel is shorter and tighter in focus than Dreiser’s, and without question, the former’s prose is technically superior. Fitzgerald also benefited from a critical preference for the “less is more” style in the emerging tradition of modernist literature, whereas Dreiser’s comparatively clumsy tome, with its elegantly wound circular plotting, seemed like something from a bygone era. Nonetheless, the two novels share a focus on tragic events which shed a critical light on social problems of their time.
Likewise, if we compare *Native Son* to an exact contemporary, Ernest Hemingway’s *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, we see similar themes but radically different styles. The principal struggle for Hemingway’s protagonist, Robert Jordan, is to come to terms with his impending death. Against the backdrop of the Spanish Civil War, which stands as a figure for any of the social problems of the age which cause men to turn to Fascistic narratives of intolerance and hate, Jordan ultimately decides that he can accept his impending death because he has experienced love and feels a connection with the world. Hemingway’s writing has even been called naturalistic, although Walcutt claims that *For Whom the Bell Tolls* achieves a “reintegration of spirit and matter, of the demands of science and idealism,” thus reuniting the “divided stream” (Walcutt 270). Despite Hemingway’s focus on natural elements and a connection to the material world, and despite the similarity of *For Whom The Bell Tolls* to *Native Son*, there is one major difference between the work of Hemingway and Fitzgerald and that of Wright and Dreiser: the former do not write to expose social problems in a naturalistic way. Naturalist narratives typically operate by providing what June Howard calls a “slice of life,” a simplified representation of the “total reality” which György Lukács describes in his essay “Realism in the Balance” (Howard 146). Individuals such as Bigger Thomas and Clyde Griffiths, in addition to being characters in their own right (as I argued in Chapter 1), stand for classes of people who struggle with particular forms of social inequality. The characters that surround them likewise double for representatives of social classes and ideologies, although they are not restricted to being purely allegorical figures.

This distinction helps to bring into focus one of the unspoken trends in the criticism of naturalist works, the tension between being read as allegories and being read as stories in their
own right. As I have argued, many of those who have criticized these novels, as well as some who have praised them (such as Irving Howe), have focused on the allegorical reading, arguing that they are too unreal to be read for anything else. This is certainly the thrust of Baldwin’s critiques of Wright, and it fits Trilling’s dismissal of Dreiser just as well. However, as I believe I have demonstrated, these readings focus on perceived political and philosophical problems, both of which I have disputed, to the exclusion of a truly accurate reading of either novel. *Native Son* and *An American Tragedy* defy such simplistic readings because they are complex, multi-layered narratives which skillfully work allegorical elements into their plots. Hemingway, by contrast, was distinctly un-allegorical in his writing, taking the attitude that one could interpret anything one wanted from a good story. The reality which he represents is a modernist world in which events such as World Wars defy our attempts to sum them up with tidy, structuralist interpretations. Likewise, despite its potential for social commentary, Fitzgerald’s writing cannot be simplified into allegory. What I believe I have defined as the genre of Dreiser and Wright is a form of socially conscious fiction which reaches the same ultimate conclusion as Hemingway and Fitzgerald, that the prevailing ideologies have failed, but must work throughout the course of the novel to reach that realization, rather than beginning from the disaffected point of view of the “Lost Generation.” At the same time, the protagonists of the social protest novels I have examined struggle toward a realization of themselves as conscious actors who must ultimately accept responsibility for their own actions, and thus their own agency, even in the face of seemingly overwhelming and deterministic social forces. Whether a protagonist reaches that point or not (as we have seen, Bigger does, but Clyde does not), the novel provides enlightened characters who are capable of receiving its social message, and it dooms any main character who
does not doing so to a tragic end. Finally, although the narration of social protest novels focuses on individuals, it is also conscious of society as a whole throughout, maintaining the reader’s awareness of the allegorical link between the characters and the social forces which they represent.

Rather than looking to writers such as Hemingway, as Walcutt does, for the progress of naturalism, as I have defined it\(^k\), I suggest that we look to another author who began by writing socially conscious novels during the Great Depression, John Steinbeck. Steinbeck began his career with writings in a naturalist vein, such as *In Dubious Battle* (1936), which depicts a strike among fruit pickers who organize around communist-inspired ideas of class struggle. Warren French suggests, however, that in writing *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), Steinbeck turned away from the use of naturalistic characters, by which he means those who are deprived of free will, and began writing “dramas of consciousness” in which downtrodden characters discover their own agency (French 2, 44). If French is correct in this analysis, then we can consider this novel as standing alongside *Native Son* and *An American Tragedy* in this regard. French argues that *Grapes of Wrath* and Steinbeck’s next few works are his greatest achievements, but that after World War II, Steinbeck’s career fell into artistic decline, as he began to blend his “dramas of consciousness” with elements of mythological cosmogony in an attempt at “creating a self-conscious folk hero” and providing a “dramatization of the discovery of an affirmative philosophy” (139-40). In other words, Steinbeck attempted to elevate his social narratives to mythic status in order to create more powerful and more universally accessible figures who could serve as moral examples for all Americans. In *East of Eden* (1951), he produced what is

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\(^k\) And, once again, rejecting Walcutt’s argument that the naturalist works I have analyzed fail to bridge the “divided stream” between materialistic determinism and romantic optimism
universally regarded as his most ambitious of such attempts, and, I suggest, the greatest articulation of the legacy of Dreiser and Wright.

*East of Eden* is a broad novel, with action that covers three generations, two separate family trees, American history from the Civil War to the First World War, agriculture and industry, priestly virtue and unconscionable vice, and a landscape stretching from New England to the South and West to California. Unsurprisingly, it has often been complained that the novel tries to accomplish too much. And, as with *Native Son* and *An American Tragedy*, it has been said that the characters that are used allegorically, which French calls “symbol people,” fail to “come to life for the reader” (French 2, 142). Rather than revisiting these discussions in detail, as I did for the other novels, I would like to briefly examine the symbolic work that *East of Eden* performs in order to analyze how it responds to and builds upon the tradition of naturalist protest novels.

As mentioned above, Warren French has argued that the central conflict in Steinbeck’s novels, beginning with *The Grapes of Wrath*, is in characters coming to gain “consciousness,” in defiance of naturalistic social forces. For much of the novel, the character who struggles to do so is Adam Trask. Adam is emotionally crippled by his desire to please his father and his idealism, which is crushed by two revelations: that of his father’s having gained his fortune through embezzlement and that of Cathy’s infidelity and evil nature. The latter leaves Adam utterly brutalized and inarticulate to the point of failing to name his sons until an enlightened character, Sam Hamilton, intervenes. In Hamilton and his disciple, Adam’s Cantonese cook, Lee, Adam finds a community which eventually helps him to accept his own free will by understanding the Biblical message, *timshel*, “Thou mayest”, which signifies that man has free will (303). As Lee
puts it, “It is easy out of laziness, out of weakness, to throw oneself into the lap of deity, saying, ‘I couldn’t help it; the way was set.’ But think of the glory of the choice! That makes a man a man” (304). Adam does not come to fully understand this lesson, however, until the end of the novel. Meanwhile, his son Caleb must struggle with the same issues that haunt his father. Caleb realizes that he has inherited his mother’s potential for evil, as he finds himself unable to restrain his tendency to be cruel toward his brother, Aron. This parallels the relationship between the sensitive Adam and his stronger brother, Charles, and, likewise, harkens back to another pair of brothers with the same initials, Cain and Abel. Caleb ultimately repeats Cain’s sin of failing to be his “brother’s keeper” by revealing to Aron the truth about their mother, that she is alive (contrary to what Adam had told them) and runs an infamous brothel in town, specializing in sadomasochism. Aron then disappears, enlists in the army, and loses his life in the First World War. Caleb thus feels morally responsible for Aron’s death, even though, unlike Clyde Griffiths, Bigger Thomas, or Cain, he has not gone so far as to embrace murder. Caleb is also conscious of his struggle against naturalist forces, and continually asks if he is doomed to act on the wicked impulses that have been passed down by his mother.

After hearing the news of Aron’s death, Adam suffers a fatal stroke. On his deathbed, however, he manages to repeat “Timshel” to Caleb to pass his “blessing” on to his surviving son (602). The novel ends with hope for Caleb, that he may be able to come to terms with his innate tendency for evil by receiving his father’s forgiveness and accepting his own free will. Thus, Steinbeck’s circuitous, doubled plot (a technique akin to Dreiser’s) shows its efficacy, as Adam is able to avoid repeating his father’s mistakes and pass on his enlightenment to Caleb. Although Adam, like Bigger, faced circumstances too powerful for him to survive, he has the chance to
find redemption through Caleb. Cathy, meanwhile, suffers a fate much like Clyde’s: unable to see a world beyond her own self-interest or to move beyond her own innate wickedness, she dies in terror and existential darkness, disappearing as though “she had never been” (554). Cathy, like Clyde, lacks what Adam and Caleb have: community.

*East of Eden* also expands upon the tradition of protest novels in its attempt to create a broad, inclusive American mythology which reaches across regional, religious, class, and racial lines. The community which helps Adam and Caleb to accept their lots in life includes Lee, a Chinese American who ultimately decides that he is an American as much as anyone else (570), and Sam Hamilton, an Irish immigrant who overcomes the prejudice and hardship with ingenuity and without complaint. Steinbeck situates this community within a broader American culture, using the Hamilton children to represent different walks of life: Tom works his father’s farm; Will becomes a successful businessman; George opens a Ford dealership; Joe becomes an academic; Una marries a poor man; Mollie marries a rich man; Dessie runs a dress shop that is doomed by the advance of industry; and Olive (Steinbeck’s mother) becomes a teacher. All of this is important to Steinbeck’s goal to create an inclusive mythology. As he writes, “I believe that there is one story in the world, and only one, that has frightened and inspired us, so that we live in a Pearl White serial of continuing thought and wonder” (*East of Eden*, 413). That story is the battle between good and evil, between free will and fatalism. By making his novel a distinctly American revision of the story of Cain and Abel, Steinbeck updates this story in a way that will appeal to a broad audience.

In bridging the economic divide, Steinbeck deals principally with the question of guilt: what is the responsibility of the rich to the poor? Steinbeck links this to the question of evil by
making the virtuous Sam Hamilton poor and the Trask and Bacon families rich by ill-gotten
gains. Adam tortures himself throughout the novel for his fortune, wondering why he deserves
the choicest plot of land while the hard-working Hamiltons live on the only infertile tract in
Salinas. Adam later crushes Caleb by rejecting the money he has earned through his investment
in canned beans, profits which, due to the realities of economics, were not shared with the
farmers who grew the beans (543). After his father spurns Caleb’s money, which would save
them from financial ruin, Caleb burns it all in despair. Although this assuages Caleb’s guilt, it is
not a realistic way of living in a capitalist society. Caleb does get another chance, however. One
of Cathy’s final, sadistic acts is to will the fortune that she has amassed through prostitution to
Aron, who, sharing Adam’s moral purism, would be horrified to receive the money. Aron does
not live to collect, and it falls to Caleb to deal with the guilt of profiting from evil:

“Cal said, ‘Abra, I’ve killed my brother and my father is
paralyzed because of me.’
She took his arm and clung to it with both hands.
Cal said, ‘Didn’t you hear me?’
‘I heard you.’
‘Abra, my mother was a whore.’
‘I know. You told me. My father is a thief.’
‘I’ve got her blood, Abra. Don’t you understand?’
‘I’ve got his, she said.’” (598)

Together, the pair can come to terms with their shared guilt because they are not doomed to
repeat the sins of their fathers (or, her father and his mother). Considering the novel’s reflection
on American history, which Lee summarizes as “We’re a violent people” (570), Cal and Abra’s
resolution suggests the potential for Americans to accept our history of slavery, imperialism,
aggression, and social inequity and acknowledge that we are not doomed to repeat them. This is
the novel’s final, triumphant lesson for society as a whole.
There may be those who cannot accept an American mythology because of its obvious unreality. It is always easier to accept the mythical events of an unreachable, distant past. If we ever try to picture those times, however, we are inevitably left disappointed that the real King Arthur could not have been the man of legend. He is best left alone in the obscuring magic of “a long time ago” because the unreality of the story is understood from the start. In *East of Eden*, Steinbeck asks us to accept the unreality of American characters that resonate symbolically with Biblical figures. Rather than placing them in a distant past, with limited moral applicability to the social problems of the present day, he places them only one generation in the past. And he asks us to accept one more level of unreality by placing real people among the “symbol people,” as French calls them, by making the “symbol people” the parents and grandparents of the real. The reason this all works is that we are told this story through the voice of John Steinbeck (the narrator), the grandson of Sam Hamilton (the character)\(^1\). Because the events of the novel take place during the narrator’s childhood and before he is born, we know that his information is largely second-hand, and given to some exaggerations. It is understandable, then, that the narrator would build up his grandfather to a folk hero status, or that he would paint Cathy, the character about whom he has likely received the most biased accounts, as a devilish figure, a born “monster” (73). Steinbeck draws on our innate tendency to see the figures in our own lives as representatives of a cosmogony, a system which defines our place in the world, as a means of linking personal struggles to social ones.

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\(^1\) The names of the narrator’s family are accurate to those of the author’s family.
At the same time, Steinbeck is careful to remind his readers that we must not go too far in mythologizing our lives because of the tendency to posit ourselves at the center of that cosmos. Lee explains this to Caleb, chiding,

“You’re pretty full of yourself. You’re marveling at the tragic spectacle of Caleb Trask—Caleb the magnificent, the unique, Caleb whose suffering should have its Homer. Did you ever think of yourself as a snot-nose kid—mean sometimes, incredibly generous sometimes? Dirty in your habits, and curiously pure in your mind. Maybe you have a little more energy than most, just energy, but outside that you’re very like all the other snot-nose kids.” (570).

This is a lecture that Clyde Griffiths sorely needs as he comes to believe that it is his destiny to follow “The way of the Lake,” for the innate narcissism that suggests that one’s own struggles are of mythic proportions can, at the same time, tempt one to deny responsibility for one’s own actions. If An American Tragedy and Native Son show us how damaging that temptation can be, East of Eden shows that it is possible to believe in the mythical, the legendary, the existence of forces greater than oneself. This faith, tinged with self-doubt, is, I believe, the heart of naturalism.

Despite the last century’s predilection for literature that focuses on the observable, the small, the human, and its rejection of the grandiose, all-encompassing metanarratives of the past, our literature and other forms of culture continue to ask questions about the broader movements of society. Although some have argued that this form of literature is not true to lived experience, do we not in our daily lives stop to ask the larger questions, to think of ourselves as connected to an “imagined community” with certain common values, and believe in something called the American dream? The grain of Modernist literature was to accept man’s smallness and his
inability to define the world with rigid structuralist systems. The convention has been to accept this fatalism with a mixture of hope and despair. But naturalist writing, by daring to deal with social issues head-on and address individuals’ roles in these modern (and yet eternal) problems of inequality and the choice between good and evil, has moved in a more romantic direction. The authors I have discussed all believed in the potential for social change, and their novels express that belief by placing change within—or just beyond—their characters’ grasp. By creating worlds which are steeped in allegory, ultimately reaching toward the mythical, they bridge the gap between individuals and imagined communities to show the potential for reform on the societal level through the lessons learned by their characters. If these novels indeed deal with a “divided stream,” then I suggest that it is a division not between hope and materialistic despair but between the smallness and futility of man to bring about social reform and the potential to take strides in that direction through the power of example and the bonds of community. In the face of overwhelming odds, not all of us can accept the harder, romantic path. These novels reflect that accurately. But they also suggest that in the greater scope of society, there are those who can rise to mythic status and inspire many to join with them in effecting reform. In that regard, these novels of social protest are at least the equals of their counterparts, the works of modernist literature which focus their hopeful individuals bucking the great tide of social change.
Bibliography


