Reality, Narrative, and Law: The Case of An American Tragedy

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Abstract: Theodore Dreiser’s An American Tragedy tells the story behind the sensational murder trial of a young man who is accused of drowning of his pregnant girlfriend. He had ample motivation to commit the crime and took initial steps to make it happen. He may not, however, have “caused” the crime in the technical sense that lawyers use the word. My essay describes the metaphor of the threshold that recurs throughout Dreiser’s novel and traces the theme of “liminality,” or border-crossing. The social border in the novel is the line between classes. Both Clyde Griffiths and Roberta Alden are social climbers, hoping to ascend in status by marrying upward. The legal border is the line between intention and causation. At the root of Clyde’s bungled murder plot is his wish to exchange Roberta for “Miss X,” the wealthy socialite with whom he was infatuated. Roberta’s “accidental” drowning, however, may really have been accidental. Later, his lawyer, with more than a modicum of irony, urges Clyde to exchange a plausible lie for the implausible truth by concocting an alibi. This advice reveals to Clyde that the law, instead of reflecting the truth, sometimes reverses it into its mirror image. The exchange of reality for illusion, or truth for falsehood, turns out to be what passes for justice in the legal order to which he must answer. At the end, the reader is left to ponder the truth about Clyde himself – whether he ever crossed the line between thought and deed, or, more pointedly, whether he was psychologically capable of any deed that requires deliberation, resolve, and action.

Introduction: Border-Crossing

Casual examination of himself in mirrors wherever he found them tended rather to assure him that he was not so bad-looking – a straight, well-cut nose, high white forehead, wavy, glossy black hair, eyes that were black and rather melancholy at times. And yet the fact that his family was the unhappy thing that it was, that he had never had any real friends, and could not have any, as he saw it, because of the work and connection of his parents, was now tending more and more to induce a kind of mental depression or melancholia which promised not so well for his future. It served to make him rebellious and hence lethargic at times. Because of his parents, and in spite of his looks, which were really agreeable and more appealing than most, he was inclined to misinterpret the interested looks which were cast at him occasionally by young girls in very different walks of life from him – the contemptuous
and yet rather inviting way in which they looked to see if he were interested or disinterested, brave or cowardly.¹

In this scene from the early pages of *An American Tragedy*, Theodore Dreiser introduces the protagonist of the novel, Clyde Griffiths, as an unhappy teenager pondering his appearance in a mirror. What is perhaps most significant in this description of the future murderer is the complex set of false oppositions generated by the subject’s examination of himself in a mirror. What Clyde sees in the mirror is supposed to reflect reality, but the image returned by the mirror differs from what Clyde knows the truth about himself to be. The mirror reflects a well-bred attractive youth, rather than the unhappy, isolated person who stands before it. Somewhere at the borderline between reality and representation, a subtle change occurs that transforms the image in the mirror into a representation of what might be rather than a representation of what is.

This puzzling reversal typifies encounters between the individual and the social order in Dreiser’s America. The liminal or border-crossing experience portrayed by Dreiser in his story about the killer, Clyde Griffiths, has a social and legal as well as a psychological dimension. At the novel’s pivotal moment – when Clyde and his victim, Roberta Alden, are drifting alone on a boat in Moon Cove – Clyde reaches a point where he has a chance to change his status in some decisive way, either by letting Roberta drown or by rescuing her. Just as the change is about to occur, however, Clyde is entranced by the fantasy that his actions are being controlled by a malevolent genie. What seemed to be a threshold that could easily be crossed turns into a gap that cannot be crossed, and Clyde is transformed by the genie from an agent of change into the passive observer of his own crime.

On a small scale, the confusion and frustration that results from Clyde Griffiths’ attempt
to make reality conform to its mirror image is evident in the passage quoted above. The disparity makes the young man “rebellious” but, at the same time, “lethargic.” He is frustrated because he is less valuable than the image in the mirror suggests. But the handsome image in the mirror nevertheless attracts attention from “young girls in very different walks of life from him,” which he interprets as “contemptuous and yet inviting.” His interpretation of the message he receives from the looks of others encourages him to misread his own identity as a choice between reflecting and yet opposing alternatives: he may be either “interested or disinterested, brave or cowardly.”

These false and mutually exclusive alternatives are the immediate form taken in this scene by the theme of liminality. Between reality and representation there is always a gap, or indeterminate space, or threshold, that cannot be crossed, and which cannot even be admitted to exist. The protagonist is compelled to try to cross the space between the two and become the idealized image reflected in his mirror. As he tries to cross the threshold, however, he is paralyzed by the impossible choices he must make. It is impossible to be both things at once – interested and disinterested, brave and cowardly – because he finds that he is both and yet neither of the two. In the end, the threshold that looked so easy to cross turns into a dangerous gap in reality into which he falls and disappears.

I will first describe metaphor of the threshold as it is deployed by Dreiser, and then I will move on to explicate the essential liminal experience in the novel, the tragic encounter between Clyde Griffiths and Roberta Alden in Moon Cove. Here, in the midst of a realistic true crime story, the textual narrative begins to fray, and what happens between them is represented as a psychological experience rather than an objective fact. The rest of the novel shows the legal and
social order trying and failing to come to terms with Clyde’s inexplicable crime.2

1. “The Door of Hope”

liminal \li-me-nl\ adj [L. limin-, limen threshold] (1884) 1: of or relating to a sensory threshold 2: barely perceptible 3: of, relating to, or being in an intermediate state, phase, or condition: IN BETWEEN, TRANSITIONAL <in the ~ state between life and death – Deborah Jowitt>3

The “Door of Hope” is the novel’s most obvious and ironic metaphor for the threshold. In the beginning of the novel the “Door of Hope” is the name of Clyde Griffiths’ home, the depressing and decrepit mission run by his fanatical parents in Kansas City. The “Door of Hope” is the door that Clyde pushes against throughout the novel, hoping that it will open into a better world. At the end of the novel, however, the only door that opens for him is the door of the execution chamber. Here at last Clyde passes through a door that leads, as the bitter saying goes, into a better world than one he has ever known, a world into which his victim Roberta Alden preceded him earlier in the story.

Just as the novel has two “Doors of Hope,” it has two Clyde Griffiths who bear an ironic relationship to each other: there is Clyde himself and his cousin Gilbert, who startlingly resembles Clyde. Clyde and Gilbert immediately hate each other; Gilbert recognizes Clyde as a threat to his social standing, while Clyde enviously identifies Gilbert as an image of what he might have been if he had been born into a different family. Clyde’s project throughout the novel is to displace Gilbert, while Gilbert, in turn, makes it his business to exclude and, if possible, to destroy the usurper. Hence instead of embracing their composite identity as two aspects of “C.G.,” they experience the likeness as a threat to both “C” and “G.”
If they are mirror images of the same person, one must be real and the other a fake. Gilbert immediately casts Clyde in the role of charlatan, while Clyde portrays himself as the rugged original compared to whom Gilbert is an effete, faded copy. The mutually exclusive alternatives perceived by Clyde and Gilbert are illusory effects of the reflective process that created their double identities, but the illusion is no less powerful for being unreal. The gap between the two characters, as well as between the two social classes from which they come, is the space between two mirror images that cannot be crossed without shattering one or the other.

In the context of the novel, the most immediate and compelling consequence of this gap between representation and reality arises from the protagonist’s attempt to wrest his new identity out of the social order. Just as literary realism is supposed to reflect social reality, so the legal system is supposed to reflect the social order. Clyde, however, is to discover that the law cannot comprehend the truth of the experiences he has undergone, and therefore cannot begin to represent that truth in the form of justice.

When he realizes that law-abiding conduct is not going to deliver his fair share of the world’s bounty, Clyde becomes convinced that it is necessary to break with the social order, that is, to break the law. Crossing the line between legal and illegal behavior, however, becomes the ultimate liminal experience, one that turns into a threshold that cannot be crossed despite Clyde’s best (or worst) efforts. To the contrary, Clyde’s attempt to act according to the dictates of his own needs rather than according to the rule of law merely ensnares him more firmly within the law’s meshes.

This is because, as Clyde will later learn, money and law bring together defendants and plaintiffs in a way that translates the defendant’s guilt and the plaintiff’s injury into an exchange
of identical sums of value. Law is ultimately a medium of exchange rather than an enchanted doorway through which one might hope to glimpse an ideal social order, or even a mirror that accurately reflects society as it is.


The point at which the story of Clyde Griffiths begins slipping from sequential narrative into surreal delusion comes midway in the novel, at the end of Book II, when Clyde’s darker or primordial self detaches itself from his conscious mind, “emerging as smoke from the mystic jar in the net of the fisherman – the very substance of some leering and diabolical wish or wisdom concealed in his own nature...”4 The two voices of Clyde’s self, his conscious mind and the genie or “Efrit” of his subconscious mind, begin to engage in a dialogue that circles around a set of reflecting yet illusory alternatives: entrapment or escape, life or death, plan or accident. Similarly, the genie’s actual appeal consists of a set of opposing and self-negating terms – “now abhorrent and yet compelling, leering and yet intriguing, friendly and yet cruel, offer[ing] him a choice between an evil which threatened to destroy him (and against his deepest opposition) and a second evil which, however it might disgust or sear or terrify, still provided for freedom and success and love.”5

These false oppositions, as noted before, revolve around the textual device of the ‘threshold,’ a literary counterpart to the legal fiction that allows judges to draw lines between criminal laws and outlaw behavior. Judges are able to assume their positions of authority inside a legal order that encompasses all of society only by assuming that the image of the outlaw reflects and reverses the image of the law-abiding citizen. In other words, legality and illegality
are conceived as two terms of a binary opposition, separated by a criminal threshold that one crosses when one violates the law.

What if, however, the opposition between legality and illegality is yet another false opposition, a choice of reflecting and illusory alternatives similar to those offered Clyde Griffiths by his genie? If this were so, the legal system would be unable to offer a coherent explanation of the criminal’s actions. In order to prevent this from happening, society always contains criminals within the legal order, even when they are outside the law. The threshold between legality and illegality is one that beckons, but which dissolves as they approach it; they can come near the line that Clyde tried to cross, but never actually cross it and go beyond the law.

The threshold between law and non-law is “temporally non-existent… a phantom place [that] unmakes the dialectic of inside and outside, replacing it by a mediating passage between.” Nevertheless this crossing point is a necessary fiction for the construction of a social order, so that even though it is a non-existent, phantom place, it is also everyplace and everywhere. It is not only the threshold between constraint and freedom, legality and illegality, but it is also the line between social classes in America, where it functions as it does in literary history, as the space between the archetypal images of the labyrinth and the temple.

[The] threshold is an edge at which simultaneous participation in the sacred and the profane becomes available to the hero of consciousness.... If the temple and the labyrinth provide the models of sacred stillness and profane movement, the threshold is the model of the transitional phase that links these two fundamental modes of being.

The pivotal threshold experience in *An American Tragedy* revolves around an unsuccessful attempt by Dreiser’s parodic “hero of consciousness” to cross the boundary between
social classes. Indeed, the ideal of equality with which he is imbued teaches him that lines between social classes are there only to be crossed. This is why every time Clyde glances casually in the mirror, hoping to see the image of a well-bred, sophisticated youth, he is wondering why he is excluded from the society to which he deserves to belong, and assessing how far he will have to go before he will take his rightful place inside the sacred precincts of the temple.

Unfortunately he lacks the ability to rise on his own, and he wasn’t lucky enough to be born into the privileged branch of the Griffiths family, but he shares with Roberta Alden the belief that marriage to a social superior (Roberta to Clyde Griffiths, Clyde to “Miss X,” Sondra Finchley) will take them from the labyrinth of poverty into the temple of affluence. For both Roberta and Clyde, “the way of the lake” is the threshold through which they must pass on the way to love and good fortune.

Because the threshold is a non-existent, phantom place, however, it seems to recede as Clyde and Roberta approach it. At the moment of truth on the lake, the realistic texture of the narrative liquefies, blurring the line between the subjective contents of Clyde’s consciousness and the objective facts of his situation. The “way of the lake” turns into the “passage across [a] no-man’s-land” where “the betweenness of time-as-moment, pure thresholdness, barren liminality, at least in what Einstein would call a ‘space-like’ way, must be a nothingness. Between the temple and the labyrinth there must be a crossing which, viewed from the perspective of time, does not stand, stay, hold, or persist.”

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3. “Moon Cove”

The clearly etched lines that sustain the social and legal order turn out to be lines that have no crossing point. The barrier, however, is not physical, or even financial, but psychological. Clyde learns that there is no “Door of Hope” into the world of inner sanctity, but only a series of mirrors that reproduce images of unsanctified reality and reflect him back to himself.

The legal boundary that Clyde must cross in order to break the law, like the surface of the lake into which he must plunge to rescue Roberta, is figured metaphorically in the text as a mirror that seems transparent, but through which he cannot pass. The circularity of the stand-off in Clyde’s mind between illusion and reality is represented, in turn, by the spherical configuration of the lake in which Roberta drowns.

And then at last, after fully an hour of rowing, brooding, singing, stopping to look at some charming point of land, reconnoitering some receding inlet which promised water-lilies, and with Roberta already saying that they must watch the time and not stay out too long, – the bay, south of the island itself – a beautiful and yet most funereally pine encircled and land delimited bit of water – more like a smaller lake, connected by an inlet or passage to the larger one, and yet itself a respectable body or water of perhaps twenty acres of surface and almost circular in form.9

This circular body of water, a lake within the lake, not only reflects the form of the larger lake, but projects its form into three dimensions (it is a “huge, black pearl,”10 “a large, crystalline ball”).11 The alternating opacity and transparency of the sphere corresponds to the delicate balance between sanity and psychosis that characterizes Clyde’s mental condition as he drifts on the lake with Roberta.

To be sure there was Roberta over there, but by now she had
faded to a shadow or thought really, a form of illusion more vaporous than real. And while there was something about her in color, form that suggested reality – still she was very insubstantial – so very – and once more now he felt strangely alone.... And Clyde was alone, so very much alone and forlorn, in this somber, beautiful realm to which apparently he had been led, and then deserted. Also he felt strangely cold – the spell of this strange beauty overwhelming him with a kind of chill.\textsuperscript{12}

In view of the homicidal act that Clyde is contemplating, it is hardly surprising that this circular body of water should serve as a metaphor for an easy death: “And somehow [this inner lake] suggest[ed] an especially arranged pool or tarn to which one who was weary of life and cares – anxious to be away from the strife and contentions of the world, might most wisely and yet gloomily repair.”\textsuperscript{13} The insidious beauty of the lake mocks him precisely because, paradoxically, its encircled banks seem to suggest “endless space where there was no end of anything – no plots – no plans – no practical problems to be solved – nothing.”\textsuperscript{14} Yet the illusion of endless space where there is really only the endless reflexivity of circular form paralyzes Clyde when he most needs the will to begin the series of sequential actions that will realize his plot to rid himself of Roberta. So instead of taking the necessary steps for moving forward, Clyde sinks into a death-like trance and seems “to slip away from the reality of all things.”\textsuperscript{15}

It is while Clyde is in this trance that he hears for the final time the voice of his genie. The inside/outside opposition, which is literalized by the configuration of Moon Cove as a lake within a lake, takes the same form as the puzzle of where the genie’s voice originates, since it is “concealed in [Clyde’s] own nature,” but it speaks from a location outside his conscious self. The scene, at “the center or mentating section of his brain,” where the debate between Clyde and the genie takes place is compared to “a sealed and silent hall in which alone and undisturbed, and
that in spite of himself, he now sat thinking on the mystic or evil and terrifying desires or advice of some darker or primordial and unregenerate nature of his own..."16

This sealed and silent hall is located within his own brain, but just two chapters later this inner chamber is externalized as the dark and silent pool of water (Moon Cove, itself an inner chamber of Big Bittern Lake) where Clyde again seems to be alone, again hears the genie’s voice, and again is caught in “a balanced combat... between a powerful compulsion to do and yet not to do.”17 The spherical chamber of his own skull is transformed into “the magnetic, bluish, purple pool” on which he and Roberta float, “and which, as he continued to gaze seemed to change its form kaleidoscopically to a large crystalline ball. But what was that moving about in this crystal? A form! It came nearer – clearer – and as it did so, he recognized Roberta struggling and waving her thin white arms out of the water and reaching toward him!”18

The skull-like chamber in which Clyde is contained has changed into a womb-like chamber in which Roberta is contained. Moon Cove is not only a womb in which Roberta floats, but also a metaphor for Roberta’s womb in which Clyde’s unborn infant floats. The fetus in Roberta’s womb, in turn, refers back to – and is the direct cause of – Clyde’s delicately balanced condition, floating in a state of “balanced immobility” and “eerie unreason or physical and mental indetermination,” but momentarily prepared to yield “to a tide of submerged hate, not only for himself, but Roberta – her power – or that of life to restrain him in this way.”19

4. Criminal Intent

Clyde is unable to identify the target of his hatred, or the source of the constraints that hold him back, because the line between the contents of his own consciousness and his external
environment is fluid rather than fixed. The series of concentric spheres in which he moves have no fixed relationship to reality, but only a reflexive relationship to each other. The line between imagination and reality keeps moving and reframing the field of his consciousness.

In this psychosis, the concept of criminal intent becomes worthless as a criterion of culpability because the opposition between an external reality and an inner core of self-willed meaning to which real-life events or criminal acts can be referred has been turned into yet another hallucinatory reflection in the mirror of Clyde’s own derangement. As presented in the novel, Clyde at one point intended to kill Roberta, his pregnant fiancée, but then changed his mind. Nevertheless, the events he set in progress led to her death. Hence he is ‘constructively’ guilty of murder – that is, guilty as a matter of interpretation, rather than of fact.

The reflexive structure of the tarn (“Moon Cove”) defeats reality by unsettling the relationship between an inner mental space, and a real world in which the protagonist (the “hero of consciousness”) must act. Clyde’s reflective, inward gaze, however, should not be mistaken for a sign of psychological depth. His inward gaze does not probe the depths of the lake, but stops at its reflective surface, where self is experienced as a reflection of others, and others are experienced as projections of the self. At the threshold between self and others, there is no ‘real’ self or ‘real’ other, but only a proliferation of narcissistic mirror images.

Clyde’s psychological shallowness is the shallowness of a two-dimensional copy, which is why Dreiser portrayed him, not as an object of revulsion, but rather as a mirror in which society can see what it has produced. To emphasize this point, Dreiser gave Clyde a heavy box camera to use for his murder weapon. Before Clyde strikes Roberta with this camera, he takes her picture with it. The murder thereby merges reality and representation into a single act – both
literally and metaphorically – by mimicking and reversing the technology of picture-taking. This is because the camera is supposed to imprint an image of the subject on sensitized paper without making physical contact. Clyde, however, strikes Roberta with his camera and imprints the camera’s outline on her face so that her skin is like a film that records the violence of his deed. Later the coroner’s ‘development’ of this image is introduced as evidence at Clyde’s trial, along with the blurred but still recognizable image of Roberta retrieved from the wet film in Clyde’s camera.

5. An ‘Alibi’ is not a ‘Lie’

Throughout the novel, such mechanically produced images proliferate on the borderline between fantasy and reality because Clyde’s imagination is entirely captivated by the images and goods offered to him by a consumer society. In the latter half of the novel, however, a second type of free-floating representation, the narrative form of Clyde’s alibi and the conflicting accounts of his crime offered by the prosecution and defense, appears to fill the space between Clyde’s criminal deed and its legal meaning.

When Clyde’s attorney, Reuben Jephson, advises Clyde to construct a fictitious version of his activities prior to the ‘accident,’ he carefully explains that an alibi is not a lie, but rather a “dummy” that substitutes for the truth, and mediates between the things that happened to Clyde, and what those things meant:

“You’re not guilty! You’re not guilty, Clyde, see? You understand that fully by now, and you must always believe and remember that, because it’s true. You didn’t intend to strike her, do you hear? You swear to that. You have sworn it to me and Belknap here, and we believe you. Now, it doesn’t make the least
bit of difference that because of the circumstances surrounding all this we are not going to be able to make the average jury see this or believe it just as you tell it. That’s neither here nor there. I’ve told you that before. You know what the truth is – and so do we. But in order to get justice for you, we’ve had to get up something else – a dummy or substitute for the real fact, which is that you didn’t strike her intentionally, but which we cannot hope to make them see without disguising it in some way.”

Jephson then goes on to explain how this “dummy or substitute” is a kind of counterfeit currency that you use to pay for justice when, for some strange reason, people will not accept the ‘real’ currency, that is, the truth.

[Jephson] looked into Clyde’s eyes for a moment more, and then added: “It’s this way, Clyde. It’s like having to pay for potatoes, or for suits of clothes, with corn or beans instead of money, when you have the money to pay with but when, because of the crazy notions on the part of some one, they won’t believe that the money you have is genuine. So you’ve got to use the potatoes or beans. And beans is what we’re going to give ‘em. But the justification is that you’re not guilty. You’ve sworn to me that you didn’t intend to strike her there at the last, whatever you might have been provoked to do at first. And that’s enough for me. You’re not guilty.”

At first it sounds like Jephson is recommending that Clyde revert to a primitive barter economy, where commodities are traded for commodities of equivalent value without the mediation of currency. On closer inspection, however, it becomes clear that Jephson does not plan to trade value for equal value, but rather to give the court a worthless dummy in place of the real thing. His “beans” are counterfeit currency – junk, nonsense, and garbage – a plausible but untrue story that is being substituted for the truth. “So you’ve got to use potatoes or beans. And beans is what we’re going to give ‘em.”

Jephson is aware of the equivalence between money and value, and conceives of
narrative as a type of currency that can be used to pay for justice. Because the truth in Clyde’s case cannot be represented in the form of a ‘true’ story, however, it is necessary for Jephson to substitute a plausible lie that can be exchanged for justice, as if it were real money. Like counterfeit currency, the alibi by this means acquires a practical usefulness, despite its intrinsic lack of value.

Conclusion: Reflecting Mirrors

counterfeit n (15c) 1: something counterfeit: FORGERY 2: something likely to be mistaken for something of higher value
<pity was a ~ of love – Harry Hervey> syn see IMPOSTURE

Playing the legal game, as Clyde’s attorney recognizes, means paying for acquittal in the coin of the realm, even if payment entails substituting the truth’s mirror image for the truth itself. Indeed, the truth-substitute his lawyer wants to present to the jury bears a familial resemblance to the real thing, just as Clyde bears a familial resemblance to his cousin Gilbert. Instead of serving as a reliable channel from events to meaning, however, the alibi is a dangerous passageway between events and meaning into which reality and justice both disappear.

Why not simply tell the truth? The problem is that there is no simple truth in the case of An American Tragedy. Clyde Griffith’s personality is so weak and narcissistic that he knows himself only as a shadowy phenomenon that has somehow appeared between the reflecting mirrors of the prosecution and defense. Hence there are competing narrative versions of the crime between which Clyde may choose, but no pre-narrative reality against which they can be tested. The last third of the novel shows him puzzling over these overlapping and conflicting versions, and finally settling on one that comes fairly close to an admission of guilt. By the time he reaches this point of self-knowledge, however, the ironic “Door of Hope” again beckons, and
the threshold standing open before him will take him beyond all such temporal concerns.

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2 The novel was based on a notorious murder case, People v. Gillette, 83 N.E. 680 (N.Y. 1908). (Chester Gillette and Clyde Griffiths have the same initials, C.G.) The Record on Appeal and other relevant documents are available on the website of the New York Court of Appeals at http://www.courts.state.ny.us/history/Gillette.htm.


4 DREISER, supra note 1, at 463.

5 Id. at 464.


7 Id.

8 Id. at 140.

9 DREISER, supra note 1, at 488.

10 Id. at 489.

11 Id. at 490.

12 Id.

13 Id.

14 Id.

15 Id.

16 Id. at 464.

17 Id. at 492.

18 Id. at 490.

19 Id.

20 Id. at 631.

21 Id.

22 Emphasis added.