The Americanness of Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy:* From a Japanese Reader's Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses what makes Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* (1925/1971) so "American" to Japanese readers. It compares the story with a Japanese novel *Seishun no Satetsu [Stumbling (or failure) of Youth*[1]*]*, written by Tatsuzo Ishikawa in 1971. Even though the two stories depict similar plot lines and deal with the same theme (i.e., man's desire for success resulting in murder), *An American Tragedy* presents some elements that are very American to a Japanese reader: the notion of naturalism and the influence of Christian teachings. This paper compares the story with its Japanese counterpart *Seishun no Satetsu* and attempts to describe the "Americanness" perceived by a Japanese reader in the story.

INTRODUCTION

Literary themes can be either universal or regional. Literary work has been dealing with universal themes such as "unchanged human nature" (Shafer, 1971, p.96) from its beginning. Regardless of the language and culture in which the literary work is conducted, man's greed and lust for money, sex, and success is undoubtedly one of the main themes that have repeatedly been brought up in literature, and these themes often result in tragedy, as is the case of Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy. An American Tragedy,* however, is not just a tragedy: it is an "American" tragedy. It bears some regional characteristics of the American culture and society of a particular age, and it contains some elements that make this novel very American to the mind of a Japanese reader, like myself.

This novel was written in 1925 and was translated into Japanese by different scholars in later years. In 2002, a group of Japanese scholars (Ohura, 2002) published a book titled *Amerika no Higeki no Genzai [An American Tragedy's Present Situation],* and they reexamined this piece of literature from different perspectives, discussing not only literary issues but also socio-cultural and linguistic issues. However, none of these Japanese scholars refers to the factor of the Christian influence that seems to be so dominant in the story.

One possible reason for this omission in the scholarly work is the low recognition level of Christianity in Japan. Historically, Japan has been known as a Buddhist country, and Christianity was prohibited while Japan closed the country to foreign influences in the 18th century. In terms of so called people's religious interests, Christianity is still not very prevalent in Japanese society. According to the statistics provided by the Japanese government (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology) for 2005, the

[1] I was not able to find an English translation of this novel. All summaries of the novel provided here are my own translation of the story.

total number of Christian believers in Japan was estimated to be approximately 2.6 million. While some Japanese scholars point out and discuss the influence of Christianity on areas like literature, history, and culture, only a few writers are recognized by general public either as Catholic (e.g., Shusaku Endo,1923-1996; Ayako Sono,1931-) or Christian (e.g., Ayako Miura, 1922-1999) writers. It seems Christian teachings are seldom mentioned overtly in literary works written in the Japanese language.

An American Tragedy, on the other hand, presents the element of Christian teachings as part of the dominating theme in the story. It is this Christianity element that allows the story to successfully create and depict the conflict that the main character, Clyde Griffith, experiences between "what he should be" and "what he really is."

The story of *An American Tragedy* depicts a life and struggles of a young man, Clyde Griffith's, a son of poor Christian missionary-worker parents, Asa and Elvira Griffith. The developing capitalism in early 20th-century America serves as background to the story, and it reinforces Clyde's American dream for success. He attempts to get out of the family poverty and move up in the society through the connection with his rich uncle. Clyde begins to work at his uncle's factory, and he meets a factory girl, Roberta, and starts an affair with her. Clyde also meets his dream girl, Sondra, who is rich and beautiful. As Clyde finds out about Roberta's pregnancy, he contemplates the possibility of abandoning Roberta for Sondra, which leads him to plot a murder. He lets Roberta drown, and the story ends with the death penalty sentence for his crime and his execution.

In order to point out what makes this story so American to me, I will first provide a brief description of *Seishun no Satetsu* written by Ishikawa (1971). This Japanese novel uses the same basic plot line as *An American Tragedy.* Post-war Japan had managed its full economic recovery within a short period of time. This was largely due to the fact that the Japanese people emphasized that hard work would result in success. The same idea, however, had also produced very competitive social and educational structures in Japan during that time. Additionally, so-called American dreams of success had a strong influence on Japanese young people during the post-war economic recovery.

Seishun no Satetsu portrays a poor law student who aspires to become successful in such a Japanese society. He is in the process of completing a law degree through his rich uncle's support. He then gets engaged to a daughter of this uncle. This marriage will certainly secure his future success both financially and socially. Like Clyde in *An American Tragedy,* this young Japanese man kills his pregnant girlfriend. Unlike *An American Tragedy,* however, the novel ends with his imprisonment without commenting further on the final outcome and verdict on his crime

Aoyama (1971), in his review of *Seishun no Satetsu* included in the paperback edition of the book, states that this novel reminds the reader of Dreiser's *An American Tragedy.* Aoyama also says that, although the basic plot is very similar to *An American Tragedy, Seishun no Satetsu* has its own independent message about the distorted, modern Japanese society that could lead or force a young man to commit such a horrible crime. Whether the message in *Seishun no Satetsu* is independently motivated by Japanese society or not remains a matter of debate for me; however, this book clearly deals with themes similar to the one portrayed in *An American Tragedy*: a young man's desire for success resulting in a murder.

When a Japanese reader reads the two novels that are so similar in theme, the reader cannot help but start considering what makes one story different from the other. To me, two elements that are absent in *Seishun no Satetsu* seem to dominate the entire story of *An American Tragedy* — the notion of naturalism and the influence of Christian teachings with their moral and ethical standards. These two elements indeed make this story American to a Japanese reader in spite of the fact that it talks about the common universal theme of man's greed.

TEXT ANALYSIS

On the one hand, this eight-hundred-and-some-page novel presents a typical, (and to a large degree universal) problem and ultimately a crime caused by the young man's desire, which is very common to all men — desire for money, wealth, luxury, nice clothes, beautiful girls — to name but a few. It is "not different from 90 per cent of all the millions that make up the population of the earth" (Darrow, 1971, p.6). As Howe (1971) points out, it is "the common denominator of our foolish tastes and tawdry ambitions... Clyde Griffiths, he is us" (p.38-39). Matthiessen (1971) also states that "the case of Clyde Griffiths was a typical result of the fierce competitive spirit...not only typical but also approved by all the standard *mores* as Clyde's longing to rise" (p.66).

The story, therefore, undoubtedly deals with a common universal theme, yet on the other hand, in its description of the extremely complex and intricate inner male struggle, something American is presented. In addition to the social background of developing capitalism in America at the time, the concept of literary naturalism, combined with the strong elements of Christian teaching, makes Clyde's soul a battleground for good versus evil. The notion of good and evil by itself may be a universal theme commonly seen even in cultures with little Biblical influence; however, Dreiser's naturalistic/deterministic view, in which man's chemistry, accidents, and fate are often not in accordance with the good emphasized by the teaching of the Bible, adds more struggles to Clyde's soul. This battle is further intensified by the subtle discrepancies between the two kinds of law that declare judgments on Clyde's guilt — God's law and man's law.

1. Naturalism in *An American Tragedy*

As pointed out by many critics, Dreiser's naturalistic view — man's life is determined by factors he has no control over — essentially dominates this novel. To Dreiser, Sherman (1971) explains:

> The real world is composed of money-hungry and sex-hungry males and females, who, so far as the heat of their blood supported them, seized what they wanted and ran off with it, or rushed upon one another in carnal rages under the impulse of forces which they were helpless to resist — the devil taking the hindmost...The only laws which enforced themselves in this real world were biological, physical and chemical. Accordingly, these became the only laws which commanded his respect. (p.19)

The story is filled with incidents of "chances" and "accidents." For example, Clyde happens to see his mother on the street a few times; then, shortly after that, he finds out where his sister, who has run away from home, lives. He and his friends happen to get into a car accident. By chance, Clyde meets his uncle, an image of an American dream, at the Union League Club in Chicago. His second meeting with Sondra was also by accident, by her mistaking Clyde for his cousin, Gilbert. Roberta's pregnancy and its timing, to Clyde and Roberta, are also accidental. Clyde happens to read the newspaper story of a drowning person at the very moment he wishes to get rid of Roberta. This makes Clyde yearn for an "accident," and he plans and arranges an accident for Roberta's death. Therefore, the story is full of incidents, and these incidents are described as accidents, things over which Clyde has no control.

Dreiser also uses the idea of man's "chemistry" (Dreiser, 1971, p.29, p.263, p.456) to describe some uncontrollable factors in life. Clyde's attraction to beautiful women is uncontrollable. Sondra has "electric" effects (Dreiser, 1971, p.242) on Clyde. As emphasized in the trial scene, Clyde's feelings toward Sondra and Roberta could not be changed. Jephson, Clyde's lawyer, makes this statement to Clyde: "Not that I am condemning you for anything that you cannot help. (After all, you didn't make yourself did

you?)" (Dreiser, 1971, p.728). At the very end, Dreiser poses a question:

> "And Clyde, feeling how strange it was that the Reverend McMillan could not conscientiously bring himself to do more than that for him. How sad. How hopeless. Would no one ever understand — or give him credit for his human — if all too human and perhaps wrong hungers — yet from which so many others — along with himself suffered?" (p.864)

In Clyde's mind, and in Dreiser's too, he is a victim of his own natural make-up. This is a tragedy as Matthiessen (1971) explains:

> In presenting Clyde he (Dreiser) gave the most complete illustration of his belief that "the essential tragedy of life" is that man is "a waif and an interloper in Nature" which desired only "to work through him" and that he has "no power to make his own way." (p.68)

Of course, this factor of naturalism could well be a universal literary theme, not solely American in itself. If this story just deals with the element of naturalism, then it does not have to be uniquely "American." To me, what makes this story so American is the co-existence of this theme with the traditional Christian teachings, which creates the source of conflict in Clyde's soul.

2. God's law and man's law in *An American Tragedy*

Mencken (1971) points out that in this story Dreiser was "still engaged in delivering Young America from the imbecilities of a frozen Christianity" (p.16). Dreiser certainly portrays the failure of organized religion to guide Clyde in carrying out of his American dream.

The novel begins with a scene of street preaching by Clyde's parents, immediately presenting the elements of Christian teachings and God's law, the background for the contrast between good and evil. However, from his youth, Clyde sees that something is wrong with his parents' missionary work. The father, Asa Griffith, repeatedly says, "Praise the Lord," even at inappropriate moments, such as when his daughter runs off with an actor (Moers, 1988). Clyde abhors the impracticality of faith, which results in his family's poverty and directly contradicts his inner desires.

Clyde's apparent downfall from good to evil start with his lies to his mother about the amount of money he makes at work. His lies eventually become more serious traps in Clyde's own life. He lies to his relatives, to Roberta, and to Sondra. He even lies to the court under oath. Ultimately, he lies to his mother and Reverend McMillan, who visit him in the "death house" (Dreiser, 1971, p.811, p.815), regarding the assurance of his salvation.

Through his entire life, even though Clyde holds values of good (represented by his parents' faith and Christian teachings) to a degree, he is fully influenced by the evil (represented by his own life). As Clyde goes to a brothel, there is a battle within his soul. He has fear, worry, and doubt. When Clyde finds out about the borrowed car, he feels uneasy about it also. Yet his fear, worry, doubt, and uneasiness based upon his mere knowledge of Christian teachings do not give him the power to go against his lust or against peer pressure. After his escape from Kansas City, he writes to his mother and explains that he "just went along" (Dreiser, 1971, p.182).

Like Clyde, Roberta also has mixed feelings. She has had a similar upbringing in her moral and ethical standards, but she too is not able to hold onto these. Her first reaction to Clyde' seduction is described as follows:

> For on the one hand all her conventional training was now urging her to stand firm...whereas on

> the other, all her desires ... urged her to run after him before it was too late ... And yet so binding were the conventions which had been urged upon her up to this time that, through suffering horribly, a balance between the two forces was struck, and she paused, feeling that she could neither go forward or stand still -- understand or endure this sudden rift in their wonderful relationship" (Dreiser, 1971, pp. 320-321).

Another contrast of good and evil is indicated by the different "voices" Clyde hears. When Clyde is away from home, he is not within the reach of his mother's voice, so the mother in her letter admonishes her son to "listen to the voice of our Lord" (Dreiser, 1971, p.183). However, Clyde hears another voice instead as he meditates about the killing of Roberta even though his conscious religious knowledge asks him, "How could you?" After Roberta's death, Clyde feels that it was not he who had killed Roberta but something had done this for him.

The entire trial scene introduces another law, man's law, into the story. Clyde is judged by this law and sentenced to death. This is brought together with the law of God in the last scene, which portrays the subtle discrepancy between guilt under man's law and guilt under God's law. In this scene, Dreiser depicts a detailed discourse of religious appeal offered to Clyde by his mother and Reverend McMillan. Reverend McMillan comes to save Clyde's soul. After Clyde's confession, McMillan concludes: "In your heart was murder then" (Dreiser, 1971, p.854). As Matthiessen (1971) points out, the effect of McMillan's religious efforts is very ironic.

> For as he (Reverend McMillan) gains the young man's confidence and hears his whole story, he comes to the saddened conclusion that, though Clyde may be technically innocent on legal grounds, his whole tangled train of thoughts and actions makes him deeply guilty in the eyes of God. But he does not turn against Clyde, but labors to bring him to contrition and conversion. He thinks that he has succeeded. But though Clyde, under his prompting, signs a statement to that effect, as he walks to the electric chair he is not at all sure that he really believes. (p.69)

The subtle difference between the two laws then could well be what ultimately constitutes the very tragic element of this story. Shafer (1971) states:

> Without evading any of its difficulty, he (Dreiser) asserted his faith that Moral Law uncompromisingly governs the life of man, making for an order which is divine, in the face of a chaos intrinsically evil, and that men are fully, if tragically, responsible for the consequences of their acts, whatever their motives or compulsions, so that ignorance and self−conceit are equally as criminal as violence. (p.95)

Robert Penn Warren (1988) also explains this last scene as follows:

> At the end, in a last desperate hope, Clyde is forced by McMillan to recognize the truth that he has fled from responsibility and self. But even now, as Clyde tries to recognize this fact and thus discover and accept a self, he cannot be sure of who or what he is. His "tragedy" is that of namelessness, and this is one aspect of its being an American tragedy, the story of the individual without identity, whose responsible self has been absorbed by the great machine of modern industrial secularized society, and reduced to a cog, a cipher, an abstraction. (p.31)

One important representation of Clyde's American dream is the image of walls as pointed out by some

scholars (e.g., Moers, 1988). His American dream eventually turns out to be his nightmare. In that nightmare, Clyde still continues to dream about his release from his punishment. In his mind, then, is a never-ending discordance, or wall, between 'what life really is' and 'what life might be or could be.' The image of the wall is also mentioned repeatedly in the story until we read about the walls of the death house. It symbolizes the barrier between Clyde and his parents—between his desire and their inability to understand his desire. Clyde, even on the very last days of his life, is not able to make his mother understand his dream of success, and he speaks about the "unsurmountable wall or impenetrable barrier" (Dreiser, 1971, p.866) between him and his parents. His mother "would never understand his craving for ease and luxury, for beauty, for love... She would look on all of it as sin—evil, selfishness ... adultery — unchastity — murder, even" (Dreiser, 1971, p.866).

Moers (1988) thus points out:

> In this fable of the Unreal City, no wall is higher, no door more firmly shut, than that between Clyde and his parents, between the seeking and the shunning of the evil in American life. (p.7)

Finally, the Souvenir Section is a small yet very important addition to the story. The Griffiths family carries on their religious work, now not in Kansas City, but in San Francisco. This time Clyde is not present, but his nephew, who looks very much like Clyde, replaces him. Clyde's mother realizes that she must be more liberal and gives her grandson a dime to buy an ice-cream cone. It is a rerun of the same show all over again, as Mattheissen (1971) explains:

> Essentially she has learned nothing, and the whole course of events might easily be repeated. We feel "the vast skepticism and apathy of life" with greatly increased pressure. (p.70)

Conclusion

Clyde, the individual without identity Robert Penn Warren (1988) calls him, lived a life of struggle pulled by three forces — his American dream (what he could/might be), his religion (what he should be), and his chemistry (what he really is). Ironically, the word *American as* in "an American dream" depicted in this story is not uniquely American: it may be substituted with another word, say "Japanese," to create another version of an American dream. In so doing, the theme of man's desire still stands universal, as demonstrated by Ishikawa in *Seishun-no Satetsu*.

However, in *Seishun-no Satetsu,* the elements of naturalism and Christian teachings are completely absent from its themes. *Seishun-no Satetsu* portrays a hard-working individual instead of naturalism/determinism. It also deals only with man's law, as represented by the main character who is a law student, without any mention of God's law or Christian teachings. As a matter of fact, the story ends with the young man's tragic discovering of the real truth regarding his girlfriend's pregnancy: the autopsy shows that the baby's blood type did not match his. The girl herself had committed adultery, yet there is no moral condemnation by God's law on this act because no overt teaching of God's law is given anywhere in this Japanese story. Only man's law governs here, and the youth is condemned only under the law of man for the crime, which was not even necessary for him to commit to begin with.

It is then the combination of the two elements — overt teaching of Christianity and American naturalism/determinism — that creates a particular national aspect of the theme, making this novel so American, at least to a Japanese reader such as myself. *An American tragedy* is not only a tragedy caused by someone's desire in relation to what he "could be" or "would want to be." Such desires could well be universal. How-

ever, this universal tragedy can become an American tragedy when that desire becomes a battleground for the two contradicting forces — one's outward religious teaching and one's inner chemistry — what he "should be" and what he "really is." Its tragic element is further intensified when two sets of law with subtle differences place their condemnations on the same crime.

Clyde, at the very end, is still pulled by "what he is" although he puts out the appearance of "what he should be." This alone is a tragedy, and this is where Dreiser himself took a stand in his own view and life.

> Mr. Dreiser, on his own showing, was first awakened to a sense of life as a problem to be solved by his discovery of the radical contrast between the ethical standards of his father and his church (as he understood its teaching), and his own spontaneous impulses and desires. His haphazard undirected education gave him an unexcelled opportunity to learn that there were many others like himself, that they seemed to be the most vigorous members of their mutinies, and that they never hesitated to transgress every ethical standard, when they could get away with it, in their struggle for self-advancement and self-gratification. He treasured every impression which seemed to be on his side against ethical standards by which he stood condemned. (Shafer, 1971, pp.97-98)

This is a tragedy, and it is an American tragedy — probably because it was written by the individual who knew so well what it meant to live a life in America where the two contradicting forces of the traditional Christian teachings and the aspiration for American dream of success were so strong. Dreiser's real experience of the inner struggle of what he could have been, should have been, and really was the intrinsic factor that made *An American Tragedy* very American.

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