A Class of Its Own

A Class of Its Own: Re-Envisioning American Labor Fiction

Edited by

Laura Hapke and Lisa A. Kirby

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PREFACE

In a society that has long ignored class, the study of both working-class literature and the socioeconomic issues it transforms into art are crucial for an understanding of the real and literary lives of American blue-collar workers. Writings of and about the working class reveal the complexities of existence in a society in which 36% of those earning less than $15,000 a year term themselves as middle class (National Center for Opinion Research, 2000). It seems that class is often an entity that is masked in our society in the name of a universal American Dream.

Observes Janet Zandy in *Calling Home: Working-Class Women's Writing*, "according to the book of success, a working-class identity is intended for disposal" (1). Yet Zandy and others have repeatedly pointed to a rich, if erased, tradition of working-class fiction in American literature; recent advances in Working-Class Studies have sought to bring attention to and reclaim these writings. And one need look no further than such journals as *PMLA* and *College Literature* to see that scholarship in this field is rapidly expanding. However, still missing thus far from this newly emerging field are resources for teachers and scholars who wish to include working-class literature in their classrooms. Although Working-Class Studies is making great strides in critical appraisal of this literature, little attention has been given to pedagogical approaches to these works. While this collection does offer new interpretations, *A Class of Its Own* primarily hopes to fill the instructional gap in the field.

Working-class literature courses are fairly recent additions to some English departments, and often the union of Working-Class Studies and more "traditional" courses has been an uneasy marriage. As Laura Hapke points out, institutions "doubt their [working-class literature courses'] appropriateness and students and question their utility" ("Telling" 180). There are a variety of possible reasons for this tension. One reason, as Hapke writes in the *Encyclopedia of the American Left*, is that: "'intellectual disfavor of radical literature became the norm in universities when [. . .] English professors adopted 'New Criticism' that devalued writing that was politically committed'" (qtd. in "Wealth" 143-44). Some view working-class literature as radical because of its often proletarian or highly liberal political slant. Another reason might be that the emphases in working-class literature tend to be very different from those many literary

scholars are accustomed to. In labor literature, aesthetic concerns are secondary to the view of working-class life that the work depicts. Also, theoretical foundations, as we have established, while not counter, are not essential when analyzing working-class literature; again the concerns are different. While some theoretical schools of thought, such as Marxism, provide further commentary on these works, the literature itself is not theoretically based nor does it require a theoretical analysis for understanding. Finally, the language, style, and context of working-class writings are very different from what most scholars are familiar with. The often blunt, graphic subject matter, mechanized or technical language, and very realistic instead of abstract themes are often unfamiliar to many literary scholars.

For students too, the transition into working-class writings is not a smooth one. Their notions of traditional literature are brought into question as they read about the intricacies of the working-class experience. Further, students' belief systems are challenged as they read works "that challenge rather than celebrate upward mobility." The shared notion of success is what most middle- or upper-class students have been taught ("Wealth" 146). This point became especially evident when Lisa Kirby taught Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* in a course on "Issues of Socioeconomic and Racial 'Passing' in American Fiction." *The Great Gatsby*, which is arguably the most widely read text in American literature classes, lauds a certain rags-to-riches story, the quintessential American Dream. For her students, it was the lavish parties Gatsby hosted, his luxurious cars and clothes, and his mansion-like home that were impressive. This story of "upward mobility" read to many students as a model of what the American Dream should be, despite the fact that Gatsby and his cronies such as Meyer Wolfsheim came to these fortunes through slightly questionable means. It was not until the class began discussing the complicated class issues at work in the text, such as Gatsby's humble beginnings, the tragic death of one of the few working-class characters in the text, Myrtle Wilson, and the way that Gatsby's American Dream was ultimately never achieved, that they began to see that the story was much more complicated than they originally assumed. Still, just teaching this one text reveals the "shared notion of success" that many undergraduates possess and how difficult it is to expose them to new versions of this story.

As one of the editors points out, "perhaps the task of assigning fictive texts that pay compassionate attention to the factory worker [. . .] involves too drastic a shift from the aesthetic to the humanistic or a relocation of the aesthetic in what Janet Zandy aptly terms the 'collective sensibility'" (qtd. "Wealth" 144). Working-class writings often expose

readers to terms that are almost uncomfortably realistic, personal, and humanistic. And because of these terms, Working-Class Studies have dismantled many traditional notions of the canon, literature, and what the focus of literary study should be.

However, the benefits of offering these types of courses far outweigh the negative reactions that might accompany the notion of Working-Class Studies. Working-class literature exposes students to a new type of writing that encourages an examination of social, political, and intensely personal issues that may have been previously discounted. Zandy makes the point that, "confronted by the complexity of working-class experience, students would develop an intellectual elasticity and a tolerance for difference" ("Editorial" 3). Exposure to class issues, which until recently have been largely ignored in the academy, gives voice to a class of writers and students whose voices demand to be heard. Furthermore, as Pam Annas contends, her Literature of the Working-Class course provides students from working-class backgrounds with "the opportunity to read [their] own experience. Students from non-working-class backgrounds have also found in the course a powerful introduction to class issues in literature that asks questions [they] also puzzle over in [their] own lives" ("Working-Class" 3). Reading working-class texts is not only reading literature but also reading real world experiences. Yet it is not only students, but also the academy that will benefit from these sorts of courses. As Sherry Linkon contends, "bringing class into the classroom is an important step both to benefit our working-class students and to expand our institutions' recognition of diversity" (3). The university's notion of diversity should inevitably include class, just as it does race, religion, gender, and sexual orientation. Providing the institution with a course of this nature will aid in the recognition of class issues and concerns that have received little note in the past.

Annas reveals that she wants to "introduce students to writers they might not encounter in their other literature courses [. . .] and place these and other writers they might have met elsewhere [. . .] in the context of an alternative tradition of working-class writing about the experience of working-class people" ("Literature" 1). Because working-class literature is composed of inventive, obscure, rarely studied, and often very political works, the nature of courses that focus on this subject are by nature quite innovative. In her own teaching, Kirby has included Meridel Le Sueur's *Salute to Spring* alongside more traditional modernist works such as *The Great Gatsby*, Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*, and Eliot's *The Waste Land*. It was her hope that allowing students to explore a different version of the Modernist period, as told in a working-class context, might reveal to

them that the 1920s were not just flappers and philosophical abstractions (though, of course, these are also important notions for students to study in the Modernist period). Instead, she hoped that my students would realize a different version of American history and literary expression through Le Sueur's words. Many professors teaching working-class literature also rely heavily upon sociological, historical, and political texts to supplement their courses. Shor, for instance, frequently makes reference to *The State of Working America*, published by the Economic Policy Institute, and other economic and sociological works as a source of statistics and "real world" information (Shor). Annas too remarks that she likes to "surround the [working-class] literature with historical, economic, and sociological readings" ("Literature" 3). This is a wise conjunction considering the inherently political and economic nature of many working-class writings.
and/or political role.

Teaching working-class literature is an endeavor that requires a reconsideration of traditional notions of literature, innovative new pedagogical strategies, and often difficult questioning of our own values of aesthetics and society. *A Class of Its Own* is a collection of the thoughts, theories, musings, and pedagogical strategies of a group of scholars invested in Working-Class Studies who hope to add to this reconsideration of our notions of literature. This text has evolved from our own interest in how socioeconomics and labor play out in the realm of literature and from our commitment to bringing these issues into the classroom. In a society where class issues are so often silenced, the scholars in this collection seek to present strategies for both analyzing these literary texts and for bringing these issues to the forefront for our students.

Some thoughts on the methodology of the contributors, all of whom have developed courses and learning communities, both for beginning and more seasoned college students. Many, too, have written on the goals and results in journals as diverse as *Women's Studies Quarterly*, anthologies of memoirs by working-class academics, and in poetic form in established and "little magazines." By extensive analysis of the laborist, political, gender, and racial content of the texts in question, the authors within provide versions of the mini-lectures employed in the courses mentioned above. The references to student responses integrated into the critical exegeses point to common reactions over the years, and in some cases, decades that these instructors have observed and elicited. Yet the editorial decision to focus on critical understanding of these long-neglected texts is a needful one. If curricula, including General Education and satellite courses, are to add or even privilege Oates, Saxton, Le Sueur, and their colleagues, scholarship must provide a way into their texts.

The creators of these essays emerge from a variety of social, cultural, and economic backgrounds, yet they all are part of a quest for a better working-class existence. Furthermore, bringing these analyzed texts into the literary canon plays a crucial role in the way we introduce our students to the ideas of radicalism and diversity. As Renny Christopher points out, the "inclusion of works from the 'expanded canon' has brought about reform without bringing about revolution. Works by working-class authors who have not wholly embraced upward mobility suggest that a revolution—at least in thinking—is called for" (55). For our students, those who may be encountering and questioning labor and class issues for the first time, studying these texts will allow them to understand that there is more than one version of American literary history, and they will subsequently develop both a greater understanding of the diversity of American experience and a stronger tolerance for that diversity.

Lisa A. Kirby
Laura Hapke

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***

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Lisa A. Kirby

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Laura Hapke

PART I.

EMBATTLED RADICALS: DIFFICULTIES AND MODELS

CHAPTER ONE

LABORING DREISER AND WORKING-CLASS STUDIES

LAURA HAPKE

For what can be worse in America than a radical?
—"Ernita," *A Gallery of Women* (318)

If I have seemed to indicate by my devotion to minor matters that [at twenty-one] I was not interested in the general drift of public affairs, I have given an inadequate picture of myself.
—*Newspaper Days* (43)

Reclaiming Theodore Dreiser for working-class studies is no easy task. In 1970s graduate programs subordinating American to English literature (Anglophile Henry James was an honorary Briton), Dreiser, the "proletarian," was tabooed. Even before that, in the decades between the end of the Second World War and the rise of the New Left, those who analyzed Dreiser had little use for a class-based reading. He was America's bard of economic rising, not calling for class consciousness nor systemic change.[1] Or, it was argued, if Dreiser was a trenchant critic of socioeconomic barriers, his in-your-face success and many contradictory statements about Communism (he toured the Soviet Union with great fanfare in 1927) rendered his working-class origins irrelevant. In any case, along with Jack Conroy, Nelson Algren, and many other fine writers, he was soon tarred with the brush of literary naturalism in post-Cold War doctoral programs—and, like them, erased from the curriculum.

Given the revisionism sweeping graduate education from the mid-seventies to the present, Dreiser has regained legitimacy. But it is not for his Socialist leanings. Erasing his ties to the Depression's signature

novelist, Mike Gold, to the Communist Party labor luminary, William Z. Foster, and to 1930s strike-torn Harlan County, Kentucky, many in Dreiser circles have reinvented him as a Great American Author. In a parallel development, Dreiser's narratives of success, however ambivalent, have been variously tied to his consumer ethos or his investment in literary realism as itself a marketplace commodity.[2]

To restore Dreiser and his mammoth novel *An American Tragedy* (1925) to discussions of class challenges teacher/scholars in literature and labor history alike. For Dreiser is a supreme example of the "common man" novelist in a country where ordinariness has been novelized in contested ways, from "man on the street" to "middle class," but only occasionally "proletarian."

To study how Dreiser buys into and veers away from the ascensionist cravings that doom his easily led *American Tragedy* protagonist is to trace a pervasive conflict not only in American culture but also in labor history itself prior to the rise of mass unionism in the Great Depression.[3] Are American workers "exceptional" in their access to a middle-class standard of living or in believing the myth of universal ascension? As the exceptionalism trope continues to inspire heated debate in American Studies scholarship and the wider society, locating Dreiser's novel in a worker context can only augment scholarly discussion and pedagogical practice.[4]

I. Dreiser's Class Position(s)

Dreiser did not use the phrase "class struggle." Rather, his politics encompassed crossover economic ascent through strategic self-transformation. His parents influenced him by negative example: hardcore poor, they had fantasies of prosperity. His German Catholic father, stern and conservative, drew no political lessons from the unlucky business experiences that reduced him to a taciturn lifetime of supporting a large family on blue-collar work. Dreiser's Mennonite mother engaged in a utopianism about the family future. If there was any lesson Dreiser learned from the thwarted attempts of his embittered father and unrealistic mother, it was the shame of downward mobility. Unlike Jack London and the more privileged Upton Sinclair, Dreiser neither expected the working class to triumph nor offered Socialist political narratives that foregrounded class struggle.

Instead his writings often resonate with Horatio Alger's rather fraudulent "pluck and luck" philosophy. His many autobiographical essays also sound the Franklinesque note of competitive individualism. Even

reading Dreiser's odes to his young manhood in his many autobiographical pieces, one finds a disingenousness about his relentless ascent to fame.

Whether his fiction is a veiled chronicle of his "survivor's guilt" remains the province of those applying more psychoanalytic approaches to American authors. What is clear is that his enormous body of work, published and uncollected, reprinted and archival, was energized by an endless working-out of the politics of consumption—or its obverse, scarcity.

Dreiser's wellspring of memories about a hardscrabble family life, though, cannot solely account for his lifelong fear of falling (and his corollary tight-fistedness with everyone from publishers and movie studios to fellow authors and estranged wives).[5] In his "lost decade," beginning in the late 1890s, he had to send his conventional wife, Sarah White, back home to her Missouri family because he couldn't support her. One year he all but starved in a Brooklyn rooming house. But he repeatedly offered an analysis of his misfortunes that both proclaimed his merit and reflected his status insecurity (Lingeman 190-98). To which class, as he writes in *Dawn*, did the young Theodore properly belong? Answers were difficult to come by, as by class Dreiser meant for an economic elite and an intellectual aristocracy that naturally enjoyed the fruits of talent. He never had difficulty distinguishing himself from the unimaginative, plodding majority—in *Newspaper Days* he writes of "having a kind of contempt for the average mind" (Dreiser, *Newspaper Days* 40).

Where he *was* conflicted, however, was in his assessment of monied elites. No matter how high he climbed in life, he coupled an awe for wealth with an outrage at power. Often drawing on his apprenticeship as an 1890s Chicago *Globe* political reporter, he could be savage about the back-room politics, partisan city editors, and corrupt judges involved in presidential conventions such as that which nominated the Democrat Grover Cleveland in 1892. All this allies him with other Midwest-born Progressives such as David Graham Phillips, C. E. Russell, and the scourge of the oil oligarchies, Ida Tarbell.

The difference, however, is stark. Dreiser was always at his best as the loner with one eye fixed on the world's corruption and the other on "that great something which seemed to be calling me" (*Newspaper Days* 25). Journalism became a way out such as he had always hoped for. Because the specter of poverty hovered over Dreiser's youth and early manhood, his sense of thwarted entitlement precluded a solid class identification with the masses of disenfranchised ethnics whom he had covered reportorially in Toledo, Chicago, Pittsburgh, and New York. He did not so much transcend class barriers as join his rightful class. Whether looking back on

his pinched Chicago years, seeing breadlines, or attending a Broadway production of *An American Tragedy*, he never ceased reminding his readers that the poor suffer more than anyone.

As a storyteller, Dreiser's forte was the prescient sense of the Almighty Dollar as a force in American lives. His marginalized groups of hyphenated Americans are microcosms of a society in which labor and capital were at odds. There is little escape from economic tyranny; battles between corporate absolutism and industrial unionism are abstractions for breadwinning people. Instead Dreiser's virtue was thus his understanding of how American monetary success gave "average" people a language in which to articulate desires for love, for agency, for spiritual fulfillment.

Nor did that position foster complacency. Dreiser's lifelong fear of falling, endlessly repeated, endlessly exorcised, was personified by every tragic entrepreneur from his failed father to the suicidal Hurstwood. He never forgot that his own ascension, first in the magazine editing business and soon after in American fiction, was laced with disasters overcome.

He was on much shakier ideological ground as a social theorist. A chronicler of relentless change, Dreiser embraced neither a gradualist nor an apocalyptic view of modern human development. His quasi-scientific explanations complicate rather than clarify the environmental determinism compelling his characters.

It is thus difficult to extract a pro- or anti-capitalist politics from Dreiser's attempts to balance the inexorability of socio-economic forces with the potential for change. Multiple are his ideologies, from his airily promoting equal income for all; his comments on democracy as a farce; his praise for the Soviet Union; and his criticism while in Moscow of that city's "unAmerican" poverty (Swanberg 229).[6]

But there is one way to sort this out: through his commitment to expanding personal freedom. There is a remarkable passage in his *Russian Diary*:

> The true anarchist must quarrel with and rise against all forms of human constraint or enforced human direction…Leadership, chameleon-wise, will reflect the best of mass mood; its real and constructive necessities.…But here, as any one can see, is quite all law and direction. For "From each according to his capacity; to each according to his need" is quite the first and final and iron law of Marx. But who is to interpret the capacity of each—or his proper reward; and who is smilingly to accept the judgement? (Dreiser 44-45)

He was similarly adamant that publishers not interfere with his artistic freedom. Many are his letters demonstrating considerable legal savvy

about publishing hegemony over his growing body of works. He engaged in (and lost) censorship battles, most notably in the Boston proceeding against him for birth-control references in *An American Tragedy* (Lingeman 221). He even positioned his army of extramarital liaisons in a context of liberty.

It also should be noted that, particularly in the decades before he publicly accepted Communist Party invitations, added his name to their petitions, and was praised in the Party press, Dreiser's "political" prose adapted to various constituencies, from radical to genteel conservative. He was a tirelessly prolific author who could contribute as handily to mass-market periodicals the same month he was protesting the unequal distribution of wealth Even more complexly, Dreiser was somehow able to publish the same pieces on what the signature proletarian author and sometime friend Mike Gold called Dreiser's "social pity" in venues as unlike as *Success* magazine and the New York *Call*.[7] Relying on the embrace of particularity that was his forte, his news articles often skirted—yet implied—the language of class.[8] *Vide* this selection from "The Toil of the Laborer":

> The toil of the laborer is without mercy....grim, insistent…unrequited by anything save the meager wages with which it is paid. There is no beauty in it—no tenderness....The sum of what is accomplished passes almost entirely into other hands. There is no provision made for the future of those who will be as tattered remnants when the things they have labored for have been accomplished.[9]

On laboring men, as his letters chastising luminaries such as American Federation of Labor President William Green or supporting the left-led National Maritime Union on the Pacific Coast attest, he deplored the exclusionary politics of Big Labor. Yet his opposition to business unionism's vow to remain "male and pale" did not mean he was enlightened about ethnic labor *unless* it was "old immigrant" such as British, Welsh, or German. He was appalled by Slavic Homestead when he visited in the late 1890s. He consistently deried "the smirch of the shop" among Jewish garment workers in the early 1900s. And he applied a similar nativism to Russia's proletarians in his 1920s visit there. Nor did the Depression and wartime era erase prejudices about the low-skilled non-native-born. To his mind they were below average, sluggish, and unimaginative. Even labor violence, which he deplored in *Sister Carrie*, he elsewhere defended, if limited to American workingmen alone.[10]

Well before his own “red period,” whether consciously or not, Dreiser tried to reconcile his own contradictory attitudes toward labor in his greatest novel, *An American Tragedy*.

II. Laboring *American Tragedy*

Using *An American Tragedy* as a watershed text is an object lesson in the tumultuous ethno-racial history of trade unionism and Fordism during and after the “Red Scare” years. The book inspires lively discussions of the Palmer raids; nativism and racism directed toward and in the labor movement; the rise of the IWW, and the early CPUSA.[11] Yet reading Dreiser through labor events has rarely been central to discussions of his work.

From the outset, *An American Tragedy* establishes a questionable figure, ashamed of his “poor white” origins yet opposed to any suggestion of manual labor. He is Clyde Griffiths, an *isolato* hungry to put behind him a rootless past who lowers himself for sex with his factory girlfriend, Roberta Alden. The “seduction” plot was based on the sensational 1906 Cortland, New York, trial and execution of Chester Gillette for murdering Grace Brown, his pregnant girlfriend.[12] Like the social-climbing Gillette, Clyde drowns his drab rural girl when she presses for marriage. What made the trial so sensational, and Dreiser’s version a best seller, was that the man accused and put to death was both a poor nephew and a favorite employee of the upstate town’s leading factory owner.[13]

Altering crucial aspects of the Gillette story, Dreiser on one level created a critique of the American justice system and the power of wealth. In a romance between Clyde and a wealthy young local woman, Dreiser supplies just the damning circumstances needed to squelch reasonable doubt and demonize the alleged—but somehow hapless—murderer. All the while, he clouds the issue by reiterating Clyde’s frenzied despair as a crucial factor in Roberta’s death. (The mainstream press, responding with approbation to this dark novel, perhaps because the murderer was put to death, found the novel quintessentially “American,” always a loaded word, but even more so in that anti-radical time.[14])

To influential reviewers of the 1920s, Clyde’s is an odyssey from a disgruntled poor relation dreaming of recognition to a willing if pathetic victim of the American ideology of ascent. Nor did Dreiser correct that critical half-truth. He fed the public’s conception of him as a great American novelist by distancing himself in those years from blue-collar heroes, much less revolutionary thought.[15] However disingenuously, even a year before he began to flirt with Communism and five years before his

1927 visit to the Soviet Union, Dreiser was proclaiming: “I don’t care a damn about the masses. . . . It is the individual that concerns me” (qtd. in Filene 188).[16]

Rather than an “agitprop” belief in the shared author of worker and artist, in Clyde Dreiser created a man caught up in the irrelevance of work to his outsize desires. Usually read only as a condescending comment, his cousin Gilbert’s summation of Clyde is accurate: “You haven’t had either a commercial or a trade education of any kind” (*American Tragedy* 230). If ascension rather than a modest living is all, Clyde by his desperate act in a sense dies for his beliefs. But contrasted with the radical protagonist at the center of an Upton Sinclair novel, who proclaims, “I never loved money” (*Boston,* 416), Clyde’s beliefs were not even worth living for.

In class terms, however, Clyde buys into the elitist imaginary: he associates workers with lesser beings, internalizing society’s view. As he fantasizes climbing the social ladder, for a time he sees clerking in a hotel superior to factory work in some way as it is closer to the powerful. He has no democratic remembrance of things past, personal or class-linked, because he has no belief in human solidarity. Though by the “decade of strikes,” the 1910s, the labor movement had grown in visibility, Clyde is as cut off from collective bargaining, contracts and workers’ self-activity in all forms as was the more fully realized onetime businessman George Hurstwood (in *Sister Carrie*) twenty-five years prior.

American Tragedy’s value to Working-Class Studies is its analysis of a white Protestant native-born “upper tier” of factory workers that jealously holds onto an investment in its whiteness alone. This is the opposite of the cross-ethnic solidarity preached by Socialist speakers who visit upstate New York and textile towns in the Northeast in the nineteen teens and early 1920s. True, Dreiser retains that complex interest in and distrust of social climbing from *Sister Carrie* days. But his depiction of a character obsessed with climbing, who only feels hungrier, not more satisfied, with each step upward, complicates the earlier plot. In this probing study of the stratified world within and beyond the assembly line, his anti-hero is at once obsessed with class and classless. The fact American commentators bypass the Griffiths story as a labor parable is as much a commentary on their resistance to laborizing authors who are inconsistent leftists as it is on Dreiser’s own ambivalence.

III. Reading the "Red" Dreiser: Russia, Harlan County, and the CPUSA

While American critics have historically read into Dreiser a lament for crushed individualism, Soviet explicators reinvented him as a bard of the injuries of class under capitalism. As Dreiser had, in fact, read a number of Marx's key texts, Russians looking for brutal capitalist indifference found material aplenty. In fact, Dreiser enjoyed immense popularity in the Soviet Union even as late as the 1990s. The Soviet press repeatedly issued a twelve-volume collection of his fiction, something American publishers have yet to undertake. Bolstering the Soviet view was that Dreiser admired the CPUSA luminary Mike Gold's *Masses* sketches of 1927 and 1928 (prototypes for the finished 1930 novel *Jews without Money*). Now instead of distancing himself from Ellis Island arrivals, Dreiser apparently found that ethnicity gave fictive form to the necessary radicalism of exploited Lower East Side Jewish immigrants.

Dreiser's anti-bourgeois reputation, however exaggerated by the Bolsheviks, set the tone for his 1927 tour as a guest of the state on the tenth anniversary of the Revolution. His diary entries reveal a fascination with those who were fascinated with him (including film directors, soldiers of the Revolution and pretty apparatchiks). On his return to America, he was courted by leftists who for understanding the grand experiment against fascism. (This was prior to the Nazi-Soviet Pact.)

"Your name is now known as that of a comrade," wrote Gold in the *New Masses* on Dreiser's sixtieth birthday in September 1931. [17] By the Great Depression, Dreiser supported the Scottsboro Boys (1931), young black men wrongly arrested for raping a white woman. He also rather courageously spoke out on behalf of Tom Mooney, a Communist organizer for whom Dreiser raised funds and visited in prison (Lingeman 312).

But it was Harlan County, Kentucky, that fired Dreiser's pro-labor energies, that center of turbulent strikes during 1931-1932 in the eastern coalfields of Kentucky He was among the many public intellectuals outraged by the use of National Guardsmen and their strikebreaking tactics, the blacklisting of unionist leaders, and the violation of working-class civil rights. At the urgings of William Z. Foster, a Party labor tribune, Dreiser soon visited the warring region. There the Communist-led National Miners' Union (NMU), breaking from the more traditional United Mine Workers, was spearheading a radical unionization drive.

Dreiser did not officially represent the Party. But he was the power behind a "red-left" writers' group. This included John Dos Passos and

Samuel Ornitz, assembled to conduct on-site investigations. With Dreiser as its luminary, the group spent five days in Harlan and nearby Pineville. Spied on by authorities, it conducted fact-finding tours by interviewing militant miners. The resultant book, *Harlan Miners Speak* (1932), while indebted to Dos Passos' organizing intelligence, appeared with Dreiser's name on the cover.

Dreiser's fame as a rough-hewn statesman of American letters smoothed the way for this well-publicized trip to the oppressed coalmining area. Not only did he hold the local authorities publicly accountable for the safety of his ad hoc commission. On November 6, 1931, he began hearings of sorts in a local hotel, the Lewallen, in which he gathered an unlikely mix of aggrieved, impoverished strikers and their families and local pro-business newsmen. A week after the author of *An American Tragedy* and his party rather hurriedly left the vigilante locale, a Bell County Circuit Court indicted the whole Dreiser committee for "criminal syndicalism," a charge later dismissed. Yet the business put an end to the great novelist's earnest efforts to alter the political climate of "bloody Harlan." By late 1932, the NMU was also backgrounded, ending what had briefly seemed a two-pronged initiative to bring mass organizing and industrial democracy to a union-busting state.

Yet the same year an undaunted Dreiser supposedly met with William Z. Foster, in Harlan County, and kept up an epistolary connection for some years to come. Almost a decade later, in 1941, he publicly praised Foster for his many organizing drives and writings on syndicalism, the Russian Revolution, and the need for militance in the American labor movement. Shortly before Dreiser's death in 1945, the iconoclastic man of letters formally joined the Party, allegedly with Foster's full approval ("Appendix" 32-34).

Still, deathbed Communist or not, the labor Dreiser remains hidden. Ironically, this is not the case with Jack London, Upton Sinclair, and others who were as fascinated by titans of industry as Dreiser himself. (His trilogy, *The Financier* [1912], *The Titan* [1914], and *The Bulwark*, published posthumously, is still in print.) It is as if an author so immersed in contrasting upward and downward mobility could not have offered a class perspective on both.

Like key American authors after him, including John Steinbeck and James T. Farrell, Dreiser's contradictory views on class defy a simple reading. Yet, contrary to received opinion, his greatest strength was not a belief in the power of individuals to surmount the oppressive conditions of American society. If he did not point the way to a radical revisioning of

capital and labor, he understood the lure of the relentlessly entrepreneurial country America has always been. Working-Class Studies still needs to deconstruct his signature fiction, in which, given the American horror of "falling" into the working-class, the revolution will have to wait a very long time.

Notes

[1] For an excellent overview, see Miriam Gogol, Introduction, *Theodore Dreiser: Beyond Naturalism*, ed. Miriam Gogol (N.Y.: New York University Press, 1995), vii-xvii.

[2] A representative exploration of Dreiser's consumer ethos and aesthetic and psychic investment in capitalism is Walter Benn Michaels, *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), esp. 26-27.

[3] The comment also applies to many in labor critical of "bread and butter" AFL-CIO unionism today.

[4] On the exceptionalism debate in American culture, see Laura Hapke, *Labor's Text: The Worker in American Fiction* (New Brunswick, N. J.: Rutgers University Press, 2001).

[5] For details on Dreiser's fear of poverty and how he lived it out with others, a still useful, if decidedly biased, book about Dreiser's "seduction" by leftists, is W. A. Swanberg, *Theodore Dreiser* (New York: Bantam Books, 1965), 92, 186-87, 517, 558.

[6] Interestingly, a letter written around the same time that says the opposite (Swanberg 475).

[7] A widely known essay researched in the 1900s and published later was Theodore Dreiser, "Toilers of the Tenements," reprinted in the invaluable *Out of the Sweatshop: The Struggle for Industrial Democracy,* ed. Leon Stein (New York: Quadrangle Books, 1977), 42-44. It first appeared in *Success* Magazine, April 1902, and reappeared in the antithetical Socialist journal, the *New York Call*, August 1919.

[8] *New York Call*, July 13, 1913.

[9] Theodore Dreiser Papers, Appendix A, Box 155, University of Pennsylvania.

[10] While Dreiser's sexual politics is the subject of another essay, it should be noted that he seemed to address what as late as 1936 he called the Woman Question by sympathizing with working-class women in a protective, even chivalrous, way. He met the philosophical challenge posed by "Red Emma" Goldman and Elizabeth Gurley Flynn by adopting a warmly mentoring pose—not unlike the one he had perfected with his many young "secretaries" (including the fervently left Ruth Kennell, his translator on his mid-1920s Soviet trip). In the main, he did not seem to empower women with working-class, much less political consciousness, although feminist critics have recently challenged that view.

[11] See, for example, the excellent Dreiser WebSource,

<http://www.library.upenn.edu/special/dreiser> and Salon.com postings on Dreiser's fiction.

[12] Dreiser, very explicit about his protagonist's ignorance of birth control, by its mere mention ensured the book's banning in Boston, and a court battle, which he lost, about his "obscene" book. A good account is in Lingeman, *Theodore Dreiser*, vol. 2, 321-22.

[13] For a solid discussion of the similarities and differences between Clyde Griffiths and Chester Gillette, see Richard Lehan, *Theodore Dreiser: His World and His Novels* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1969), 146-51.

[14] Influential reviewers in the *New York Times*, the *New York World*, and the *Saturday Review of Literature* (but not, given the obscenity proceedings, the *Boston Transcript,* which blasted the book) marveled at how well he had outlined the psychic landscape of a tormented young American ashamed of his missionary background. R. L. Duffus*, "An American Tragedy," New York Times*, 10 January 1926, 1; J. W. Crawford, "*An American Tragedy," New York World*, 10 January 1926, 6; Sherwood Anderson, "*An American Tragedy," Saturday Review of Literature* 2 (9 January 1926): 475; E. F. Edgett, "*An American Tragedy," Boston Transcript*, 9 January 1926, 1926, 3. Dreiser relied on the *New York World* for information on the Gillette trial.

[15] A selection of reviewers who found *An American Tragedy* a book of greatness—while steering clear of the issue of class—includes Sherwood Anderson, "Dreiser," *Saturday Review of Literature* (9 January 1926): 475; Julia Collier Harris, "Dreiser's Long Expected Novel Depicts the Tragedy and Turmoil of Youth," *Columbus [Ohio] Enquirer Sun*, 3 January 1926, reprinted in *Theodore Dreiser: The Critical Reception,* ed. Jack Salzman (New York: David Lewis, 1972), 445; and Charles R. Walker, "Dreiser Moves Upward," *Independent,* 6 February 1926, reprinted in *Dreiser: The Critical Reception*, 468. For a standard negative appraisal, see Stuart Sherman, "Mr. Dreiser and Tragic Realism," *New York Herald Tribune Books,* 3 January 1926, 1-3.

[16] By 1931, a few years after Dreiser's Soviet visit, the *New Masses* was celebrating his birthday. See the review of *"The Titan," New Masses* 2 (September 1931): 533.

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CHAPTER TWO

THE AMERICAN NIGHTMARE: READING AND TEACHING PIETRO DI DONATO'S ETHNOGRAPHIC NOVEL *CHRIST IN CONCRETE*

ROSE DE ANGELIS

Reading the Novel

Published in 1939 by a young bricklayer, Pietro di Donato,[1] the autobiographical *Christ in Concrete* tells the story of a young boy forced into a man's world by his father's premature death.[2] At the age of twelve, Paul, like the author himself, takes on the responsibilities of head of household and begins a life of hardship far from the promises of a better life in the New World. Written in the period of economic depression, social protests, and a growing interest in socialism as a possible remedy for the societal ills spreading as steadily as American capitalism, the novel never made it into the critical arena of American studies even though it was a best-selling novel, one compared to and chosen over John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* as a main selection of the 1939 Book-of-the-Month Club.[3] Until its recent resurrection as a result of the general interest in ethnic literature, *Christ in Concrete* was relegated to the margins of mainstream American literature.[4]

Notwithstanding its eventual disappearance from historical and literary studies of American literati, at the time of its publication *Christ in Concrete* received national acclaim from readers and critics alike. Even Louis Adamic's less than complimentary review of the work praised di Donato's craftsmanship: "But this bricklayer can write, and—although this is almost a direct contradiction of what I have just said—there is no lagging. The writing is far too intense for that. The words are powerful"

(5).[5] The novel was unlike the staple fare of working-class fiction. Yes, it shared a similar theme with novels such as *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) and *Wait Until Spring, Bandini* (1938): it celebrated the heroic attempts of ordinary working men and women facing overwhelming odds and confronting them daily as they labored for a better life.[6] Di Donato's novel with its description of the immigrant worker's mindset and the destructive social forces of those institutions that were unscrupulously indifferent to the very people they were supposed to serve joined the ranks of what Warren French calls the "social novel" to which Upton Sinclair, Sinclair Lewis, and John Steinbeck had already become contributors (7). However, as Arthur Casciato points out, di Donato rejected the role of "class-conscious revolutionary" and "the prescribed literary posture of the day in which the writer would efface his or her own class or ethnic identity in order to speak in the sonorous voice of 'the people'" (70).

There was no posturing either in life or on paper, for di Donato lived his working-class convictions in print and in life, joining the Communist Party and declaring himself a conscientious objector in World War II.[7] In his writing, di Donato depicted his working-class people without the usual self-congratulatory prose that was reflected in his own attitude towards his life and work, and he pioneered the way in which ethnic literature would evolve.[8] Read as a cultural artifact, *Christ in Concrete* documents with historical clarity and brutal honesty the "grave social problems" facing the immigrant worker (French 7). Guided by the voices of his extended family and his Italian compatriots, Paul comes to an understanding of his place in a world that is alien and often unwelcoming. The novel, divided into five sections, each of which incrementally contributes to Paul's rite of formation, chronicles the lived lives of working-class people with flaws and virtues. This polyphonic narrative "succeeds far better than many violent protest stories because of the way in which the muted protests make the careful reader discover for himself the underlying plight of those who bravely tried to cling to a tradition" despite the "duplicity and injustices of the established society that [controlled] their environment" in which, as di Donato points out, they played their own part (French 183; Green 152). Di Donato made the complicity of his compatriots clear when, in a personal interview with Dorothèe von Huene-Greenberg, he said, "I realized that the enemy, the traitors, are right amongst the working-class. They are directly and indirectly responsible. They go to war, they pay for the wars, they elect . . . politicians, they support dictators" (38). While his novel dramatized the exploitation of the immigrant worker at the hands of a capitalist regime that privileged the few at the expense of a working class increasing steadily as the immigrant population grew and marked its

discontent, di Donato was not formulaic and monologic in his dissent. Instead of essentializing the discourse on class, he "articulate[d] a literary version of working-class identity as a situated consciousness—as a socio-spatial dialectic" in hopes of spurring the transformation necessary for the truth to be told (Irr 120). Years later, when asked about his ideals, di Donato answered, "Truth, truth, truth, truth" (von Huene-Greenberg 52).

Language

Di Donato's true revolutionary spirit reveals itself in the rhetorical stratagem of his linguistic innovations. His characters speak "broken English," for di Donato preferred recording the immigrant contortions of the English language as it was truly spoken by literally translating the Italian language into English. "In short, Di Donato discovers, for himself, and for his readers, that . . . speech acts construed as phonocentric—that is, . . . words conceived as elemental, self-present, and hence pure sounds which he employs not to write about, but rather to speak of, the vividly worldly consciousness of his characters"—become the way he will speak for and of his people (Orsini 199). The language, with its disregard for grammar and with its purposely discordant syntax, allows the Italian workers to speak for themselves and unveils the exploitative world of working-class immigrants as they battle to make themselves understood so that they can survive. That the author utilizes the speech patterns of everyday communication is not surprising, for, as Franco Mulas makes clear, the immigrant struggled with a series of "linguistic limitations": those of the individual regional dialect from which they originated; those of the mother country in which they now found themselves; those arising from the amalgam of "American jargon . . . that sprang up in the large cities, each rooted in the customs and dialects of its native regions" (308).

Di Donato celebrated what he called the "sophistication and the incisiveness" of people who could not speak, read, or write and yet make themselves understood (von Huene-Greenberg 37). For him, language was a way of expressing the intrinsic tension that existed in the daily lives of these men and women; language was one of the many strictures that kept the immigrant worker a prisoner of his class. As Giovanni Sinicroppi notes, "[T]he narrative syntax sustaining the novel and the morphology that forms its muscles are as alogical and agrammatical as daily reality itself" (175). Each sentence, with its staccato beats, its abrupt starts and stops, and its omissions, reflects the hesitation, the trepidation, and the frustration of each move forward—and backward—towards the elusive American Dream. This symphonic gambol is evident after Geremio's death