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# Secular Understanding and Shattering the Myth of the American Dream: A Chronological Analysis of Changing Attitudes and Depictions of Murder within the Twentieth-Century American Literary Canon

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SECULAR UNDERSTANDING AND SHATTERING THE MYTH OF THE AMERICAN  
DREAM: A CHRONOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF CHANGING ATTITUDES AND  
DEPICTIONS OF MURDER WITHIN THE TWENTIETH-CENTURY AMERICAN  
LITERARY CANON

by

ZIPORA WAGNER

Under the Direction of Elizabeth Burmester

ABSTRACT

Extreme violence, which often results in murder, is a prominent theme in the American literary canon; therefore, it deserves a wider and more focused lens in the study of Twentieth-Century American literature. Murder and entertainment seldom coexist in canonical literature, but the very nature of the murder, foreign to many readers, consequently piques one's curiosity, and demands special attention.

The literary texts I have chosen to discuss are four novels and three plays. They all belong to the genre known in literature as 'a crime novel or play.' The murderers are easily identified, and their criminal acts have been carried out successfully, often with much forethought and detail. My focus has been to conduct a psychological study to highlight the impetus for the crime. Three basic themes have captured my attention:

- 1- Is the murder a sin or a crime? What is the role of religion in the lives of the accused?
- 2- Is it right to blame society for such horrendous acts?
- 3- How is the American Dream portrayed in these works?

The closer we get to the end of the Twentieth-Century, the harder it is to detect an affirmative ending in the works of literature I have explored. The insatiable appetite for material consumption overshadows the pursuit of happiness, or, maybe happiness *is* defined by material wealth. The critical question is: can American society read the warning written on the wall?

INDEX WORDS: Twentieth-Century American literary canon, Murder, Murderer,

Victim, Victimizer, Abused, Abuser, Protagonist, Antagonist, Hero,

Blood, God, Sin, Crime

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CENTURY AMERICAN LITERARY CANON

by

ZIPORA WAGNER

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Doctor of Philosophy

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

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## Acknowledgements

I am an ordinary person. I like to spend my weekends at home rather than picnicking in nature and sleeping in tents. I eat healthy but constantly crave for chocolate chips ice-cream. I love to death my two sons and spoil rotten my four grandchildren. And I have spent fifty years of my life teaching languages: English as a second language in Israel, and Hebrew as a second language in the United States. I also started a Hebrew program at Georgia State University in Atlanta, in 1996.

I am an ordinary individual. I do not believe in superstition, but I do get worried when a black cat crosses my way. What does an ordinary person do when she feels bored and starts looking for new challenges? The answer is this work.

I could not have written my dissertation had I not received infinite support from my three readers: Dr. Elizabeth Burmester, Dr. Matthew Roudané, and Dr. Christopher Kocela, who taught me how to read and write critically. I thank Jody, my daughter in law, and Ruth, my friend, for editing my work patiently and tirelessly, and answering my weird questions at weird hours of the day and night. And last but definitely not least, I do not know how to thank my son, Roy, for taking charge of my computer.

I dedicate this work to my long gone parents and my late husband who always believed in me.

I am an ordinary person who has materialized her dream.

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## Introduction

### **Background**

My fascination with murder in Israel grew stronger in the late 1970s, after having earned my Master's degree in criminology. At that time Israel was still a young state, about 25 years of age, struggling to overcome devastating wars. Every big wave of immigration had a critical impact on its culture and its national literature, and a literary canon was hard to define, especially when I limited my research to murder described by Israeli writers, who lived in Israel, and wrote in Hebrew. But I found the research intriguing and I pursued it as part of my doctoral studies in Jerusalem and Tel-Aviv. Unfortunately, my research ended abruptly, due to personal tragedies in my family. How pleased I was that I could officially renew it in the United States, 25 years later, this time shifting from Israeli literature to the twentieth-century American literary canon. I had *An American Tragedy* and *All My Sons* carved in my memory, and I felt that profiling the murderers there would make a solid beginning to a renewed research in American culture and literature. From there I found my other texts and made the decision to examine them by historical time period.

For me, where and when a murder occurs, and the literary ripples it creates, opens a window of understanding into the cultural milieu of the author and American society. My research in this dissertation follows several authors and playwrights across the twentieth century whose protagonists are murderers. I trace possible changes and developments in the acts of murder and analyze the profiles of the murderers and their victims. Delineating those changes can support my predictive reading of a society that is heading towards a secular understanding of murder. Is it true that this secular understanding is based almost solely on materialistic pursuit, a pursuit that shatters the myth of the American Dream? I focus on authors' intentions and motives

in writing these acts of murder and describing their murderers, hoping that readers really see how culture is reflected in them.

### **Research Questions**

My primary research questions include:

- \* Is the murder a sin or a crime? What is the role of religion in the lives of the accused? Are these acts crimes against God, or crimes against society?
- \* Does American literature emphasize the relationship between intentional deadly violence and the pursuit of economic resources and material gain?
- \* Is it right to blame society for such horrendous acts?
- \* Do American literary authors seek to condemn their murderers, or do they attempt to seek compassion in understanding their actions? What attitudes and cultural circumstances contribute to one's stance over the other?
- \* What is the role of *innocence* in murder and its aftermath?
- \* How is the American Dream portrayed in these works? How does American literature project the shattered myth of the American Dream?

I hope that my research will be a contribution to inter-disciplinary research drawing criminal justice, law, religious studies, and American literature together.

### **Definitions**

What is murder? Who is a murderer, and how should he be punished? The definition of murder and its punishment have evolved over several centuries and ancient civilizations. King Hammurabi (circa 1780 B.C.) of Mesopotamia was probably the first to write a code of laws

which also addresses criminal acts. Sumerian law, as represented in Hammurabi's Code, was a law of revenge. There were several kinds of executions, depending on the nature of the crime. Strangely, imprisonment was not listed in the code to be a penalty, but death frequently is invoked (Sumerian Law--- King Hammurabi).

In Jewish religion, the prohibition against murder is the sixth commandment. According to the King James' English translation of the *Holy Bible*, Exodus Chapter 20, verse 13 reads: "Thou shalt not kill." However, in Hebrew the verse reads "Thou shalt not murder," and I find the difference critical: killing is not murdering; killing might have happened accidentally, whereas murder is well calculated. Not all murderers get the death penalty, and Cain's punishment is a good example of deterrence.

In America, a destructive act that ends a person's life is classified as a *homicide*, which includes manslaughter as well as first and second degree murder. Assigning different labels to murder allows the judicial system more freedom in handing down the appropriate sentence, especially when insanity is in question. Under American Federal Statutes, and under most modern state law codes in the United States, the term *murder* dictates a crime where a person, with premeditated intentions, kills another.

However, my work is not about punishment. It does not include professional studies and legal theories about murder, nor does it deal with the detective genre or science fiction, none of which are included in the traditional western literary canon. My objective is to follow acts of murder in literature and see if they are accepted by their writers as wrong, and thus have to do with religion, or if they are criminal, and have to do with a secular approach. To follow my schematic path of exploring relevant terms in modern criminology and

contemporary literature, and to understand why I sometimes decide that the murderer is also a victim, we need to also discuss the term “victim.”

Under American Congressional Statutes, 18 USC section 3771a (2), and under section 3663a, dated April 24, 1996, as well as the Crime Victims’ Right Act, used in the federal courts (2004), the term *victim* dictates:

a person directly and proximately harmed as a result of the commission of an offense for which restitution may be ordered including, in the case of an offense that involves as an element a scheme, conspiracy, or pattern of criminal activity, any person directly harmed by the defendant’s criminal conduct in the course of the scheme, conspiracy, or pattern. In the case of a victim who is under 18 years of age, incompetent, incapacitated, or deceased, the legal guardian of the victim or representative of the victim’s estate, another family member... may assume the victim’s right under this section. (Crime Victims’ Rights Act)

The law adds that the victim can be injured either physically or emotionally during the occurrence of a crime and has the right to claim compensation. The problem is that murder victims and the offenders are represented in court by others; therefore, they become missing characters in the tragedy.

Minnie, in Susan Glaspell’s *Trifles*, is already in custody, and she will not get a Jury of her own; her jury of “peers,” in 1908, will not include any women. Does this turn her into a victim of the judicial system? In Dreiser’s novel, Clyde Griffith’s victim, a young woman, has been deprived of her life, leaving behind emptiness and grief, whereas Clyde as murderer becomes a celebrity. Is it really possible to fully represent them? Are we not witnessing a distorted situation in which, oftentimes, after a murder is committed, the killer is arrested and

all the attention suddenly focuses solely on him, and the victim is soon forgotten in the tedious procedure of seeking penalty?

Many state codes define the victim as being innocent in the ensuing crime. However, I find the word *innocent* disturbing, because it might arouse discussion as to what has incited the murderer. Unlike earlier novels, such as *Billy Budd*, in which the discussion about the innocence of the victim is central, literature later in the twentieth century places more emphasis on the circumstantial context in which the murder takes place. Modern American culture since the 1960s is often identified by literary writers with the excessive urge to make money at any cost, a behavior that takes its toll on society. Many violent acts occur as a result of this distorted desire.

The novelists and playwrights I follow in my dissertation clearly point out the paradox of victims who have contributed to their victimization. If the victim is also a victimizer, and if the abused is, in a way, also the abuser, then it might be possible to lift some of the blame off the murderer's shoulders, and to gain empathy into the human condition. I find myself inexplicably sympathizing with Clyde in *An American Tragedy*, who does not read correctly his society's double standard signals; and I fully understand Minnie in *Trifles*, who cannot take abuse any longer, and ends her husband's life with a rope. I can identify with a judge who might eventually exonerate her. It is worth exploring these external factors in order to better understand the place of violence and the role of crime and criminals in American society.

## **Literature Review**

An exhaustive review found no scholarship in English Studies that specifically looks at the role of the murderer or the representation of murder in canonical literature in the way that I outline for this dissertation. Crime and criminal behavior usually falls under law, or Criminal

Justice as a field of research, but it is also a category within Sociology. The field of *criminology* seeks “to explain the causes and prevention of criminal behavior” (West’s). It is:

the scientific study of the causation, correction, and prevention of crime. As a subdivision of the larger field of sociology, criminology draws on psychology, economics, anthropology, psychiatry, biology, statistics, and other disciplines to explain the causes and prevention of criminal behavior. (West’s)

Forensic Science, a related field, seeks to solve crimes, while criminology studies crime itself and its place in our culture. Literary studies is notably missing from this list, but has nonetheless engaged the study of crime and criminals, and the ways they are both shaped by, and shape, society. The theories of Kenneth Burke, as they relate to social realism and social criticism of literary texts, are most influential in this regard, but they do not touch on the figure of the murderer as I wish to do in my study. Before turning to the literary studies background though, it is important to look at how murderers have been discussed in scholarship within criminology and criminal justice.

### *Criminology and Criminal Justice*

Beginning in the 1920s and developing through the 1930s, the University of Chicago launched the “ecological school of criminology,” which sought to “explain crime’s relationship to social and environmental change” (West’s). My interest in exploring the role of the murderer in fiction, especially fiction which was influenced by actual cases, such as Glaspell’s play *Trifles*, falls within this school of thought. The social-structural theory holds that “social situations and structure influence or relate to criminal behavior” (West’s) and this is exactly what I am arguing. My concern is not with the psychopath or serial killer, or those who are criminally

insane. I am intrigued by normal individuals who act with extreme -- and singular -- violence, in response to external motives and environmental factors. What pushes someone to kill? What social and cultural forces contribute to murder in America? These questions drive my research.

One book that serves a bridge between criminology and literary studies is *The Murderer and His Victim*, which came out in the second edition in 1986; the first edition was published in 1961. The author, John M. Macdonald, was Professor of Psychiatry and Director of Forensic Psychiatry. In this “true crime” volume, he interviewed 400 murderers. The book cover reveals that he “reviews the origins and circumstances of murder, probes the mind of the murderer and discusses the victim.” I argue that this is exactly what American authors of canonical literature do; they play a similar role in getting inside the minds of murderer and victim and sharing that with readers. The final chapter in Macdonald’s book makes this connection explicit. Chapter 16, “Homicide in Fiction,” written by Stuart Boyd, asserts “Every great writer deals with murder because he knows it lies in the human heart” (297). Any author deals with the fact that any human – even the author himself – is capable of killing. So what leads some humans to kill, while others never do this? One characteristic is *ambivalence*, the fact that their moral fiber is too flexible or too weak to prevent their actions. In fact, Boyd says, “The great killers of literature and drama (Macbeth, Othello, Oedipus) are timeless and fascinating precisely because of their ambivalence” (319). Yet, there is more to it than this. There is also the historical moment the killer occupies and the social forces surrounding the killer and the victim. I have arranged my text in chronological order so that I can examine the role of this history, rather than the “timelessness”. What about these historical time frames contribute to the character’s actions and push them from citizen to murderer? While murderers in real-life crime “rarely show the comprehensibility of fiction,” the literary killer is “a creation of the author... [who] is presented



often as someone whose behavior is rational” (Boyd, 320). When irrationality is ruled out, why do people kill? And how should others view their actions, when those circumstances are put into a sequence of events and dramatically unfold?

A recent study, *Murder Most Foul*, published in 1998 by Harvard University Press, also examines what I identify as a shift away from sin. Karen Halttunen argues that

The act rends the community in which it takes place, calling all relationships—mother and infant, husband and wife, lovers, friends, strangers and mere acquaintances—and posing troubling questions about the moral nature of mankind. Murder thus demands that a community come to terms with the crime—confront what has happened and endeavor to explain it, in order to restore order to the world” (1-2).

In a postmodern culture, there is no order to restore, as a consequence of society being fragmented and lacking a moral center. Halttunen is interested in the “narrative accounts” of crime, rather than literary texts, but she still looks at the shift from sacred to secular in American culture (2). The original genre of these narratives, according to Halttunen, was the “execution sermon,” which only dealt with the spiritual condition of the convicted. As time went by, “in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, that sacred narrative was replaced by a variety of secular accounts—criminal biographies and autobiographies, journalistic narratives, and most important, printed transcripts of murder trials” (2), all of which later influenced American authors. Halttunen goes on to discuss the material that creates her study, Gothic literature and its connection to the genre fiction of horror, mystery, and detective novels, which feature sensationalism and an emphasis on emotions. My study is limited to plays and novels and focuses on the intellectual and moral responses elicited by these fictional texts.

As I selected the individual works to include in my study, I made an intentional decision not to use detective novels, murder mysteries, true crime, or any genre literature. While I am interested in the role of culture on the act of murder, I wanted to see how classic canonical American literature revealed these attitudes and raised social critiques, not to look at the popular representation of crime, or crime for entertainment. In my selected works, the crime is driven by character, and constitutes a tragedy. The murders in literary texts, especially novels and drama, are used to express a message about society in general, but are also works of art. Their position in the canon provides another lens to examine social themes, particularly themes of religion and the American Dream.

#### *Literary Study, Social Realism and Murder*

While no studies cover the texts or approach I use, the subject of crime is one that has been explored in literary scholarship for a long time, and has been an influence for my work. M.E. Grenander wrote in 1977, "American fiction for almost two centuries has been examining assumptions and values relevant to crime in our society" (221). It is usually related to character, "as literary critics use the term," so that it "derives from the moral choices an individual makes throughout his life" (221). It is far more common in literature to make the character accountable for their actions, because otherwise, he would be dehumanized; it is crucial that he faces a moral dilemma and has to choose how to act (Grenander, 221). While European literature relied on "naturalistic determination," or the idea that heredity directs behavior, American literature "in the first half of the twentieth-century" was marked by a transition "to environmental determinism," which allowed the "lifting of the burden of criminal responsibility" due to external

factors (222). Grenander examines this theoretical perspective in Richard Wright's *Native Son* and in *Knock on any Door* by William Motley.

Taking a different view, an article published in *College English* almost two decades earlier, in 1959, looks at how American literature evaluates evil. Its central idea is related to my own thesis that society changed over time from its formation as a nation strongly rooted in religion, where guilt and sin were predominant social values, into a country where secularism and consumerism now rule. Ihab Hassan looks at evil through the position of the victim of murder and crime, while I am focusing on the position of the murderer, and attitudes about him (or her) as they connect to prevailing social values that emphasize individual rights and the pursuit of happiness as men in particular strove to realize "The American Dream." None of the works he looks at are the same as my selections. Central to my argument is my belief that reality extends beyond the imagination, and society is actually reflected through the prism of literature.

## **Methods**

I believe that culture creates literature; it provides nutrients and ingredients for the development of literature that reflects that same society. In other words, American society and its literature are intertwined and mirror each other. My hypothesis is that literary protagonists not only describe reality but often mirror it; fictional characters are often based on reality. For example, *Billy Budd*, *Trifles*, and *An American Tragedy* are based on real murder cases, and their authors elaborate on the actual events in order to convey a message: Billy, the sailor, sins to God; Minnie, in *Trifles*, is a sinner who was brutally abused by her husband; Clyde, Dreiser's protagonist, is the secular victim of American society which sends ambiguous

messages of discrimination and partiality. These examples support my opinion that murderers in literature are the authors' projection of our society and its perception of good and evil.

In order to support my hypothesis and give theoretical foundation to my analysis, I am drawing on several literary movements and schools. Foremost is Kenneth Burke's "sociological criticism of literature." I also use Lacan and Freud with psychoanalytic criticism, then draw on cultural studies, reception theory, and reader-response theory. These inform my individual reading of the novels and plays. My work is also related to naturalist writing, as I am viewing reality in fiction. I also rely on my background and previous studies in criminal justice and criminology. Finally, my position as a citizen of Israel, and a relatively new citizen of the United States, gives me a unique perspective to view American culture and comment on it.

In his essay "Literature as Equipment for Living," Burke describes the method he calls "sociological criticism of literature" (293). He admits it has been practiced long before him. In fact, scholar Stanley Edgar Hyman traces it back to Plato's *Republic* (Hyman 541). According to him, Aristotle has a concept "of the social origin and function of art" that was psychological and based on cathartics (541). While Horace, the first Latin writer of literary criticism, "made his ethical and legal" (541). The source for "[m]odern sociological criticism of literature more or less begins with the 18<sup>th</sup> century with Vico," then picks up in 1864, when it was applied to English literature by H.A. Taine, who had studied the method in France (542). His work was still considered important in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century.

John Macy wrote the first text applying this method on American literature, in 1908, under the title *The Spirit of American Literature* (543). In the 1940s, the works of critic T.K. Whipple was published posthumously, and continued the tradition of this literary method. *Study Out the Land* was a "genuine attempt ... to study calmly and analytically the complex web of

relationship between a work of art and society” (544), and that is the scholarly lineage to which I wish my work to continue adding to.

When Burke published the second edition of *The Philosophy of Literary Form* in 1974, he emphasized “attitude” as a “strategy” for reading that was preferable to the term “method” (297-8). Burke was a literary scholar, but also a cultural critic, producing work that was cross-disciplinary and based on his theoretical and personal beliefs (Jay 535), so he is a model for my project.

American authors writing through the end of the nineteenth century, such as Herman Melville, generally based their concepts of good and evil and right and wrong on the Judeo-Christian paradigm, which dictates that the murderer has committed a sin not only against society, but most importantly, against God. In the twentieth century, however, I find that writers begin to take a secular approach to criminals and their heinous acts, and fictional works reflect an increasingly irreligious society and secular theories. John Hawkes in *Travesty* represents postmodernism that describes certain characteristics of post-World War Two literature, relying heavily on fragmentations, paradox and contradictions, and a godless society – all foreign to a religious approach (Klages).

Those who read literature for pleasure do not always read professional or scholarly journals in order to shape their attitudes. Even on important legal matters, these readers are more likely to seek out answers from the internet or conversations with their friends. When they encounter antisocial behaviors within their daily reality, such as vandalism, they attempt to understand them with the help of limited resources at hand; not law codes, but news media, television shows – and also popular literature. I argue that canonical literature examines antisocial behavior through its fictitious murderers; therefore it is another source of information

for those who read for pleasure. However, as previously stated, reality extends beyond imagination, and society is actually reflected through the prism of literature. This grants American literary canon importance and responsibility toward its readers. In most cases, novelists, such as William Motley and Theodore Dreiser, are appalled by *their own* murderers and subject them to a terrible death – capital punishment – as a deterrent for potential delinquent readers. On the other hand, other writers, such as novelist John Hawkes, and short-story author and playwright Susan Glaspell, express sympathy for their inhumane protagonists, attempting to explain their motives. My analysis also examines this phenomenon of being merciful rather than indicting.

### **Outline of Chapters**

I do not know of other works previously published, which follow my specific choices of literary texts. The mixture of novels and drama catches my interest, especially after having taken courses in drama and realizing that both genres may have a similar impact on the reader and theatergoer. In order to trace the steady shattering of the American Dream, I have split the twentieth century into three: Herman Melville, Susan Glaspell and Theodore Dreiser are in the first third. Arthur Miller and John Hawkes appear in the second third. Sam Shepard and Cormac McCarthy close the century. I actually had William Motley and his *Knock on any Door* (1947) on my list, but later decided to leave him out because his narrative closely resembles *An American Tragedy*.

The literary texts I have chosen to discuss are four novels and three plays. They all belong to the genre known in literature as ‘a crime novel or play.’ The murderers are easily identified, and their criminal acts have been carried out successfully, often with much

forethought and detail. My focus has been to conduct a psychological study to highlight the impetus for the crime. The closer we get to the end of the twentieth-century, the harder it is to detect an affirmative ending in the works of literature I have explored. The insatiable appetite for material consumption overshadows the pursuit of happiness, or, maybe happiness is defined by material wealth. The critical question is: Can American society read the warning on the wall?

*Chapter 1: "Struck by an angel of God! Yet the angel must hang!" : Billy Budd, Herman Melville, and the Turn of the Twentieth Century*

\* In this quote (69), Captain Vere proclaims that although Billy Budd is God's messenger on earth, yet he must pay restitution for his sin. This response reflects a distinctly religious approach to this event.

The narrative *Billy Budd – Sailor* was written during Melville's retirement, between 1885 and 1891, but to the best of my knowledge was never completely finished. The original manuscript was discovered among Melville's papers in the 1920s, the years known as "Melville's revival." The first American edition was published in 1924. Since then the text has undergone several revisions. The plot is straightforward. Billy, a very handsome and adored black sailor, loses his self control and hits his officer hard on the head, causing him immediate death. The captain of the ship convinces the judges on board to indict Billy and give him the death penalty, which is actually carried out the following morning. Everything about Billy hints at a religious messenger, including his own death, one that grants him some unexplainable halo. I decided to include *Billy Budd* in my research because it help to depict the transition from the nineteenth to the twentieth century, and to clearly demonstrate the fundamental conflict between

good and evil, and virtue and sin in accordance with a religious approach to viewing the act of killing.

*Chapter 2: "The Kitchenette Jury of Her Own": Gender and Murder in Susan Glaspell's Trifles, 1916*

\* This title has been adapted from Susan Glaspell's *A Jury of Her Peers*, written in 1927.

Glaspell was aware of the patriarchal hegemony that existed at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and knew that the murderess would not get a jury of her peers. The only peers in the play are two female protagonists, but they could not exist in reality.

Although *Trifles* was originally written as a companion piece for a Eugene O'Neill play, it received its literary acknowledgment only years later. The play is an obvious critique of the rigid attitudes of males toward women after the turn of the twentieth century. Only in the early 1960s was *Trifles* revived for stage production, and has since been an integral part of American canonical drama. The portrayal of a woman killing somebody else, especially if that somebody is a male and her husband, usually evokes fear because it challenges the social construct of femininity: passivity, restraint, nurturing (Halttunen, 135-171, *Murder in the Family Circle*). Men rush to isolate and label the female offender: her behavior must be aberrant or crazed (Ben-Zvi, 141). *Trifles* falls into this category and the male arrogant characters clearly project this concept. The play is based on an actual murder case. In 1900, Glaspell was a young newspaper reporter who found herself deeply involved in shaping her readers' opinions of a murder case, where a wife and mother of nine children (five living in the house at the time of the murder) stood accused of killing her husband with an axe to the head (Ben-Zvi 144). Although



Glaspell never admitted that she had failed in describing the murderess in a favorable manner in her articles, I believe that this painful experience inspired her to write *Trifles* sixteen years later, and to portray Minnie in a sympathetic way, understanding her motives and even forgiving her, within the context of genre in her time period.

*Chapter 3: "Mental and moral cowardice... plus new opportunities... had affected his pliable and sensual and impractical and dreamy mind": The Roaring Twenties and An American Tragedy*

\* The murderer's defense attorney (790) tries to convince the jury that Clyde is not only a murderer but also a victim of a society that transmits double standard codes of behavior.

Therefore, American society is partially to blame.

Like *Trifles*, *An American Tragedy* is a fictional text based on an actual murder case, and events Dreiser experienced firsthand. Clyde Griffiths, Dreiser's protagonist, is based on a young man named Chester E. Gillette, who drowned Grace Brown in a lake, and was convicted and electrocuted for this murder. In his introduction to the novel, H. L. Mencken explained why Dreiser violently objected to making any changes in the original text: "But that is something I simply can't consent to. *It really happened*" (9). His mind was packed with facts directly observed and experienced, and his soul was burning with the urge to share, and thus, maybe, relieve his personal pain. As a result, he reflected hostility to the "Catholic piety of his father" (9), and sought secular ideas, such as fatalism and psychology, which can clearly be detected in *An American Tragedy*. Mencken assumes that part of the great success of the novel is due to its sheer bulk, and suggests to impatient readers to begin reading the second book. I disagree,

because the first book, although tedious, lays the foundation to the tragedy. And this tragedy “is not only a minutely detailed picture of one unhappy young man’s life; it is a commentary upon human life in general” (11). Very little is fantasy in *An American Tragedy*; therefore, it reflects a very real society and its culture in the middle of the twentieth century. The narrator critiques society bitterly and blames it for sending illusionary messages and contradictory approaches concerning the “American Dream.” It is Dreiser’s opportunity to espies his opinions on the causes of Clyde’s crime and thus lift some of the guilt off his shoulders, and spread it to others across society, including readers.

*Chapter 4: “Is that as far as your mind can see, the business? Don’t you have a country? Don’t you live in a world? No animal kills his own, what are you?” : Homicide and All My Sons in Postwar America*

\* Chris, the murderer’s son, has always seen in his father a role model; however, the discovery of his father’s actions during the war breaks his spirit. He cannot comprehend how his own father traded soldiers’ lives for profit.

Twentieth-century American drama is obsessed with, maybe even haunted by, the crushed idyllic American family. The primal unit has received a sick, cursed twist and identifies its members as victims and victimizers, as murdered and murderers, Arthur Miller’s *All My Sons* is a perfect example of what has happened within American society since the Second World War; the pursuit of money has replaced the pursuit of happiness, or maybe money embodied happiness. As a nation, American people are generally proud of their social ideas and their constant attempts to achieve perfection. At the same time, they have tended to worship

materialism as the ultimate success, especially in the late 1940s through the mid-1960s. Social structure, vital to achieving the “American Dream,” slowly dissolves in the fictional setting of *All My Sons*. Joe Keller, the father and protagonist, lavishes money on his son, Chris, and then complains that Chris does not understand the value of money. As a businessman, Keller commits a crime, but does not understand it. He finds no crime in profiteering from the war; therefore he cannot grasp Chris’ bitterness and despair. Keller’s inability to take responsibility, and his constant accusations of others when things go awry is an integral part of his character. All these traits are clearly shown in the play and demonstrate a secular approach to a biblical sin: murder. Miller poses a serious issue: who is to blame? Is it society with its ambiguous concepts? Can it be possible that the murderer is not guilty, but the system? Does Miller believe that the victimizer has been victimized by his own society and should not be blamed? I think that unlike Dreiser, Miller despises this approach, and allows – perhaps drives – his protagonist to take his own life, after the actions have resulted in the deaths of 21 pilots, and the suicide of his combat-pilot son, Larry, and Chris’ threatening to leave home. The tension played out is one between “private tensions” and “public issues” (Roudané) and “commitment to one’s own success on the account of public demands” (C.W. E. Bigsby).

*Chapter 5: “But now I make you this promise, Henri: There shall be no survivors. None”:*

*Travesty and the 1970s*

\* Papa, who is deliberately racing towards a deadly collision, has two captives in his car. His intention is to kill them as well as himself (128).

In this 128-page monologue, Papa is speeding down deserted road ways with the intention of crashing into a thick brick wall. His daughter, Chantal, and his best friend, Henri, are held captive in the car with him. But they are unseen and unheard. Papa considers himself a privileged man whose self-destruction is the ultimate act of a poetic imagination. He discards Henri's assumption that he wants to take revenge of the two passengers because they have betrayed him. Instead, Hawkes, through the character and voice of Papa, introduces several theories to illuminate the narrator experimenting them, such as *Design and Debris* in Physics, Freud and Jung's the *Ego, Id and Superego*, the *Death Instinct (Thanatos)*, *Postmodernism*, and more. I content that piling theories in one short novel is distracting and confusing; it is possible, though, that Papa is hiding behind them because he finds it difficult to confront the issues that really bother him: Henri, his best friend, has been sleeping with both Papa's wife and his daughter, making him a stupid cuckold. And Papa feels that he must exercise his control on them, and also on his beloved wife, who is sleeping and has no clue what kind of surprise is awaiting her – becoming a widow and a bereaved mother very shortly. I included this novel in my dissertation for its unique character, who is planning to become both a murderer and a suicidal victim. Hawkes, who based the narrative on an actual car accident, does not criticize society for being responsible for what is happening to Papa; and Papa does not feel guilty for having sex with his daughter, nor does he regret his relationships with other women. It seems that Hawkes' post-modernist society is not only godless but indifferent. The American Dream has changed directions, and here is heading toward self destruction.

*Chapter 6: "You think just because people propagate they have to love their offspring?*

*You never seen a bitch eat her puppies?" : Killing the family in Buried Child*

\* In this quotation (111-112), Shepard conveys the shattered American Dream and the disintegration of the family core: parents do not care for their children, fail to recognize them and in this play also kill a member.

The American Dream presents hope, happiness, authenticity and proud identity. However, towards the end of the twentieth century this dream is shattered to pieces: nothing is true and real anymore. People become the shadows of themselves, unable to identify their “self,” and too weak to restore and rebuild their family core. *Buried Child* is undoubtedly one of Sam Shepard’s best and most powerful plays. It supports my understanding of the sad trajectory of American society. This chapter relies on the original edition written in 1978, with one exception: a later manuscript clarifies Shepard’s initial intention that an act of incest was committed by Halie and her son Tilden, whereas the 1978 text is unclear, ambiguous, and leaves the incest question for the reader and theatergoer to decide. I adopt the later and clearer intention. The play depicts an American family that violates civic, criminal and biblical laws, and hence is doomed. The protagonists – Dodge, Halie, Tilden and Bradley – have dual identities as both criminals and victims, accomplices to a horrible crime and also its sufferers. Are they victims of a social system? Can we allow them to get away with this excuse? Shepard, apparently, does not think so; they are all cursed. He does not allow any affirmative ending to this play. Some sins cannot be forgiven even in a secular society.

*Chapter 7: “Somewhere out there is a true and living prophet of destruction and I dont want to confront him. I know he’s real” : The Turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century and No Country for Old Men*

\* Sheriff Bell decides to retire prematurely because he feels he cannot cope with the growing violence in his county. He feels that Satan is destroying the tranquility of his community but he himself is afraid to confront him (4). In this novel, McCarthy criticizes American Society that pursues happiness through money.

Cormac McCarthy has written ten novels in different genres. This novel gives a glimpse of a total destruction of American society and a gloomy view of its future. Literary critic Harold Bloom considers McCarthy one of the major American novelists of his – and our – time. In *No Country for Old Men*, Sheriff Bell states very clearly that narcotics will destroy American society: “If you were Satan, and you were settin’ around tryin’ to think up something that would just bring the human race to its knees, what you would probably come up with is narcotics.” In this novel, money is the root of all evil. American society has abandoned God and bows to Mammon, thus being cursed. According to Chigurh, the psychopathic killer in the novel, every person walks along a path whose shape is visible from the beginning, but he himself is not aware of it. Can a human being change his fate? Will flipping a coin demonstrate whether or not he is destined to die? Chigurh’s only apparent moral code is to leave no live witnesses to his very existence; therefore his path is drowning in victims’ blood. I cannot find a hero in this play, and pointing at Chigurh is frightening. Hell is the Devil’s domain, and if Chigurh is the Devil, then he is the anti-hero from Hell, walking around on earth as if it were his, and leaving society with a grim future. Does the ending of the novel support this assumption? What does it say about the future of good and evil, innocence and guilt, realism vs. imagination, society and art?

Chapter 1: “ ‘Struck dead by an angel of God! Yet the angel must hang!’: *Billy Budd*, Herman Melville, and the Turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century”

The novel *Billy Budd*, begun in 1888 and apparently completed three years later, drew enormous controversy during the twentieth century. The manuscript was found in 1924, about thirty-three years after Melville’s death, and was edited several times with small but significant changes. Critical disagreement lies in almost every aspect of the novel, starting with Melville’s initial intention when writing the novel, continuing with the protagonists, and ending with interpretations of the different sequels of the story. An increasing number of critical essays appeared towards the close of the twentieth century, offering new understanding of Melville’s *Billy Budd*. It seems that Grant Watson is right in suggesting that “*Billy Budd* is a book to be read many times, for at each reading it will light up ... a beyond leading always into the unknown” (Watson, 16).

The purpose of this chapter is to urge the reader to go back to the novel, dive into its unknown and comment on my interpretation of the three men living within the microcosm of a naval boat. My objective is to conclude who, among the protagonists, is good and righteous, and who is bad and ugly. I try to analyze the roles of Billy, Claggart and Captain Vere in order to determine who the real hero is, and I conclude that Vere is Melville’s hero despite the story’s title. I also argue that each protagonist is both the victim and victimizer, the abused and abuser. I do not think that Melville’s intention was to merely emphasize the conflict between good and evil, and the probable superiority of innocence over wisdom. The intelligent reader also recognizes the distinction between divine justice and human justice. We are not expected to assume that Melville, at the age of 69, found peace of mind in cultivating well-discussed issues

such as these. I would rather say that he wished to convey opinions that did not comport with the nineteenth century's conventions and wanted his work to reflect his distinct insight of them. This might be the reason for the ambiguities in the novel. It is my opinion that Melville intended for *Billy Budd* to be about the inevitable destruction of an innocent sailor who has no insight and no experience. The sailor's execution proves that divine justice cannot prevail in the modern world, and any attempt to prettify this unpleasant reality is doomed to fail.

The novel is well rooted in its author's life experience, a fact that adds a tinge of reality to his work of fiction (Robert Levine, xv-xix). According to xroads (1-4), when Melville was a child, his father observed that the boy was a little slow in speech and comprehension. There is no doubt in my mind that such an observation haunted the boy and found its expression in Billy's defects. The choice of sailors as protagonists derives from Melville's youth; he spent several years working on ships, sailing to far away places and even joining a mutiny led by dissatisfied, underpaid shipmen. These voyages provided him with the imagery and vocabulary that was later infused into *Billy Budd*.

It is hard to follow the first seeds of *Billy Budd* because Melville left behind a very disorganized pile of papers and documents. His biographers and editors assume that the ballad that ends the novel was written first, and then put aside. Much later, Melville read an article in *American Magazine* about a mutiny on the US brig Somers, which happened a half century prior to the account. Unfortunately, Melville's older cousin was a lieutenant aboard the Somers and actually served as one of the officers who decided to hang without trial three rebellious sailors. The conflict between the scorn and outrage this cousin brought upon his head, and his innocence in the eyes of the family intrigued Melville. Captain Vere, whose principles transcend his emotions, is likely modeled on him. I believe that all these true-life events were the inspiration



for the fictitious event which is set in the eighteenth century, during the naval war between Great Britain and France.

The plot is simple and straightforward: in 1797, the young and charming crewman, Billy Budd, is impressed from the merchant ship *The Rights of Man* onto a British naval vessel named *Bellipotent*. He is immediately characterized as innocent, naïve and agreeable. Billy manages to enchant everybody on board except for Claggart, the master at arms, who suspects Billy in faking a peaceful personality. “You have but noted his fair cheek. A mantrap may be under the ruddy-tipped daisies” (*BB*, 62). Claggart, though, has no idea what he is foreshadowing. He falsely and deliberately accuses Billy Budd of plotting a mutiny. The handsome sailor, impeded by a pre-existing stutter, and unable “to use the civilized man’s weapon of speech” (Charles Reich, 57), reacts violently by striking Claggart hard on his forehead and inadvertently killing him. After a brief trial, Billy is accused and hanged.

Melville, very shrewdly, interweaves the profiles of his three protagonists to hide his intentions. It is easy to mistake Billy for Melville’s favorite character: at the age of 21, having no rights what so ever, Billy is impressed from *The Rights of Man*. The choice of names is deliberate. *Bellipotent* represents strength in war, and *Billy Budd* stands for a young, immature boy, who has no rights and no say, not even about his own future.

The first nine chapters delineate Billy as the “Handsome Sailor” (*BB*, 4), having undeniable and distinguished charismatic qualities. The narrator says: “The moral nature was seldom out of keeping with the physical make... Such a cynosure ... was Baby Budd” (*BB*, 3-4). However, at the same time, we also hear a past account of Billy, striking hard a sailor who touched him in an insulting manner. This event foreshadows the future climax of the novel, when

such an incident repeats itself and has a tragic ending. Billy was then both a victim and victimizer; Melville continues in the same path, making Billy the accused and the accuser.

At this point we find the first hint of Billy as the anti-hero, the ordinary human-being that loses his temper and uses his fist. In this case, nature does not keep with the physical make, thus Billy cannot be Melville's hero, although the narrator goes to great length describing this beautiful person. The captain of the *Rights* even detects divine capabilities in Billy:

Before I shipped that young fellow, my fore-castle was a rat pit of quarrels ... But Billy came, and it was like a Catholic priest striking in an Irish shindy. Not that he preached to them or said or did anything in particular; but a virtue went out of him, sugaring the sour ones (*BB*, 6).

Melville describes Billy as a jewel, the flower of the flock, very handsome and a peacemaker. "Anybody will do anything for Billy Budd" (*BB*, 7). But we also get Billy's genuine description in negative prefixes, as Barbara Johnson brings to our attention: "*in-nocent, un-conventional, il-literate, un-sophisticated, un-adulterate*" (Johnson, 577), and I am adding *no ignoble* (*BB*, 12). So, is Billy just a boy who cannot say no and therefore is allowed not to be responsible for his own deeds? I will further discuss this issue when we finish profiling Claggart and Vere.

The story is replete with biblical allusions, mainly comparing Billy to Christ and, in some cases, to Moses. Although I have not found evidence pointing to Melville being a firm Christian believer, he was probably torn between religion and Darwin's theory, as many of his contemporaries were<sup>1</sup>. I find Billy's execution very similar to the biblical account of Jesus' death. Before he is actually hanged, Billy shocks the whole crowd of the shipmen, as well as the reader, crying out "God bless Captain Vere!" (*BB*, 95). The narrator describes these words as

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<sup>1</sup> Carlyle, for example.

Syllables so unanticipated coming from one with the ignominious hemp about his neck ... syllables too delivered in the clear melody of a singing bird... syllables that resonant sympathetic echo – “God bless captain Vere!” And yet at that instant Billy alone must have been in their [sailors] hearts, even as he was in their eyes (*BB*, 95).

Billy forgives the captain, just as Jesus asks God to forgive his executioners. Billy is all heart but no insight, says Skylar Burris (1); therefore, I think that he cannot be Christ, as Chase claims. It is true that he endures a persecution similar to Christ’s, but Melville forms a “Half Christ” figure to support his philosophy that “innocence, unaccompanied by wisdom, must inevitably meet with destruction” (Burris, 1).

The act of hanging is wrapped in religious mystery:

At the same moment it chanced that the vapory fleece hanging low in the East was shot through with a soft glory as of the fleece of the Lamb of God seen in mystical vision, and simultaneously therewith, watched by the wedged mass of upturned faces, Billy ascended; and, ascending, took the full rose of the dawn (*BB*, 96).

To add to this mystical vision, Melville goes into detail describing two human sounds, “not easily to be verbally rendered” (*BB*, 98). The first comes from the men on the deck. The second is the shriek of the sea fowls which fly screaming to the spot where the heavy hammock slides into the water. Don’t these screams protest against the silent acceptance of the verdict, as Watson insinuates, and thus add mysticism to the scene of hanging?

All of Chapter 26 is devoted to the Surgeon and the Purser, discussing the phenomenon of Billy’s body *not* surrendering to spasms, as expected under such circumstances. They both

wonder if it can be will power or supernatural forces that played a role in the process. The text provides no answers to these questions, and the mystery adds to the sailors' superstitions. But the narrator's response is very realistic and is similar to the Chaplain's understanding when failing to impress "the young barbarian with ideas of death... and since he felt that innocence was even a better thing than religion wherewith to go to judgment, he reluctantly withdrew" (*BB*, 92-3). This quote clearly demonstrates Melville's philosophy that religion is not the answer to salvation, nor does it provide a solution when it is critically needed. The narrator does, though, emphasize that Billy is a victim of both Claggart's malice and a martial environment which encourages harsh authority, or as Kieran Dolin hints, "the rule of law."

Again, Melville chooses his words very carefully. It is possible that when he began writing *Billy Budd*, he actually saw in the young sailor his hero. But now, as the story progresses, Melville retreats. He actually paves his own path of regression when rendering Billy with physical flaws similar to Moses'. Like Moses, Billy does not know when and where he was born: "But I have heard that I was found in a pretty silk-lined basket hanging one morning from the knocker of a good man's door in Bristol" (*BB*, 12).

The narrator, as usual, (and much too often) gives his insight: "Yes, Billy Budd was a foundling, a presumable eye-blow, and, evidently, no ignoble one. Noble descent was as evident in him as in a blood horse" (*BB*, 12).

What strikes me is the word *hanging* in this piece of genealogy. Billy starts and ends his short life being hanged. Moses, as a baby, floats on the Nile and ends up leading a new nation to the Promised Land. Both Moses and Billy demonstrate a wild nature when killing a man. Both suffer from stuttering; but unlike Moses, who struggles to refuse to be God's messenger to Pharaoh due to his flaw, Billy does not acknowledge the problem. And the most important

difference between the two is that Moses never repeats his violent behavior, whereas Billy does. Therefore, I agree with Reich who claims that “Billy is innocent in what he is, not in what he does... The conflict [in the story] is between society and nature that contains both good and evil” (Reich, 56).

Questions of Billy’s innocence and his failure to speak out receive great attention in Brook Thomas’ essay. If Billy’s speech defect is a natural condition, then “his gaps of silence are forced upon him by a repressed political system that explores his desire to appear innocent” (Thomas, 75). The wording *desire to appear innocent* does not sound innocent at all; it has a cunning implication. The opposite is rather convincing. In the narrator’s words, Billy “stood like one impaled and gagged... straining forward in an agony... bringing to his face an expression which was as a crucifixion to behold” (*BB*, 66-7).

I find Billy’s profile somewhat annoying. It does not sound realistic to me that a 21-year-old sailor can be so innocent, or rather naïve. He has spent several years working on boats and living among rough and tough shipmen, and still has not learned anything. He may be illiterate and incapable of reading into humans’ hearts and minds because he lacks insight; but I suspect that he is slow in comprehension as well. He is a grown-up child, extremely handsome but probably developmentally challenged. He is an uncultivated child of nature, “one of whom not yet has been offered the questionable apple of knowledge” (*BB*, 12).

No, Billy Budd is *not* Melville’s hero, and he cannot be a “Traveling God,” as Jenny Franchot suggests. Can Claggart make the hero in this novel?

Claggart is Billy’s counterpoint, but in some aspects he is also his counterpart. Claggart, master-at-arms, is the protagonist we like to dislike: he is first introduced in the eighth chapter, and not in a very favorable way. He is a “petty officer” whose current duty is to preserve order in

the lower gun decks. Even when the narrator tries to balance out his observation by describing Claggart's clean-cut appearance, the reader senses some antagonism:

Claggart was a man about five and thirty, somewhat spare and tall, yet of no ill figure upon the whole. His hand was too small and shapely to have been accustomed to hard toil... The face was a notable one; the features all except the chin cleanly cut as those on a Greek medallion; yet the chin, beardless... had something of strange protuberant heaviness in its make ... (*BB*, 26-7).

At first, we do not understand what is wrong with being spare and tall that the narrator adds the word *yet* in his description. Melville is very bothered by a heavy chin and pale skin which “seemed to hint of something defective or abnormal in the constitution and blood” (*BB*, 27). I assume that it is his intention to convince us that something is *terribly wrong* with this person. Melville is aware that these hints might be insufficient, so he adds some more details by discussing Plato's theory of “Natural Depravity” (*BB*, 39) and alluding to King Saul's concealed envy of young David.

To add another dimension to this confusing opinion of Claggart, the narrator softens his tone by telling the reader that nothing is known of this poor guy's former life, and that no man with the role of policing his fellows can be popular on deck. Besides, “the dearth of exact knowledge as to his true antecedents opened to the invidious a vague field for unfavorable surmise” (*BB*, 28).

Providing the reader's first glimpse of the hatred brewing in Claggart, Melville describes an incident, presumably negligible, in which Billy accidentally spills his soup quite close to Claggart's shoes on the newly scrubbed deck. But when we read the narrator's description of Claggart's face, we realize its importance: this is the *real* Claggart: the master-at-arms does not

make any comment until he realizes the culprit. “His countenance changed” (*BB*, 35); yes, he is restrained but holds grudges.

The reader is puzzled: “Why should Jemmy Legs... be down on the Handsome Sailor? But... the late chance encounter may indicate... secretly down on him, he assuredly was” (*BB*, 37). Melville harnesses social psychology and Plato’s language to explain the unexplainable:

Towards the accomplishment of an aim which is wantonness of malignity would seem to partake of the insane, he will direct a cool judgment sagacious and sound. These men are true madmen, and of the most dangerous sort, for their lunacy is not continuous but occasional, evoked by some special objects; it is probably secretive... it is to the average mind not distinguishable from sanity... always perfectly rational (*BB*, 40).

From this point onward, it becomes clear that Billy has lost the fight even before it has started. The mere sight of his beautiful body provokes Claggart’s uncontrollable, irrefutable, and unanswered sexual attraction, all of which lead to his profound antipathy; Billy’s *bud* will not have the chance to develop, and his fate has already been determined. However, Claggart cannot be responsible for his “natural depravity” if it is innate in him. It all sounds like Billy’s inability to change his innate innocence and to adapt to society. In other words, being unable to control his deeds, Claggart is his own victim, exonerated before harming anyone. Again, the reader is intrigued: if society does not punish such a sick person, nature, or some divine power, should revenge itself.

Melville’s journey into Claggart’s soul does not include a clear interpretation of his name, a fact atypical of Melville, who usually chooses names for his characters and objects to convey significant ideas. Howard Vincent (8) suggests that “Claggart” is a clanging and grinding

sound; its guttural snarl and cough... “Claggart” has ugly associations in his echoes... cling to his person within the story”. I disagree with Vincent.

The pronunciation of the name does not suggest a guttural sound, since *guttural* refers to sounds produced in the pharynx and glottis in the throat. But Melville may have had in mind the blend of *braggart* and *clack*; so the name suggests some negativity. “Claggart” might have foreign roots and this assumption agrees with the character’s past, “shrouded in mystery and gossip” (Vincent, 8). I do not find anything unusual and unpleasant in the name and it does not “snarl and cough” in my ears. It is also possible that Melville wished to stay equivocal and let the readers decide where to direct their feelings. It could also have been the author’s intent to highlight the diverse crew on board; in spite of the broad versatility, most of the sailors dislike Claggart and keep their distance from him.

As a literary character, Claggart does not evoke controversy among most critics. He “is presented as the very image of urbane, intellectualized, articulate evil” (Barbara Johnson, 570). But Melville is ambiguous and reveals his inner conflict when insinuating that Claggart is the “man of sorrows” (*BB*, 54) in Isaiah 53.3. The whole biblical chapter refers to Isaiah’s continuous pain, which lasts throughout his life. Verse 3 reads: “A man of pain and acquainted with disease,” which reminds one of Claggart’s pallor which is unusual among sailors and hints of a disease. The “man of pains” has been identified by Christians as the metaphor for the Messiah and as a portrait of the dead body of Jesus. This understanding goes hand in hand with the narrator assessment that “sometimes the melancholy expression would have in it a touch of soft yearning, as if Claggart could even have loved Billy but fate and ban” (*BB*, 54). The conflict between loving Billy and envying him is very strong, and Claggart is probably torn from within, hence he is a man of sorrows.



Johnson quotes Melville pointing out the different conceptions of language between Billy and Claggart: “To deal in double meaning and insinuations of any sort was quite foreign to his [Billy’s] nature” (*BB*, 9). The Dansker on board suggests that Billy is a novice in questioning the meaning of appearance. Johnson (573) purports that Claggart’s pleasantness can be interpreted as its opposite. He distrusts appearance and is suspicious of Billy’s pleasant behavior, a fact which eventually proves to be correct: Billy is not completely innocent and conceals a plot planned on board.

Melville is determined to understand the relationship between innocence and evil, but actually sketches Billy and Claggart as having and exercising both traits. Claggart’s innocence lies in his experience in reading human nature and in correctly assuming that there is a dark side in Billy, and it is his job to unveil it. It is not clear whether the attempt to lead Billy into an outright act of insubordination is Claggart’s doing, but it makes no difference to the result: Claggart’s hostility is finally released in a lie which leads to his own death and Billy’s execution.

Claggart, in the role of the biblical Satan, Judas, the cunning Serpent and also the scorpion which stings itself to death, is very convincing. I cannot, however, agree with Albert Braverman (25), who traces homosexual attraction in Claggart; I understand, however, that “direct references to homosexuality were forbidden in nineteenth century literature.” Robert Martin (197-9) suggests that “the novel enacts the destruction of the beautiful young man by a system of power that cannot allow for the subversion of the erotic.” Claggart accuses Billy of mutiny as a result of his unfulfilled desire; Vere suppresses his attraction in the name of authority. I feel that this critical approach imposes modern trends of behavior into the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century novel. I am not convinced that admiring a person’s beautiful body makes the admirer a homosexual. Twentieth Century Western culture is infatuated with beauty and youth; still, it

should not make us all homosexuals. Worshipping the loveliness of a person your own gender does not make one a homosexual or lesbian. I would rather agree with Sedgwick who finds that every impulse/desire of every person on board can be called homosexual desire. Therefore she claims that “this is a dangerous book to come to with questions about the essential nature of men’s desire for men” (Eve Sedgwick, 218).

I see in Claggart an earthly man whose evil traits take over, thus he must die. Melville projects his own dying beliefs in divine judgment onto his human protagonists who inflict death on each other; the accused become accusers, the abused are abusers, and the murderers get murdered – all by human hands. The author has succeeded in portraying Claggart as difficult to grasp: “His portrait I essay but shall never hit it” (26).

John Claggart does not represent Melville’s ideals and cannot be his hero.

O Captain, my Captain – Vere is not the typical warship captain whose mind is occupied with his boat. *Captain the Honorable Edward Fairfax Vere* is a very impressive title that immediately reveals the man’s “higher nobility” (BB, 22). Melville takes pains to provide important details about this character, who I believe is his hero. The author refers to his noble genealogy and to the circumstances through which he received his fanciful name “Starry Vere,” but there is no solid evidence of any “starry” achievements. This conservative gentleman, and a gentleman he is, finds strength in stability; he is not open to the new winds influencing his century. His narrow-mindedness and character limits make him fallible and might also explain his excessive dedication to the ritual of war. Howard Vincent finds that *Vere* suggests *verus* in Latin, which stands for power and energy. *Vere* also suggests *very*, which is intensive. It is Captain Vere who insists on the fulfillment of the orders which he has sworn to serve: “He is a ‘very’ very man” (Vincent, 8).

Melville profiles Vere in a very positive way, so positive that it raises suspicion and forces the reader to dig deeper into the text: "... a sailor of distinction even in a time prolific of renowned seamen" (*BB*, 22). I do not agree with the assumption that Vere can be compared to Nelson who earns more than one whole chapter in the novel, and is pictured as *the* British Navy hero of all time. Vere's merits lie in his being an intellectual: "... his bias was towards those books to which every serious mind of superior order occupying any post of authority in the world naturally inclines: books treating of actual men and events... free from cant and convention... in the spirit of common sense philosophize upon realities" (*BB*, 24). But if we read between the lines, we are confronted with a dogmatic individual who believes that his, and only his views are the correct ones. The books he chooses to read confirm *his* thoughts and *his* sense of reality. Vere does not know how to look right and left; his path leads only straight forward, and forward for him is a very conservative sense of authority that conceals seeds of destruction both to himself and to Billy. The "invading waters of novel opinions" (*BB*, 25) do not speak to him because he is sure that they can neither solve problems nor last. Other officers of his rank find him boring, pedantic and antisocial, all of which are negative traits that undermine Vere's superiority.

Unlike Billy, and somewhat also unlike Claggart, Vere is not a charismatic figure. His presence on board is hardly noticed, although he is respected. The sailors appreciate his "always acquitting himself as an officer mindful of the welfare of his men, but never tolerating an infraction of discipline" (*BB*, 22). Such fanaticism cries out danger, and it is Melville's intention to foreshadow an approaching tragedy.

Vere is puzzled by Claggart. When he observes who is awaiting his notice, "a peculiar expression came over him... but something in whose aspect nevertheless now for the first

provokes a vaguely repellent distaste” (*BB*, 58-9). The captain is impatient, suspicious and astonished when listening to Claggart accusing Billy of plotting a riot on board. “... the more he weighed it [“mantrap under the daisies”] the less reliance he felt in the informer’s good faith” (*BB*, 63). Still, he must confront Claggart with the Handsome Sailor, the “King’s bargain,” (*BB*, 63) or he is not being loyal to his office.

The narrator describes the confrontation in a very dramatic language. For the first time Vere learns about “Billy’s inability to vocal impediment,” (*BB*, 67) but his soothing voice and fatherly touch have a contrary effect on the young sailor. The accuser’s hypnotizing muddy purple eyes lose human expression and get the mesmerized glance of a serpent, while the dilated blue eyes of the accused man reflect his shock and foreshadow “the hungry lurch of the torpedo-fish” (*BB*, 66).

On seeing Claggart’s dead body, Vere’s face is transformed: “The father in him, manifested toward Billy thus far in the scene, was replaced by the military disciplinarian” (*BB*, 68). From this moment, Melville allows Vere to take the podium, and Vere only; he becomes the center of the novel, and the show is his. When the surgeon verifies Claggart’s death, Captain Vere states in ecstasy, “It is the divine judgment of Ananias! Look!” (*BB*, 69). The doctor is profoundly disturbed by the excited manner he has never before observed in the captain. He is startled again when Vere claims, “Struck by an angel of God! Yet the angel must hang!” (*BB*, 69). “Was Captain Vere suddenly affected in his mind, or was it but a transient excitement? ... Was he unhinged?” (*BB*, 70).

To even more strongly emphasize Melville’s suggestion that Vere is mentally ill, and that his hidden sickness is as dangerous as Claggart’s, the narrator pushes the reader to such a conclusion, saying “Whether Captain Vere, as the Surgeon professionally and privately

surmised, was really the sudden victim of any degree of aberration, one must determine for himself by such light as this narrative may afford” (*BB*, 71).

Unfortunately, Vere suffers from a suppressed mania, a subconscious fear that someone or something might jeopardize his position in the navy and imperil his reputation of integrity. The *Starry Captain* is viewed as a tyrant who blindly and insanely follows the Mutiny Act, and hence sacrifices innocence for social order and harsh authority. Vere is only a military officer who keeps his vows of allegiance to martial duty and ultimate responsibility to the King; but his fanaticism is sick and destructive.

William Tindall comments on the *Ceremony of Innocence* and implies that Vere is Abraham about to sacrifice Isaac (38). Tindall, however, does not say that Abraham was being tested by God, whereas Vere is playing God. We share Melville’s agony in describing the captain’s crucial role when addressing the drumhead court. Melville plants a unique power of rhetoric in his hero’s mouth: “... irrespective of the provocation to the blow, a martial court must needs in the present case confine its attention to the blow’s consequences” (*BB*, 76). And on page 79 he says: “... clash of military duty with moral scruple ... under martial law practically to be dealt with.” And if this is not influential enough, Vere assures the court that if they decide that the punishment shall be death, it cannot be held against them. Law enforcement officers are protected by the same law they represent:

But to these buttons that we wear attest that our allegiance is to Nature? No, to the King ... For suppose condemnation to follow these present procedures. Would it be so much we ourselves that would condemn as it would be martial law operating through us? For the law and the rigor of it, we are not responsible (*BB*, 80).

Rhetoric and false authority win. Vere is not only the sole witness, but also the prosecutor and the judge. The extreme tension between emotion and intellect is exposed when Vere orders the court not to let their hearts betray their heads; they have to stay cool and rational.

The trial also reflects the tragedy of Melville's resistance to accepting the new world which is all formal and institutional. Compromise is impossible, and one is forced to confront the imperatives of the law. There are many *Veres* whose understanding is limited, and for them, outward display of order and formality are everything.

Charles Reich (64) acknowledges this absurdity: "The law, designed to be the protector of man's highest aspiration against the savagery of nature, has become instead the irrational destroyer of man." Cormac McCarthy, more than a century later, expresses his dismay and cynical criticism of the law and American society as a whole:

I told him [the prosecutor] that a lawyer one time told me that in law school they try and teach you not to worry about right and wrong but just follow the law... he said that he pretty much had to agree with that lawyer... if you don't follow the law, right and wrong wont [*sic*] save you (McCarthy, 298).

Old rules of nature do not apply any longer, and what begins with a conflict between angelic and demonic forces finally centers on a captain enthralled with authority to act when his orderly world is threatened. What seems in the beginning to be Melville's acceptance of the superiority of the soul turns into an ironic indictment of the establishment and society.

Melville dispatches Vere with a musket ball during a military engagement with an enemy vessel; the ship's senior lieutenant takes command. The author summarizes the life of his "hero", and maybe even his own, in a sorrowful tone: "The spirit that spite its philosophic austerity may

yet have indulged in the most secret of all passions, ambition, never attained to the fullness of fame” (*BB*, 102).

Melville kills his three protagonists and thus destroys the microcosm that he has created. Hopefully, this ending does not foreshadow destruction of the macrocosm of America.

While *Billy Budd* is my first novel to demonstrate an accidental murder viewed as a sin in a religious society, the following literary piece is an early bird introducing feminism at the turn of the century in the United States. A battered wife takes the law into her hands, and Glaspell feels that American culture is partly to blame for her desperate act. Can Minnie get a jury of her peers? Is the audience understanding and sympathetic?

Chapter 2: “ ‘The kitchenette jury of her own’: Gender and Murder in Susan Glaspell’s  
*Trifles*, 1916”

Lessons in law from literature? *Trifles* as a catalyst to legal education? This approach introduced by Marijane Camilleri (1) is definitely bringing the play to life in new ways. Camilleri explains that the law and literature movement has lately emerged as a response to inadequacies in current legal education, as well as limitations in legal analysis. She believes that the attempt to integrate literature and literary techniques into the pool of legal materials and tools is innovative and will help students more deeply understand characteristics of both legal and literary works. Her approach supports my belief that literature stems from culture and reflects cultural events, some of which may deal with the law, such as *Trifles*. I think that literature’s role in discerning a moral vision of law is critical because it reveals the linearity of the society that spawned a crime. Describing Mr. Wright, the murdered husband, as the

embodiment of the dominant legal system... the bravado of the masculine superiority. ...the county attorney’s inquiry into the facts surrounding Mr. Wright’s death has a masculine bias, ...his masculine perspective hindered his ability to recognize evidence, not only of Minnie Forester’s [Mr. Wright’s wife] guilt, but her emotional desperation as well (Camilleri,1-2).

This chapter seeks to trace the genesis of *Trifles* in order to examine the profiles of the murderess and her victim. I will discuss Glaspell’s innovative device, her unseen characters; those “silent warriors” whose actions trigger the denouement of the play. I will also try to evaluate the playwright’s contribution to the early feminist movement and its importance to modern times.



Susan Glaspell was born and raised in Davenport, Iowa. Both her mother and grandmother were her role models for “the strong female figures who would appear in her writing” (Linda Ben-Zvi, 4). Her mother, however, gave up her work when she got married and devoted her life to raising three children. Apparently, feminism was not a priority of hers. Glaspell chose a similar pattern when, later on in life, she shifted her own career to publish her deceased husband’s poetry and to write his biography.

Already at the age of 18, Glaspell had a column of her own in the local newspaper. She wrote about women’s fashion, tea parties and other female activities that introduced a genteel and different life from that of the early female pioneers. After graduating from Drake University with a degree in philosophy, she continued her journalistic pursuit, publishing short stories and winning prizes and she earned acknowledgment as a writer. Marrying George Cook, a twice-divorced famous character in Davenport, was a courageous act that displayed her free-of-conventions spirit, her perception of what an image of the “new woman” should be. Still, Glaspell never stood up to patriarchal superiority and never urged women to actively fight for rights. In a way she was an early Martin Luther King: fight for your rights in peaceful ways. I believe that her approach helped her survive and thrive in a male-oriented world. Ben-Zvi (12) claims that “If the voice of Glaspell had not been silent, those who followed ...might have been free to use their own registers and to use new forms... And those who have dared to do so - ... might have been more distinctly because the critical ear had grown accustomed to their voices”. In my opinion, Glaspell read the social arena very carefully and played wisely, keeping her voice soft, yet clear and firm. By taking a non-aggressive stance, she proved that she was not radical; therefore, she succeeded in diverting possible “fury” away from the birth of a new movement while gaining the ability to peacefully utter feminist opinions.

The genesis of *Trifles* begins in 1900. While reviewing women's events and publishing them in the *Des Moines News*, the young journalist Glaspell was appointed to cover an actual and very sensational murder case, in which the victim's wife allegedly killed her husband and was standing trial. More specifically, the murder trial was of a farmer's wife, Margaret Hossack, who was accused of killing her husband, John, by striking him on the head with an ax while he was sleeping, thus unable to even defend himself. At first it was assumed that a burglar committed the crime, but further investigation suggested that Mrs. Hossack was very unhappy in her marriage and put an end to it, using an ax. Eventually she was found guilty of first degree murder and sentenced to life in prison. Two years later, however, a second jury ordered her released.

This dramatic case both attracted and stunned the reporter, no less than stories of women killers attract audiences today. In the past, as well as nowadays, women who kill evoke fear as they challenge and test society's boundaries. Ann Jones, in *Women Who Kill*, maintains that women have usually been perceived as the weaker and more susceptible sex, the one that is vulnerable, gentle, restrained, supportive of their husbands, and most of all nurturing and educating the younger generations. Women who kill, says Ben-Zvi, pose a threat to society, therefore there is that tendency to isolate and label them: "Their behavior must be aberrant, or crazed, if it is to be explicable" (19).

Ben-Zvi claims to have discovered the historical source of *Trifles* and *A Jury of Her Peers*, in the Hossack case. It is not clear why Glaspell never provided the actual names and details of that trial. I suspect that the reason lies in her own unease with the way she presented it in her initial reports: Glaspell wrote dozens of reportages on the case, suggesting insanity and unpleasant relations in the family. She included ugly rumors and witty gossip, all of which

reflected the writer's personal understanding that the murderess wanted to get rid of her husband who could not defend himself and remained a missing character.

Glaspell's audience was clearly against Mrs. Hossack and supportive of the condemning district attorney. But then the journalist was allowed to visit Hossack's farmhouse, a tour which apparently changed her mind dramatically; the murderess looked heartbroken, frail and worn out, and "Mrs. Hossack May Yet Be Proven Innocent," as the report of December 12, 1900 read. Ben-Zvi decides that the following reports were sympathetic to the accused, because Glaspell explained that she, the accused, must have been either crazy or innocent, and might even be acquitted. But these reports came too late: the fear that the murderess would not get a jury of her peers proved realistic, and on April 10, 1901, Mrs. Hossack was found guilty as charged and was sentenced to life imprisonment at hard labor, a verdict that was overturned two years later because of unconvincing evidence.

Ben-Zvi concludes the discussion of the event by citing that Glaspell resigned immediately after the trial and moved to Chicago. I do not dismiss the assumption that the young reporter might have felt guilty of misleading her audience and of feeding them false and even slanderous information just to maintain their interest in her reports. Because women could not have a say at the turn of the century, Glaspell offered them the right to be heard sixteen years later.

Glaspell found the right channel through which to finally cleanse her pricking conscience in 1916 with *Trifles*, and a year later with the short story *A Jury of Her Peers*. Beverly Smith indicates that Glaspell's ironic use of the word "trifles" is an early key that has been underestimated not only by the male characters in the play but also by American society in the first half of the twentieth century. Smith's essay titled "Women's Work – Trifles?" reflects her

stance: *Trifles* deals with significant *trifles*, but only the women in the play decode them successfully and get to the heart of the matter.

Smith's analysis is very convincing: she makes analogies between the trifles women deal with, and the truths discovered in the play with the help of those trifles. The audience sees only the untidy kitchen, which is the woman's domain, but this kitchen "saw the extinction of a family life" (Smith, 174), and is now witnessing the invasion of males who are clearly critical of the detained housewife, who cannot defend herself. The bedroom, which is the actual scene of the crime, "may conceal many of the secrets of a marriage, none more serious than the murder of a spouse" (Smith, 174). The messed up quilt found in the kitchen *speaks* volumes; the few bright pieces in it are some of the very few colorful items in the dreary kitchen. Most parts of this quilt express Minnie's creativity and skill; however, its initial purpose of warming her bed does not stand to test because it will never dissipate the coldness between the couple.

Smith, as well as other critics such as Ben-Zvi, Lane Glenn and Ann Jones, elaborates on Minnie's cherry preserves, which got lost in the cold. To the arrogant men in the play it is trivial, exactly as "The women themselves are 'trifles' to the busy, efficient men who leave them behind to tidy up while they (the men) investigate the murder ... , searching upstairs in the bedroom for clues to the motive. The county attorney, intent on finding physical evidence, fails to pursue ... references to Wright's meanness" (Helen Chinoy and Linda Jenkins, 252). The women, on the other hand, attend carefully to the trifling details and decipher the mystery. The clues are a strangled canary and an irregular stitching of the quilt. These critical findings reveal a narrow, dull life, frustrating and probably also violent. "In *Trifles*, as Mrs. Wright's neighbors view the separate fragments of the incomplete quilt, the mood is not festive but funeral. They

have come not to join in the warm and social act of creation, but to clean up the debris of destruction” (Chinoy and Jenkins, 153).

Minnie’s desperate loneliness drives her to the very edge of sanity; that her husband killed her bird is one straw too many. The silence in the house and in her soul destroys the remnant of her ability to cope with her brutal husband. The two women understand the pain in silence:

MRS. HALE. If there’d been years and years of nothing, then a bird to sing to you, it would be awful – *still*, after the bird was *still*.

MRS. PETERS. I know what *stillness* is. When we homesteaded in Dakota, and my first baby died – after he was two years old, and me with no other then – (44).

The setting of the play foreshadows a tragedy. It is a bleak and untidy kitchen in a rural abandoned farmhouse. “Faded wall papers... uncurtained windows... unpainted kitchen table... unwashed pans... incompleated work” (Trifles, 36); so many negatives must be intentional. Bigsby adds a few to Glaspell’s stage directions: “...bereft of characters ... a gloomy disorganized kitchen” (“Introduction” 9) – all negative and troubling adjectives that reflect a miserable life.

Three men file in to investigate the violent murder of the owner of the farm, Mr. Wright. The alleged murderess, his wife, has been taken into custody. There is neither action nor tension in the play because “The crime has already been committed, the discovery effected, the arrest completed” (Bigsby, 10), so the genre is not that of a detective story. The language used by the two women, Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters, is simple, colloquial and unambiguous, although only the readers interpret it correctly. They speak little, but the meaning is unmistakable and painful. As

said before, the sheriff, the district attorney and the neighbor cannot come up with any motive, and their fruitless visit gives the playwright the time and location to slowly unfold the mystery and build the characters, so that the unseen protagonists are established. The women's job is to collect a few clothes for Minnie, an obviously feminine job unrelated to the investigation. From the very beginning, Glaspell distinguishes between the flat and boring male characters, who are clearly oblivious to clues and who display physical and emotional distance, whereas the women cling together farther away. From this point onwards, the playwright encumbers us with many minor domestic details that lead to the bottom of the case and provide the motive of such a heinous act. The men, on their end, make cynical comments about the women's dealing with trifles; their arrogant behavior is exactly what Glaspell wishes to criticize.

Veronica Makowsky points out that the play begins in the middle, with Glaspell's "heroine trapped in an untenable situation from which she needs to think backward and forward in order to extricate herself" (Makowsky, 317). This experimental technique at the turn of the Twentieth Century is unique to Glaspell and is later repeated by others, such as Clifford Odets in *Waiting for Lefty*.

Mr. Hale tells the legal representatives how he discovered the murder the day before. He was on his way to the market place and decided to stop and try *again* to *convince* his neighbor to share a telephone line with him. Convince? Yes. Mr. Hale expected a negative response, knowing his stingy and frugal neighbor, who was withdrawn and failed to communicate. Still, Hale wanted to make the offer in the presence of the nice and friendly Minnie. He found her in a rocking chair,

not even looking at me, so I said, 'I want to see John.' And then she laughed. I guess you would call it a laugh... I said a little sharp: 'Can't I see John?' 'No',

she says, kind o' dull like... 'Then why can't I see him?'... 'Cause he's dead', says she. She just nodded her head, not getting a bit excited, but rockin' back and forth... 'He died of a rope around his neck', says she, and just went on pleatin' at her apron (37).

Minnie did not make sense in any way. The few sentences Mr. Hale could understand were cynical, sarcastic and unbelievably incredible, so he took time in describing the scene: "She was rockin' back and forth. She had her apron in her hand and was kind of – pleating it" (37). And when asked how she seemed to feel about Mr. Hale's visit, he reported the weird conversation:

'Who did this, Mrs. Wright?'... 'I don't know', she says... 'Weren't you sleepin' in the bed with him?' says Harry. 'Yes', says she, 'but I was on the inside'. 'Somebody slipped a rope round his neck and strangled him and you didn't wake up?' says Harry... We must'a looked as if we didn't see how that could be, for after a minute she said, 'I sleep sound' (*Trifles*, 37).

While the men go upstairs to check the bedroom, Mrs. Hale expresses her troubled feelings: "I'd hate to have men coming into my kitchen, snooping around and criticizing" (39). And then she adds: "Seems mean to talk about her for not having things slicked up when she had to come away in such a hurry." And Mrs. Hale continues telling us how difficult the husband was, not even considering a party line, and thus precluding Minnie from having any social life. It is not fair what the men are doing, but the women's hands are tied. Mrs. Hale is seeking revenge, saying: "I hope she had it a little more red-up up there. You know, it seems kind of *sneaking*. Locking her up in town and then coming out here and trying to get her own house to turn against her!" (40).

Mrs. Hale puts things back in place while relating to Mrs. Peters and to the readers all she knows about Minnie's life: Mr. Wright was "Like a raw wind that gets to the bone," close-fisted and uncommunicative, which probably made his wife keep so much to herself (*Trifles*, 42). Mrs. Hale sounds very bitter, imagining that the men are trying to incite the house as a witness against its owner. She is so sorry for not having visited Minnie more often. She is stricken with guilt and remorse:

I could've come. I stayed away because it weren't cheerful – and that's why I ought to have come. I – I've never liked this place. Maybe because it's down in a hollow and you don't see the road. I dunno what it is, but it's a lonesome place and always was. I *wish* I had come over to see Minnie Foster sometimes. I can see now – (42).

When finding the dead bird and realizing its implications, Mrs. Hale is beside herself: "O, I wish I'd come over here once in a while! That was a crime! That was a crime! Who's going to punish that?" (44).

It is clear that she is alluding to her own guilt for not coming to visit and thus demonstrating insensitivity. Living close together and being far apart? Having killed the bird, Minnie's only friend? I guess she is pointing at all of them together.

And then the women find the empty bird cage, whose hinge is brutally pulled apart; and they discover the dead canary, whose neck is broken and is wrapped in silk to be buried; and they connect the dots, tie the ends and knot the pieces together: Mr. Wright/Wrong killed the bird, Minnie's only friend and supporter. Wright did not like the bird, a thing that sang, and by killing it he symbolically killed his wife as well. Glaspell is sparse of words here, allowing the



audience to absorb the man's cruelty and its consequence. The sentence structure and punctuation reveal the horror:

**“Somebody – wrung – its – neck”** (*Trifles*, 43).

And the stage directions say: “(Their eyes meet. A look of growing comprehension, of horror.)”

The women comprehend not only Minnie's tragedy but also their own: women are trapped by a social system that may lead them into crime and punish them when they are forced to commit it.

“Necessity has made them allies” (President Kennedy)<sup>2</sup>. Karen Alkalay-Gut explores legal issues

in the play that reflect the American legal system in the second decade of the twentieth century:

women could and were tried for crimes but at the same time were forbidden to vote for judges

and juries. Women were triviality in the eyes of their own patriarchal society, maybe just an

inventory for their husbands, and their rights were minimal. They were expected to be concerned

with the minutiae of women's lives only; they did not have and were not provided with

qualifications to deal with the consequences of committing such a crime as Minnie's. Barbara

Ozieblo states that Glaspell did echo her female protagonists in 1916's *Trifles*, something that

she did not do in 1901. Liza Maeve Nelligan maintains that all the trifles mentioned in the play

reinforce the idea of women being mere household objects; on the other hand, this same limiting

situation has probably provided women with a stronger common bond and a purer sense of

propriety and justice.

Mrs. Hale is more dominant in action; still she finds full cooperation in Mrs. Peters. She

lies to the district attorney, and Mrs. Peters supports and collaborates with her in spite of her

being “married to the law” (*Trifles*, 43). When the playwright collects all the trifles detected by

the two nameless women, we get the profiles of Minnie Foster and her husband: in her youth she

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<sup>2</sup> In 1961, when talking about the relationships between the USA and Canada, JFK said: “Geography has made them neighbors; necessity has made them allies.”

was a cheerful girl, compassionate and friendly, singing in the choir and wearing pretty dresses. Thirty years later she is childless, lonely, socially withdrawn, and battles to survive through the singing of a caged canary. There is no doubt that she has *constantly* been abused, and maybe even physically battered. It is not surprising, then, that the victim of such a domestic violence turned the tables on her oppressor. It is known in criminology that a crime of domestic violence often occurs without warning, and it is usually very violent.

In his drama courses at Georgia State University, Matthew Roudané compares the bird's broken neck to the way the rope is wrapped around the husband's neck. To this I will add the word "knot," which is mentioned by both Mrs. Hale and the district attorney when talking about the method of knitting the quilt, and readers can picture skillful strangling by means of a rope. Mr. Wright is far from being right; Minnie has minimal rights; the other ladies have no names because they are assets belonging to their husbands – should we be surprised that Minnie decides to take action by paying back in the biblical way, an eye for an eye? Both Bigsby ("Introduction" 11) and Roudané claim that Glaspell's play was not written purely as a reaction against a male dominated world and to advance feminist opinions, but she consistently and carefully depicts the spirit of her time, bringing to light women's hard and tedious work. She reprimands them for not taking control of their own lives and finds flaws in their sisterhood and fear to speak up; but at the same time, Glaspell expresses discontent with the patriarchal world. This way she maintains the balance needed to live in relative peace in a world of diminishing possibilities.

The play has an indeterminate ending and no resolution is offered. Glaspell's American society does not acknowledge women's rights and Minnie cannot get a sympathetic jury. She must not challenge authority and break the law; therefore, she cannot be acquitted. The readers sense the unjust system but understand the playwright's limitation in openly condemning it.

However, I feel very uncomfortable with the unanimous support that the two female protagonists receive from the audience. Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters clearly violate the law by hiding the truth from the investigators, and we defend them and can rationalize their acts. There is a deliberate cover up of the murderess' heinous act, and we approve of this kind of behavior. Is this not a dubious sense of morality? We applaud the shrewd women for their loyalty to their sex (*Trifles*, 38), but ignore their social misconduct and criminal conspiracy. Glaspell, in her own shrewd way, has made us all vigilante seekers and double standard holders. I believe that in today's judicial system, these two women would be charged as accomplices to a murder.

Annett Kolodny suggests that "The essential crime in the story... has been the husband's inexorable strangulation, over the years of Minnie Foster's spirit and personality." Kolodny praises Glaspell's clever ruse: creating sympathy for the defendant, and casting the whole blame on the abuser. Karen Stein elaborates on Minnie as her husband's victim. Does she mean that the woman is more sinned against than sinning?

This question brings us back to the playwright's seeking of moral seriousness, which is also acquired by hiding the murderess and her victim from the stage. I attribute this innovative technique of integrating absence and silence in American drama to Susan Glaspell. She is the first major playwright in 20<sup>th</sup>-century American drama to concern herself and the audience with loss, absence and silence of her protagonists, with the pervasive presence of absence. There is a constant reference to these characters, but they do not have a say; the readers and viewers "hear" them through the characters telling the story. Those missing protagonists are the catalyst of the play or the novel; without them there would be no story. This absence/silence creates a dramatic effect and raises tension. It contributes to the action that occurs onstage and stimulates

imagination and interest. It also urges the audience to establish their own judgment without being influenced by the physical image of the character.

This tool has attracted other writers as well. As previously stated, Clifford Odets used it in *Waiting for Lefty*; Arthur Miller followed in *All My Sons*, and John Hawkes in *Travesty*. All the absent and silent characters in these pieces of literature represent a dead end, loss of hope and a desperate need to take control. Critic Susan Kattwinkel claims that Glaspell's technique for tackling the issue of the changing role of women at the turn of the twentieth century is demonstrated in the absence of Minnie. In Kattwinkel's opinion, Glaspell positions the character out of sight and allows the other characters to speak not only for Minnie but also for herself, the playwright. Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters find the motives for the grisly murder, and they may be seeking retribution for perceived oppression, as we all do; however, if men are at unease with such a condemnation, it is convenient to put blame on the women's shoulders, rather than on Glaspell's. The play clearly represents the playwright's awareness of the delicate issues involved in the struggle for women's rights. It is very possible that Mrs. Hale stands for Glaspell herself: smart, witty and observant; the victim becomes a victimizer and the victimizer becomes a victim.

Once again I am asking myself: is the woman more sinned against than sinning? Is society allowed to forgive Minnie and her accomplices? Is it right to justify homicide prompted by neglect and misery? Is society to blame? These loaded questions do not have one clear answer and society's role is to delve into complicated situations and judge each and every case individually.

In *Susan Glaspell – A Critical Biography*, Barbara Ozieblo suggests that the playwright is unremembered because of her lack of self-appreciation. I would rather say that the dramatist respected the rules imposed by her society, meaning the burdens inflicted on women by

marriage. Still, her play clearly mirrors her progressive feminine opinions. I support Karen Stein (150) who claims that *Trifles* brings to light “the drab existence of rural wives,” and hence explains Glaspell’s personal feminine sensibilities and quiet involvement in early feminism. “Glaspell introduces the idea that the truly ‘awful thing’ was not the murder of John Wright but the life that his wife [and many other wives] had been forced to endure...*Trifles* explores sympathetically the lives of middle-aged, married, rural women, characters who would usually be minor figures in a play. In this way, *Trifles* is a unique female and, indeed, feminist document” (Stein, 251).

As suggested by Marijane Camilleri in the beginning of this chapter, law and literature seem almost mutually exclusive enterprises. Literary techniques can enter the pool of legal materials and tools; social sciences complement legal education and “contribute to the stagnation of the law... Where literature exposes the realities of a historically underrepresented or unrepresented class of persons, such as women, minorities, or the handicapped, the importance of reading literature for lawyers becomes particularly acute. Literature vividly communicates the voices of these classes... Literature can awaken lawyers to the possibilities of otherwise suppressed legal alternatives which might suggest more inclusive solutions to the pressing problems of the underrepresented” (Camilleri, 2, 3).

Readers and theatergoers might view the play as a study of a gender differences. I see in it a murder case which earns not only empathy but actual sympathy. Both women, Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters, crack the mystery of the murdered husband in *Trifles* by searching Minnie’s domain - the kitchen - and putting trifles together. They examine the condition of the kitchen that clearly projects the murderess’ state of mind, and feel pity for her miserable life.

They, as women, understand Minnie's fate – she can never get a jury of her peers – so, in this play, they voice their grim fate and Glaspell's sympathy for a murderess.

Just as *Trifles* is a critique of rigid attitudes of American males towards women in early twentieth century, *An American Tragedy* is a direct indictment of society and its ambiguous treatment of the American Dream. Christian religion is probably shared by most of the audience in the court house, but murder is treated as a crime against society, and the survivors of the murdered girl are clearly demanding the death penalty from the court of criminal law.

Chapter 3: “ ‘Mental and moral cowardice had affected his dreamy mind’: The Roaring Twenties and *An American Tragedy*”

Like Susan Glaspell, Richard Wright, Willard Motley, Truman Capote and others, Theodore Dreiser based his densely packed and monumental novel on an actual homicide that took place during his lifetime. Not only was he deeply infatuated with murder trials, as Richard Lingeman states, but he was also a flag-bearer in the American naturalist movement and tried to prove that many murderers were not destined to follow criminal paths. Dreiser purported that criminals pursue the American Dream like everyone else, but become victims of circumstances that they handled or interpreted poorly. Their fate is not a conscious choice, but a result of their inability to recognize and properly react to arbitrary situations which, ultimately, result in their physical undoing.

The purpose of this essay is to portray the ordinariness of the protagonist in *An American Tragedy* and to support Dreiser’s opinion that Clyde is an outsider in search of the American Dream. Clyde (the murderer) and Roberta (the victim) are average lower middle class working individuals who encounter and misjudge *un-ordinary, uncommon* situations which are strange to them and therefore prove fatal. Unfortunately, Clyde’s pursuit of the American Dream is hindered by the social and judicial systems that work against him; for Clyde, the American Dream is just an illusion.

What really is the American Dream and why is it mentioned so often in the novel? The answer can be traced back in American history to the Founding Fathers of the United States. Historian James Adams coined the phrase in his 1931 book *Epic of America* and many Americans see the Statue of Liberty as its symbol. The basic meaning of the phrase is

encapsulated in “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” It is commonly held that in America, anyone can realize this dream through good education and hard work. Individuals can make themselves into whatever they choose and have the ability to soar as high as they are willing to fly – the sky is the limit.

However, I would argue that 20<sup>th</sup>-century literature clearly demonstrates that this dream is frequently connected with tragedy, loss and the failure to achieve the goal. The original dream was never about material possessions, but during the 20<sup>th</sup> century it was interpreted as obtaining a nice house, an expensive car and a happy family. All of these components appear in *An American Tragedy*, which, alas, brings the reader to think that Dreiser was probably warning society against the evils of material pursuit - warnings that have been largely ignored. Not everyone can attain these material ideals, and Dreiser used his novels to blame American society and its social system, which values those who succeed and rejects those who cannot. I would say that this novel, like *Sister Carrie*, exposes the harsh realities of American life, depicting the dark side of the American Dream.

During the first three decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when Dreiser was penning his novels, he subscribed to the popular world view that naturalism strongly influenced an individual's fate. At the core of naturalism lies the concept that a human being's life is determined by instincts, heredity and environment. Norvell explains that “a person's fate is sealed from birth, determined by his particular heredity and environment in tandem with animal instincts that affect all humans.” If a person has no control over his fate, he will survive only if he can correctly decipher the cultural system he lives by. Joseph Karaganis claims that naturalist fiction translates determinist assumptions “...by refusing to describe persons as autonomous individuals capable of moral choice.” David Guest explains that naturalism in narratives illustrates forces that



determine human personality and behavior. Dreiser's protagonists, Clyde and Roberta, fit perfectly into this paradigm; they were born and will die poor and powerless, with little hope of bettering themselves economically or socially. In fact, it is their efforts to change their situation that causes their death. Norvell comments that it is "as if nature punishes them for trying to subvert order."

Guest adds to the forces of determination also the impact of reporters, narrative authors, television anchors and others who have created a genre of sensational capital cases, which he calls the "execution novel" - tragic stories of a lives that end in legal execution, retribution for crimes against mankind. Guest's list of execution novels includes *Billy Budd*, *An American Tragedy*, *Native Son*, *Knock on any Door*, *In Cold Blood*, *The Postman Always Rings Twice* and other famous tomes of the time.

This examination of *An American Tragedy* traces the public's reaction to murder and execution and Dreiser's habit of populating his works with middle and lower-class protagonists, through whom he mirrors the ailments of society. It seems that American naturalist literature in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century focused on the suffering classes, portraying individuals with no access to good education. By excluding upper class society from this movement, the literature of the time failed to reproduce naturalist conventions among the affluent.

Powerful, deterministic forces prevail in *An American Tragedy*: instinct, heredity and environment, lack of free will, survival of the fittest, a forceful sex drive and social conformity – forces that even mature and experienced adults would find hard, if not impossible, to conquer.

With the illusory American Dream and naturalism in mind, the young Dreiser decided to base his novel on a real life murder case (Plank), an easy choice, since state executions were relatively frequent in the 1900s, numbering about 100 per year (Guest, xi). Dreiser spent years,

both as a journalist and as a curious human being, searching for incidents in which men murdered women “with whom they had been romantically involved but who had become inconvenient” (Bookrags study-guide). Eventually, he chose the case of Chester Gillette, who drowned his pregnant girlfriend in New York, in 1906, was found guilty and who was electrocuted for his crime. To add authenticity to the story, Dreiser interwove autobiographical details, recalling his very poor parents, a dysfunctional father, a sister who eloped with a married man, superstitious and ignorant siblings and the lack of parental guidance. His central character watches and envies successful Americans who have realized the dream of wealth, and disdains the masses who fail to do so and live in poverty and distress. Where is equality?

The novel is divided into three books, and Grebstein compares this structure to a three act play: Book One, 19 loaded chapters, describes the Griffiths family and establishes the main character and the basis for the conflict. Book Two, no less loaded - forty-seven chapters, describes Clyde, who gradually improves his social circumstances, but just as success is within his grasp, his country girlfriend tells him she is pregnant with his child. In a fit of desperation, Clyde murders her. Book Three, thirty-four chapters, is what I call ‘the court story’ and describes the formal assembly of lawyers, witnesses, jurors, and journalists. Clyde steals all the attention, while the murdered girl’s family gets very little attention. The trial leads to Clyde’s condemnation and capital punishment.

As previously stated, when describing the central character’s family members, Dreiser leans heavily on his recollections of his own family. Asa is “one of those poorly integrated and correlated organisms, the product of an environment and a religious theory, but with no guiding or mental insight of his own... without any practical sense whatsoever” (*An American Tragedy*, 22). Elvira “is another reincarnation of Dreiser’s mother” (Gerber 136), who “had been nothing

but an ignorant farm girl... had become inoculated with the virus of Evangelism... stood out as having that force and determination... however blind or erroneous” (*An American Tragedy*, 16).

Both the parents are poor evangelists who run a dilapidated mission, as well as hold forth with religious sermons on the streets of Kansas City. Their four children must accompany them and therefore hardly ever attend school on a regular basis. Clyde, 12 years old, is Dreiser’s protagonist. The reader and the few observers on the streets feel the teenager’s antagonism toward his parents’ beliefs and street activity. His contempt of his parents’ way of life is painful. He looks at them with scorn at them and tries to physically distance himself from the group, as if he does not belong. One observer comments, “...don’t wanta be there. He feels outa place” (19). And the narrator adds, “... appeared indeed to resent and even to suffer... deprived of many comforts and pleasures which seemed common enough for others... Plainly pagan rather than religious” (17), Clyde’s eyes capture the pedestrians, but he only pays attention to the affluent ones, wishing to emulate their nice clothes and happy countenances as soon as possible. Occasionally he finds temporary jobs that do not prevent him from daydreaming about future success.

Gerber (136) poses a foreshadowing question: “What happens to children from such a family, such an environment, when their little mission world collides with the universe beyond its walls?” Under such circumstances it sounds only natural that their train to a successful life will derail, which begins to happen already in the first book. Esta, the oldest child, reminiscent of Dreiser’s sister, Emma, is seduced through “Chemic witchery” by an actor, and is then deserted, pregnant. She becomes an outcast both from society and her own family.

When Clyde bellhops at a glamorous hotel, he befriends young men whose dreams are congruent to his own, which begins to pave the way to his downfall: drinking in spite of the

Prohibition, visiting prostitutes and enjoying *sex and the city*<sup>3</sup>, lying to his mother – all become his way of life. When he courts Hortense, a superficial girl who sells her favors for gifts and clothes, Clyde is fully aware of the fact that he is the frustrated *buyer* who is willing to pay, even at the expense of helping his family. To silence his pricking conscience he gives his mother a weekly allowance, but even this is accompanied with lies, “... he suffered a pang of commingled self-commiseration and self-contempt, based on the distress he felt for his mother... And yet his mother looked so lone and so resourceful. It was shameful. He was low, really mean. Might he not, later, be punished for a thing like this?” (*An American Tragedy*, 135).

As expected, a catastrophe hits him: along for the ride when Clyde’s friend drives a stolen car recklessly, a young girl is run over and dies. It becomes a hit and run case; Clyde and his friends flee the scene of the crime. Afraid to share responsibility for the crime, Clyde must leave town. He heads to Chicago, becoming a refugee in his own country and a prisoner of his pursuits: how do I get money and women? How do I upgrade my life? How do I hold on to what I have already accomplished?

I cannot agree with Leonard Cassuto’s opinion that “But before he runs, Clyde distinguishes himself. Staying at the scene of the crash to help his injured friends, he puts their welfare ahead of his own. He waits until the last possible instant to escape, and is almost caught by the police” (Cassuto, 201-2). My reading dictates that Clyde is stunned, shocked and frightened to death. He helps only when called upon and does not take any initiative of his own to assist others: “Give us a hand here, Clyde, will you? Let’s see if we can get her out. She’s fainted” (157). It takes time until he pulls himself together and flees. He does not just *leave*, he *flees*. In Dreiser’s language, Clyde sounds extremely self-centered:

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<sup>3</sup> *Sex and the City* is not just a show, it is probably a reality.

He must get out of this. He must not be caught here. Think of what would happen to him if he were caught – how he would be disgraced and punished probably – all his fine world stripped from him before he could say a word really. His mother would hear... Most certainly he would go to jail (160).

“The police were in *pursuit*” (157), and he is in *pursuit*, of a different goal though, and his comes first. I suggest that the word ‘pursuit’ was deliberately chosen: Clyde has only ‘Clyde’ in his mind, nobody and nothing else. The emphasis on wealth and materialism conquers faith and morality.

In light of such a character, the frustrated reader, close to running out of patience, is prepared to hear about the consequences that will teach Clyde a lesson, but Dreiser has just begun his story. The first book functions as an introduction to Clyde’s adventures in a society that repels him like an insect. Slowly but profoundly, Dreiser builds Clyde’s background, his uncontrolled infatuation with women and his sick fantasy of getting easy money. We are curious to know how low he can go, and through Clyde – how low American society can go in search of a myth called the American Dream. The next phase, as foreshadowed, must be the protagonist’s downfall.

H.L. Mencken, in his introduction to the novel, finds Book One superfluous: “If any reader of the present volume is pressed for time, I advise him to begin his reading with the second book. “The first is a menagerie of all Dreiser’s worst deficiencies” (11). Unable to decide whether Mencken, at this point of a questionable friendship, is a fan or a foe, I will stick to my opinion that Book One is important in detailing Clyde’s historical background in historical context, “The 1920s, when religion was giving way to idolizing materialism and hedonism, and when cars and movies and mass media were planting in the lower, deprived classes new desires

and strong feelings of dissatisfaction” (Orlov, 123). Gerber (134), states that all those minute details in the first book foreshadow “Clyde’s later actions that come not as a surprise but as a fulfillment.”

Once Clyde’s poor and deprived background has been established, Dreiser continues to form his character and to lead him to the ultimate crime – murder. In Book Two, the conflict between sex and ambition is established, intensified by a crisis – Roberta’s pregnancy, and results in a climax – her murder. The story continues three years later, after Clyde flees from the wrecked car and from his possible implication in the event. He is now in Chicago, enjoying forbidden sex and the worldly pleasures of life. Chicago, like other big cities, is flooded with people who come from rural places, seeking work. Nothing comes easy, and Clyde consistently blames his tough life on his poor, suffocating childhood and a class-conscious society that views poverty as a flaw.

He works as a bellboy and is waiting for a miracle to happen. His dream comes true when his rich uncle happens to visit the city. It is just a coincidence that plays in Clyde’s favor, and Dreiser harnesses it to support his support naturalistic theme: Clyde has done nothing to make such a meeting happen, and the rich uncle definitely has no clue that his nephew is in town. Clyde’s weakness becomes apparent again when he lies to his uncle about his parents’ business. He is so ashamed of them that he “invents” a 40-room hotel attached to the mission they lead. He does it to beautify reality and make it advantageous to him.

The first several chapters of Book Two profile the rich Griffiths family members, and Dreiser takes care to describe the offspring: money in search of social status and the sweet life. Clyde and his cousin, Gilbert, are close in age and share a familiar resemblance. Bur Gilbert,

threatened by Clyde who knows how to impress his father, decides to push the unwanted interloper out of the family circle.

On the other side stands Clyde, living a life of deprivation, envy and uncertainty, confused by the contradictory messages of his environment. Why is that the rich idolize money, have fun with girls and live in mansions, and he cannot? He feels entitled to a flashy lifestyle. The narrator paints Clyde's flaws in dark colors to further sway reader opinion. The young man laments his life as a bad chain reaction: his parents' poor lifestyle and religious beliefs deprived him of education, led to his lower class status and left Clyde and his sister victims of circumstances that are beyond their control (*An American Tragedy*, 180).

The omniscient narrator discloses his opinion of his protagonist, stating that he lacks "sturdy courage and faith in his own" (180). Instead of working hard and acting respectfully and responsibly, he is waiting for a savior to propel him on the trajectory to success: "... one of these very remarkable men might take a fancy to him and offer him a connection... and that might lift him into a world such as he had never known" (189).

And if we are still not convinced that Clyde is incorrigible, the following paragraph cinches it:

For to say the truth, Clyde had a soul that was not destined to grow up. He lacked decidedly that mental clarity and inner directing application that in so many permits them to sort out from the facts and avenues of life the particular thing or things that make for direct advancement (189).

By depicting Clyde as permanently and hopelessly immature, Dreiser places some of the blame on Clyde's character. He does not know how to advance his social qualities and actually begs for sympathy and understanding. According to Cassuto's diagnosis of Clyde in *Lycurgus*,

He tries hard to meet the requirements of this [commercial] world, but the Lycurgus Griffiths family isolates him; Clyde goes from being a boy with a family he wants to escape, to a young man who wants to be embraced by a new family who won't accept him (Cassuto, 202).

Clyde's desire to escape from his authentic self pushes him, in Paul Orlov words, "imitating other people and then mistaking the roles he is playing for his genuine individual nature or status" (Orlov, 120). Renunciation is devastating and leads to his manipulative scheming and grisly plans which are far from being childish, as revealed in subsequent chapters.

Feeling lonely and isolated, Clyde begins seeing Roberta, an attractive, young worker under his supervision at his uncle's collar factory. She is a poor farmer's daughter who has come to the big city in hopes of making a little money to enable her to study and earn a good profession. She is practical, serious and very charming, but not wary enough to recognize the wrong person in her path. Robert Shafer describes Roberta as a "simple county maiden, though she was drawn to him and he was drawn to her, was never the less rigidly conventional, immovably moralistic, one of the predestined pillars of ordered society and a stable family" (Pizer 261). Both she and Clyde know that it is strictly forbidden to mingle socially; still they meet secretly and eventually become intimate. Both continue to dream of future success but do not know that it has been derailed before it even started.

Slowly, events take a better turn and Clyde is finally invited to the Griffiths' sumptuous mansion, where he meets Sondra, the girl of his dreams. She is young, beautiful and rich, and more importantly, she is part of the high society Clyde covets. He is ecstatic: she must be his; he will do whatever it takes to marry her. Instead of immediately breaking up with Roberta, he



decides to end the relationship gradually and, in the meantime, enjoy both worlds. However, in Michael Cummings wording, “a twist of fate takes him by surprise: Roberta is pregnant” (Cummings study-guide). The news devastates him. He is already close with Sondra; she buys him gifts, invites him to socialize with her friends... she even allows him to kiss her.

Roberta does not make for desired company any longer. What should he do now? Pills fail to work, and the doctor refuses to abort the baby. Roberta urges Clyde to marry her, even for a short period of time, at least until the baby is born. She is scared, ashamed and feels cheap and unworthy. He seduced her and she yielded. She is so desperate that she sends him letters begging him to visit and save her from a grim future. She realizes that she is a victim of Clyde’s sexual power, but she consented and thus contributed to her own tragedy. On the other hand, he is responsible and must help her, or she will reveal their relationship. Roberta is so overwhelmed by her own tragedy that she does not view herself as Clyde’s victimizer. She realizes that she is pushing him, but she has no one to help her, least of all, her parents. Without him she is socially and morally lost.

There is no doubt that Roberta understands what she is doing to Clyde, and she resents herself for being so pushy. Yes, she uses him as a tool to a better social future, but he knew very well who she was when he first laid his eyes on her.

Once again, it is only a coincidence that Clyde sees headlines in the local newspaper: an *accidental double tragedy happened at a nearby lake – an upturned canoe and floating hats probably reveal the loss of two lives. An unidentified body of a girl has been recovered; however, her companion’s body is still missing.* All of a sudden it dawns on Clyde that this is a perfect solution for his problem: “Death! Murder! The murder of Roberta!” (477). Dreiser takes six long chapters to detail Clyde’s descent into mental unbalance, building his murder plan and carrying it

out. Thomas Riggio (515) suggests that “Dreiser achieves his special effects through the use of a few unlikely fictive devices: a bizarre nightmare, a psychic evil genie who tempts Clyde, a gothic landscape ... and... gothic “weir-weir” bird to both herald and precipitate Clyde’s murderous act.” The narrator does not spare psychological effects: “efrit... genii of the darkest and weakest side... The strained and bedeviled look in his eyes... The weird, haunting cry of that unearthly bird... the imminence of trance or spasm” (517-30).

The scene in which Roberta drowns is critical in determining later whether Clyde is responsible for her death or whether it was just an accident. Critics, such as Riggio, Cummings, Mencken, Orlov and others, offer their various readings of the text. Shawn St. Jean tries to identify some contradictions in Dreiser’s text:

Yet... pushing at her so much vehemence as not only to strike her lips and nose and chin with it, but to throw her back sidewise toward the left wale which caused the boat to careen to the very water’s edge. And then he, stirred by her sharp scream...rising and reaching half to assist or recapture her and half to apologize for the unintended blow – yet in so doing completely capsizing the boat – himself and Roberta being as instantly thrown into the water. And the left wale of the boat as it turned, striking Roberta on the head as she sank and then rose for the first time, her frantic, contorted face turned to Clyde, who by now had righted himself. For she was stunned, horror-struck, unintelligible with pain and fear... and the blow he had so accidentally and all but unconsciously administered (531).

The text does not state that Roberta rises again, so why does Dreiser say “for the first time”? Furthermore, St. Jean goes into technical explanations, suggesting that

since the left wale is at ‘the very water’s edge’ with Roberta’s weight, and Clyde is going toward her, the boat must flip in that direction, meaning the *opposite* (right) wale would rise in the air and come down hard, the boat now upside down. The *left wale*... no downward movement or force for a blow. Yet, the narrator states that the *left wale* strikes Roberta on the head. There is no way for this to happen... (St. Jean, 17).

I find this description very convincing, especially when tested on a child’s toy boat. The narrator knows this fact might save Clyde’s life, but unfortunately, the defense attorneys are not aware of the contradiction, and Dreiser does not bother to enlighten them<sup>4</sup>.

Clyde allows Roberta to drown, convincing himself that it was an accident. The genie, this inner evil voice in him, supports his decision not to help her for fear that he too might drown. Only the voice of that weird bird shakes him again and undermines his self conviction. What does its voice sound like? A warning? An accusation? A condemnation? And Clyde runs away, further hiding clues which might indict him.

Book Two ends exactly as does Book One: Clyde leaves the scene of the crime without looking back. He cannot and would not take responsibility. Furthermore, he does not express remorse in any way. “Even animals don’t eat their own” says Chris at the end of *All My Sons* (70). So, what is Clyde? The omniscient narrator has a clear answer in Book Three. Mason, the prosecutor, is compared to “a restless harrier, anxious to be off at the heels of its prey [wolf] – of a foxhound within the leap of its kill” (*An American tragedy*, 756). Naturalism, or the use of metaphors to compare the human experience to the wild kingdom is an effective technique of Dreiser’s character development. Clyde is not a strong species and cannot survive. However, the

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<sup>4</sup> St. Jean states that deconstructionists call such a phenomenon *aporia*, meaning that the language fails to provide stable meaning and multiple interpretations are possible.

author is not comfortable with exonerating Clyde of any social responsibility and only blaming society and the environment, so he punishes his protagonist as well. This way, Clyde is a victim and a victimizer, an abused and an abuser. What will the jury decide?

The penal system in a law abiding society is taken very seriously, not only because a criminal has to be removed from society to safeguard the rest of the population, but also to deter potential criminals. I assume that Dreiser did not have deterrence in mind while writing Book Three. The question he poses is precisely the one that bothers Clyde: is he guilty? Has he committed an act of murder? The district attorney, Mason, addresses the same issue to the coroner: “We’ll have to know beyond a shadow of a doubt... whether that girl was killed before she was thrown of that boat, or just stunned and then thrown out, or the boat upset” (564-5). Dreiser dedicates a third of the entire novel, 34 chapters, to a long denouncement, a murder trial with a coroner, a police investigation, an autopsy, a Judge and jury, lawyers and dozens of witnesses, and eventually a first-degree murder conviction that leads to Clyde’s execution.

What is murder? And what is first degree murder? As previously stated in the introduction, Under the *Common Law* of the United States, and *Crime Victims’ Rights Law and Legal Definition*, murder is the unlawful killing of a human being with malice aforethought. The emphasis lies on a *premeditated* killing, a willful and intentional act of taking a human life. The prohibition of murder appears in the *Sumerian Code* written about 2,000 BC. That code says that if a man commits a murder, that man must be killed. The sixth commandment in the Jewish Bible, written about 3500 BC. reads: לא תרצח (lo tirtzach), which means “thou shalt not murder” (Exodus 20:1-17), unlike King James’ translation that says “Thou shalt not *kill*.” Most states distinguish between first and second degree murder, depending on the seriousness of the offense, such as if the murder was accomplished with an aggravation or in an especially heinous

circumstance. The distinction is important in determining the punishment: capital punishment (death) for the first and life long imprisonment for the second.

In the novel, it is clear that the defense attorneys will relate to Clyde's earlier life, trying to throw some light on the incident? – accident? – murder? Their initial approach is to claim “insanity, or “brain storm” – a temporary aberration” (655) due to his love for Sondra and the fear of Roberta's objection to letting go of him. However, they have to reject this plan for lack of evidence and also because the affluent Griffiths will not testify – after all, they are the ones who pay the lawyers and dictate the rules of the game. Jephson, the shrewd lawyer, invents a story that supports Clyde's former testimony and sounds more credible than the truth. But no one can really empathize with Clyde because they cannot relate to his personal experience, ideology and personal considerations: the biased prosecutor suffers from “what the Freudians are accustomed to describe as a psychic sex scar” (547). He knows what hunger for sex can do; still, it is his job to squeeze Clyde and get a full confession that will send him to the death chamber. Mason's deputy is sure that Clyde deliberately hit Roberta in the head *before* she hit the water, so why waste precious time if he can help his boss. He secretly plants two of Roberta's hairs in the camera. The coroner has two young daughters at home and Roberta's tragic encounter with Clyde frightens him. All the jurors, but one, are married, and religious. Sex between those who are not married is a sin, no matter how hard the defense attorney attempts to convince them otherwise: “...love is love... Only remember, we were once all boys...girls, and know well, - oh, how very well – the fevers and aches of youth that love have nothing to do with a later practical life” (718).

The lawyers do not isolate private interests from lawful considerations. Local elections are around the corner, and a sensational trial like this one can definitely advance their social

status and boost their careers. The prosecutor scores points by withholding information from the defense. The contest continues with the defense overlooking a complimentary letter from Clyde's former employer, enumerating his positive traits, because it does not exactly fit into his concocted story. One juror does not like the political party that Mason, the prosecutor, supports, and wants to undermine his certain victory, but receives threats to his successful business. The narrator details all this information so the readers will wonder how just "justice" really is. St. Jeans (15) claims that "the reader is in the position to see the dramatic erosion of truth." It seems that everybody connected to the trial has tainted considerations that tamper with the system.

The audience in the courtroom, as well as the community and the press, has a crucial impact on the law makers when they express their hostility for Clyde. The power of the written word goes beyond Lycurgus and the State of New York, and many Americans send letters encouraging the jurors to convict this hard-boiled murderer. Dreiser makes it obvious that social pressure, personal interests and the money that hires the distinguished lawyers dictate the "truth"<sup>5</sup>.

Along with the detailed description of the trial, Dreiser attacks Clyde with feelings of guilt but no remorse. "But ghosts – God – spirits that might pursue you after they were dead. Seeking to expose and punish you... Who could tell? His mother... and Frank and Esta and Julia believed in ghosts" (573).

Indeed, Clyde is found guilty of murder in the first degree and is taken to the "death house." The rich Griffiths leave Lycurgus and refuse any further connection or support. His mother comes to visit and tries to collect money but cannot find sympathetic ears. Dreiser describes the inmates in jail, all murderers waiting to be executed, and in spite of the horrendous

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<sup>5</sup> Did O.J. Simpson kill his wife and her friend?

crimes they have committed, he depicts them with compassion and empathy<sup>6</sup>. Reverend McMillan befriends Clyde and tries to help him discover God. Having earned his trust, Clyde makes a full confession, revealing his disturbing dreams and hidden fears. He still cannot make up his mind whether he has killed Roberta, or if the whole event was an accident: “No, I didn’t. I think I didn’t... I’m not quite sure... It may be that I wasn’t quite right... I guess – sick almost. I – I ... I was frightened and I didn’t want to help her” (853-4). Karaganis notes that this linguistic breakdown reappears when Clyde is under extreme pressure and reflects his incoherent state of mind. Clyde is indeed confused; the Reverend is the only person he confessed to, believing that it will save him. Save his life or save his soul? Neither. Ironically, his confession takes his life. When the new governor asks him what his personal judgment of Clyde is, the Reverend cannot deny that he has found him guilty before God and the law: “As his spiritual advisor I have entered only upon the spiritual, not the legal aspect of his life” (863). Clyde dies unsure of the extent of his own guilt.

Dreiser leaves the answer to the question of whether Clyde is guilty of murder in the first degree open and not unequivocal. My reading of the novel says that Dreiser clearly puts personal responsibility on Clyde’s shoulders. It is also possible that a good lawyer can plead Clyde’s technical innocence, but *still* he is guilty because he denied Roberta his help. Gerber states that there might be four responses to the question: that of the law; that of Christian ethics; that of the jury; and that determined by the social conditions under which Clyde lived. Gerber, however, does not elaborate on possible answers.

I suggest that the question of guilt or innocence is less important than criminal responsibility – therefore Dreiser “kills” Clyde and leaves us to judge. Does Clyde really die? Matters are settled but not resolved, and that might be the reason why the novel is an open-ended

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<sup>6</sup> Dreiser actually visited “Sing-sing” to learn about the execution act.

drama. According to Sheldon Grebstein (319), the novelist adds *Souvenir* to express his deep irony: twelve years have passed between Book Two and Book Three and the Griffiths

continue to loft their prayers and hymns to a just and merciful God against the tall, indifferent walls of a commercial city... Everything Mother Griffiths has learned can be summed up in the dime for ice-cream she gives Esta's illegitimate child and Clyde's replacement in the group of evangelists; it is her way of forestalling another American tragedy (Pizer, 319).

When looking carefully at the last paragraph, one can still find some affirmation. Five people are marching on the streets of San Francisco to deliver evangelical messages: the same old man and his tired wife; Esta and another woman, and 7 year-old-Russell. When the boy asks his grandmother for a dime, she gives him the money, thinking, "She must be kind to him, more liberal with him, not restrain him too much, as maybe, maybe, she had -" (874). The "may be" illustrates the difference between this mother twelve years ago and now.

To assume that Dreiser's sole intentions were to portray Clyde and Roberta's profiles simplifies the novel. Not only does he smash the American Dream, but he also portrays a sociological phenomenon. It is bitter, social criticism that exposes a serious fault in American culture and its devastating servitude to conspicuous consumption. Almost every character of his is both a victim and a victimizer, one who is abused and an abuser, no matter whether he is religious or secular, rich or poor, old or young. One can clearly feel Dreiser's agony when describing America's sick culture. The collision between the classes makes all his characters victims, although some do not realize it. The rich Griffiths victimize Clyde by helping him "create a prestigious pseudo-identity" (Orlov, 133) and thus assist his desire for a "fantasy self" (Orlov, 125). Gerber (134), states that "What happens to Clyde will happen not only because of



his drives with which he has been naturally endowed, but because of the influences which mold him and the direction from which the indifferent winds of chance happen to blow.” Is this description not a clear sign of victimization?

Clyde, of course, sees himself only as a victim, but Denby (4) adds to his “traits”, saying, “...a shallow, sensual American boy... wholly defined by desire, and too dazzled and jangled by the lure of money to care, or even notice, that he is becoming a parasite.” On the other hand, Sondra, Clyde’s love, constantly victimizes him by using him as a tool to attract Gilbert, and later as a toy. Finally, once Clyde’s guilt is established, all his affluent “friends” disappear for fear of ruining their own social and economic connections. His loving parents victimize Clyde and his siblings by denying them a normal life. At the same time, they themselves are victimized by strict beliefs of their religion. Ironically, this same religion denies the pious mother money for a possible appeal.

Critics agree that the novelist’s style and language make it hard to read *An American Tragedy*. In Pizer we read:

Dreiser’s characterization... must inevitably suffer from his incapacity to handle words... to communicate intense feelings... deluge of inept verbiage... Not the reader is unaffected – but the disparity between the author’s perturbation and the inadequacy of his expression is almost grotesque. If Clyde and Roberta and the rest were not half concealed by the deluge of inept verbiage, *An American Tragedy* might well be one of the world’s great novels (256).

Shafer is another hostile critic: “His difficulty is that his mechanistic naturalism compels him so to select and manipulate facts of experience to deny... that human life has any meaning or value” (Pizer, 268). On the other hand, we read Robert Penn Warren, who compliments

Dreiser and voices his admiration even in the title of his essay “Homage to Theodore Dreiser on the Centenary of his Birth” (Pizer, 282).

I think that Dreiser’s *An American Tragedy* is fascinating and educational. His condemnations are painful yet sincere. American society and the present economy are indeed in trouble, but curable. The American Dream can still be realized: Dreiser’s own success in life contradicts the movement he endorses. Poor-born, poorly educated, Dreiser became rich and famous, and gained respect from most of his peers and readers, while Clyde got the electric chair. Both shared similar pre-conditions, but Dreiser was nominated for the Nobel Prize, whereas his protagonist was nominated to hell. Is this not proof that the American Dream is attainable?

The transition from *An American Tragedy* to the next chapter, *All My Sons*, is smooth because both Dreiser and Miller accuse society for bending the American Dream and putting emphasis on the pursuit of materialism. The historical development of secular understanding of murder is clear: if Clyde’s parents are devoted evangelists, the following play introduces Joe Keller as a secular American whose religious approach is not even mentioned. His tragedy stems from misinterpretation of the American Dream, resulting in private tensions that precede public responsibilities. Does Keller realize that he has committed a crime?

Chapter 4: “ ‘You’re not even an animal, no animal kills his own, what are you?: Homicide and  
*All My Sons* in Postwar America”

Twentieth-century American drama is obsessed with, maybe even haunted by, the shattered myth of the idyllic American family. The primal unit has received a sick, cursed twist and identifies its members as victims and victimizers, the seduced and seducers, the murdered and murderers, the abused and abusers. This phenomenon of the broken family is clearly seen in such plays as Susan Glaspell’s *Trifles* (1916), Tennessee Williams’ *The Glass Menagerie* (1944), Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman* (1949) and Eugene O’Neill’s *Long Day’s Journey into Night* (1956). The inability to communicate in spite of utmost love is also obvious in Edward Albee’s *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962), Sam Shepard’s trilogy of family plays in the end of the 1970s, Marsha Norman’s *night Mother* (1983), Paula Vogel’s *How I Learned to Drive* (1997), and Suzan-Lori Parks’ *Topdog/Underdog* (2002).

The list is long, the genre familiar. The stage, as described in *Trifles*, *All My Sons*, *Buried Child* and other plays, is mainly domestic and puts the emphasis on the individual in juxtaposition to the public world. Physical, spiritual and emotional space is either lost or limited and suffocating. On the one hand, the American characters are proud of their ideals and the constant attempt to achieve perfection; on the other, they renounce what does not seem to be perfect, and worship material gain as the ultimate success. The social structure slowly dissolves: the father who invests in his son and then complains that he does not understand the value of money; stinginess in hiring a good doctor for a beloved family member; bitterness and despair, endless acquisition of assets; others are always guilty. Again, the list is long.

Although the iconic playwrights mentioned above acknowledge through their works that the deepest human relationships exist within the family, their plays depict dysfunctional family units. In most of these contemporary plays, emphasis shifts from the public to the individual, from shared space to limited space, and all of this results in mental agony and sometimes even death.

In this chapter, I will follow closely the spineless murderer Joe Keller and his accomplices to the crime. I will elaborate on their fruitless attempts to be authentic to their own identities even though they actually do not have integrity. By suppressing the truth they try to ignore the past and hang on to a shaky present. They unsuccessfully strive to compromise between private needs and public obligations, as Christopher Bigsby comments in *Arthur Miller – A Critical Study* (90). Their flaws may be covered, welded and painted, but they still exist. Values are bent to match private greed and personal needs. The patriarch is an utter failure and cannot be a role model. He is blind to his own shortcomings and blames the world around him for the consequences of his own deeds. He speaks and acts with hubris which leads him toward destruction.

Can there be a recovery in the end? Is there any affirmative message in *All My Sons*? Does idealism still have a place in our modern times? Will the characters finally realize that their constant denial of the truth is destructive? And maybe more importantly, what are the individual's narrow responsibilities to his family compared with the broader accountabilities to the society he lives in?

Arthur Miller's *All My Sons* (1947) is one of the stepping stones to this pattern. His biting indictment of American society as materialistic to the point of consuming itself and therefore, as a source of evil, was distinctive in the middle of the twentieth century. According to Miller, the

individual has internalized popular, flawed values and later pays the price. Since one does not know any better, why is he to blame? If his money is tainted, then “Half the Goddam country is gotta go if I go!” (*All My Sons*, 82).

Neil Carson (14) tells his readers that *All My Sons* is based upon a true story published in an Ohio newspaper during World War II. A manufacturer’s young daughter notified authorities that her father had knowingly shipped out defective machinery to the U.S. military, resulting in the deaths of many soldiers. Miller fictionalizes this story and portrays two partners in a business: Joe Keller owns a successful machine shop and Steve Deever is a neighbor and employee in position of increasing responsibility. Deever’s daughter, Ann, and Keller’s eldest son, Larry, are engaged to be married; Deever’s younger son, George, idolizes Keller’s younger son, Chris, and both have become close friends. When the US joins WW-II, the boys join the armed forces, and Ann moves to New York. Keller’s company supplies airplane parts to the army and both fathers look forward to a prosperous future. But one day, the manufacturing process fails and produces cracked cylinder heads. Keller is sick in bed and gives the order to weld the cracks and ship the faulty cylinder heads anyway. As a result, twenty-one pilots get killed and the two partners stand trial. Both men are convicted, but Keller convinces the jury that he is not responsible for the tragic event and that Deever acted on his own. The verdict sends the latter to jail and Keller goes free. Only later does the theatergoer understand that one is forced to take moral and legal responsibility, while the real culprit, Joe Keller, walks free because “I pulled a fast one getting myself exonerated” (*All My Sons*, 30) and destroys both himself and his family.

The plot of *All My Sons* seems simple and linear. The action begins in August 1947, two years after the end of the war, in the Midwest. The events occur between Sunday morning and a

few minutes after two o'clock the following morning. In a period of less than 24 hours we are introduced to the protagonist, Joe Keller, who loves his family above *all*, and sacrifices everything and everybody to achieve the American Dream. He has lost his older son, the combat pilot Larry, in the war and is ready now to have his younger son, Chris, take over the business. Keller's wife, Kate, who is always addressed as Mother, deludes herself into believing that Larry is only missing in action and forces this opinion on everyone around her. She also insists on Keller's innocence, because it is impossible that a father could kill his own son; this contradicts the natural order of the universe. To validate her stance, Keller insists to the reader and the viewer that Larry did not fly the defective planes that broke down in the air.

Thomas Adler states the "Larry's presence [although being the missing character on stage] has been felt from the very first moments through visual state symbolism, mainly by the tree that was planted to commemorate his missing in action, and is now broken down by the wind" (Adler, 65). Chris has returned from the war decorated with medals and filled with noble ideals of social responsibility, but the reality of middle-class American values seeps in, and he capitulates to the hegemony of materialism. He, too, is certain of his father's innocence. It is Chris' desire to marry Larry's fiancé that becomes the catalyst for uncovering everybody's denial of the truth. What is the truth? Who should take the blame?

Miller obviously feels that injustice must be corrected in order to preserve cosmic order, the same order Kate believes in. Evil must be punished but at the same time the murderer must acknowledge his crime. Abbotson, Bigsby, Adler and many other critics believe that Keller finally accepts that he made critical mistakes in judgment, and this is the reason that he commits suicide at the end of the play, closing the circle of the tragedy and allowing his family to live with dignity. I, however, disagree: one cannot expect a leopard to change its spots. I do not think

that Keller reveals “a newly awakened recognition” (Neil Carson, 17) that *he* is responsible for the death of the pilots. I would rather suggest that he takes his own life when he realizes that Larry did not understand this value of unconditional love between father and son.

My analysis consists of two parts: Joe Keller permitted defective airplane cylinders to be supplied to the United States Air Force, directly causing the deaths of combat pilots. His own materialism trumped his moral conscience, threatening American society as a whole. He also contributed to the destruction of his own family by allowing his wife to play the role of a disturbed mother who refuses to admit that her eldest son died in combat. He tacitly supports her faith in Larry’s possible return, just because this allows him to avoid any confrontation with her and with his conscience.

In spite of the serious accusations, most theatergoers see Keller as a tragic figure. They tend to empathize with Joe’s defense of his actions, because although his motives are unacceptable, they sound honest. I support Carson’s analysis of this protagonist, quoting the playwright himself: “Keller looks on himself not as a partner in society but as an incorporated member who cannot be used” (Miller’s “Introduction”, 19). Viewers recognize the pressure Keller was under and are afraid that they themselves might collapse under similar circumstances. There might be other “Kellers” in the audience who will do anything in order to survive. Miller is terrified: where is society really heading? Is a single-minded coward allowed to refuse to confront his crime only because he is embraced by the viewers?

During the course of the play we learn that the facts, as brought to us, are all correct, but they do not completely reveal the problem: Joe Keller actually possessed information about the defective cylinders, but still allowed them to be welded and shipped out because of his fear for the future of his plant. He was under massive pressure by the Department of Defense to

manufacture “a lot” and “fast.” If he temporarily halted production, even briefly, he might have found himself economically devastated. Three years later, Keller confesses to Chris and explicitly addresses the dilemma:

What could I do! I am in business... a hundred and twenty cracked, you are out of business; you got a process, the process don't work you're out of business...they close you up, they tear up your contract with you...what could I do, let them take forty years, let them take my life away? I never thought they'd install them. I swear to God. I thought they'd stop 'em before anybody took off (69).

We are sympathetic towards Keller also because he is a family man and is driven by love and devotion; however, he willingly took the risk of killing people for the sake of his business. His oath to Chris that he did not believe that those cracked cylinders would really be installed in the planes is unreliable. It was convenient to delude himself and rationalize the situation: so many shipments arrived daily, why should *his* be installed on the same day of its arrival? His excuse that he could fix the line and send good parts is unacceptable. Furthermore, could he really warn them not to install the previous shipment? His explanations and excuses sound unreasonable and unrealistic. His wishful thinking could not change the facts, and more than a score of pilots met death in the air.

This chilling account shocks the declared idealist Chris, who has returned from the war with social awareness and feelings of guilt that he survived while so many of his comrades sacrificed their lives. Although I find Chris' idealism phony and oppressive because he asks sacrifices of everybody but himself, his shock in finding out the truth is genuine. He interrogates his father, almost compelling Joe to bring to light every detail of the event. During their painful conversation, Keller confronts Chris with a statement, “I did it for you, it was a chance and I



took it for you” (*All My Sons*, 70). In a rage and nearly hysterical, Chris retorts that his father’s mere existence is a threat to society: “Don’t you have a country? Don’t you live in the world? ...You’re not even an animal’ no animal kills his own, what are you? What must I do to you?” (*All My Sons*, 70).

The realization that his father is a murderer devastates Chris. Already uncomfortable with the success his father’s business found during the war, he is now faced with the truth of his own hypocrisy. Yes, it has been convenient to believe his parents and enjoy their money, but *blood money*? Chris, a conspirator in denial, reiterates his opinion later, saying,

This is the land of the great big dogs, you don’t love a man here, you eat him!  
That’s the principle; the only one we live by--it just happened to kill a few  
people this time, that’s all. The world’s that way, how can I take it out on him?  
What sense does that make? This is a zoo, a zoo! (*All My Sons*, 81).

During their argument Chris storms out, leaving Keller and Mother to face a grim and threatening reality. Joe’s passivity and inability to make decisions are manifested in his temper and outbursts of anger. Desperately he asks his wife for advice, but she answers with unnerving calmness, “Joe, you are doing the same thing again. All your life whenever there’s trouble, you yell at me and you think that settles it” (*All My Sons*, 76). So where has she been all these years? Does she not prove to be an accomplice to their distorted mutual lives? Is she not a conspirator like Chris? But she does prove to have a strong personality, and on stage she steals the audience’s full attention and gains respect.

Chris’ threat to leave home scares Mother as much as it does Keller: to leave them with an empty nest? To have them struggle all by themselves? To have them face the truth about Keller’s being a murderer and she herself being an accomplice? Mother is no longer willing to

cover for her husband and deny the truth. So far she has done so to protect the family, but now there is nothing left to protect; everything and everyone is falling apart. Kate urges Joe to confess his responsibility for the crime in hopes that the tension within the family will subside. The solution she presents now stands in contradiction to the way she was in denial about her husband's culpability during the last three years, revealing the terrible toll she has been paying all this time. Mother is taking responsibility for the gloomy atmosphere at home, knowing that she has been protecting not only Joe and Chris, but also her own sanity. However, this sacrifice is in the end insufficient. The truth has been exposed to such an extent that, in her opinion, Keller must confess to his son and ask for forgiveness. She knows that because he was exonerated by the authorities, Joe cannot be prosecuted again; therefore, conveniently, Kate sees no real harm in Keller's making up with Chris; but she misinterprets the situation: the blow that Keller absorbs is a shock; the whole world is against him.

And Chris is gone. Can he keep his threat and abandon his parents' home and his comfortable life? Does he have integrity? The sad answer comes from the neighboring doctor, who explains to Kate some painful facts of life:

... he'll come back. We all come back, Kate. These private little revolutions always die. The compromise is always made... -- every man does have a star. The star of one's honesty. And you spend your life groping for it, but once it's out it never lights again... He probably just wanted to be alone to watch his star go out (74).

This prophecy, made by a frustrated physician, accurately reflects the compromise many make in life: idealism fades away when confronted with the realities of daily existence. Miller is

rightfully alarmed by the direction towards which society is heading: the individual first, the community second.

Chris returns, still determined to leave. He cannot continue denying facts:

I was made yellow in this house because I suspected my father and I did nothing about it, but if I knew that night when I came home what I know now, he'd be in the district attorney's office by this time, and I'd have brought him there. Now if I look at him, all I'm able to do is cry (80).

And then he adds: "I could jail him, if I were human any more. But I'm like everybody else now. I'm practical now. You made me practical" (80). For a moment it looks like Chris is taking responsibility for his own actions, but the last sentence reflects his inability to confront his own flaws. It is so much easier to place the full weight of guilt onto others. Like his mother, he tries to absolve himself by blaming Keller. Mother believes that the stars determine fate rather than personal choice (Terry Otten, 21); Chris discovers that "I can't bear to live any more... If I had him [Keller] here now I could kill him" (*All My Sons*, 83). The words "kill," "die" and "live" appear six times on one page, foreshadowing the tragic ending of the play.

Otten claims that Miller makes Chris the spokesman in the play (21), but I think that Chris' "moral ideals" are phony and cover weakness of the soul; therefore he cannot be the spokesman and represent all of American society. I agree with Bigsby's analysis that Chris' self interest is hiding behind the mask of idealism. I find Chris to be a naive hypocrite who broadcasts ideals he himself fails to uphold. Such innocence is destructive, and his moral righteousness is wasted. Chris' initial role as the ultimate believer in mutual responsibility and human solidarity changes into a murderous rage. In an attempt to maintain his own identity he must turn in his father. Unlike Jim Bayliss, the neighboring doctor, who notes that Chris does not

have a talent for lying, I feel that this same Chris, along with his parents, is the master of denial. Otten observes: “Suffering from guilt because he lived while those under his command died, because he betrays them by doing business with his father, because he wants to marry Larry’s intended, he finds his father a scapegoat for his own passivity” (24). I maintain that Chris wishes to atone for his own sins by punishing Keller, thus becoming both the accused and accuser.

Keller is not ready to become a scapegoat. He is “a man among men” (*All My Sons*, 6); he “made it” in his society and deserves respect, especially from his immediate family members for whom he has toiled all his life. He expects them to be thankful and understanding; and what is he getting instead? Condemnation, alienation and rejection. He is truly, honestly and deeply hurt: “I got plenty to say. Three and a half years you been talking like a maniac” (*All My Sons*, 68), and he still supports his wife’s illogical belief that Larry is alive. To him, Chris is not better than his mother. The boy’s unrealistic set of ideals does not bring him money, nor does it open doors in this capitalistic society. It is beyond Keller’s comprehension that Chris puts public obligations before private needs. Keller does what he has to do in order to survive and to support his family. The ultimate value that trumps all others is family solidarity, and especially love between father and son. Chris is oblivious to comforts in life because he grew up with them and never bothered to stop and ask where they came from. It is no wonder that Keller is so disappointed with both his wife and his son:

I didn’t want it in that way, either! What difference is it what you want? I spoiled the both of you. I should’ve put him out when he was ten like I was put out, and made him earn his keep. Then he’d know how a buck is made in this world.

Forgiven! I could live on a quarter a day myself, but I got a family so I ... (76-7).

When Kate answers that there is something bigger than family to Chris, Keller explodes, “Nothin’ is bigger!” (*All My Sons*, 77), and he means it with all his heart. There is nothing Chris would do and not be forgiven by Joe, “Because I am his father and he’s my son” (77). For Keller, the American dream is the holiness of the family and nothing is bigger than that. The threat to put a bullet in his head if this concept is rejected by Chris frightens Mother. Like her husband she begins to apprehend that they do not really know their sons. Keller pinpoints the issue as he says:

Goddam, if Larry was alive he wouldn’t act like this. He understood the way the world is made. He listened to me. To him the world had a forty-foot front, it ended at the building line. This one [Chris], everything bothers him. You make a deal, overcharge two cents, and his hair falls out. He don’t understand money. Too easy, it came too easy (*All My Sons*, 77).

Kate’s semi-solution that Joe should agree to go to jail is too simplistic. Criminology emphasizes that the punitive system does not allow action against an offender who has been exonerated from responsibility. This means that Joe cannot be punished for this crime. Still, the idea of prison shakes him to the core. At this point Chris returns and adds himself to the victims of practicality. He is probably going to end up being disillusioned and bitter like the doctor, and he feels like spitting on himself.

In *A Critical Introduction to Twentieth-Century American Drama*, Volume 2, Bigsby posits: “Chris’s idealism conceals a compulsive need to justify his own silence, the suppression of his own doubts” (169). And yet he continues to use his father’s money and does not seek a way out. Each character in the family is trapped in misconception, and “The backyard is hedged in, offering no escape for its inhabitants” (Abbotson, 56).

As already pointed out, the hypocrisy in Chris' character is clear; however, his awakening consciousness is genuine, his painful observation touching. It is not clear whether Keller, deep in his heart, understands the outcome of his crime and therefore cannot beg for forgiveness. Larry's letter is a turning point in Keller's comprehension of his sons. The revelation that Larry sacrificed himself for his country because he was unable to live with the disgrace that his father had cast on the family both shocks and sobers Keller. He starts to understand that human morality does not allow any human being to become a predator. Larry in his letter, and Chris in his verbal confrontation with Joe, address their father's accountability not merely to his family but to society at large. Only when Keller realizes the veracity of their worldview is he able to understand how different his views are. Can he really see all American soldiers as his sons? He nods his head in bewilderment, murmuring, "And I guess they were, I guess they were" (*All My Sons*, 83). I refuse to believe that guessing is enough.

Keller's suicide does not satisfy the audience. The action follows the pattern of a Greek tragedy, in which the protagonist gets punished and dies; his death provides divine retribution. But Keller's suicide is different. It is a convenient way out and does not balance out the deaths of Larry and the other pilots. Larry committed suicide in a kamikaze flight, and thus served his country to the end. Keller puts a bullet in his head, but this selfish act does not serve society's need for justice. He chooses his own punishment, whereas it is the prerogative of society to decide how to punish its offenders and deter potential criminals. Furthermore, society should be compensated, but Keller is unable to deal with public consequences.

According to Steven Centola, "Keller prefers to see himself as a victim of others. Instead of acknowledging his complicity in the crime that sends pilots to their death, he lies about his involvement and diminishes personal culpability. He blinds himself to the impulses that make

him a danger to himself as well as to others” (52). Centola emphasizes the importance of the past, saying: “The past is always present and cannot be ignored, forgotten, or denied” (50).

When we come to summarize each character’s crime, it is clear that Keller is a murderer destined to suffer, and he drags his family along with him. However, his simple conduct and utmost devotion to his immediate family engage the audience. The domestic setting that the stage suggests is familiar to many viewers: Keller is reading the want ads in the newspaper, while Chris is busy reading the book section, and the conversation is flowing and funny – a domestic atmosphere. Keller represents to them an ordinary American who faces a conflict of responsibility – his accountability to the family and his obligations to his society. Keller does not fully comprehend his crime against the universe and prefers to see himself as a victim of others. He denies his connection to the tragic event, and in a way he also secludes himself from the world. I am not convinced that he is conscious of the fact that not only Larry was his son but so were all the other American soldiers. His broken utterance “I guess” is not a clear confession. He cannot fully come to terms with his guilt, and if he is to blame, then all of America is to blame.

Keller has achieved the American Dream – an uneducated man who has become prosperous, has a comfortable house and a nice family. But this dream looks hollow when we know what the endless quest for material comfort causes. His family unit is an illusion because it is falling apart. Keller causes the death of Larry and the destruction of Kate and Chris. His myopic vision of the world and his unwillingness to face confrontation make him a “little man” (32) – exactly his perception of his partner. I cannot take Keller to represent the ordinary American, because if he does there is no recovery and no affirmative message in *All My Sons*. If one apple tree bears some rotten fruit, it is still not a sign that the whole orchard is infected. This single tree should be uprooted and the space given to a healthy specimen. When Joe Keller takes

his own life, he paves a safe way for his offspring. In Miller's *The Family in Modern Drama*, we find the exact reason for Keller's suicide: "We cannot go home again, and the world we live in is an alien place... the central theme of the modern repertoire is the alienation of man... of man's deprivation of... bliss unjustly shattered" (37). Keller sees himself the man whose bliss has unjustly shattered, and he cannot fight back. And he cannot fight his wife.

Mother Kate is both an accomplice and a victim. She lives in denial and self deception just to cover up for her husband's crime. She sacrifices her integrity and Chris' happiness to save Keller. It is beyond the limits of her emotional strength to believe that Larry gave his life to atone for his father's action. She must deny facts to preserve her marriage. The letter that confirms Larry's suicide breaks her loyalty to her husband and deepens the gap between them. She advises him to figure out his life, because she is not able to think for him any more: "I mean you ought to make it clear to him [Chris] that you know you did a terrible thing" and a few lines down she is more specific: "Tell him... you're willing to go to prison" (*All My Sons*, 76). If he complies, the past can merge now with the present and open a gate to the future. She does not foresee Keller's suicide because he firmly disagrees with her and is argumentative as he usually is when he needs her advice. The act of suicide takes her by surprise, still, her motherly instincts take over, and her obligation now is to forgive Chris and help him get over the tragedy: "Don't take it on yourself. Forget now. Live" (*All My Sons*, 84). I feel that she is willing to take the whole blame on her broad shoulders in order to help Chris build a healthy life for himself. At this point she does not think of her own wellbeing.

Chris is critically responsible for the family's dilemma. His idealistic notions bend when convenient; therefore he deceives his parents and allows them to believe that their way of living in this world is also his. Detesting dishonesty is just verbal. Commentators, such as Abbotson



and Bigsby, question Chris' idealism, because he criticizes war profiteers while living from the profits. Susan Abbotson observes that as a result of the war, Chris and Larry developed a heightened sense of social responsibility. "This leads Larry to kill himself for shame at his father's action, and Chris to set himself impossible idealistic standards" (Abbotson, 63). She states that Chris is still a product of a traditional generation and is reluctant to throw away his old values.

Chris urges his mother to accept Larry's death not because it is reality, but because he wants to marry his brother's fiancé. He has long suspected that his father's money is tainted, but his own selfishness has helped him deny the evidence and avoid confrontation. He casts his guilty feelings onto his father and hides behind a mask of false values. When the truth hits him in the face, he runs away to grieve in solitude. He returns a different person, less naïve and more accepting of reality.

Chris admits that putting his father behind bars will not bring the dead back. Still "It's not enough for him to be sorry. Larry didn't kill himself to make you [Mother] and Dad sorry" (*All My Sons*, 84). He demands that they understand that "there is a universe of people outside and you're responsible to it" (*All My Sons*, 84). The irony is that he demands "perfection from the imperfect" (Centola, 57), and finds it difficult to admit that he himself is part of the imperfect. At the very end of the play, Mother allows him to begin a new life, presumably free from guilt.

In conclusion, in *All My Sons* Miller examines the morality of a man who places his personal responsibilities above those of society. Joe believes that his rightful position in his society is to be a good husband and a good father. Yet, he commits a horrible crime against the community. His twisted priorities blind his conscience and diminish his judgment. It is true that "Chris, a man can't be a Jesus in this world" (*All My Sons*, 83), but he must maintain some moral

values that protect society at large. In his disappointment and despair, Keller chooses to depart from this world in an abrupt way: suicide. As for Kate and Chris, Miller leaves an open ending and it is not clear what they will do in the future, but they have one. However, it is obvious that they will carry feelings of guilt for the rest of their lives. It is definitely not simple to come to terms with having victimized both yourself and others.

The depressing ending also poses a challenge and a promise of a better future. Miller emphasizes his conviction that “there’s a universe of people outside” (*All My Sons*, 84) and we are *all* responsible for it. It is true that a myopic perspective of the world encourages antisocial behavior that might lead to destruction, and it is also obvious that the principal concept that the past has an enduring influence on the present is reflected in *All My Sons*. However, there is a future ahead for the common individual if he remembers not to place himself at the top of the pyramid and not to surrender to private tensions. The line between values always exists, and the primacy of the nuclear family is not to be denied. However, in an ideal world, Miller suggests, the ordinary individual should attempt to make moral decisions that will honor and respect both his own needs as well as the interests of the public; but Miller’s is hardly an ideal world.

*All My Sons* has made repercussions all over the world. It has been translated into many languages and continues to show on stages. The following theater review section and the various accounts of selected productions support my interpretation of the play. It first opened in Broadway, at the Coronet Theatre in New York City, on January 29, 1947. It ran for 328 performances and closed on November 8, giving a serious push to Miller’s career. The play was awarded the 1947 Tony Award for Best Authored Play and for Best Direction by the unforgettable Elia Kazan, and also won the New York Drama Critics’ Circle Award. Mordechai Gorelik was the scenery designer and the light controller. Ed Begley played Joe Keller; Beth

Merrill was Kate/Mother and Arthur Kennedy played Chris. Brooks Atkinson from the *New York Times* reviewed the play, saying “Ed Begley dramatizes the whole course of the father’s poignant ordeal without losing the basic coarseness of the character. As the son, Arthur Kennedy is giving a superb performance with great power for the climaxes and with insight into the progress of the character. Beth Merrill is giving a brilliant performance as the neurotic and tired mother ... gives the impression of an inner strength that dominates at least one corner of the crisis.” In spite of the awards and complimentary reviews, “the play did not win friends among the political right who attacked it as a smear on the American business community and as the work of a Communist. The play was also denied a license to be performed in the occupied area of Europe by the Civil Affairs Division of the American Military” (*CurtainUp Review*).

Elyse Sommer from *CurtainUp – The Internet Theater Magazine of Reviews, Features and Annotated Listing* begins her review of a 2008 performance with two important quotes from the play. The first is Keller’s who claims that “nobody worked for nothin’ in the war.” The second is Chris’ who states that “I know you are no worse than most men but I thought you were better.” Sommer elaborates on the director McBurney, who stripped the Keller home of furniture, tore down the walls and left a door leading to a vast, barren and unattractive backyard. Sommer thinks that this setting takes the sixty-year-old play to the twenty-first century by associating the Keller family with middle-class America, and thus makes the play commercial. “The production chucks realism off the stage, even before the Keller’s tragic saga begins. The entire cast walks on stage in a sort of reverse curtain call...” The actors are phenomenal, especially Dianne Wiest who captures the complex emotions of a woman in deep retreat from the truth.

The play was reviewed several more times in the USA, one of them in the Cascade Theatrical Company in Oregon, in January 2009, by the *Innovation, Theatre Works*. Another

review is by Chris Jones from *The Chicago Tribune* in October 2009, in which he elaborates on the female director Senior and her cast that "...will make you feel like you've never met the play's women until now... Senior understands that this is a play that needs to make an audience cry... This new Chicago production is far simpler and far, far superior [to the recent Broadway revival starring Katie Holmes]. Jones finds Janet Ulrich Brooks [as Kate] the character that simply drives the play.

I have to betray my own prejudice about *All My Sons* and the 1976 Israeli production hosted by Arthur Miller as the guest of honor. To better understand this impressive event, the reader should know that Israel has been engaged in a major war every 8-10 years since its 1948 Independence War. Almost every third family is bereaved. War profiteering is a known fact; the American dream has been adopted by many Israelis and money plays an important role in keeping families united. *All My Sons* has been so relevant to our lives that in 1975 the Department of Education replaced *Julius Caesar* with *All My Sons* as a recommended text for high-school advanced English students. Israel is certainly the only country to have officially institutionalized the play.

One more important piece of information is essential: the Yom Kippur War in 1973 is still extremely traumatic because the state was on the verge of extinction. Bar-Lev Line, a chain of fortifications built by Israel along the Suez Canal, was designed to defend against any major Egyptian assault and was expected to function similarly to the Maginot Line along the German frontier from Luxembourg to Switzerland. The Bar-Lev Line was wildly popular with the Israeli public in spite of its tremendous cost and profiteering, and in spite of some criticism made by generals (notably Ariel Sharon). The Egyptians surprised Israel and were able to easily overcome the line in less than two hours. More than 5,500 soldiers lost their lives and so many newly

bereaved families joined the painful list. Bearing all this in mind, *All My Sons* is very relevant to Israeli life and culture: what can be more true to life than a soldier missing in combat, his mother becoming neurotic and a security scandal involving easy money?

The play opened in December, 1976 in Jerusalem by the Cameri Theater.

Director: Hey Kelos

Stage director: Arnon Adar

Translator: Ofra Ben-Ari

Mother: Hanna Maron

Keller: Yossi Yadin

Chris: Michael Varschaviak

The most important critics were H. Michael for the *Davar* newspaper and G. Grinfeld for *Ma'ariv*. Both elaborated on the context and its relevance to Israel, and praised the actors for their outstanding performances. Hanna Maron portrayed the protagonist and actually carried the play on her shoulders and proved to be a stunning figure on the stage. Some viewers swore they saw tears in Miller's eyes.

In his *Arthur Miller: A Critical Study*, Bigsby notes that "The Israeli production, likewise [the London one], shifted the emphasis as Kate was played by a powerful actress whose leg had been shot off in the attack at the Munich Olympics" (86). Hanna Maron was, indeed, on an El-Al flight to London on February 10, 1970, when the aircraft was hijacked to Munich Airport by Arab terrorists. Her foot sustained serious injuries in a hand-grenade attack and had to be amputated<sup>7</sup>. I suggest that these events had an impact on Miller, which he could not hide when watching the show.

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<sup>7</sup> The Munich Olympic games and the massacre of eleven Israeli athletes happened in 1972, at the Olympic Village.

Unlike *All My Sons* that is a clear indictment of American society, the following novel deals with a personal tragedy: Papa, a husband and a father, is betrayed by his own family members and cannot live with the shame. However, his pride does not allow him to admit his mental pain, so he cloaks it with modern scientific theories and plots a horrendous revenge. Is he successful in deluding the reader?

Chapter 5: “ ‘But now I made you this promise, Henri: there shall be no survivors. None!’:

*Travesty* and the 1970s”

“With all the recent critical attention to the misuse of power by the authors, symbolic violence against the audience of a literary work of art has become to seem so traditional that only naïve readers can now apparently feel a sense of outrage... An author’s power can... be measured by the reader’s feeling of being “caught” inside the text. Usually this feeling is being taken as a sign of the writer’s mastery: ‘I couldn’t put it down’ signifies helplessness and enjoyment at being subdued by the narrative” (Charles Baxter, 871).

John Hawkes, in *Travesty*, definitely aims to create suspense by manipulating the audience and causing discomfort, sometimes even making the reader feel deeply disturbed. Christopher Bigsby (*Modern American Drama: 1945-2000*, p. 251) notes that in 1965, Hawkes said that “he [Hawkes] had begun to write fiction on the assumption that ‘the true enemies of the novel were plot, character, setting and theme.’ Should there be logical coherences of narrative, the subordination of moment to flow, a simultaneity to sequentiality and substantiality of character?” Bigsby poses the question for the readers to decide and for critics to assess when diving into *Travesty*. I find this diving in disturbing, though fascinating.

This paper attempts to explore whether the book’s narrator, Papa, is a murderer as well as a suicidal character. I want to decipher who the victim is and whether he has contributed to his own murder. Furthermore, it is important to discuss whether Papa is not only a murderer but also a victim, and if society has had a critical part in victimizing him. It is clear, however, that there are no easy answers to these questions, because Hawkes does not play by the “rules” of writing a conventional narrative. He seems to reject the term ‘conventional’ and this may be the reason for

the piling on of theories in *Travesty*, as we will see later. I will respond to some of these theories in order to evaluate their relevance to my paper.

The plot seems misleadingly simple: Papa, who is never identified by his real name, is racing his flashy, expensive sports car down rural roads in the south of France, in the darkest hour of the night. At speeds approaching 150 kilometers per hour (about 94 mph), he reveals his plan to smash the car into the thick, brick wall of a deserted barn in order to explore and experience ‘design in chaos’ and ‘beauty in destruction.’ Two unwilling passengers, his best friend Henri and his own daughter Chantal, and a voluntary reader are desperately begging him in vain to stop this insane journey drive:

No, no, Henri. Hands off the wheel... It is too late...surely it is obvious that your slightest effort to wrench away the wheel will pitch us into the toneless world of highway tragedy even more quickly than I have planned... we are still accelerating. As for you Chantal, you must beware. You must obey your Papa ... and control yourself (*Travesty*, 11).

Prior to this intriguing introduction, the reader learns from the jacket cover that the novel is a 128-page-long monologue. We quickly realize that this piece of fiction is different from almost anything we have ever read.

Papa mentions repeatedly the words ‘design’ and ‘debris’ as being the main motive for the journey. What is this theory called “design in debris”? Both Di Piero and Conte explain the theory and how it connects to Postmodernism. Conte maintains that chaos begins to seem like a normal way of being, and there is some order that arises out of the disorder of materials. He further examines “the coeval development of non-linear narrative and the concept of orderly disorder as they have been promulgated by scientific theories of chaos and complexity in the



1970s” (Conte, 2). Conte compares modernism, which emphasizes order and stability to postmodernism, which emphasizes uncertainty and unpredictability. He (3) claims that “... there has been a shift from the classical science that emphasized order and stability [modernism], to the physics of non-equilibrium processes and unstable systems” [postmodernism]. *Travesty* falls into the category of postmodernism because it reveals an immanent design in a fractious situation. Conte sees the climax of the narrative in “the swerve that sends the sports car beyond the immediate experience” of this act (Conte, 50). I personally am not certain that we have to adopt such theories like *the swerve* and *design in debris* in literary works. I believe that many readers (if not most) lack extensive scientific knowledge of physics, mathematics and chemistry; their frustration could keep them from finishing the novel. No reader likes to be confronted with theories he does not understand; it embarrasses, humiliates and frightens.

Suicide is not a new phenomenon in literature, but when the innocent become captive victims, the act becomes both suicidal and murderous. The reader might feel frightened or confused, but before judging the author, he should try to understand him. It is possible that John Hawkes’ previous experience as an ambulance driver taught him to worship beauty in disfigurement and a design where others only see destruction. Donald Greiner profiles Hawkes as an important anti-realistic novelist in post- World War II America. Hawkes, says Greiner (*Understanding John Hawkes*, Chapter 1, 1), strongly emphasizes “the beauty of the language, the power of imagination, and the relation of love and death. He uses comedy, irony, and parody to explore often terrifying situations.” This may well be the reason why some critics, such as Greiner and Tony Tanner, view Hawkes as an excellent writer, whereas others, such as Charles Nicol, did not. According to Nicol (461), *Travesty* is “a single sustained moment, and really does not have the stamina of a novel... a symbolic catalogue of sex and death.” He actually

discourages the novice reader: “*Travesty* has some splendid moments, but the reader who is not already a Hawkes fan should be advised to start with something else.” Sheldon Frank from *Chicago Daily News* (11) calls *Travesty* “a dead, empty, foolish book ... lacking stylistic density.” To follow Greiner, the truth may lie somewhere in between the extremes. I feel that the different engagements and readings of Hawkes reveal much more than discomfort; they also reflect fear and even a sense of self punishment: ‘why do I deserve this? So, shall I start reading something else, or shall I further dig into this?’

The genesis of *Travesty* was Hawkes’ time in France. When Richard Vine asked him whether his personal experiences were reflected in his work, Hawkes concurred, “In regards to *Travesty*, for instance... there was a car accident near us in Brittany - a marvelous French car accident with the cars coming together head-on and then just melding their pieces all over the landscape for hundreds and hundreds of yards... I knew that I would have to write a novel about a character who does commit suicide and who is a clear-headed murderer.”

Historical inspiration clearly influenced Hawkes and proved that the past had a direct impact on his present; however, I disagree that his character is a clear-headed murderer. Hawkes’ comic, or perhaps tragic, statement that “I really wasn’t expert in driving a car... I soon developed a horror of automobiles through trying to drive an ambulance” is a twist of irony: an ambulance is supposed to protect – not endanger – its injured and sick passengers. And how can a sane human being say that such a terrible accident was “marvelous” when several casualties were among the ruins? Following Postmodernism conventions, Hawkes likes to plant contradictions in his work, as we see throughout the novel.

When the United States entered World War II, Hawkes, a student at Harvard University, left school to serve as an ambulance driver for the American Field Service in Italy and Germany.

In an interview with Heide Ziegler and Christopher Bigsby (179), Hawkes reveals that during the war he underwent a psychiatric treatment known as “insulin shock therapy.” Decades later, he learned that “in the insulin coma the patient is brought as close as possible to death... and because of its dangerous aspects, the treatment has been long abandoned.” Greiner is right: we have to first understand Hawkes; and in my opinion, you must also understand a little psychology: such a trauma might explain Hawkes’ fascination with Freudian theories, such as the Death Instinct – Thanatos - and the Id, Ego, and Super Ego.

In psychoanalysis, the death instinct (or death drive) “is a force that makes living creatures strive for an inorganic state”<sup>8</sup>. It is usually connected with Eros. In this combination, “the main impetus takes the patient towards dissolution and dissociation.” This drive is also reflected in the excessive wish for mastery, control and destruction. In 1920, Freud introduced the concept of the death drive as a negative term that is in opposition to the life drive. Freud acknowledged the contradiction between the ego and death drives on the one hand, and the sex and life drives on the other. This could be the reason why Hawkes deals so much with contradictions. It is also possible that the source of the violent sex he describes in *Travesty* lies in Thanatos. Freud emphasizes that Thanatos is resistant to shaping, or to diversion, or to displacement; it manifests in powerful ways but is always invisible and silent<sup>9</sup>.

In his short article on Negation, Freud concludes that affirmation belongs to Eros, whereas negation belongs to destruction. However, I find that Eros in *Travesty* leads to destruction and death, which are both negative, unless we adopt the narrator’s opinion that there is a design in debris, and that there are pleasures in death. I do not agree with Papa’s

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<sup>8</sup> [www.answers.com](http://www.answers.com) – some of Freudian theories. See other psychoanalysis sites in Works Cited.

<sup>9</sup> Should we re-evaluate *Billy Budd* and Claggart’s characters?

explanations. He sounds as if he has Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD), an endless pursuit of excessive order and the need to control one's environment to perfection.

Greiner, Joseph Conte and others mention Freud's popular theory on the *Ego, the Id and the Superego*. Freud assumes that there are three conscious and unconscious thoughts which occupy the psyche. Psychological, pathological and non-pathological conditions, all result from internal tensions in the sub-consciousness, which only psychoanalysis can uncover. In other words, psychoanalysis can bring them to consciousness so that the individual can resolve them. Freud further argues that these internal tensions are oppositional; a) between the Ego and the Id; b) between the Ego and the Super-ego; and c) between the love and death instincts. The Ego merges into the Id and controls it; but sometimes it also conforms to its desires. Therefore, it is assumed that the Ego is responsible for dealing with reality.

Cherry Kendra explains that the Ego develops from the Id and insures that the impulses of the Id can be expressed in a manner acceptable and recognized in the real world. If all this is correct, then I can easily place Papa on the analyst's sofa: his personal loss of love and feelings of betrayal can position him in a pathological situation that allows him to recognize his loss and to contribute his death wish to it. Papa is a knowledgeable person, so he can mitigate the pain of loss by involving theories and ideas that will explain his present act of suicide and murder. Conte contends that Papa tries to refute the accusations of depravity, and I claim that he must be ashamed of them and would rather stick to theories that only few understand. Psychology in the 1970s was not widely accepted, and visiting a psychologist was not only rare but also a cause for shame. I understand very well the narrator's humiliation and fear of being exposed as pathological.

Lacan links the death drive to the suicidal tendency of Narcissism. The Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary (764) explains that Narcissism is the sexual desire for one's own body, which may apply to the narrator's sexual desire and Hawkes' erotic world mentioned later. If we stick with Greiner's opinion that Hawkes is an anti-realistic author, then *Travesty* does not represent reality; it reflects the novelist's stream of consciousness on his subjective experience. Still, *Travesty's* genesis is based on a true event – the car accident - which leads to the assumption that Hawkes deliberately uses parody and contradiction to both amuse and confuse the reader. The parody in this novel lies in the idea that a dead narrator, Papa, tells the story of his own death. The artistic paradox of “design and debris” does not bother the narrator, who believes that even chaos has an inner design, especially when pieces of the broken machine – the car - integrate with landscape and nature:

In this course of the first day the gasoline evaporates, the engine oil begins to fade into the earth, the broken lens of a far-flung headlight reflects the progress of the sun... the birds do not sing... the human remains are integral with the remains of rubber, glass, steel... And despite all this chemistry of time, nothing has disturbed the essential integrity of our tableau of chaos, the point being that if design inevitably surrenders to debris, debris inevitably reveals its innate design (*Travesty*, 58-9).

I personally do not see any beauty in pieces of metal scattered in nature, especially not in a green field whose end cannot be seen. Such a scene is exactly what we do not want to see in our world; it mars and destroys nature.

Hawkes continues with some comic terror, an elaborate parody on a possible future situation that will disclose the scattered metal, and on the bizarre geometry of his understanding of debris:

Until one day, two boys [will] stumble upon the incongruity of a once beautiful automobile smashed in the barnyard of an abandoned farm. For them the spectacle yields only delight: a little plastic-coated identity card winking in the sunlight, dead leaves nesting in the wheels which lie on their sides, a green shoot growing from the mouth of the rusty and half-crumpled fuel tank (59).

The storyteller's entire monologue is often ironic, contradictory and painfully sarcastic. His father-daughter incest is sickening, yet haunting: who has the power and control over such relationships? I do not think that Hawkes finds society responsible: it is not right to blame society for every act of misconduct in a family. Furthermore, does Papa not feel betrayed and belittled when he learns that his best friend, Henri, is the lover of both his wife and his daughter? Is he not victimizing himself while hiding behind theories, such as Thanatos, Chaos, Design and Debris, and freedom of restrictions? It is also hard to accept that Papa can be a free man if he carries with him disturbing memories of himself, such as trying to run down a little girl led by an elderly poet, or trying unsuccessfully to shift gears and leave his injured soldiers behind. Something is terribly wrong here, and Hawkes deepens the reader's angst with each page: Papa must be insane. He is mentally ill, suicidal and a masked murderer.

This same madman talks about his young son, Pascal, who "died around the time [his wife] Honorine nicknamed Chantal [his daughter] the 'porno brat'. My son, my own son, who died just at the moment of acquiring character" (21). Right after mentioning such a tragedy, Papa responds to the request to turn off the radio. I find it hard to believe that Henri, a beloved poet

and best friend, is so rude and indifferent to talk about trifles when Pascal is being mourned. In this case I would rather support an assumption that the narrator is alone in the car, surrendering to his feverish mind:

Because what I have in my mind is an ‘accident’ so perfectly contrived that it will be unique, spectacular, instantaneous, a physical counterpart to that vision in which it was in fact conceived. A clear ‘accident’, so to speak, in which invention quite defies interpretation (23).

Once again I face the question of whether *Travesty* can be part of my dissertation: if Papa is alone in the sports car, then he “just” commits suicide and there is no murder, in which case, how can I include this narrative in my research? I tend to believe that he is looking for vengeance because he cannot live with the idea that he has been “doubled” cuckolded.

It is possible that because of his frustrated state of mind, the storyteller jumps from one topic to another while trying to respond to Henri and Chantal’s reactions: vomiting, crying, sweating and gasping for air. This jumping is demonstrated by segments, each separated from the next by white space on the page. If these spaces represent silence and meditation, then the reader is excluded from the thoughts controlling Papa’s mind. He keeps returning to the issues that disturb him, especially his relationship with his daughter, otherwise the word impunity should not appear here. He testifies of himself that

...for years I have been... a normal father, feeling only joy for Chantal’s joy and pain for her pain. My ‘perversion’ has long since been cauterized. I no longer reverse and then exaggerate what Chantal feels. I still enjoy licking smeared chocolate from my daughter’s fingers, and do so with *impunity*.

But I am in no way responsible for maintaining Chantal’s life, and long ago

gave up anticipating grief for its loss. Do you know that now I am not even tempted to look into the rear-view mirror? (33).

His cynicism worsens when he admits that he does not believe in secrets - withheld or shared. And he does not believe in feeling guilt either, meaning that he does not feel remorse for having destroyed his daughter's innocence. He has always thought of her with utter faithfulness, and she has always been in the very center of his concern (39). But now she is humiliated,

to be seated behind Henri and me and hence quite alone in the car with no one to comfort you by touch or wordless embrace... and to be conscious of yourself... but also to know yourself to be forgotten, only accidentally present, unaware perhaps... have spent almost the total store of your youthful sexuality ... on Henri's poetic vision (38-9).

Ironically, now it has become Papa's turn to be menacing, but because he cannot admit to his guilt, he tells Chantal "no one can rob you now of your Papa's love" (40). I honestly do not know if I can believe that he loves Chantal. He is distraught and confused and can not be trusted. I also have to admit that I feel very uncomfortable with the sexual passages in the novel: Papa's descriptions of perverse sex are disgusting in my eyes, and the idea of incest makes me sick. Even more disturbing is that Papa and his wife, Honorine, are responsible for this perversion and distorted sexual behavior, and yet they do not regret their behavior, nor are they punished. Killing Chantal cannot undo this injustice.

Papa turns sentimental when talking about Honorine, his beloved wife; but in the same breath he elaborates on her pushing him to have sex with other women, including their own daughter. Irony, sarcasm and mental pain are clearly detected in the following lines: "And with my two women, who are yours as well [Henri], have I not created a family small in size but rich



in sentiment?" (31). As much as he is proud of the "small in size but rich in sentiment" family that he has created, Papa is not completely convinced that Honorine will be able to view the accident beyond the narrow insight that he has taken revenge and restored his self esteem. She is the lady of the chateau "who earlier dined alone and then at a late hour undressed for bed without fear, without suspicion, and with only a few agreeable thoughts of us..." (122). 'Us' refers only to Papa and Henri, not Chantal. The storyteller, pretending to be indifferent, describes a scene earlier that afternoon when Honorine unveiled the truth:

Without preliminaries and in her clear, quiet way she said that she thought you and I were both a little out of our heads. She said that we were selfish, that we were hurtful, and that she did not trust either one of us. But then she laughed and said that she loved us both, however, and was willing and capable of paying whatever price the gods, in return might eventually demand of her for loving us both (Travesty, 124).

The following paragraphs clearly demonstrate confusion and a twisted way of thinking. On the one hand, Papa praises Henri for not even raising the argument that the storyteller's insistence on suicide and murder are a secret desire to punish the lady. No! Papa denies being motivated by cruelty, and murder is not in his norm; but he does enjoy the thought of his wife captured in doubts and remorse:

... months and years beyond her recovery, Honorine will know with special certainty that just as she was the source of your poems, so too was she the source of my private apocalypse. It was all for her... Sooner or later she will understand (124-5).

We understand that the narrator is consumed with inner pain, and no intellectual theory can conceal his agony. Memories haunt him; therefore, he demands that Henri acknowledge that “imagined life is more exhilarating than remembered life” (127). I assume that Papa prefers imagined life in which he can change or undo actions, unlike in real life. Does Henri submit in the end, or is this only happening in Papa’s head? And if Henri does utter this realization, as Papa desperately wants him to, then the planned accident is unnecessary, but he cannot stop it because of his infatuation with control.

Triumphantly, Hawkes waves the flag of confusion and bewilderment: Papa’s love is followed by murder, but murder is not a norm in American society, so who is to blame? Papa views himself as an artist and as a well-educated killer who calculates his steps very carefully, but the reader tends to disagree with most of his frightening arguments. There must be another way of reading the novel and following the madman at the wheel, understanding this crazy “tour de force”, as Greiner calls it in John Hawkes’ Symposium (142).

Stephen Criswell presents a Jungian reading of *Travesty*, which places Henri in the center of the novel. Unlike Greiner, Emmett, O’Donnell and others who suggest that the non-speaking characters are creations of the narrator’s wild imagination, Jungian theory of the *shadow* supports the assumption that all the events imagined in the novel take place in Henri’s psyche (Criswell, 20-7). Jungian theory says that the human psyche “is composed of conscious and unconscious elements... [the psyche] is self-regulating ... by uniting all aspects of the mind.” This process is called “individuation”; however, if it is ignored by the conscious self, then it can develop into an “autonomous complex... which leads a life of its own.” Unfortunately, the person is blind to the inner realities: “A man cannot rid himself in favor of an artificial personality without punishment” (Jung 82-3). Criswell (21) explains that “the ignored

unconscious mind makes itself known either through neuroses or as images in dreams... they serve a compensatory role... help the ego [the conscious self] toward individuation.” One of the two most common dream images of the unconscious is the shadow, “which is personified in dreams by persons of the same sex as the dreamer.”

Criswell further elaborates on the shadow theory by quoting from Jungian analyst James A. Hall and from Clifton Snider’s *Jungian Theory*. Snider tries to simplify the theory for the average reader:

The encounter with the shadow is the first major stage in the process of individuation... [The shadow] is the dark opposite side of ourselves that we usually prefer to hide from others and even from ourselves.. The shadow is always personified as a member of one’s own sex... An individual [must] come to terms with his shadow and ... not feel threatened by it (Snider, p. 25).

Trying to impose this theory on *Travesty* leads the reader to a new perception in which Henri is the dreamer, while the other characters are parts of his psyche. Papa is Henri’s shadow; he sees himself as a mirror image to the poet, which explains his fondness for the following lines “Somewhere there still must be her face not seen, her voice not heard” (27) and his confession “I might even have written them myself” (127).

In O’Donnell’s interview with Hawkes (139), the interviewer specifically notes that Papa views himself as Henri’s double. Hawkes himself says that Henri and Papa “are deliberately and obviously a single character” (qtd. in “Interview” p. 80). The poet, then, is the dreamer, and *Travesty* is his dream. Papa is the unconscious shadow that leads Henri and Chantal toward conscious experience. There must be an accident that will unite the three into one self. The

opposing powers here lie in Henri having a creative psyche and Papa having a destructive psyche:

The reason we make such a perfect pair, such an agreeable match, is that you are a full-fledged Leo, while through the marshes of my own stalwart Leo there flows a little dark rivulet of Scorpio... I deliberately ... concealed even the slightest shade of that all-too-suspect influence from your detection ... it now appears that the poet is the thick-skinned and simple-minded beast of the ego while contrary to popular opinion, it is your ordinary privileged man who turns out to reveal... all those sinister qualities of the artistic mind. Yes, you are the creature who roars in the wind while I am the powerful bug on the wall... behind my coldest actions and most jocular manner there lies not hostility but the deepest affection (99-100).

If we agree that Papa and Henri are a single character, then all the pieces of the puzzle fall into place. Papa is struggling for recognition, which can come through imagination and memories. He admits that “I would rather see two shadows flickering inside the head than all your flaming sunrises set end to end” (57). The shadow insists on being integrated with Henri and then it will put an end to their private apocalypse. Criswell explains Papa’s having no survivors because Henri’s persona will finally dissolve and embrace his shadow (25). I cannot support this theory because I want an actual murderer and a real suicidal character, which I believe I found in the narrator.

Tony Tanner claims that there are no instructions for reading *Travesty*, so the reader must follow the narrator’s distraught explanations and travel through horror with a madman, “locked up within the sealed-off acceleration of his mania, incapable of interrupting or deflecting the

suave nihilism of his resolve.” Tanner believes that a reader might also be somewhat hypnotized by perverse aesthetics. He agrees that the book is disturbing, not only because it is a kind of a diary of a madman, but also because we can not know how to “read” it in any one stable reassuring way.

In “The Reader’s Voyage through *Travesty*,” Emmett supports Tanner and further suggests that the novel should be read as a structured labyrinth. Emmett says: “Hawkes’ method allows only gradual discovery of the mythic threads. In the meantime, locked inside the head of the narrator who borders on psychosis, the reader struggles to interpret both what the narrator means and what Hawkes intends him to mean” (Emmett, 175). A repeated motive for the journey is the storyteller’s frustration caused by Henri’s lack of understanding that there is ‘order in formation.’ Papa’s order of events seems very clear to him because every step of the journey has been carefully calculated. His deep obsession with both order and imagination sound maniacal because they justify death. In his words, “... nothing is more important than the existence of what does not exist... my theory tells us that ours is the power to invent the very world we are quitting” (57).

Emmett supports the idea that the Unconscious struggles to break free from the Conscious. Ignoring Jung’s *anima* (soul) causes a person to be incomplete. Some of the narrator’s memories have to do with this lack of completion and reflect this deficiency: the doctor without a left leg attends to Papa, who is missing a lung; the lover in Lulu’s story has only one arm. “Left is the side representing the unconscious, so these two amputees suggest the deficiency that the narrator has unconsciously felt since the day of the earlier accident ... In death the narrator will be reunited with the poet who reappears as Henri and the little girl who reappears as Chantal” (Emmett, 182). Honorine embodies the liberated life of sexuality. She is

the wife, the mistress, the Muse, the sleeping princess and the owner of the chateau. But she is also the devouring mother of Papa's childhood. The storyteller's memories reveal his innermost fears and desires, which he calls "the symmetry I have in my mind" (25).

Jan Gorak disagrees with some of these interpretations: "[Paul Emmett's] reading is foreign to the moral topography of the book, and is false even to the experience of reading it" (Gorak, 55). He asserts that Papa's private apocalypse destroys the old world but does not create a new one.

Moreover, this event is not designed from scratch... Hawkes' hero [Papa] has his reasons for wanting to blast past and present into an apocalyptic future; both characters have suffered too many domestic humiliations not to want the pleasures of a spectacular climax... The debris of memory provokes the godly mastery of his mastery of his design (Gorak, 54).

Gorak adds that other commentators, such as Baxter and Greiner, have identified too strongly with Papa's design, but this same Papa "is the masterful spiriting away even the illusion of the existence of other people" (Gorak, 55). The critic further assumes that "Hawkes uses Papa to attack our own unthinking orthodoxies... [but] Hawkes' imagination breaks the bonds of his own commitment to... imagination itself... It is difficult for a reader not to have some grave doubts about the authority of the artist to create his own world." He suggests that Hawkes uses the idea of a travesty, or false pretense, as a kind of a complex word, a collection of public and private masks:

Papa is the embodiment of the masquerades of his culture and his creator: his pride in his own expertise is... a part of the 'culture of know-how'... while his

devotion to his visionary power resembles... a man... who has repeatedly affirmed his desire to 'invent' the universe (Gorak, 57).

I have mentioned numerous critics and discussed several theories, but the only one I choose to go by is Freud's psychoanalysis, because it supports my initial assumption that there is a real murderer with actual victims in *Travesty*. If the Ego is the component of personality that is responsible for dealing with reality, then it insures that the impulses of the id can be expressed in a manner acceptable in the real world and in socially appropriate ways. I see in Papa a psychopath who lacks remorse and finds pleasure in controlling others' lives. Since Papa is mentally ill and socially humiliated, he cannot pull himself together or regain control over his impulses, nor can he place priorities in their right order because he is consumed with despair and emptiness. It is true that Henri and Chantal are victims, but they are also victimizers, because their actions provoke Papa to react the way he does. In his sick perception, he triples his control because he takes the lives of Henri and Chantal, destroys Honorine's future and finally disappears in a heroic way. Until his last breath, he believes that he has the ultimate power over his closest relatives and friend, and that he must exercise it. All the rest is Hawkes' beautiful writing, intelligent understanding of the social theories of the 1970s, and a probable pleasure in confusing his readers. The narrator is his own victim as well as the executioner; the exclusive authority and control that he has unsuccessfully been seeking are lethal. "We get the impression of a world where power provides the sole basis of authority... the world of *Travesty* is totalitarian, with Papa its self-elected deity... impress upon us the sense of a natural order in decline, a culture of fractured pieties" (Gorak, 59).

If Papa is Henri's unconscious shadow, then *Travesty* is all about imagination. If Papa is looking for design in debris, then the novel rationalizes deliberate murder, and American society

should not tolerate it. And finally, if *Travesty* enables Papa to purify his soul by committing suicide, then the captive passengers and the reader are suffering witnesses.

I have my own opinion as to why Hawkes invoked so many theories in *Travesty*. The second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century granted much respect to new physical and mathematical approaches, as well as to the understanding that there is a lot to “see” beyond the real. In seeking social validation, literature and arts pushed to scientific models comparable to those in physical and chemical sciences. It is possible that Hawkes strived to add some extra aura to his writing. Unfortunately, the novel is packed so full of theories and ideas that a reader can become muddled in the minutia. For one to truly grasp the depth of the novel requires a second reading and a deeper knowledge of the theories mentioned in order to see the forest from the trees.

Personal note:

The story of Asaf Goldring<sup>10</sup>, who recently murdered his three year-old daughter and later committed suicide, is summarized in Jungian and Freudian language and shares much with the pathologies that characterize Papa: narcissistic disturbance, childhood traumas, obsession for order, loss of control and a farewell letter – all of which profile a madman who desperately needs to explain his motives. Criminologist Inna Levy, from the Academic College in Safed, Israel, says: the few days that Goldring spent in a psychological institute help profile him as a narcissistic control freak, haunted by skeletons from the past, extremely talented and well educated... He is ‘love sick’, a situation which dictates to him that if the object of his love betrays him, then their mutual fruit of love – their daughter - will be neither his nor hers. This might explain why Hawkes’ storyteller passes Honorine’s chateau and does not stop to see her. This way he controls the lives of four people: his own, Henri’s, Chantal’s and his wife’s.

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<sup>10</sup> Israeli newspaper *Yediot Aharonot*, 11/13/09 pp. 20-24: my free translation.



Goldring and Papa's *sweet* revenge triggers the *bitter* life awaiting the wife. The combination of a problematic character, childhood abuse, depression, endless pursuit of excessive order and the need for control identify both Goldring's and Papa's personalities and lead to similar events. Both men sought revenge by killing the people who they believe wronged them; therefore, both are cold-blooded murderers who escape public punishment by killing themselves.

Just like Papa in *Travesty*, Dodge in *Buried Child* explores a similar pattern of survival after being mentally abused by his wife; but to murder her child and make the whole family accomplices is horrific. How far can one go? It seems that murder becomes more heinous while the reaction of the law is less effective. The American Dream of an idyllic family is disintegrating if a grandfather can murder his baby grandson.

Chapter 6: “ ‘You think just because people propagate they have to love their offspring? You never seen a bitch eat her puppies?’: Killing the Family in *Buried Child*”

Two decades after the close of World-War II, modern American drama was quite pessimistic and reflected a noir atmosphere in plays, such as Albee’s *The American Dream* (1961), *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962), Sam Shepard’s *Rock Garden* (1964), Adrienne Kennedy’s *Funnyhouse of a Negro* (1964), all describing dysfunctional families and characters searching for their lost identities. Sam Shepard continued this line of despair in his trilogy of family plays at the end of the 1970s. “His characters struggle, unsuccessfully” (Roudané, *Plays and Playwrights*, 343) to find some authentic meaning to their existence. Instead, they discover that the American Dream misleads, betrays and destroys many of its followers.

Sam Shepard was born in 1943, in Illinois. His father was a military pilot and took part in WWII. Belonging to the Army Air Corps, the family followed him from airfield to airfield before settling down on a farm in southern California. Young Shepard, son of a severe disciplinarian, was not easy to raise: he went to jail, turned over some cars, drank, got familiar with drugs, dropped out of college, and finally hooked up with a troupe of actors until he landed in New York in 1963, where the making of a playwright started (Herman, chapter 2). His writing activity was feverish, especially after realizing that *Chicago* took one day’s work. Shepard has produced dozens of plays, five screenplays, two books of prose and poetry, and the list is long. In the *New York Review of Books*, Shepard was called “one of the three or four most gifted playwrights alive.” During the 1970s and 80s, he collaborated with the famous actor, writer and director Joseph Chaikin and both careers escalated rapidly. The plays that actually secured Shepard’s reputation are, in my opinion, *Curse of the Starving Class*, *Buried Child*, for which he

won the Pulitzer Prize, and *True West*. All three outline a curse running in a family and profoundly destroying both the family and the American Dream as a whole. Many of Shepard's plays depict broken characters, a deep sense of loss, nostalgia for the original rural world, and yearning for a simple life.

Shepard is also known as a film actor and was nominated for an Oscar for his role as a test pilot. In 1988 he made his debut as a film director. His latest works, published in 2010, are *Ages of the Moon* and a collection of stories named *Day out of Days*. To complete the outline of his life, I will add his acting in *Border Crosses* and *Tough Trade*, 2010. There is no doubt that this prolific writer and his career are impressive and admirable.

*Buried Child* is undoubtedly one of Shepard's best and most powerful plays. It is the third of his trilogy of "family plays" written in 1978 and revised in 1995. This chapter relates to the original text with one exception: the later script clarifies Shepard's initial intention that an act of incest was committed by Halie (mother) and Tilden (son), whereas the 1978 text is unclear, ambiguous and leaves the incest question for the reader to decide. In Stephanie Cohen's interview with the playwright, Shepard states that he resolved the confusion with his revision: "The revised text makes it clear from very early on that Tilden is the father of the buried child" (Cohen, 28).

Shepard's play, *Buried Child*, depicts an American family that violates civil, criminal, and biblical laws, and hence the family is doomed. The modern field of criminology teaches us that the penal system in Western societies, which are based on Judeo-Christian biblical interpretations claims to have four components: revenge, paying restitution, deterrence and rehabilitation. Are these expressed in the play?

This chapter will focus on the analysis of the characters of Dodge, Halie, Tilden and Bradley and their dual identities as criminals and victims, accomplices to a crime and those who suffer from it. It is important to explore whether or not the family members knew, but were silent, and therefore collaborated with the murderer. If they were aware of this crime, then there should be another charge: concealing a death. All organized societies want their offenders to be behind bars as a means of deterrence, whereas this chapter attempts to prove that all four components listed above are missing in the play; therefore, by societal standards and biblical teaching, the family is damned.

From the very beginning of *Buried Child*, the audience is intrigued by the title of the play. In his introduction to Shepard's plays, Richard Gilman (xix) observes that most of his titles "...appear as aggressions... they scare you or break you up before the curtain has even risen". Roudané (*The Cambridge History of American Theater*, Vol.3) posits that Shepard's choice of names foreshadows acute situations. Names, such as *The Tooth of Crime* (1972), *The Curse of the Starving Class* (1977), *States of Shock* (1991) and others, "indicate the territory in which he [Shepard] works" (344-5), namely, a post wars America, looking for an authentic and meaningful life.

The title *Buried Child* indicates a particularly distressing tragedy, a threat to the unity of a family. The death and burial of a child usually shakes a family's foundation, and its aftermath threatens the ability to return to normal life. Shepard takes this tragic event to the extreme by presenting to the readers and theatergoers shocking information: Halie, the matriarch, and her older son, Tilden, committed an act of incest that resulted in the birth of a baby. Dodge, the patriarch, could not bear the consequences, and when the baby was still very young he drowned him and buried the body in the back yard. The text makes it quite clear that he did it all by

himself; however, nothing points to whether this was an impulsive or a premeditated act, an important fact to help judge the seriousness of the crime. I tend to believe it was the latter, because Dodge had several months to “bake” the act in his distorted mind and injured soul.

The curtain opens twenty or thirty years after the event, describing a cursed family that is trying to conceal the truth from outsiders while concurrently struggling to live with it. Will they be able to overcome the tragedy? Can such a sin (or a crime) be atoned for and forgiven? Fate demonstrates its answer repeatedly in this story of a stricken family: it disperses hints, sends omens and writes them on the wall, and eventually laughs bitterly as Vince, the grandson who returns home, naively declares: “Just getting rid of the vermin in the house” (*Buried Child*, 131). In the past, Dodge was a prosperous farmer, proud of his family and farm:

See, we were a well established family once... The farm was producing enough milk to fill Lake Michigan twice over... Everything was settled with us. All we had to do was ride it out. Then Halie got pregnant again. Outa’ the middle a’ nowhere, she got pregnant... In fact, we hadn’t been sleepin’ in the same bed for about six years (*Buried Child*, 123).

The terrible act deepened the friction in the family because not only did Halie betray Dodge, but she did it with their own son. Apparently Dodge, who could not live with such shame, killed the baby. The members of the family have been hiding the event from the outside world. “Nobody could find it... Cops looked for it... Finally everybody just gave up” (*Buried Child*, 104). Dodge stopped planting crops in his fields and took to drinking, killing himself slowly.

As the actors take the stage, Dodge is in his late seventies, old and beaten. His spiritual backbone has been crushed and his physical health has deteriorated dangerously, therefore he

prefers to divorce himself from reality. He is very skinny, sickly looking, and is wearing worn clothes that are partly hidden by a brown blanket with which he covers himself. From time to time he sips from a bottle of whisky hidden under a pillow. This domestic setting is a refuge for a nihilist who does not enjoy anything but his bottle. John Clum asserts that “Dodge is the embodiment of nihilism, never leaving the ratty sofa to which he seems physically attached” (180). Halie, talking to her husband from the second floor, asks “Are you going out today?” (*BC*, 67). This simple domestic question receives a nihilistic response: “I rarely go out in the bright sunshine, why would I go out in this?” (*BC*, 67). No doubt that such an answer foreshadows a bitter ending.

Halie is upstairs, in her territory, nagging and complaining while not really expecting any serious response. She reacts to Dodge’s bad coughing, threatening him to take his pills or otherwise, she will make him take them. Dodge does not want to see her, “Don’t come down!” (*BC*, 64). Both characters communicate by “long distance,” avoiding relating to or having eye contact with each other, and thus they minimize any direct contact, an important strategy in this distorted family life. Their dialogues are strained; they skip from one topic to another without making any sense, as if they cannot or do not want to really understand each other. They are clearly afraid of the mutual secret, which is not supposed to be uncovered. Stephen Bottoms points out (67), they strive to minimize any kind of contact, and the audience actually witnesses their effort all throughout the play. Dodge finds refuge in living in the present only. He refers to himself as “a corpse” and suppresses any memories that might shake his fragile existence. He cannot identify with his younger self or he must die. As a further means of defense, he disconnects himself from the whole family, although he physically continues to share the same roof with them. This roof provides physical shelter but deprives him of emotional support which

he needs so desperately but would not admit it. Dodge actually refuses to belong to any of the family members: “My appearance is out of his domain! It’s even out of mine! In fact, it’s disappeared! I’m an invisible man!” (BC, 68). This attitude helps him confront the present, while deluding himself that everyone else has forgotten the past, “Everybody knows, everybody forgot” (BC, 77). Moreover, “...it’s much better not to know everything” (BC, 88). His self-denial goes to the extreme when he claims “This isn’t me! That never was me! This is me. Right here... The whole shooting match, sittin’ right in front of you” (BC, 111). It is clear that he refers to the present corpse we see sitting on that sofa, this formerly powerful farmer who has been stripped from his pride by a terrible act of incest. He does not view himself as a murderer, and surprisingly, most critics agree, saying that he *killed* the baby instead of *murdered* him. As previously stated, killing can be accidental, whereas murder is premeditated.

One of the contradictions in Dodge’s behavior is clearly seen when he almost enters a state of panic whenever he is left alone. He repeatedly orders Tilden to stay with him even when he falls asleep: “I can’t be left alone for a minute!” (BC, 79). In Act Three, Dodge begs Shelly not to leave him when Halie returns home. It seems that he is afraid of his own shadow, as well as of his family, scared of disintegrating into thin air before a solution or redemption to his unworthy existence arrives.

Every time I lay down something happens! Look what happens! (whips off his cap, points at his head) Look what happens! That’s what happens! (pulls his cap back on) You go lie down and see what happens to you! See how you like it! They’ll steal your bottle! They’ll cut your hair! They’ll murder your children! That’s what’ll happen” (BC, 93).

Dodge mentions the word *murder* but accuses others; it is *they* and not *I*. He is not yet ready to take responsibility.

In spite of the emotional atmosphere on the stage, Dodge produces some instances of comic relief, proving that his sense of humor is still alive. He is sarcastic, observant and sharp. His wry comments and sarcasm are both funny and sad: “Gimme back that coat! That coat’s for live flesh, not dead wood!” (*BC*, 115), he yells at Bradley, who is trying to cover his wooden leg. In Act Three, Dodge is very amused watching Shelly stealing the wooden leg and bringing to light Bradley’s impotence. In spite of being close to eighty and weary of life, he knows a pretty woman when he sees one. He is definitely impressed by Shelly’s looks and would try to engage her for his own purposes: “She is the type of girl who could get me a bottle. Easy... They’d probably give her two bottles for the price of one” (*BC*, 94). He is fond of her determination, remembering that he used to date women like her. And when speaking of women, while listening to Halie telling him about a breeder whom she dated when she was young, Dodge mocks her, saying: “And he never laid a finger on you I suppose?” (*BC*, 66). He expresses his disbelief in her stories and finds fun sneering at her phony righteousness. All these comments prove that he does maintain his memory and sense of humor when he finds the time appropriate to his immediate needs.

Not only Halie lets him down. At his advanced age, Dodge is extremely disappointed with his living offspring and does not trust either of them. Bradley sneaks into the house while he is sleeping and shaves Dodge’s head, almost butchering him. While there is no indication that Shepard had the biblical story of Samson and Delilah in mind, one cannot escape the idea that Dodge is being usurped by Bradley, who wants to take over. The act of shaving is metaphoric; the wish to be responsible for Dodge’s appearance poses a threat to the present monarchy. Dodge



despises Bradley and denies that he even belongs to the family: “He was born in a goddamn hog wallow! That’s where he was born and that’s where he belongs! He doesn’t belong in this house” (76). And if this is not convincing enough, Dodge gets angrier, causing Halie and Tilden to freeze: “He’s not my flesh and blood! My flesh and blood’s buried in the back yard!” (BC, 77). The last sentence is in the Passive Voice, but I would prefer it be said in the Active Voice, meaning *I buried* the baby, *I take* responsibility.

Tilden, the older son, is another problem. Dodge expresses his feelings toward Tilden, saying: “Tilden lost his marbles” (BC, 98). Tilden cannot be trusted because he seems mentally unstable. It is bitter to listen to a father say to his son, “You shouldn’t be needing your parents at your age. It’s unnatural. There is nothing we can do for you now anyway. You expect us to feed you forever?” (BC, 78). He literally sends him away, but at the same time needs him around. Dodge’s confession to Shelly betrays his indifference to his children: “You think just because people propagate they have to love their offspring? You never seen a bitch eat her puppies?” (BC, 112). This destructive opinion shakes the foundations of the traditional family unit and puts into question the American Dream of loving parents who support and guide their children. In Matthew Roudané’s interview with Shepard, the playwright states very clearly his opinion of the nuclear family: “... there is no escape from the family,... even if you didn’t know who your mother and father were, even if you never met them, you are still intimately, inevitably, and entirely connected to who brought you into the world – through a long, long chain...” (67-8). Dodge violates this conviction; at the same time he needs a little contact and some human attention, which might restore his distorted feelings. However, when he gets a bowl of hot soup from Shelly, he rejects it, afraid to expose his desperate need for a warm relationship, which he does not have with his own family members.

Dodge's façade of indifference loses its balance when his grandson Vince makes his unexpected homecoming. The young man brings the odor of the past with him, the same threatening memories that Dodge cannot confront and has been trying unsuccessfully to bury. Therefore he does not recognize him: "How am I supposed to remember you if you don't remember?" (89). And he continues to ignore any relationship with Vince, yelling: "Stop calling me Grandpa will ya'! It's sickening. 'Grandpa.' I'm nobody's Grandpa!" (BC, 90). Yet, Vince and Shelly consistently force him to remember the past. The turning point comes when Shelly tells Dodge about the pictures in Halie's bedroom. Those pictures describe a happy family in better days. This young stranger, Shelly, succeeds in peeling off some of Dodge's layers of self defense. In the end of the play it is Dodge who reveals the family's horrible secret. He cannot live with feelings of guilt any longer, and Shelly's frank behavior makes him unveil the secret. Once the truth is out, Shepard suggests, Dodge is left with no space, neither physical nor mental. The time has come to transfer the realms of patriarchy to his heir. In his living will he leaves the farm to Vince, who should supposedly be able to restore the family's legacy without the curse. Tilden can get the tools only if he stays on the farm, and Bradley is not even mentioned in the will. Now that the new king is in power, Dodge can disappear, and he is actually doing so by dying soundlessly and unnoticeably. He leaves behind the barren legacy of a cursed patriarch and crippled offspring. He is not only a murderer but also a victim and a victimizer.

Halie is legally Dodge's wife, but in reality she is far from being the ideal supporting wife, as understood from the American Dream. As previously stated, she committed incest with her older son, Tilden, and gave birth to their baby, who was later drowned and buried by her husband. Unlike *Curse of the Starving Class* in which the males inherit the curse, carry it in their

blood and pass it on, Halie, in *Buried Child*, initiates the curse. She serves as the catalyst that causes the murder, though Dodge carries it out. Their fate is interwoven.

At present she is in her mid-sixties and struggles mentally to survive by inhabiting a world of her own. She lives on memories that are sometimes distorted, such as the “heroic” son, Ansel, who died mysteriously in a motel on his honeymoon. I suggest that Shepard may be idolizing her account of Ansel, because the text does not give any evidence of heroism. What is heroic in dying on your honeymoon in a motel? She pretends to preserve an illusion of a normal family, while flirting with her Protestant minister. How normal can a family be with a drunken patriarch, an aberrant matriarch, a demented and confused son, and another one-legged son who terrorizes the family? Her domain is the upper floor, where, according to David DeRose, she “surrounds herself with pictures of the past and of her family at its prime” (100). She clearly lives in the past. Her communication with Dodge is not only minimal but also incoherent. She does show some vague interest in his health, but is inconsistent about her concern. Before she makes her appearance on stage, we learn from her dialogue how disappointed she is with her sons. She supports her husband’s opinion by saying, “Bradley can’t look after us... I had no idea in the world that Tilden would be so much trouble” (*BC*, 72). Naturally, she cannot elaborate on it because of her own critical role in crippling Tilden’s soul. When she comes down, she is dressed elegantly in black, heading to the outside world only to relive and recreate the past she wants to remember. However, the audience does not really know the past and if and whether the dead Ansel, her third son, was a hero and why he died. It is not clear why he deserves a statue in the center of town. DeRose (100) even suggests that Ansel might be the product of Halie’s imagination, an acknowledged substitute to her buried child. She beautifies a questionable past in order to create a nicer future, and on the way she tries to conceal a very ugly and painful present.

Stephen Bottoms (160) contends that Halie moves abruptly from romantic dreams of the past to hopeless despair in the present. She shares with the family the terrible secret that Dodge killed and buried her baby; therefore, she becomes an accomplice to the crime. She acknowledges their sinful family situation: “The most incredible things, roses... They almost cover the stench of sin in this house” (*BC*, 116). But nothing can actually cover the impact of the crime, and all her attempts are in vain. She tries to “make it up” to God and to herself by becoming a devout, religious person, but at the same time flirts with Father Dewis. Her nagging and endless complaints are annoying: she nags Dodge about the pills and later contradicts herself by saying that they make him crazy. She complains about their worthless sons and about modern ways of behavior she finds anti-Christian; therefore, she reflects, it is silly to think of the future. On the other hand, she claims that one has to believe in something or go crazy like her husband. She is hypocritical, promiscuous, inconsistent and uncaring as a mother. When the chaotic situation at home becomes unbearable, she tries to impose order by yelling and threatening. As Halie sees Tilden compulsively husking corn while ignoring the rest of the world, and Dodge curled up on the sofa talking incoherently, she is shocked by the absurdity of the scene. Neither of the men dares to confront her accusations. Dodge changes the topic and takes refuge under the blanket, in the style of “if I don’t see, it’s not there.” Since she cannot understand his mumbling, she concludes that he is insane.

Language is an essential component in the life of a family, but not in this one. Roudané (*American Drama since 1960*, 210) states that unlike an articulate family, “... their body language communicates more than the words that prove inadequate substitutes for their experiences”. Furthermore, he maintains that the playwright’s language is singular and distinctive because it attempts to depict the chaotic order in which the characters live (*The*

*Cambridge Companion to Sam Shepard*, 5). The characters in *Buried Child* talk, they exchange words, but they do not really communicate. Each one lives in his (or her) own crazy world and does not allow rationality in. It seems that Shepard compensates for the lack of verbal language by drawing our attention to body language, especially when it comes to Tilden watching Shelly, as I will explain later.

Halie radiates a strong personality. She knows she has brought the curse into the family and realizes that it is her duty to control the decay around her. This is probably why she recognizes Vince; he belongs to a better past and might be able to restore the ruins. When Dodge opens up to Shelly, Halie orders him to be silent: “Dodge, if you tell this thing – if you tell this, you’ll be dead to me. You’ll be just as good as dead” (*BC*, 123). However, this threat would not impose a big change for him, and thus it does not deter him from revealing the whole story. Halie’s reaction sounds childish: “I’m not listening to this! I don’t have to listen to this!” (*BC*, 123), as if by her going upstairs the truth will not affect her. Yet, she is afraid of Dodge’s confession of the murder and pretends that it is a bunch of lies, therefore she begs the weak and incompetent Father Dewis, who is God’s messenger on earth, to rectify the family’s situation. Since Halie cannot receive salvation, she retreats to her safe harbor upstairs, crying. Her bright yellow dress and beautiful roses, which are supposed to reflect optimism, cannot produce anything fertile because she is sick and cursed.

At the very end of the play, Halie is reunited with both Tilden and their dead baby, but this reunion does not bring any continuity to the dynasty. In spite of Shepard’s opinion that he is not a doomsday person, as he says in the interview with Stephanie Cohen, one can foresee a cursed family and a dying future. Richard Gilman, in the introduction to Shepard’s *Seven Plays*, posits: “... there is no past to propel the future” (xxvi). I would rather say that the past, in this

family, propels a sick present, and this sick present cannot propel a healthy future. Halie pays dearly for bringing into the world a baby who is the result of incest. She suffers terribly for covering up this murder. But the theatergoer cannot feel any compassion for her; on the contrary, he likes to dislike her.

Another victim and victimizer is Tilden. Tilden is Dodge and Halie's eldest son and father of Vince. As a child his parents expected great things from him, "I always thought he'd be the one to take responsibility... Tilden was an All-American... Fullback. Or quarterback. I forget which" (*BC*, 72). But then the act of incest took place, followed by the murder of his baby, and Tilden left for New Mexico in an attempt to start a new life. It is not clear when he went astray, but somewhere along the way, however, he got into trouble, spent some time in jail and was eventually forced out of the state. After twenty years or so Tilden is back home, not a penny to his name, socially detached and mentally unstable. He is in his late forties, as Shepard writes in a key stage direction, and "something about him is profoundly burned out and displaced" (*BC*, 69). He communicates, but his sentences are singular, simple and detached from reality: "Back yard's full of carrots. Corn. Potatoes." And when asked if he is Vince's father he answers: "All kinds of vegetables. You like vegetables?" (*BC*, 93). His bad experience in New Mexico has taught him the importance of being able to communicate with people, as he declares: "You gotta talk or you'll die" (*BC*, 78), but he is lonely, scared and disconnected from society. Clum sees him as the only character in the play "who expresses positive human attributes like love or loyalty," (181) but nobody appreciates them. Strangely, Tilden keeps bringing in armloads of vegetables he claims to have harvested from the fields outside, although his parents insist that the fields have not been planted for years. Tilden's ability to harvest crops from fallow fields may be symbolic and suggests that he is still fertile, but his fertility leads nowhere. He is so cursed that

he cannot even recognize his own son Vince. Like Dodge, who denies any affective bond with his family, Tilden follows in his footsteps and stays disconnected. We hear from him that even when he was younger and imagined he would drive around and tour places, he was still all alone. Tilden knows that he is not wanted at home, but he has nowhere to go and is incapable of staying on his own. Although he is the oldest son, Tilden makes no real attempt to claim patriarchy. He puts the corn in Dodge's lap, later he covers him with a blanket, and finally places the husks of corn on him – literally *burying* him, as was done to Tilden's own baby. However, he does not further pursue his rights to inherit the farm and become the head of the family. He is a victim of his own actions.

Unlike Bradley and Vince, Tilden is submissive, yielding and feels lost in his own cursed world. He desperately tries to avoid contact with others; yet, he cannot conceal his obsession with Shelly and the way she moves her hands and arms. Her body language suggests confidence and strength, and he keeps staring intently at her hands as if he were hypnotized. When Shelly holds out her arms, Tilden slowly dumps the carrots into them, like handing over a delicate treasure, a baby. She clearly is a mother-figure to him. DeRose observes that “As do the corn husks in Act I, the carrots assume an unvoiced significance as Shelly cradles them in her arms like an infant, and refuses to let Vince take them from her” (*The Father, the Son and the Holy Ghostly*, 104). Once again we see that in this family, body language communicates more than words. Tilden himself is far from loquacious; he cannot express his emotions clearly; he actually cannot verbally express anything coherently. However, his experience of holding his baby is embedded in his memory. Watching Shelly takes him back to a better past, which has been suppressed for over twenty years. Tilden is an accomplice to the crime by keeping it secret, but he is also the cause of the curse. This makes him both the victimizer and the victim.

I could not find evidence to Shepard's deliberate intention to allude to the Bible, but I find it important to prove that body language in the Holy Book can lead to mischief. The motif of body language, and in our case expressing emotions through the hands, is already mentioned in the Book of Genesis (27.4-22). There we read about Esau, who was a cunning hunter and his father's beloved son. His father, Isaac, was already very old and his eyes were dim. In spite of being near death, he still had a passion for Esau's venison, "and my soul may bless thee before I die." Rebekah, his wife, wanted Jacob to be blessed and become the patriarch, so she disguised him to look like Esau. Jacob was afraid he might lose it all and says: "My father peradventure will feel me and I shall seem to him a mocker, and I shall bring a curse upon me, and not a blessing." Verse 22 reads: "... and he felt him and said: The voice is the voice of Jacob, but the hands are the hands of Esau. And he discerned him not, because his hands were hairy, as his brother's Esau hands: so he blessed him." Isaac trusted body language, especially arms, more than Jacob's voice.

One cannot escape the resemblance between Isaac and Tilden: both judge a person and gain confidence in him by the looks and feel of his hands. Ironically, both are misled: Jacob was blessed instead of Esau, and Shelly is not compatible with Vince and leaves, thus saving her future.

Bradley is Dodge and Halie's middle son. Do we consider him to have received the least attention and respect from them? It appears that as a child he unsuccessfully fought for his place in the family; otherwise, I cannot explain his parents' resentment against him. His sin lies in being an accomplice to his father's crime. He has been part of the plot to conceal the murder from the authorities, pretending not to know where the baby is and how it disappeared. Neither Dodge nor Halie have any expectations of him, especially after the accident he inflicted on



himself and there by lost his leg. They have actually given up all hope for him, praying that Tilden would be able to care for him when they are gone: “Bradley can’t look after us. Bradley can hardly look after himself” (*BC*, 72). When he makes his first appearance on stage, we see a big man, struggling with his wooden leg through the door. His arms and shoulders are extremely powerful and muscular. Shepard does not offer details of the accident but I am intrigued with the disturbing question of why Bradley has a wooden leg and not a modern, light prosthetic one. Is it to emphasize his parents’ indifference to his needs and comfort? Is it to confirm their poverty? I would like to believe that both reasons are valid, although the first is compliant with Dodge and Halie’s lack of attention to Bradley. According to Halie, Bradley is responsible for Dodge’s appearance, but what he actually does is to mutilate his father’s scalp. Halie witnesses that “Bradley’s going to be very upset when he sees this [the mess in the living room]. He doesn’t like to see the house in disarray. He can’t stand it if one thing is out of place. The slightest thing. You know how he gets” (*BC*, 76). Bradley’s disrespect of his father indicates that he is prepared to remove Dodge from his “throne” and so the sofa becomes his target. At the end of Act II, Bradley sees Shelly and hopes that she has come to take Tilden with her. She, however, is so frightened by his scary looks that she cannot even answer and only shakes her head for *no*. Bradley indicates his contempt of both Dodge and Tilden; about his father he says, “All boney and wasted away” (*BC*, 105). He believes that no one can rescue Dodge, only “shoot him or drown him,” causing him the same death he brought onto the baby. About Tilden he says, “No use leaving him here. Doesn’t do a lick of a’ work. Doesn’t raise a finger” (*BC*, 105). Bradley humiliates Shelly by sticking his finger in her mouth, hence insinuating sexuality and disrespect. She is so shocked that she dares not to object. When she recovers and regains confidence, Shelly yells at him, “Shut up!” which evokes a harsh response: “Don’t talk to me in that tone a’ voice.

There was a time when I had to take that tone a' voice from pretty near everyone... Him [Dodge] and that half brain that just ran outa' here... Not any more. Everything's turned around now. Full circle" (*BC*, 106). However, his full circle is not really complete; it will be completed only after Dodge dies and Vince will inherit the house and the farm, unlike Bradley's scenario. The bitter memories of his being neglected as a child and verbally abused cause him to be wickedly brutal in the present. On top of this, he is burdened by the cursed secret and the accident. The result is a distorted personality that fails to cope with the desperate situation at home. Without his wooden leg his castration is complete. His fierceness is all gone and his former attempt to claim patriarchy seems pathetic now; his behavior resembles that of a child who has been scolded by his mother: "She [Shelly] is lying... I never did anything, mom! I never touched her! She propositioned me! And I turned her down!" (*BC*, 120). Bradley is desperately trying to win his mother's approval, but she has almost never been the right person to do so: "...when Ansel died that left us all alone. Same as being alone. Same as if they'd all died" (*BC*, 73). Instead, Halie seeks Dewis' interference, which fails to come. No help can come from the outside, they are all outcasts. All the members of the family are trapped in the curse that they have brought upon themselves.

Although they are not major characters, a few words about Vince and Shelly seem appropriate. Vince makes an unexpected visit, but is accepted with suspicion and hostility. He and Shelly end up desperately attempting to correct and heal the cursed family, but fail. The family will not heed the warning written on the wall. Vince has the option to leave unharmed, but stays and begins to regress to the past, receiving the identity of his father and grandfather. The cursed atmosphere at home urges Vince to search for new identities, those of his

grandfathers. Decay is creeping on him slowly, and by assuming Dodge's patriarchy he becomes "one of them," namely sick and doomed.

Shelly is a significant outsider. She is not a prisoner of heredity and is smart enough to know when to leave. Both she and Vince have become innocent victims, but I do not think that Vince realizes it. Lynda Hart (77) adds: "Shelly's apprehension is the catalyst for a conflict that has long been dormant in the family". And in William Herman's words "...her self possession and her consequent aggressive responses... unleash the buried rancor in Dodge" (53). Vince's barren search for identity is one more proof of a bitter end to the family and of the myth of the American Dream. Vince will end up as sick as Dodge and as hopeless as his father, Tilden.

In conclusion, it seems that Shepard has deliberately left *Buried Child* open ended, allowing the audience to decide whether or not Dodge takes the curse with him to the grave and redeems the family. As suggested above, my reading of the play dictates a pessimistic ending. Both State laws and biblical laws forbid acts of incest, which have *always* been considered a taboo for which there is neither atonement nor forgiveness. In both the books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy it is explicit that "For whoever shall do any of these abominations, even the souls that do them shall be cut off from among their people... And the man that lieth with his father's wife... both of them shall surely be put to death" (Leviticus 18.29). Vince and the supposedly and miraculously green fields in the last scene do not carry any affirmation. Society demands revenge, but in this case it does not come by lawmakers but by the guilt-ridden ones themselves. These wretched characters do not pay society direct restitution but *do* pay with their miserable existence. Deterrence is not discussed in the play because the family is secluded and thus succeeds in hiding the murder and deceiving authorities. The urge to punish severely and take

revenge is, unfortunately, not fulfilled but is insinuated; Vince's preposterous behavior mirrors the other characters and we understand that he will be as doomed as the rest of them.

*Buried Child* has repeatedly been played on stage. It was first produced at the Magic Theatre in San Francisco, on June 27, 1978. It was directed by Robert Woodruff with a successful cast. The setting, as well as in all the other performances, was a farmhouse in Illinois and a middle-class family, who struggles to hold on to reality. The reviews on the premiere were complimenting and congratulatory. In the *Nation*, Harold Clurman wrote,

What strikes the ear and eye is comic occasionally hilarious behavior and speech at which one laughs while remaining slightly puzzled and dismayed (if not resentful), and perhaps indefinitely saddened. Yet, there is a swing to it all, a vagrant freedom, a tattering song. Something is coming to an end, yet on the other side there is hope. From the bottom of there is nowhere to go but up.

The first production had an unforgettable restaging at ACT in 1979. The drama played in the Theatre De Lys in Greenwich Village for 152 performances, where it won the Pulitzer Prize for the best drama that year. Don Shewey reported that "it ranks right up there with *The Glass Menagerie* and *Long Day's Journey into Night*." Johan Callens claimed that religious concerns are all pervasive and ineffectual.

The production at the Steppenwolf Theatre in Chicago, on October 4, 1996, sounded slightly different because Shepard had revised the script, allegedly fixing edits that the original director had made without the playwright's authorization. Kathleen McClennan reviewed the performance, informing the reader that the production, directed by Gary Sinise, was nominated for five Tony Awards. The play was hailed as a comical and insightful presentation of the disintegrating American dream. However, McClennan expressed her opinion, saying: "Despite

its several strengths, the production lacked overall balance and seemed to put two distinct theatrical styles into conflict. Tilden and Vince worked with a spare acting style devoid of realistic convention... Sinese also played Shepard's irony as broad comedy." The reviewer was not happy with the last scene: "Considering the artistic talent of Gary Sinese and the cast, one might have expected more sensitivity to the demands of the final image. Unfortunately, the Steppenwolf production, in what may have been an attempt to make the play more accessible weakened a strong performance with a choice for shallow closure."

The American Conservatory Theatre at the Geary Theatre in San Francisco presented the play as its final show of the 2001/2 season. Reviewer Richard Connema elaborated on the plot and especially on Vince's tragic homecoming, "The play is severely poetic, humorous and mysterious. There is a deep symbolism in each of the characters." Robert Hurwitt, *Chronicle Theater* critic, wrote: "*Buried Child* still delivers a jolt... key characters breathe the life into revised Shepard's play... Water's production doesn't always avoid the trap... Though his "Child" is richly entertaining, lapses in pacing, a few misplaced emphases and some casting problems keep it from achieving its full impact."

I find Matt Wolf's review of the production in London, on October 4, 2004, interesting. As expected, the critic praised the "fusion of talent from America, Britain and Ireland, suggesting conclusively that as far as theater is concerned, artistry knows no boundaries." Still, "But even when the mythic aspirations of the text turn murky, the acting is almost always a delight." The reviewer talks about the acting and does not elaborate on the message of *Buried Child*.

The last review I read is from *Buried Child* played on the *Main Stage* of the NAC through January, 2009. Resident theater critic, Connie Meng, praised Director Peter Hinton's

production: “One of my favorite oddly comic moments is when one character threatens another with a third character’s detached artificial leg... Shepard leaves us with unanswered questions, while the questions he does answer leave us uncomfortable. There are many laughs in this play, but between them you could hear a pin drop. This is an excellent production of an American classic” (2).

When trying to summarize all these reviews, I would say that the play is carved in people’s minds and hearts, and it continues to be produced in the world.

All the novels and drama I have analyzed so far deal with murder which is considered a *sin* in the beginning of the twentieth-century, and becomes a *capital crime* as we come to the end of the century. All of them attempt to understand the acts and aim at protecting society from such terrible murders. *No Country For Old Men* is about not only murder but also about sheriff’s helplessness when he needs to confront the murderer. The sheriff chooses to withdraw and retire rather than face evil and fight it. Can American society survive under such circumstances?

Chapter 7: “ ‘Somewhere out there is a true and living prophet of destruction and I dont want to confront him’: The Turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century and *No Country for Old Men*”

What is there south west of the American border that provokes so much violence? Is it the hot weather which raises people’s blood pressure, or is it the permeable Mexican border? It seems that in the summer of 2010, the media dedicated endless news to this issue, no less than the attention paid to the tragic oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. Even President Barack Obama, in his speech addressed to the nation on July 1<sup>st</sup>, 2010, highlighted the prevalence of violence in his comments on illegal immigration: “Arizona’s people are tired of waiting for the federal government to secure their border with Mexico. Drug and border smugglers are more forceful than ever... The legal immigration system is as broken as the borders... although the southern border is much safer today than it was twenty years ago.”

Twenty years ago? This takes me to McCarthy’s blood-soaked novel *No Country for Old Men*<sup>11</sup>, which was published at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, details a fouled drug transaction on the Mexican border in the 1980s. This essay will refer to the genre known as the “crime novel” and to the very unique style and structure of *NCFOM*. I will try to evaluate if there is “no place for home,” as Jay Ellis thinks, and if McCarthy’s fiction is really venomous; or to believe Levi Asher who disagrees with Bloom’s positive opinion and admits that he hates McCarthy. I believe that it is important to decide whether or not there is affirmation at the end of the novel, as its pessimistic title and its ending, which does not offer a resolution, suggest. By profiling the three major characters and following their journeys, I will attempt to decide whose story it is, who victimizes whom, who is the chaser/hunter and who is the chased/hunted, and how McCarthy uses this novel to project where American society is heading.

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<sup>11</sup> *NCFOM*

Cormac McCarthy is a famous and controversial contemporary American author. Born in July 1933, and having spent most of his life in the South, his opinions of states bordering with Mexico are realistic but disturbing. I would like to believe that the blood-soaked violence in his narrative(s) is his radical way of warning us of a calamitous future, yet I find it bothersome. In the introduction to my dissertation, I claimed that the challenge to minimize deadly violence should be clearly emphasized in modern culture and in its literature. Apparently, McCarthy has a different opinion: he maximizes it in order to alert his readers.

To date, McCarthy has written nine novels, two short stories, a television screenplay, an unperformed theater script and some poetry. *The Road* won the Pulitzer Prize in 2006; it is clear that his career is not yet over. Atypical of the traditional way of getting into the literary canon – being an extraordinarily brilliant writer, white and dead – McCarthy has already earned the honor of belonging to this highly appreciated class.

According to William Cane, “McCarthy is one of the most eclectic of novelists” because he claims to have read hundreds of books in preparation for writing his own novel (5). It is possible to regard McCarthy as a somewhat alienated and different writer who, in spite of his wide popularity, zealously keeps his personal life to himself. Except for two rare interviews, both with Richard Woodward, he distances himself from the public and unlike Arthur Miller and Sam Shepard, for example, would not discuss his writing in public. In the 2006 poll conducted by *Time Magazine*, McCarthy appeared on the list of the greatest novelists of the previous quarter century. The *New Yorker* noted then that he was extremely gifted. Steven Frye (11) states that in McCarthy’s frontier romance, he is trying to “explore human potential for violence, avarice, and philosophical approaches to life.” Cane (17) posits that “McCarthy portrays an America in which material progress has not been accompanied by a spiritual or moral counterpart.”



Critics elaborate on the unusual structure, style and language in *NCFOM*. This novel blends several genres: the western, the crime, the detective and the thriller, giving the latter the birthright. Crime fiction is a literary style, most commonly associated with detective stories, but distinguished by the unsentimental portrayal of violence. Unlike the detective genre, the detective/sheriff in the crime story not only solves mysteries but also confronts danger and engages in violence on a regular basis. He is tied directly to the crime, not an outsider called to solve or fix the situation. Suspense is an integral part of this sub-genre. There is no doubt that once you start reading *NCFOM*, you cannot lay down the book until you reach the end: a drug deal gone sour, hot pursuits, high-powered weapons, merciless killings, a strange brand of honors, beautiful landscapes, cowboy boots, sheriffs on horses... what could be better?<sup>12</sup> What I cannot find is the *true*, old West with its cowboys, moral codes and naiveté, and characters like John Wayne's. Lucia Bozzola believes that "This is how the West ends – not with a bang but with a compressed air gun," the exterminator's weapon in this novel (1). This confirms my previously stated assumption that the True "Wild" West is gone; it no longer exists, not even in Alaska<sup>13</sup>. However, it is also possible that McCarthy portrays a *changed* West, one that projects bloody violence, lack of morals, addiction to narcotics and an intensive pursuit of Mammon<sup>14</sup>. It seems that the author has in mind "Apocalypse Now" and if not now, then soon.

Structurally, the story consists of italicized soliloquies by Sheriff Ed Tom Bell, in which he shares with the reader his personal thoughts, and text written in the regular body font, which signifies the plot. Jay Ellis sees two books at hand: "Shifting lights, the bright sunlit desert over Moss, the antelope, and the drug deal gone bad... fade into the darkness of his [Bell's] dreams"

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<sup>12</sup> I admit that I had to read the novel several times to follow the intensive action.

<sup>13</sup> Sam Shepard's *True West*.

<sup>14</sup> Mammon is a biblical Hebrew term which means a lot of money. Its destructive impact was already realized almost four thousand years ago.

and confessions of defeat (226). *NCFOM* gradually “reveals itself to have begun as one book, under one reading... only to slip away into another book, eventually fulfilling the depth and darkness of the title’s reference to a poem by Yeats. It begins as a [relative] young man’s book, and ends in the voice of a middle-aged man who nonetheless seems to be quite old – as old as “Sailing to Byzantium” demands.” The crime novel is the Young Man’s book, whereas the italicized sections indicate that of the Old Man’s story; they resonate more deeply with the title; they read like a touching jeremiad, one that gives voice to the fears of many Americans. Both narratives run parallel and the only distinction is the different font.

The chapters are numbered by Bell’s autobiographical reports and strangely, only the odd pages are numbered. Is this to support McCarthy’s minimalist style? And why are there big white spaces around sections of dialogue? Dennis Cutchins also leads us to question Moss’ death: why is it kept a little mysterious and is not described in the novel? (156-7). She thinks that McCarthy wants the reader to debate over the *why* rather than the *what*. I still believe that most readers would like to know exactly what happened, not out of a desire to see more blood, but out of an instinctive desire to tie up loose ends.

Grammatically, the novel is written with minimal punctuation or line spaces. McCarthy’s English is submerged in southern words and phrases, all of which make it difficult to follow the text,<sup>15</sup> which is laconic anyway. Whether one calls all of these mechanisms gimmicks or not, it works very well because the format challenges the reader and raises the level of tension.

The narrative unfolds near the Texas-Mexican border in the early 1980s, when drug wars were just beginning to escalate. The main plot is simple: it tells the story of Sheriff Bell who is frustrated because he cannot cope with the growing violence in his county. We meet Moss, who happens to uncover three abandoned trucks, several dead bodies, apparently Mexicans, a huge

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<sup>15</sup> For example “I believe they’ve done lit a shuck” (p. 93).

amount of heroin and a satchel with \$2.4 million. Succumbing to temptation and contrary to his honesty, Moss takes the money home, unaware of a transponder nestled within the deadly treasure. Sure enough, the rest of the narrative follows Moss and his attempts to escape the assassins who chase him, mainly Anton Chigurh, a psychopath who believes in vague philosophies of chance, free will and predestination. Chigurh himself is hunted by Wells, a former CIA agent who has changed “professions” and is now a hit man. Trying to stop the ruthless blood trail, Sheriff Bell chases both Moss and Chigurh, but he always arrives at the shocking scenes of depravity *too late*, discovering bodies and realizing that this West noir is not for him.

The first character introduced, and presumably the novel’s hero, is Sheriff Bell, a decorated World War II veteran and a descendent of a long line of southern lawmen. He is only in his late fifties but sounds *old* and incompetent. He feels that he cannot cope with this new, inexplicable violence and cannot confront this living prophet of destruction, Chigurh. Bell bemoans the changing times as the region becomes increasingly violent. He keeps comparing past to present and is so afraid of the future that he decides to retire very soon.

*He<sup>16</sup> killed a fourteen year old girl... And he told me that he had been plannin to kill somebody for as long as he could remember. Said that if they turned him out he’d do it again... I dont know what to make of that... maybe he was some new kind... But he wasnt nothin compared to what was comin down the pike... Somewhere out there is a true and living prophet of destruction and I dont want to confront him. I know he’s real. I have seen his work... And I think a man would have to put his soul at hazard. And I wont do that. I think now that maybe I never*

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<sup>16</sup> “He” is a boy who was sent to the gas chamber at Huntsville. To the best of my knowledge, Alabama has never had gas chambers.

would (*NCFOM*, 3-4).

Steven Frye (155) elaborates on Bell's self description, saying: "He struggles to understand the motives that drive people to acts of brutality and... initially concludes that the world is getting worse, that his efforts are ineffective in responding to the harsh realities of human avarice in the late twentieth century," and therefore he needs to resign. Bell is certainly the good and righteous character in the novel, but is he the main protagonist? Most of the critics claim he is, but I have doubts: my hero does not withdraw; my hero will not give up fighting for a peaceful and righteous life; my hero will not succumb to the devil. David Cremean, in Chapman-King's edited book, considers Sheriff Bell a spiritual hero: "Bell consistently fails to keep up with a deteriorating situation" (chapter 3, 24). I agree that he hides behind his "advanced" age and keeps running away from responsibility, exactly as he did during WW-II. Linda Woodson, in the same book (chapter 1, 11) calls it "the choice of self-preservation and its subsequent guilt." Bell finds it hard to come to terms with death, although he is surrounded by corpses. When he claims that the dead have claims on us (*NCFOM*, 124), he probably refers to his dead comrades whom he deserted during WW-II and therefore feels guilty in the present. Bell's honesty does not allow him to continue his job; he is mentally tired, defeated and disillusioned. At some point he realizes his helplessness and tries to fight it with words, rather than action: "I'm not the man of an older time they say I am. I wish I was. I'm a man of this time" (*NCFOM*, 279). Still, he always seems to be two steps behind. He purports to be contemporary, but fails. He projects a noir and grim picture of old age. So, maybe he is the antihero. The Webster dictionary (50) defines *antihero* as "the main character in a work of literature, who is represented as being no braver, stronger, or cleverer than ordinary people," and this definition matches my opinion of the sheriff. Bell is the victim of a situation he does not

comprehend and is scared to confront, therefore he retreats. He is an ordinary person with a heightened notion of decency, but this does not make him a hero who overcomes difficulties and becomes an icon of bravery.

Is it possible that McCarthy has no hero in this narrative? Maybe there are no heroes left in McCarthy's deteriorating literary world. I cannot find a hero in this narrative.

As Bell concludes his confession, McCarthy introduces Anton Chigurh, the antagonist, who manages to escape arrest by strangling a deputy with his own handcuffs. Then he steals a patrol car and kills an innocent driver with a cattle bolt pistol activated by an air tank, apparently his signature weapon. The detailed description of Chigurh's actions is so violent and graphic that already it reads like pornography of violence, and I am afraid to guess what will come next. Is he the embodiment of Satan? Bell names him "the prophet of destruction" (*NCFOM*, 4); the reader might say "Terminator"<sup>17</sup>. While his actions are horrific in nature, Chigurh's language reflects culture: always clean, voluble fluent, impeccable, unlike the others', which is very common and sometimes even vulgar. It really sounds like Chigurh considers himself superior to others. He is a drug-cartel employee who chases Moss to retrieve the money he stole. Chigurh feels that his reputation is at stake, and he cannot allow that to be jeopardized: "I'd say that the purpose of my visit is simply to establish my bonafides. As someone who is completely reliable and completely honest" (*NCFOM*, 251-2). The reader grimaces with frustration because Chigurh honestly believes in every word he is saying.

Meanwhile, Llewelyn Moss, the third protagonist, is hunting antelope in the Rio Grande, McCarthy goes into detail describing Moss' weapon and his intense concentration, which support his being a Vietnam veteran. Unfortunately, he only wounds the animal and then tracks its trail of blood. As previously stated, he discovers several corpses, bullet-riddled trucks and a

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<sup>17</sup> After the famous feature played by Arnold Schwarzenegger.

dying Mexican, begging for some water. Unfortunately, Moss cannot help him and he continues investigating the scene of the crime. When he discovers heroin he understands that a drug deal went bad. Moss continues to scan the surrounding terrain, knowing very well what he is looking for.

“Do not, he said, get your dumb ass shot out here. Do not do that” yet, he stumbles upon a document case containing 2.4 million dollars (16). Moss is totally overwhelmed. What is he to do? “...and he was scared in a way that he didnt even understand” (17).

He didnt know what it added up to but he had a pretty good idea. He sat there looking at it and then he closed the flap and sat with his head down. His whole life was sitting there in front of him. Day after day from dawn till dark until he was dead. All of it cooked down into forty pounds of paper in a satchel  
(*NCFOM*, 18).

Moss takes off with the money and returns home undetected; both he and the reader know what to expect. There is no way that the drug dealers will let their money evaporate into thin air. “Beyond all this was the dead certainty that someone was going to come looking for the money. Maybe someones... If you knew there was somebody out here afoot that had two million dollars of your money, at what point would you quit looking for it? That’s right. There aint no such point” (*NCFOM*, 29).

The following night, Moss’ conscience pricks him so hard that he is motivated to return to the scene of violence with some water for the dying Mexican, only to be detected and chased.

A bothersome irony does not give me rest: have you ever faced such a temptation? An easy \$2.4 million? Can you identify *one* person who would find black/dirty money, \$2.4 million *in cash*, absolutely certain that he has not been detected, and has yet headed straight to the police

headquarters, just to be thanked and looked at pitifully by the police officers? Would he not have heard the word *idiot* uttered there? What do we make of Moss? Is he the villain? Throughout the novel McCarthy portrays him as a decent, sensitive and faithful husband and a law-abiding citizen, except for this unexpected weakness of having taken money, which belongs to criminals anyway. On the other hand, we all agree that Moss must not take the law into his hands and punish people. He knows very well what he should do, but I cannot blame him for not being able to reason and rationalize. He is not given enough time to deliberate and act wisely; he even endangers his life again by going back to the desert, senseless but humane behavior that reflects moral responsibility.

It seems that McCarthy wants us to like Moss, therefore he brings up the conversation between Bell and his old uncle Ellis, who was his grandfather's deputy at his time. Ellis is crippled, missing one eye, very lonely, yet very concerned. Bell finds in him a priest to whom he can make confessions. "What's your biggest regret in life. The old man looked at him, gauging the question. I dont know, he said. I aint got all that many regrets" (265). And then he elaborates on his philosophy of life and jobs:

You sign on for the ride you probably think you got at least some notion of where the ride's goin. But you might not. Or you might of been lied to. Probably nobody would blame you then. If you quit. But if it's just that it turned out to be a little roughern what you had in mind... I guess some things are better not put to the test (NCFOM, 265).

Is Moss excused because it is not *fair* to put him to the test? Is the world fair? NO!! Moss is Frye's protagonist: "... a protagonist in the sense that readers are encouraged to sympathize with his plight" (p. 159). But sympathy is not enough to make him a hero.

Moss is discovered by returning gangsters, including Chigurh. He is forced to abandon his truck and barely makes it home, wounded. Knowing that his wife might be killed, he sends her away to her mother<sup>18</sup> and then begins a dramatic flight for his own life. Regret is not an option: he has the money and must find a way to both keep it and stay alive.

Most of the novel describes the chase. Sheriff Bell is also chasing Chigurh, but at the same time he needs to warn Moss, so he is chasing both men. As the story progresses, Chigurh kills everyone he comes in contact with, never leaving any trace or a possible witness. The narrative discloses that he is a professional hit man, probably trained by the CIA, but lately has been hired by drug dealers to recover lost money. He is not interested in his profit; rather he is ruled by his weird philosophy of chance, free will and predestination. It is hard to figure how these three components coexist. How can one have free will and still live by chance? McCarthy does not offer answers. To spice up his beliefs, Chigurh employs a coin flipping system to help decide who will live. This fate-deciding coin flip is used only rarely, when Chigurh enjoys philosophical encounters with his hapless victims. Or shall I say that he enjoys torturing them? And if, eventually, they turn out lucky with the coin, they are exonerated; Chigurh hands them their lives back, as if he were another god. He is both the executer and the exonerator. He is the one to decide who will live and who will die, but at the same time he allows chance to intervene. The relationship between his being violent and determinism looks natural to him: a person's life and death were determined long before he was even born, and Chigurh just carries out the verdict. I don't find him responsible to the dead, although he says so. But that is exactly the problem: he honestly believes in his mission on earth and cannot understand why his victims do not think like him. Observing the victims' behavior reveals that they actually do not comprehend

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<sup>18</sup> She is actually her grandmother.



the way he operates, and do not understand his rationale. They only know that they are in danger and that they have to lay their lives on the table as if they were gambling on them.

The following conversation is between Chigurh and a random proprietor at a gas station. The man tries to be courteous, but Chigurh plays the cat and mouse game with him. And McCarthy is doing the same, letting us decipher who says what:

Chigurh picked his change up off the counter. And what business is it of yours where I'm from, friendo?

I didn't mean nothing by it... You seem to have a lot of questions, the proprietor said. For somebody that dont want to say where it is they're from.

What's the most you ever saw lost on a coin toss?

Sir?... Coin toss? ... I dont know. Folks dont generally bet on a coin toss...

Chigurh... flipped it spinning into the... lights overhead... Call it, he said.

Call it?...Well I need to know what it is we're calling here...

You need to call it, Chigurh said. I cant call it for you. It wouldn't be fair...

I didnt put nothin up.

Yes you did. You've been putting it up your whole life...

I don't know what it is I stand to win...

You stand to win everything, Chigurh said. Everything.

You aint makin any sense, mister... (*NCFOM*, 52-6).

The proprietor is lucky because the coin turns up in his favor; still, he is left distraught and beaten: never before has he gambled for his own life or bet for something he could not comprehend. The second time Chigurh allows a person to toss a coin is when he comes to kill Moss' wife. She cannot understand why he has been waiting for her and dismisses all his

arguments. The text suggests that Chigurh likes her brave approach, so he grants her a coin toss, but she refuses to see in the coin a deterministic instrument. She is not going to put her life on the gambling table; and besides, the Bible forbids gambling, and she is a firm believer in God. He *makes* her do it anyway and she loses and is murdered. But before he shoots her, Chigurh tries to explain his philosophy of fulfilling promises, while dismissing her contentious remarks:

You've got no cause to hurt me, she said.

I know. But I gave my word... Yes. We're at the mercy of the dead here. In this case your husband.

That dont make no sense.

I'm afraid it does...

You give your word to my husband to kill me? ... My husband is dead.

Yes. But I'm not... my word is not dead. Nothing can change that. Even a nonbeliever might find it useful to model himself after God. Very useful, in fact.

You're just a blasphemer.

Hard words. But what's done cannot be undone... Your husband... had the opportunity to remove you from harm's way and he chose not to do so... None of this was your fault... It was bad luck... Every moment in your life is a turning and every one a choosing. Somewhere you made a choice... The shape is drawn. No line can be erased. I have only one way to live. It doesn't allow for special cases... When I came into your life your life was over. It had a beginning, a middle, and an end... This is the end... You are asking that I second say the world (*NCFOM*, 255-60).

Chigurh's arguments are as vague as before, but he sounds patient and somewhat compassionate and companionable. It reads like almost an apology: he wants to explain himself and makes an utmost effort to be coherent: chance finds its realization in tossing a coin and hence deciding on people's lives. What is so difficult in getting this? Why does she not follow him? He admits that he cannot change her fate as well as he cannot change the world; and being committed to chance is in his perverse character, but he does not see it like us. Alas, Carla is doomed to die.

McCarthy allows Chigurh to present his philosophy several times, but nothing is really coherent in it, except for one point: Chigurh is convinced that he is the armor bearer of *his God*, therefore he carries out *His* orders. In a conversation with Carson Wells, a former comrade from the CIA service, Chigurh argues that his beliefs have kept him intact; he is actually disappointed with Wells, who does not follow his arguments; but neither can we:

An hour later [after having killed a man at a bar] I was pulled over by a sheriff's deputy ... I let him take me into town in handcuffs. I'm not sure why I did this but I think I wanted to see if I could extricate myself by an act of will. Because I believe that one can. That such a thing is possible. But it was a ... vain thing to do...

Do you have any notion of how goddamned crazy you are?

The nature of the conversation?

The nature of you....

If the rule you followed led you to this of what use was the rule?

I dont know what you are talking about...

You surprise me, that's all. I expected something different. It calls

past events into question. Dont you think so? (*NCFOM*, 175).

It is not clear how Chigurh changed, if at all. It is apparent, though, that he is trying to cloak his weird philosophy, yet it does not make sense. He is dangerous and *unkillable*, a psychopath, a vicious executioner who enjoys doing the job and disappearing undetected. While trying to dig deeper into Chigurh's character and analyze his arguments, I can feel his inner belief in a mysterious pattern, which probably only God can understand, but where is God? Has He given up on us?

McCarthy is not clear about the presence or absence of God in this narrative; still, allusions to the Bible and to God are astonishing. Chigurh resembles the *unkillable* Satan, therefore he manages to walk away alive. Moss and Bell are ordinary human beings who live and die, like all of us.

McCarthy is particular about weaving comic-relief moments into the narrative. This artistic device works well to ease tension, but the sarcasm and cynicism that accompany them might reflect McCarthy's disillusionment. For example, when Moss leaves home to return to the scene of slaughter, he talks to his wife:

Where are you goin? ...

I'm fixin to go do something dumbern hell but I'm goin anyways. If I dont come back tell Mother I love her.

Your mother's dead Llewelyn.

Well I'll tell her myself then (*NCFOM*, 24).

Or, when Bell discusses crime carried out by current drug cartels, his language is thick with dark humor: "We got another execution here Sheriff? No, I believe this one's died of natural causes. Natural causes? Natural to the line of work he's in (*NCFOM*, 76). When Bell and his wife

discuss Moss' bitter end, we read the following: "Just don't come home dead some evening, she said. I wont put up with it. I better not do it then" (138).

Bell's sarcasm about the growing numbers of criminals is funny: "I dont know what to do about em even. If you killed em all they'd have to build a annex to hell" (*NCFOM*, 79).

I find it very interesting that as the narrative draws to a close, the main characters seem to come closer to each other in attitude. Unnatural death occupies their thoughts and I can very well relate to it. The word *death*, its derivatives and allusions seem to be the most common theme in the text. From the beginning, when Bell mentions death seven times on the first page: gas-chamber, execution, killed, planning to kill, a crime of passion, going to hell - we know that the book is going to be macabre. The other characters are equally misanthropic: Moss is not even shaken when he discovers corpses in the desert; he was a sniper in Vietnam. Chigurh does not use the word death, although he kills people with an eerie sense of detachment. Before killing Wells, Chigurh tells him to look him in the eye, so "There would be more dignity in it [death]" (*NCFOM*, 176). Or, when asked about his [dead] "associates" Chigurh replies cynically, "They moved on to other things" (*NCFOM*, 253).

Bell believes that "...the dead have more claims on you than what you might admit" (*NCFOM*, 124), and thus he expresses the influence of the past on the present. Moss lectures the young hitchhiker, saying: "You dont start over... Ever step you take is forever. You cant make it go away... But yesterday is all that does count... Your life is made out of the days it's made out of" (*NCFOM*, 227). Chigurh philosophizes that the past determines the present (*NCFOM*, 259) but unlike Bell he has nothing to say about the future. Moss is absorbed in comparing his difficult life today with the possibility of a bright future; he does not realize that the money he

stole was easier to obtain than it will be to keep. Bell reflects nostalgically to the innocence of the 1960s and dreads the future: "...not only will she [any young girl] be able to have an abortion, she'll be able to have you [her mother] put to sleep" (*NCFOM*, 197).

God is mentioned several times in the novel, mainly in relation to existence. Following Chigurh on his rampage through the desert, Jeffrey Overstreet (2) states that McCarthy offers three possible conclusions about God:

a- God is so disgusted with human kind that He decides to keep His distance and let us destroy each other<sup>19</sup>.

b- God is trying to reach into the world through "fleeting gestures of human benevolence, like Carla's steadfast love to her stupid husband, or the kindness of a young boy who offers his shirt to a bleeding victim." I doubt this conclusion because those two incidents are overshadowed and dwarfed by the consistent debasement of mankind through the novel.

c- God might not exist at all. This premise is negated by the characters' Christian beliefs and numerous biblical allusions. Already on the first page we hear Bell say about the young murderer, "... he knew he was goin to hell." Hell, Heaven and God go together in the Bible. Carla believes in God and accuses Chigurh of blasphemy. She would not cooperate with him about calling the coin: "God would not want me to do that" (*NCFOM*, 258).

Old Uncle Ellis confesses to Bell that he expected an all-seeing God to be part of his life, but it never happened:

I always thought when I got older that God would sort of come into my life in some way. He didnt. I don't blame him. If I was him I'd have the same opinion about me that he does.

You aint turn infidel have you, Uncle Ellis?

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<sup>19</sup> This opinion is often heard in the Middle East these days.

No. No. Nothin like that.

Do you think God knows what's happenin'?

I expect he does.

You think he can stop it?

No. I dont (*NCFOM*, 269).

To insure that “No, I dont” does not contradict God’s existence, McCarthy puts the following words in Bell’s mouth:

*You think that a man that had waited eight some odd years on God to come into his life, well, you'd think he'd come. If he didnt you'd still have to figure that he knew what he was doin. I dont know what other description of God you could have. So what you end up with is that those he has spoke to are the ones that must of needed it the worst (NCFOM, 283).*

We hear more about God in the painful conversation between Bell and Moss’ father:

He said: People will tell you it was Vietnam brought this country on its knees.

But I never believed that. It was already in bad shape. Vietnam was just the icin on the cake... You cant go to war like that. You cant go to war without God. I

I dont know what is goin to happen when the next one comes. I surely dont

(*NCFOM*, 294-5).

The last time God is mentioned in the story is when Bell recalls a conversation with a DA about Law Schools that teach the students to only follow the law, regardless what is right and wrong (which cannot save lives anyway). Bell asked the DA “if he knew who Mammon was.”

And he said: Mammon?

Yes. Mammon.

You mean like God and Mammon?

Yessir.

Well, he said, I cant say as I do. I know it's the bible. Is it the devil?

I dont know. I'm goin to look it up. I got a feelin ought to know who he is (*NCFOM*, 298).

The New Testament, Matthew 6: 24 reads: "No man can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other; or else, he will hold to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon."

Perhaps this passage summarizes McCarthy's opinion of American society. It is also possible that he allows Bell to voice his own political opinions of the country as well. Bell carefully chooses his words when talking about the beloved country: "This country has got a strange kind of history and a damaged bloody one too" (284). Uncle Ellis utters his pain, declaring: "This country was hard on people... How come people dont feel like this country has got a lot to answer for? ... This country will kill you in a heartbeat and still people love it" (*NCFOM*, 241).

Bell's lament voices the feelings of those older Americans, who do not understand how their country is changing and can not recognize even their own grandchildren. They watch helplessly as corrupt police-officers collaborate with cartel bosses, and tear up from the realization that this country devours its own people – they have failed in handing over their beloved country to the next generation; thus, the two youngsters who later steal Chigurh's gun symbolize the continuation of blood-shed in America. There is no doubt that McCarthy succeeds in critiquing the crime of murder and the terrible helplessness of the law to confront the deadly situation.



In spite of this angst, I still see an affirmative ending to *No Country for Old Men*. The present situation does look grim, and the future is unclear; furthermore, sometimes we all feel like Mary Whipple<sup>20</sup> who says “Gone is the belief that love and hope have a fighting chance in Life’s mythic struggle.” The Prophet Jeremiah is called *the prophet of fury* in Hebrew, and reads like a jeremiad. But the ending of the narrative is open: Chigurh apparently vanishes like a ghost and remains “something that you may very well not be equal to” (*NCFOM*, 299). Chigurh waits for the appropriate time to act: “The green diode numerals on the radio put the time at 1:17” (*NCFOM*, 202); in Revelation 1:17 we read: “And when I [Apostle John] saw him [Jesus Christ], I fell at his feet as dead: and he laid his right hand upon me, saying unto me: ‘Fear not, I am the first and the last.’” I find one more affirmation in Bell’s dream, in which his father was riding a horse in a narrow mountain pass at night. The old man was carrying a horn with embers inside that glowed like moonlight; he rode ahead into the darkness and disappeared: “And in the dream I knew that he was goin on ahead and that he was fixin to make a fire somewhere out there in all that dark and cold and I knew that whenever I got there he would be there” (*NCFOM*, 309).

It sounds like his father is preparing a fire, maybe the eternal fire mentioned in Leviticus 24:2, that is to burn continually in the Ark of the Covenant. This fire is the symbol of unity with God on earth and the proof that it is not a Godless world. Lydia Cooper puts forth her stance very clearly: “Bell, haunted by prophetic visions of hope, looks into the future and the past in order to construct a sense, however elusive, of transcendence” (49). Evidence to his vision I find in the stone water trough that Bell saw outside of an old house and is fascinated by this image of continuity:

*I dont know how long it had been there, A hundred years. Two hundred. You could*

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<sup>20</sup> The critic has mistakenly decided that Bell is 45 years old. This is impossible because he fought in WW-II and the narrative takes place in 1982. Moreover, on p. 90 Bell testifies that he has been married for 31 years. Bell is in his late fifties.

*see the chisel marks on the stone... Just chiseled out of the rock...That country had not had a time of peace much of any length at all that I knew of... But this man had set down with a hammer and a chisel and carved out a stone water trough to last ten thousand years... What was in that he had faith in?... there was some sort of promise in his heart (NCFOM, 308-9).*

We all wish we could make such a promise to our children.

Having profiled the three main characters in the novel, I can better understand Jay Ellis' pessimistic view of "home" and Levi Asher's despair of McCarthy's venomous fiction. The absence of an obvious hero in this realistic narrative highlights the stressful situation southwest of the American border. It is frightening that Satans like Chigurh – ruthless drug smugglers and money launderers with no compunction about killing anyone who gets in their way – exist. Realizing that money *can* and *does* corrupt people, even decent ones like Moss, is disturbing. And it is terrifying to encounter a sheriff who is debilitated and demoralized by his fear of the future. Outlaws hunt each other and law-abiding citizens, while the law is too weak and too slow to respond.

Are we really facing an escalation in deadly violence? It is possible that we live in a godless country ruled by Satan? I suggest to be careful in drawing hasty conclusions. McCarthy's novel is a warning written on the wall, and we should read the book, heed its warning, and find a way to better secure our country's border.

So, at the end of the day, I am still optimistic. "Nothing will solve itself overnight" said President Barack Obama. We all need to harness our strength and good intentions and fight together for a better and healthier America.

## Conclusion

The works of literature I selected for this dissertation, both novels and drama, are neither light reading nor entertaining to the average reader. Murder and entertainment seldom coexist in literature. The nature of the murderer is foreign to most readers; therefore, it piques one's curiosity, which is one more reason for special attention. I consider the genre of this literature "a crime novel or play" as opposed to a detective or mystery genre, because there is no need for a detective to investigate or decode the crime. The murderers are easily identified; their criminal acts have been carried out successfully – often with much forethought and detail. My focus has been to conduct a psychological study to highlight the impetus for the crime, rather than the result, which is always the unnatural death of the victim and the resultant punishment of the killer.

I have followed closely the role of religion and the question of God's existence in the lives of the accused. *Billy Budd* clearly illustrates societal values at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when any form of homicide was viewed as a sin, a crime against God deserving the most severe retribution. Therefore, death was the appropriate punishment, as dictated by the Bible. Billy is guilty despite having been provoked by Claggart, and his death is shrouded in religious mist. On the other end of the spectrum we find Chigurh, who introduces us to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. He is a cold-blooded murderer who gets away with his crimes, and believes that he is just carrying out his god's orders. We do not understand which god he is referring to, but it is clear that his philosophy does not comport with the Judeo-Christian paradigm.

I must admit that the beliefs I grew up with have been shaken recently: current research is analyzing the Bible for physical proof of the existence of God, which could resolve the

continuous conflict between religion and science, faith and modernism. Trying to decode the Old Testament is very presumptuous in my opinion, and I wonder if the authors were preoccupied with scientific theories when they developed characters like Chigurh and Papa. It is my understanding that science and religion should not be in conflict, but much current fiction suggests that science has the upper hand. Sam Shepard's character, Father Dewis, is an impotent messenger of religion.

In the middle of the twentieth century we find *An American Tragedy* and *All My Sons*. Both make clear accusations against a society that continuously waves the flag of the American Dream, but it is a dream that is almost only attainable to those privileged to belong to the white majority. Dreiser's character longs for that dream, but finds his attempts to live it thwarted by the values and rules – both written and unspoken - of the very society he emulates. Clyde is a member of a deprived minority looking up to a class that rejects him. Apparently, the American Dream does not allow him to cross the barrier between the “haves” and the “have nots”, and he does not have the tools to survive and persevere. In spite of his intrinsic motivation, his encounter with the big, alienating city paralyzes him: everything looks unreal, fantastic, Aladin-ish. Society, in which he desperately strives to belong, instead punishes and kills him. Hasn't the time come to restore the American Dream and really explain what it means and where its boundaries are? Is the sky the limit for all of us?

Joe Keller, however, did make it and did situate himself among the affluent class, but still discovers that his sons and society do not follow the American Dream to the letter: in order to fit in, society's expectations must come before family. So, how does one decode the dream?

My answer is personal and painful: dreams do not always materialize. Oftentimes I wake up and, although my dream is over, my dreaming never ends; it actually changes with the years

and age. Goals change, priorities come and go, and satisfaction receives other faces. While whatever I have achieved so far might be insufficient for me, it might be the dream for others. Yet, sometimes I find myself wanting more, much more. Often times, the dream of doing and achieving more – be it material or emotional – keeps us from enjoying what we already have. This insatiable appetite for something more sullies the dream and diminishes the ability to appreciate the wealth of happiness or the happiness of wealth. I find this internal conflict frustrating and confusing.

When those Americans who are denied what others take for granted get so frustrated with the disparity, some willingly forego society's rules to take it for themselves – through violence, crime, and even murder. With each passing decade, it seems that violence grows increasingly, and Sheriff Bell cannot and would not become inured to the true consequences and their impact on the victims. Many will say that the breakdown of the family and watering down of traditional Christian values contribute to the situation.

Yes! The American Dream is, and should be, a catalyst in the pursuit of happiness; however, we need to define what happiness is. If it is translated into material consumption, then society is guilty for the rising rate of deadly violence and sophisticated crime. On the other hand, if Mammon is translated into better education, then we might end up with a recipe for a healthier society.

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