



The representation of the wilderness in twentieth-century American literature: a case study of Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* (1925)

تمثيل البرية في الأدب الأمريكي في القرن العشرين: دراسة حالة عن «مأساة أمريكية»
لثيودور درايزر (1925)

La représentation de la nature sauvage dans la littérature américaine du vingtième siècle: une étude de cas de «*Une tragédie américaine*» de Theodore Dreiser (1925)

Dr. Amina Bezzazi

Department of English, Faculty of Foreign Languages, University of
Algiers 2, Algeria

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ملخص

لقد احتلت البرية منذ فترة طويلة مكانة رمزية بارزة في الثقافة والتاريخ والأدب الأمريكي. يحاول هذا البحث دراسة كيفية تمثيل هذه الركيزة في الخيال الأمريكي في القرن العشرين، بعد عقود من الإغلاق الافتراضي للحدود الغربية. دراسة الحالة هنا هي رواية ثيودور درايزر (1925) «مأساة أمريكية»، وهي رواية مطولة تصور بدقة وضع البرية في أمريكا الحديثة. السؤال الأساسي يتعلق بما إذا كانت الأهمية التي اكتسبتها البرية عبر القرون في العقول والحياة الأمريكية قد تلاشت أم لم تتلاش، خاصة في عالم حديث تغلب عليه النزعة المادية. يعتبر كل من النهج التاريخي للعمل والقراءة التحليلية النفسية له ذات صلة، حيث سيتم الإشارة إلى التغيرات التاريخية الكبرى في المشهد الأمريكي، وسيتم التركيز بشكل خاص على العلاقة المتبادلة بين الشخصية الرئيسية للرواية والبيئة المحيطة بها، التي تعمل كمرآة تعكس أعمق رغبات ونوايا الشخصية الرئيسية. يطرح هذا البحث رؤية أن المؤلف يلقي الضوء على ثلاث تمثيلات رئيسية للبرية، وهي تصويرها كسلطة، وبيئة قاتلة، وأخيرًا كمنطقة مقفرة أو مكان ميت، كما يوضح دوافع الكاتب وراء مثل هذه التمثيلات.

الكلمات الدالة: الحداثة؛ البرية؛ الأدب الأمريكي؛ القرن العشرين.

Abstract

The wilderness has long held a highly symbolic place in American culture, history, and literature. This paper seeks to examine how this pillar is represented in twentieth-century American fiction, decades after the virtual closure of the Western Frontier. The case study here is Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* (1925), a lengthy novel that meticulously depicts the state of the wilderness in

modern America. The core question here is whether the prominence that the wilderness had acquired over the centuries in the American minds and life has faded, mainly in a predominantly materialistic modern world. Both a historical approach to the work and a psychoanalytical reading of it are relevant, since reference will be made to the major historical changes in the American scenery, and particular focus will be put on the interplay between the novel's major character and his surrounding environment, which operates as a projection of the former's deepest desires and intentions. The present paper puts forward the argument that the author casts light on three major representations of the wilderness, namely its depiction as an authority, as a fatal environment, and finally, as a desolate area or a dead space. It also explains the writer's motives behind such representations.

Keywords: modernism; wilderness; American literature; twentieth-century.

Résumé

La nature sauvage occupe depuis longtemps une place hautement symbolique dans la culture, l'histoire et la littérature américaines. Cet article vise à examiner comment ce pilier est représenté dans la fiction américaine du XXe siècle, des décennies après la fermeture virtuelle de la frontière de l'Ouest. L'étude de cas ici est *An American Tragedy* (1925) de Theodore Dreiser, un long roman décrivant minutieusement l'état de la nature vierge dans l'Amérique moderne. La question centrale ici est de savoir si l'importance que la nature sauvage avait acquise au fil des siècles dans l'esprit et la vie des Américains s'est estompée, principalement dans un monde moderne dominé par la matérialité. Une approche historique de l'œuvre et une lecture psychanalytique sont pertinentes car des références seront faites aux changements historiques majeurs du paysage américain et un accent particulier sera mis sur l'interrelation entre le personnage principal du roman et son environnement, qui agit comme un miroir projetant ses désirs et intentions les plus profonds. Cet article met en avant le fait que l'auteur met en lumière trois représentations majeures de la nature sauvage, à savoir sa représentation comme autorité, comme environnement fatal et enfin comme espace désolé ou espace mort. Cela explique également les motivations de l'écrivain derrière de telles représentations.

Mots-clés: modernisme; nature sauvage; littérature américaine; XXe siècle.

Introduction

The present paper deals with the representation of the wilderness in *An American Tragedy* (1925) by Theodore Dreiser (1871-1945). What is meant by "wilderness" is undeveloped land in its virgin state. Although *An American Tragedy* has long been associated with what is labelled metropolitan literature, it remains primarily a novel of the Midwest, with almost half of



it set in the prairie. What is of particular interest is the author's depiction of the end of virgin land, mainly through its aspects of a polluted land and as a concept, in an era of consumption marked by the death of the mythical old Frontier.

The questions that triggered this research revolve around the place of the wild in modern America dominated by financial greed. It would be interesting, indeed, to investigate how this primitive natural world is represented in its ultimate struggle for survival after the virtual closure of the western frontier. It would equally be relevant to examine the influence of this world on the novel's key character, Clyde Griffiths.

Dreiser describes in detail the gradual deterioration of the Wild. The natural order of the degradation of virgin land till its complete disappearance, as depicted in the novel, corresponds to the different stages of the degradation of virgin land in the actual historical context of America. When dealing with the degradation of virgin land from a pure place to a mere concept, it is important to make reference to American history since the element of nature is closely linked to the historical background. Roland Barthes stipulates that instead of "placing Nature at the bottom of history," we must "establish Nature itself as historical" (Barthes, *Mythologies*, in Mazel, 1999, p. xi.) David Mazel states as well that "the environment *has* a history, that it is not simply 'out there' waiting to be either destroyed or preserved but rather that it brings considerable historical and ideological baggage to any discussion about it" (Mazel, 1999, p. xxiii.) That is to say, the wilderness is not reduced to a simple piece of land; it is deeply rooted in history and, thus, it has historical as well as ideological implications such as the American Frontier (West), which – together with the Biblical concept of Manifest Destiny– formed the Myth of the Frontier that had long underpinned the westward expansion with both its advantages and drawbacks. In that sense, this theme can be examined through the lens of Historicism: "a view of literature which sees it primarily as a series of works arranged in a chronological order and as integral parts of the historical process" (Wellek and Warren, 1985, p.39.) Therefore, *An American Tragedy* can be regarded as an 'integral' part of the American historical process since it is primarily the reaction of its author to specific *historical events* in America, such as the drastic social and economic changes that occurred at the beginning of the twentieth-century, namely the decline of spirituality and moral values, as well as the rapid growth of individualism and materialism. The novel, in turn, reflects these various changes in



American history as addressed by Dreiser, including the state of nature in the twentieth-century.

Adding to the historical approach relied upon in this paper, a psychoanalytical reading of the author's depiction of the wild in relation to his protagonist would be necessary. This reading is primarily based on Freudian thinking, which stipulates that the naturalist environment is the mirror of the character's and the author's psyche, as well as Mary Lawlor's theory in *Recalling the Wild*, claiming that "human figures would bear the traces of historical and social processes as embodied in such settings" (Lawlor, 2000, p.59.). There is, thus, a reciprocal relationship and influence between characters and the natural landscapes surrounding them. Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* abounds in instances of the wild as the foe of the major character.

The first section of this paper deals with one major representation of the wilderness as an authority, a new religion or law in a world where they are almost inexistent. The second section is devoted to another major representation of primitive virgin land as an evil, dark, Darwinian environment, luring and then defeating the weak individual. The third section deals with the end or the symbolic death of virgin land in a highly materialistic twentieth-century context. This is shown in the fact that virgin land is polluted, superseded by progress, and transformed into a concept, a mere idea in the minds of consumerist people for whom the wild is already absent. The paper's discussion section, finally, concludes that Theodore Dreiser does not depict the loss of primitive land with the nostalgia of the twentieth-century modernists but rather showcases, with the ambivalence he is known for, its dissolution into the modern milieu as a logical outcome of the realities of the time.

1. The wilderness as an authority

The Wilderness, as stated by David Mazel and Roland Barthes earlier, is part of History; in America, it is embodied in the myth of the American Wilderness. However, its seventeenth-century significance and its twentieth-century reduction, as represented in *An American Tragedy*, contrast sharply.

Indeed, this vast virgin landscape was considered a haven for the Pilgrim Fathers, who saw in the environmental difficulties they faced a divine test that reinforced their status as God's elect. Nevertheless, with the continuous changes in American economic, political, and socio-cultural realities, this

Promised Land has gradually lost its sacred halo over time. Primitive virgin land takes on different aspects in *An American Tragedy*. The major one is its representation as a new religion in a secular world, or even a law, a sort of symbolic authority watchful of the individual's evil and ill-intentioned actions. There are many instances where Dreiser clearly gives a religious as well as a legal connotation to primitive virgin land in a godless and lawless world. It is among the "chapel of the aisled trees" (Dreiser, 1925, p.484) that Clyde, Bertine and Sondra 'cantered' merrily. But it is also among the 'solemn aisles' of trees that the law officer, Mr. Kraut, and Clyde walked, after the latter's arrest, like "worshippers along the nave of a cathedral." (Dreiser, 1925, p.600)

This shows the religious authority Dreiser attributes to the wilderness because, even if it is the meeting place of Clyde and the materialist Sondra Finchley with whom he had an affair, it is also the place in which he was trapped and caught by the law agents after Roberta's death. The word 'worshippers' indicates that the wilderness could be the new true divinity in an era where God had been substituted for money. In a way, Clyde's capture, particularly among these aisles of pillared trees, shows that some sort of justice had been made for Roberta's murder (though unintentional), and his walk through the nave of this natural cathedral is nothing but his walk to the death room to receive his sentence for his wrong deed and evil plans. Thus, the American Wilderness seems to take on a positive aspect in the sense that it is divine even if Dreiser leans on Clyde's side, the latter being Dreiser's own reflection of himself in his youth.

1.1 Primitive land as a mirror of the character's psyche

The spiritual connotation that the wilderness assumes can be seen in its representation as the mirror of the main character's psyche. Each time Clyde thinks of a murder plan, the landscape surrounding him takes on a dark aspect. Despite the fact that "geographical settings were not intended to function as images of character psychology or as vehicles of inspiration" (Lawlor, 2000, p.59), Dreiser seems to say quite the opposite. In fact, the wild area surrounding Clyde is the actual mirror of his psyche, and thus, his gloomy thoughts are projected upon the environment making it a dark place, protesting against his actions and disagreeing with his plans.

For example, the nightmare he had after having elaborated a plan to kill Roberta was full of strange and dangerous creatures that attacked him –as if in protest against his murder ideas– in gloomy woods with no exit at the



end, and thus, blocking his way inside. Symbolically, here, Clyde's devilish plan is projected upon the woods, giving them the gloomy and the dark aspect of a prison; in other words, his plan would lead him nowhere but to his death. This particular nightmare, occurring right after the idea of the murder plan, reflects also Freud's definition of the *unconscious* as a 'hidden part' which contains a sort of 'determining reality' and whose manifestation can be seen in 'symbolic ways in dreaming.' Put otherwise, Clyde's 'repressed' desire to get rid of Roberta and his fear of failure are reflected in his nightmare, which is exactly this *unconscious* determining reality since he is later trapped in the woods and caught by the police officer. In a way, his premonitory nightmare, and more precisely these dark woods, shows him the consequences of such gloomy plans: to be really imprisoned in a dark natural region, which, in its turn, reflects his dark ideas. But in this particular instance, the projection of the character's ill-intentioned thoughts onto his surrounding environment happens at the unconscious level of the character's mind.

Another instance is the description of the very remote and primitive virgin region of Big Bittern. Indeed, this place is a 'gloomy' and 'rotten' landscape full of dark pines, sentries-like, which are 'watchful giants', almost 'ogres', with arms 'menacingly' stretched out. Even birds like the wier-wier, the wood-pecker and the blue-jay utter 'metallic' cries of 'protest', 'condemnation' and 'warning' from the top of some 'dead' trees. The image of virgin Nature given here, which is highly negative and pessimistic, is typical of the Naturalists' style. The 'negativity' and darkness of the wild is rendered here through stylistic tools and literary devices: there is an excessive use of adverbs and adjectives, as well as the use of metaphors and personifications. 'Gloomy', 'rotten' and 'dead' are adjectives suggesting the darkness of the wilderness in which a murder is going to be planned. The personification of the tall trees as 'ogres', 'sentries' and 'giants' adds to this element of obscurity in Big Bittern associated with Roberta's coming murder and emphasises the previously mentioned image of the wilderness standing for a lawful authority, whose agents are 'watchful' of what Clyde does, with 'arms' stretched out in a threatening way. Even birds' cries are reactions to Clyde's murder plan and address him as if to firmly denounce his evil intentions. In sum, the description of the darkness of Big Bittern reflects Clyde's gloomy thoughts of killing Roberta and projects his dark ideas.



It is important to note here that the relation between the character and his surrounding natural environment is reciprocal. Indeed, there is an interplay of influence between the two. Just as the character's thoughts are projected onto his surrounding environment, the latter's overall shape and aspect are often a source of inspiration for the former, determining thus most of his actions. Big Bittern, for example, which is the mirror of Clyde's sombre thoughts, is at the very origin of his murder plans, a source of inspiration that urged him to act. Mary Lawlor hints at this environmental influence on the character in naturalist writings when saying that "human figures would bear the traces of historical and social processes as embodied in such settings" (Lawlor, 2000, p.59) In other words, the character (and his psyche, including his ideas and intentions) mirrors his surrounding environment's aspect which is projected upon him.

1.2 The wilderness as law and order

All the images featuring the darkness of the wilderness stress the religious connotation Dreiser gives to it in the sense that the latter disagrees with Clyde's devilish plans and often hints at his death. In fact, even if Big Bittern first inspired Clyde to kill Roberta, it clearly protests against his ill-intentioned wedding trip with her, and the fact that it seemed to offer him a place arranged specially for the murder is part of the lure of the wilderness seeking to defeat the weak, and in this case, the sinful, individual. In other words, through such a portrayal of the wilderness as a religious authority, Dreiser seems to show that, in materialistic and godless 1920s America, primitive virgin land can restore some kind of order and that the law of Nature can fight the chaos characterising the Roaring Twenties. Nonetheless, the notion of the sacredness of virgin land is not as much stressed as its Darwinian aspect because, even if Dreiser suggests that in some cases it may stand for a moralising authority, his focus is rather on stressing the uselessness of religion itself in modern America.

2. The wilderness as a fatal environment

Dreiser adds to the wilderness the element of determinism, making it a fatal environment leading directly to man's inevitable failure. This is a characteristic feature of naturalist literature portraying Man as the victim of harsh and pitiless forces far beyond his control, among which are environmental forces. The author, thus, represents primitive virgin land as an evil place, a negative Darwinian environment luring and mercilessly conspiring against the individual –the weakest– whose fate is to end



tragically. It is important to note that *The Fatal Environment* is originally the title of Walt Whitman's poem and later used by Richard Slotkin to entitle his own book, *The Fatal Environment*.

2.1 The lure of the wild

Inspiration Point, a trackless forest to the West, is an interesting example of the luring and defeating effect of the Wilderness:

'The next morning, true to her promise, there was the canter to Inspiration Point and (...) Bertine and Sondra (...) riding briskly on before for the most part, then racing back to where he was. Or Sondra halloing gaily for him to come on (...). And Clyde thrilling, and yet brooding too-by turns- occasionally- and in spite of himself drifting back to the thought that the item in the paper had inspired- and yet fighting it- trying to shut it out entirely.' (Dreiser, 1925, p.484)

The mere fact that Inspiration Point is a natural region inspiring murder in Clyde clearly illustrates a radical shift from the Romantics' idealistic view of Nature to the Naturalists' more pessimistic view of it. The wilderness inspires murder plans in Clyde, especially when he is with the rich Sondra Finchley, whose wonderful projects for the future make, in his mind, the riddance of Roberta inevitable. Nonetheless, Dreiser makes it clear that Clyde's murder plans triggered by the item on the newspaper are 'unconscious'; he could not help it even if he tried so hard to fight it, which is closely linked to the notion of environmental determinism since the location and the whole geography of Inspiration Point and Big Bittern ultimately convince Clyde of the possibility of killing Roberta, after he had read the newspaper item.

However, the novel's most striking example of the lure of the wilderness is the description of Big Bittern. Indeed, this remote, primitive natural region seems at first to be on Clyde's side, laying before him enticing plans for his wonderful future and facilitating the fatal trip to the lakes with Roberta. However, the comfort and safety of the tall, green pines with their 'widespread arms' are far from symbolising Mother Nature's warm and tender embrace. They rather stand for a poisonous gift, a spider's web in which Clyde would be entangled and trapped. Moreover, the 'fascinating' depths of the 'magnetic' and 'arranged' pool were 'treacherous'. They 'gripped' Clyde and he was 'lured', 'pulled', and 'drifting'. In other words, he could do nothing but let himself go adrift and follow what this magnetic



wilderness suggested because he was totally under its control. In fact, the water image, including the 'pool' and the 'drifting' images, is recurrent in Dreiser's novels. The 'glittering lake' is the 'pool of death' (Phillips, in Pizer, 1981, p.115) for Clyde, who drifts powerlessly towards the death room.

2.2 The wild as a dominant force

This typically naturalistic Darwinian portrayal shows the fatal aspect of the wilderness in relation to the individual, the weakest, and the unfit, who helplessly struggles to survive. The aforementioned examples illustrate the dominating force of primitive nature's 'comfortable', 'warm' and friendly but luring 'hands', the 'fascinating' and yet 'insidious' and even 'mocking' beauty of its spots, as well as the betraying retreat of these very hands of fate that first encouraged and then left Clyde to face his failure and defeat by himself. That is to say, the glorious beauty of Big Bittern is controversial because it deceives Clyde by making him believe it is a place that would fit his plans best, and even by suggesting a quiet and serene death into which Roberta might 'joyfully and gratefully sink.' (Dreiser, 1925, p.527) However, right after Clyde felt reassured at this suggestion of murder, his courage, first enhanced by these natural hands, left him with the retreat of the latter.

This image is further stressed by Clyde's nightmare, which was premonitory of his later visit to Big Bittern, in which a very promising path through dark woods first guided him, before gradually becoming narrower until it totally disappeared, leaving him thus to face the wild creatures that attacked him.

However, even if the aim of Dreiser here in portraying the wilderness as a watchful natural church –thus a place endowed with a religious power– seems at first glance to be to punish Clyde for his mischievous and even sinful acts, the writer's primary aim, as is the case with most Naturalists, is to defend his main character as the victim of forces beyond his control because he writes reality from the point of view of the have-nots. The aspect of primitive virgin land as a 'fatal', Darwinian environment thus counteracts the previous aspect of wilderness that might consider Clyde as a naturally-born criminal, and creates a sort of balance in the novel by alleviating the burden of Clyde's responsibility for Roberta's murder and justifying it partly with environmental and social determinism, that is, the interference of fate. Put otherwise, Dreiser attributes Clyde's criminal and murderous tendencies mostly to the fatal effect of the Wilderness, which constitutes a vortex of evil forces luring him, conspiring against him, and finally, defeating him.



3. The end of the wilderness

The last representation of virgin land stands for the final stage of its degradation and is closely linked to the end of the original American Dream with the shift of values from spiritual to material. If the New Continent's early inhabitants' tamed virgin land for the sake of survival, twentieth-century Man's arrangement of the wild was motivated by his greed. As previously mentioned, Dreiser does not totally object to the transformation of the landscape because of his ambivalence towards consumerism, the poverty and the misery he lived in, and the fact that he was a progressive.

It is, however, clear that the author depicts the deteriorated aspect of virgin land with a critique of the Capitalist system –and modernity in general– which is at the source of nature's destruction. Marshall Berman says that “to be modern is to find ourselves in an environment (...) that threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are.” (Berman, 1999, p.15) Here, modernity's effects are not limited to our environment but take a broader existentialist dimension in that they threaten our *being*.

3.1 The wilderness as a filthy milieu

The image of a polluted virgin land can clearly be found in *An American Tragedy*. The author links this pollution to the expansion of railroads as one of its major causes by giving the image of ‘the railroad in the landscape,’ an image that R. W. Emerson noted with sadness in his journal (1842) when he said, “I hear the whistle of the locomotive in the woods.” (Emerson, in Ruland and Bradbury, 1991, p.141) Actually, Emerson here mourns the end of virgin land with the intrusion of technology, which was, for him and most of his contemporaries, the death of a divine element. Even if the railroad served as a link between the wilderness and civilisation, it accelerated the process of land deterioration. Dreiser here speaks about the *establishment* of railroad companies on virgin lands. It is thus a logical (and ecological) consequence to see the American landscape suffer from pollution. Richard Slotkin says that “the railroads that bound the nation together and stimulated the forces of industry were also the very institutions that had precipitated the depression. They had managed the business of capitalization, subcontracting, and management in a manner at once so dishonest and so inept that they had ‘discredited’ themselves both literally and figuratively (...).” (Slotkin, 1998, p.6) Slotkin expresses Americans' disillusionment as to their expectations from



the railroads, which seemed to promise a prosperous social and economic future.

The river, as an element of the wilderness, seems also to be one of the railroad's victims. In *An American Tragedy*, the river facing the Griffiths' factory and into which factory wastes are thrown is a good example. What makes the pollution of the river easier is its proximity to factories and the presence of the railroad, by which all products are transported from these factories to the 'vessels' lined up along the river. The latter becomes, thus, a rotten space, a rubbish dump where wastes of all sorts are discarded. It is reduced to an insignificant filthy natural element.

3.2 Progress and the death of the wild

Actually, the end of the wilderness is found not only in its polluted state but also in the fact that landscape is so flagrantly superseded by progress and its technological tools that, in twentieth-century city people's minds, it is reduced to a concept. An important illustration in the novel is the annual inter-city automobile floral parade, during which the rich of Lycurgus represent seasons and flowers, under the admiring gaze of Clyde. The terms 'automobile' and 'floral' are antipodal and irreconcilable even if Dreiser seems to find a possible way, through his description of this parade, to inter-relate them.

With his usual ambivalence, Dreiser relates the death of the wild to the end of hope for a better future, and thus, the end of the original American Dream. In *An American Tragedy*, in the remote lakes region, trees –standing for the west, or the untouched frontier– which could be 'sheltering depths' as well as a real 'safety' for Clyde, cannot hide him simply because they have no place in this material world. Symbolically, it is when dusk was gradually being replaced by darkness in the west –standing for the frontier– that Clyde, in his cell, realises the impossibility of his 'wonderful' dream, a dream of getting rid of poverty and living happily by ascending the social scale. This shows the end of the original American Dream with the end of virgin land, as well as the fake aspect of the modern American Dream based on material conditions. Furthermore, the 'smear of livid red still visible through the trees to the west' is a direct reference to the death of the wilderness as a place of regeneration, where one can start his life anew and realise his dreams of living better.



4. Discussion

The answer to the paper's research question can actually be found in the author's description of Big Bittern. The latter epitomises Dreiser's views of the modern natural milieu and embodies his vision as to its status in money-centred America. Big Bittern is, indeed, the microcosm of the larger more imposing universe in motion, where human beings are 'specks of dust'.

First, Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* features the wild, through the description of the dark natural region of Big Bittern, as the foe of the major character. When Clyde sees this obscure and remote region for the first time, the idea of murdering Roberta Alden, the factory girl he dates, becomes more acute since the place seems to fit his plans perfectly. Once he elaborates these murder plans, the gloomy aspect of the lakes region is further emphasised in Dreiser's portrayal of Big Bittern, mainly in Clyde's nightmare where he is trapped in a 'hostile' natural region. The latter point is related to Sigmund Freud's definition of the *unconscious* as "an area of activity which is hidden from us in our everyday lives but which contains a kind of determining reality" (Webster, 1996, p.87.) as well as "a region in which we hide or repress our deepest desires and fears that can only manifest itself through symbolic ways in dreaming (...)" (Webster, 1996, *ibid.*) That is to say that Clyde's repressed will to kill Roberta is reflected in his nightmare, which happens to be the reality since he is later literally trapped by the police officer in the woods, in that Darwinian Wilderness which lures him as to the success of the murder plans before it leaves him to face his fate on his own.

Adding to that, Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* depicts the region of Big Bittern as a natural cemetery epitomising the end of the Wild. For Dreiser, it is a landscape of despair where regeneration and hope for the future are impossible, an arid area suggesting death and leading to both Roberta's and Clyde's death.

But if Dreiser's progressive view of the wild seems to legitimate its taming to fit twentieth-century progressive needs (regardless of the inevitably destructive consequences), Mary Lawlor gives another reason for such a description of naturalist landscapes. She says that such gloomy descriptions are the result of the writer's disenchantment with these settings. This disenchantment partly "came as an effect of evolutionist thinking that saw history as a set of fiercely material processes, the conditions of which were inevitable. Thus, romantic geography was converted to naturalist environment, and the largeness of the west was reconstituted as a potentially



claustrophobic, totally socialized zone” (Lawlor, 2000, p.58). In other words, Dreiser’s evolutionist tendency might constitute a cause for his representation of the Big Bittern region in such a pessimistic way and portraying it as a Darwinian rotten place.

Such an attitude on the part of Dreiser also reflects his early awareness of the deep changes fracturing American society and creating a gap in American culture. Indeed, in *An American Tragedy*, the writer actually gives a nihilistic vision of primitive virgin land in the twentieth-century American context. From his descriptions of the greedy advent of industrialisation on open fields and prairies, as well as his major characters’ lack of interest in this landscape, one can easily deduce that the death of the wild is inevitable both in the historical context and in the minds of twentieth-century American people.

Conclusion

All in all, the representation of the wilderness in Dreiser’s *An American Tragedy* reflects the dominant changes occurring in the twentieth-century context, characterised by a dramatic shift of the once solid socio-cultural, economic, political and religious values, and based on a fast-growing progress_ mainly technological_ the consequences of which were fatal for primitive virgin land. The western Frontier, as praised by Frederick Jackson Turner and Henry Nash Smith, and which fuelled the imagination of most writers in American literature due to its unconquered mysterious feature and its mythological dimension, had officially lost its significance with its transformation in the real historical context. Dreiser’s novel, featuring the deterioration of the wild and its absence in twentieth-century America, stresses a major cultural shift caused by drastic historical changes occurring in the American scene: the Promised Land is in the East.

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