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Placed Between:

Roberta Alden's Inevitable Death in *An American Tragedy*

Narumi Yoshino

"If we want to know how nineteenth-century couples limited reproduction, we learn almost nothing by turning to contemporary fiction" (Brodie 1). Janet Farrell Brodie's *Contraception and Abortion in Nineteenth-Century America* begins its vast historical research with this one phrase. She then refers to several "contemporary" novels, including Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*: "Readers may wonder yet have to remain ignorant about how Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* avoided pregnancy" (1). In the chapter that follows, Brodie shifts her focus from the literary fictions to historical materials including a private diary of Mary Pierce Poor, an upper-middle class woman of the mid-nineteenth century. By deciphering the mysterious signs marked at the edge of each page as well as reading its contents, Brodie explores how Mary, all through her reproductive age, supposedly attempted to avoid unwanted. What the present paper concerns here at the threshold of the discussion, however, is not the practical means and ways that Brodie investigates in her historical research. It is rather, the historian's reference to the literary sources at the very beginning of the book, among which she raises a simple yet striking question that literary critics probably have never considered seriously so far: how could Dreiser's *Carrie Meeber* remain childless throughout the whole story?

As Brodie states, Dreiser never gave any specific reason for his first heroine's convenient sterility. This does not mean,

however, that he was unaware of Carrie's seemingly arranged biological condition, which extricated her from possible burdens she might have suffered from. While *Sister Carrie* avoids facing the subject, his second novel *Jennie Gerhardt* deals with a heroine who undergoes a series of tragedies caused by her untimely pregnancy out of wedlock set at the beginning of the story. Dreiser's concern with a poor young woman's uncontrollable fertility eventually leads him to his masterpiece work, *An American Tragedy*, where the sweetheart's unwanted pregnancy results in the male protagonist's death penalty at the end of the story. If Dreiser remains silent as to his first heroine's convenient sterility, no reader would deny his devoted attention to the woman's reproductive issue thus reflected in his plot settings in the other two novels.

Compared to the character Jennie, who has sufficiently caught critics' attention, her follower Roberta Alden has never been treated fairly. This is partly due to the fact that *An American Tragedy* originally focuses on Clyde Griffiths the protagonist, whose entire life before and after the crime is the main plot to be considered. With his murder scene placed in the middle of the story, Roberta only appears in the latter part of the first half; by the time when the reader finishes the whole story, she is a bygone figure, apt to be forgotten as Clyde's death overshadows hers. Thus, critics have often commented that Dreiser's depiction of Roberta Alden lacks power and authenticity. Ellen Moers, for example, writes: "Roberta's cries of entreaty and despair move us only indirectly in the novel... Dreiser's deepest, indeed, single-minded concern in the novel is with murderer, not victim" (213).¹

Among recent critics, perhaps Shelley Fisher Fishkin is marked as the one to focus on Roberta, whose "ignored" figure she assesses through Dreiser's gender perspective (3).

Fishkin's analysis is based on Roberta's actual model, Billy, whose character she reinterprets through the contemporary newspaper articles and the trial transcripts in attempt to compare with Dreiser's Roberta. She then criticizes that "[Roberta's] attitude toward sex may be more complex than those which the reporters ascribed to Billy Brown in the newspapers, but ultimately she is characterized as passive, reactive, and weak" (10). Fishkin's discussion, though persuasive to some extent, needs reexamination here; especially, when we note the topic Dreiser treated in his novel was considerably a very delicate one then, so far as Roberta's unwanted pregnancy was concerned. Writing during the period when abortion was strictly prohibited, Dreiser possibly needed to make Roberta the way she turns out to be; by doing so, her unwanted pregnancy and subsequent failure in getting an abortion seem plausible and credible, as well as appealing to the reader. What little he could do to make up for the concession is, supposedly, to suggest that there were options and loopholes in getting an abortion, which his "weak" and "passive" heroine could not have the skill to turn to. In *An American Tragedy*, Dreiser presents a variety of women figures, and each of them contributes to constructing a wide-range of social stratification through which Clyde goes to and fro. On the surface, the tension between the poor and the rich, represented by Clyde's wavering between Roberta Alden the factory girl and Sondra Finchley the society belle, of course, stands out. A close reading of the text will reveal, however, that Dreiser presents far more complicated classification of the women lineup, especially when he deals with the Roberta side. Placing Roberta among her friends and co-workers gives us an opportunity to see how Dreiser mercilessly isolates her figure from the group or class she originally belongs to. And this isolation

of Roberta, in my opinion, is a very important part of the story since it serves to make the heroine's death inevitable and probable in the entire plot formation.

The present discussion will try to center on the limited part of the story where Dreiser's descriptions of Roberta is concerned. We will first begin by examining her work at the Griffiths Collar and Shirt Company, where her status as a wage-earner obscures the boundary between the sheltered home and the hazardous public, leading her to an isolated being in the city. Then, the topic will be extended to her encounter with Clyde, which enhances the degree of her isolation as she faces the prospect of coming motherhood. Because her failure in finding an abortionist is closely related to her tragedy, Dreiser's treatment of the abortion issue should be unavoidable. So far critics have largely overlooked her abortion-related episodes. Yet if we note several words and bits of information in the text, it will be clear that his treatment of abortion tells so much about Roberta's indeterminable position in the society. Demonstrating Roberta's in-between status in each occasion, hopefully this paper will reevaluate Dreiser's devotion to the victim side of the story, which constitutes an indispensable part of his masterpiece.

The reader's first encounter of Roberta Alden in the text is significant, as she is introduced as "the daughter of Titus Alden, a farmer" (250). Noteworthy is the fact that Roberta's status is symbolically marked as the father's possession, which is to be handed down to a man replacing the father. Roberta herself seems to be aware of this when she dreams: "her beauty or charm might some day and ere long smite bewitchingly and so irresistibly the soul of a given man or men" (251). Despite her emotional attachment to the family,

still, her financial independence is much emphasized as she makes a remittance to help the parents who "[appear] to need her" (252). Her financial superiority over the parents serves as firm evidence that she is, after all, an independent wage-earning woman void of the social status neither as a daughter nor a wife safely installed within the domestic sphere. Emotionally attached to the family but practically independent from it, Roberta from the beginning exposes her intermediate position between the inside and outside of her natal home of the Aldens. Because of her girlish dream of becoming someone's love, her pursuit in business career fails to be a serious one; and yet because of her economic need, she must succumb to the status of someone's labor. In other words, her dream actually contradicts with the reality she faces, and it is exactly this gap between her dream and reality that Dreiser, first of all, puts her in. Since she neither pursues her profession seriously nor marries right after leaving home, Roberta is suspended in the middle, only yearning for "something better" without any clear vision before her (251). Thus, "immediately after breakfast," Roberta joins "a long procession" so as to be incorporated into the factory's work force. And after the day's work she joins again the crowd "re-forming at the mills" and "[returns] as it had come" (255).

Unlike Clyde whose situation at his uncle's factory is the reminder of his ambivalent status caught between the poor and the rich, for Roberta and other factory girls, this working environment outside their home generates a new world void of the class distinction in the society in general. Here, native American girls of lower middle-class share the work with immigrant girls, whose social rank the former despises as "ignorant, low, immoral, un-American" (257). And yet, they are counted as the same so far as their labor value is concerned.

As the head of the stamping department, Clyde soon finds Roberta clearly distinguished from those other workers: "She was, as he decided on sight, more intelligent and pleasing" (247). Yet at the same time, he notices her flexibility in socializing with several foreign girls, when he overhears their trifle conversation at a lunch break. There, a decisive scene takes place, as a Polish co-worker, Mary, brags a beaded bag she received from a man who expects sexual reward from her. She asks girls around her including Roberta: "what shall I do with heem? Keep heem an' go with heem to be his sweetheart or give heem back? I like heem pretty much, that bag, you bet" (259). This foolish waver of Mary's, suggesting her sexuality equated with the man's offer of "so swell [a] bag," serves as an important point for Roberta, as well as for Clyde who watches her reaction. Seeing Roberta laugh at one of the girls' answer to Mary — "I take [the bag] and him too, you bet" — Clyde interprets her laughter as a sign that Roberta is not as conservative as he thought she might: "he felt that she was not nearly narrow as he had feared" (260). Although Clyde is originally aware of the invisible line between Roberta and immigrant workers, the cohabitation of these two different kinds obscures the distinction, allowing Clyde's convenient interpretation that Roberta, too, could "go with heem to be his sweetheart" if the situation would permit them.

But of course, Roberta's nature is actually far too different from that of the foreign-family girls Dreiser surrounds her with. While she manages to get along with those sexually loose girls at work, she gets easily "shocked" to see factory men's "unlicensed contacts" with girls in the street (255). Roberta knows well that the appropriate place for her is not in the factory room, but in her boarding room at the Newtons, who temporarily substitutes for her family. In many ways, the

Newtons function as her protective family. There, she has George and Mary Newton as the parental figures, and Mary's sister, Grace Marr, as a watchful sister-like friend who "count[s] on [Roberta] to provide a cheer and companionship" (254). Roberta is well aware of the situation, when she tells Clyde that Grace "feels . . . as though I were a part of the family". Noteworthy is the Newtons' strict and narrow vision which highly values "[accommodating] yourself to the world and customs of the better sort of Christian factory employees" (255). This moral policing, though tight and strict, nevertheless, works as a guarded barrier for a Roberta-like factory girl, since, as Laura Hapke remarks, "[by] rejecting the protection of the home," the turn of the century female laborers were likely to "[expose] themselves to advances from coworkers and employers" (9).

As to the working girls' being at moral risk, we may also refer to Margaret Sanger's *Happiness in Marriage* published only a year after *An American Tragedy*, which reads like a list of cautions for Roberta-like young premarital women. Illustrating a dangerous type of men as a "sex pirate . . . who thinks a girl is merely a substitute for the prostitute whose price he cannot pay," Sanger warns: "Girls in sheltered homes, closely chaperoned, may not frequently meet men of this type. But girls in business pursuits who work in stores, shops and factories, are thrown constantly in contact with such men" (57). Her warning serves as a reminder that Roberta's involvement with Clyde inevitably brings about separation from the Newtons' pseudo-family protection. Because the Newtons is nothing but her "temporary" family, the protection that they can provide for Roberta is naturally limited. This is a marked contrast with the case of the Finchleys, who, in the face of Clyde's approach to Sondra, can prevent the potential dangers

by "cautioning [their] daughter under no circumstances to become too friendly" to Clyde (437). The difference between those "in sheltered homes" and those working in "shops and factories" is thus apparent in *An American Tragedy*, where Dreiser separates Roberta from the double enclosures of the family protection, first, by the Aldens, second, by the Newtons.

One might say that even though her female friendship with Grace Marr terminates, Roberta still has other girls to turn to, in her work place at the factory. In fact, her working environment at the factory resembles to a female homo-social world, where twenty-five girls are "doing their best to cope with a constant stream of unstitched collar bundles" (236). However, Clyde as the head of the department makes a great difference. If the Newtons is the place to nurture female sisterhood among the factory girls, the stamping department where Roberta belongs is the place to provoke rivalry among them, who are "prone to fix on" Clyde, "the only male present" (244). After Roberta's refusal to invite him in her newly established room at the Gilpins, Clyde chooses to have a distant attitude toward her by showing interests in other girls. As she sees Clyde's flirtation, the co-workers immediately change into the rivals for whom she feels jealousy: "Oh, how bitter! Oh, how cruel!" (307). The inconsistency that she exposes at this scene is clear. Mentally, Roberta believes herself to be distinguished from those girls whom she "utterly . . . [despises]" (307). In reality, however, what she feels and hopes, and eventually does for Clyde, is exactly the same as what they might have done for him. Already detached from Grace, a nun who is safely installed within the convent-like home, and not yet ready to submit herself to the semi-brothel world consisting of her co-workers, Roberta, here again, is at a loss, placed in the gap between what she thinks and what she does; between the

polarized choices of nun or prostitute.

The reason why Roberta shows hesitation toward the advanced relationship with Clyde is partly because she foresees the danger of pregnancy awaiting her in the future. As I have mentioned previously, the theme of women's unwanted pregnancy out of wedlock is marked as one of Dreiser's obsessions when he portrays a woman's tragedy.² In his plot settings, usually, such a woman is granted with three options to choose from: to have the baby born; to have an abortion; and ultimately, to die. In the case of Jennie, and Esta, Clyde's sister, it does not even occur to them to consider the choice of abortion, and hence, after much crying both of them decide to accept the title of a single mother. What is significant about *An American Tragedy*, then, is that Dreiser deals with the latter two options, between which the heroine's fate wavers.

Indeed, Roberta's tragedy could have been prevented if she had been able to find an abortionist. If Dreiser, under the influence of anti-abortion movement, could not write about the heroine's success in getting an abortion, at least he manages to suggest a few loopholes available for her in the text; that is, if she had personal connections with underground abortionists. In the novel, Dreiser presents two physicians who had performed illegal abortions in the past, and these episodes emphasize the contrast between the fate of Roberta and that of other anonymous girls who could survive through it. The first abortion-experienced physician we encounter is Dr. Glenn, to whom Roberta goes and asks for an abortion. Glenn, as Dreiser introduces, is a country doctor "opposed to operations of this kind," though "in several cases in the past ten years where family and other neighborhood and religious considerations had made it seem quite advisable, he had assisted in

extricating from the consequences of their folly several young girls of good family" (422, 416). The other abortion-related doctor is "the family doctor" associated with Clyde's lawyer Alvin Belknap, who helped the latter, "with a thousand dollars and other expenses," to escape from his pregnant girl (622).

Accessibility to the underground abortionists depends largely on the financial condition of the couple involved with the problem. After Dr. Glenn turns down Roberta's plea, Clyde thus meditates: "If he had a lot of money – even a few hundred dollars – he might take it now and possibly persuade [Roberta] . . . to go somewhere by herself and have an operation performed" (425). Because Belknap's case is the realization of Clyde's meditation, it is not surprising when some critics have attributed Clyde's misfortune simply to his lack of money. Richard Lingeman, for example, states: "Belknap is . . . sympathetic to [Clyde] because he had gotten into a similar scrape in his youth. But he was extricated by his father's wealth, which persuaded the family doctor to perform an abortion. Clyde, with his inexperience and lack of money, cannot avail himself of this escape route" (xiii). Another critic, Philip Fisher, even goes further. In his argument that "[within] the city all things become commodities," Fisher sees the couple's roaming to find an abortionist parallel to "shopping," which they fail to conduct well because Clyde had "no sense of world or market" (133). True, that Clyde's misfortune derives from his poverty, as well as his ignorance. But when dealing with an abortion, we must also question whether "abortion" could be categorized as "commodities" where business transaction solely settles the matter.

In her study of the era when abortion was a crime, Leslie Reagan explores the power relationship between family

doctors and their patients at the turn of the century in America generated from the doctor's financial, and the patient's medical needs blended together. Although abortion was illegal in public, the nature of the family doctor's medical practice at home, according to Reagan, strengthened the private bond between the doctor and the patient, making it fairly possible to perform abortions within the domestic sphere. Because "[medical] practice embedded physicians in family life and female lives," the doctors inevitably "interacted with the woman of the house," getting acquainted with her and her family members privately (Reagan 68). The practice within the house results in the mutual bondage between the physician and the patients, which in a meantime becomes strong enough to keep the problematic matter secret in public. What is clear from Reagan's study then, is the special features in abortion market, where, what most counts is not necessarily the buyer's ability to pay, as Lingeman suggests, but the mutual understanding between the doctor and the patient, upon which the supply and demand is originally balanced. While Lingeman emphasizes Belknap's financial privilege as the doctor saves the family from the disgrace, we must also note here, that Dreiser particularly states the physician as their "family doctor" (622), whom the father "persuaded" (Lingeman xiii). On the face of it, it is surely the hard cash, "a thousand dollars and expenses necessary to house the pregnant girl," which pays for the medical skill needed. But behind this material reward, supposedly, lies the personal obligation of the doctor toward the Belknaps, under whose patronage he was able to maintain his profession.

Dreiser's treatment of Dr. Glenn is also noteworthy. Described as a moral, ethical country physician, Dr. Glenn apparently cares more for his own reputation in the

neighborhood than for profitability gained from the operations performed. Here, too, abortion does not simply exist as a commodity that money can buy. Because it is illegal, and therefore, confidential, abortion requires, other than the material reward, the price of secrecy, which has to do with "family and other neighborhood and religious considerations" (416) based on a long time personal relationship nurtured between the residents and the doctor. Having heard the purpose of Roberta's visit, Glenn, first of all, is concerned "whether his own reputation in this community [is] in any way being tarnished by rumor of anything he [has] done in the past" (418). As she senses Glenn's anxiety and resentment toward this possibility, Roberta cleverly flatters him: "I've noticed your sign in passing several times and I've heard different people say that you were a good doctor". This, Dreiser calls, appropriately enough, Roberta's "instinct of diplomacy" (418). Certainly, when handling something illegal and confidential, you need a diplomatic skill, along with the money to carry it out.

Roberta's diplomacy does not last long however. By giving him a false name "Mrs. Ruth Howard," and later confessing him that she is not married, Glenn decides to "assume a firm and even heartless attitude" in order "to keep himself out of this" (420). Though she would never see it herself, Roberta is being in a wrong track to ask for such a crucial favor here in his office. We know that Glenn can serve as an abortionist, if circumstances allow him. But what is important in this instance is not his experience as an abortionist in the past, but rather, his private connection with the patient, which assures the security of his profession, as well as the patient's medical safety he is to provide. The patient's diplomatic skill to provoke the doctor's sympathy can never surpass his attempt to protect his own interests as a reputable doctor in the

community, upon which his entire living is based. In this respect, Clyde and Roberta's effort to "shop" for an abortion itself is a failure from the beginning. Since performing an abortion itself is a conditional affair as Glenn's case reveals, the couple should not have looked for "who" could perform an abortion; instead, they should have considered for "whom" a physician could perform it. When Glenn finally tells her to "go back to your family," this could be taken as the most appropriate suggestion given to Roberta after all. By encouraging her to go home to confide in her parents, Glenn could at least hint the prospect of finding a solution (whether be it an abortion or not), suited to her own class or group.

If the gate to abortion through doctors is closed to Roberta, she could still turn to "midwives," who, in those days, "practiced abortion in similar ways" with doctors but "primarily served poor, immigrant women" (Reagan 76). That "midwives charged half as much as doctors . . . for performing an abortion" (Reagan 74) is also important when considering this as an alternate option for Roberta. For, it means that the price for abortion is arbitrary, depending on who performs for whom, rather than who pays for how much. In other words, abortion is not necessarily the privilege for those who have, but available for those who have not, if only they turn to the right person at the right place. As to this midwife option, Dreiser goes so far as to suggest in the text, that "there were three here in Lycurgus at this time in the foreign family section," though Clyde himself "did not . . . know . . . the nature of the services performed by her" (399). The information of the midwives in Lycurgus here once again reminds us of the boldness of the sexually loose immigrant girls described at the factory scene. Their sexually active attitudes toward men could be explained, partly, by this existence of midwives they presumably know

as available if ever necessary. As for Roberta, however, the midwife option does not suit her mentally, if not financially. While Clyde suggests that "by striking up a fairly intimate relationship with one of the foreign family girls, she might by degrees extract some information," Roberta herself is "not of a temperament that [permits] of any such facile friendships, and nothing [has] come of it" (429). Roberta's companionship with foreign girls at the factory, which once leads Clyde to estimate that she is not as conservative as she looks, turns out only to be a superficial one, far from being intimate enough to confide her personal problems.

This point is important if we return to Fishkin's critical comment on Roberta introduced at the beginning of the present discussion. Whether or not Dreiser's gender bias is reflected, Roberta's "passive, reactive and weak" characterization, no doubt, contributes to the probability of her hesitation toward "facile friendships" with those belonging to a different group, where she may have found the last possible route to terminate her pregnancy. In this respect, it can be said that Roberta's passive features were inevitable in Dreiser's plot making originally. Due to her weak and indecisive characteristics, Roberta, at this point, is again caught between the choices over doctor or midwife, the haves and have-nots, just as she wavers in the beginning between the convent-like home and the brothel-like factory room.

Once she finds that abortion is no more available for her, Roberta soon comes to a state of "a cornered animal fighting for its life with all odds against it" (427), begging Clyde to marry her. Unfortunately for Roberta, however, to propose marriage as the final solution is to be caught in another indeterminable state; between the Griffiths and the Aldens. While Roberta wishes to marry Clyde because he is "a Griffiths, a

youth of genuine social, if not financial distinction, one whom all the girls in her position, as well as many of those far above her, would be delighted to be connected with" via marriage (449); Clyde himself "[winces] and [recoils] as though he [has] been slapped" at her "mere mention of a coming child" (431). His "wincing" here is understandable especially since Clyde associates Roberta with Titus Alden, whose countenance, as he recognizes, bears "a marked resemblance to Roberta about the eyes and mouth" (444-5). How much Roberta wishes to be united with the Griffiths in order "to give his name to her child" (449), to Clyde's eye, she, including *their* child, embodies the Aldens, "the shabby home world of which she was a part" (452). The demarcation between Roberta's dream and reality, once again, is clear here. Though she is Miss "Alden" publicly, personally she is conceiving a child whose name she wants to be a Griffith. Her hysteric obsession with marriage at the last moment signals not only her craving for social legitimacy, but also her disparate resistance to the suspended position from which she must escape. It is ironical, indeed, that she restores her daughter status only after she dies, when her father exclaims at the news of her death: "My Roberta dead! My daughter!" (536). Titus' cry sounds ironic when we remember that as *his* daughter she has been "dead" for a long time, since she left their home to earn her own living.

Having seen Roberta's suspended status in each crucial moment, we may be allowed to say that her death is the inevitable consequence of not only what Clyde has done, but also what Roberta, too, has done. In other words, Roberta just does not exist for the protagonist's sake. In the text she has her own course to follow, which, as we have examined above, inevitably marginalizes her in the society, where she loses a

proper place or group to belong to. The suspended status in which Roberta is occasionally placed possibly tells us that long before the actual murder scene takes place, she is repeatedly made to vanish away metaphorically, from one place to another, foretasting her literal death she faces at the end of the Book Two. In this respect, it can be said that *An American Tragedy* partly contains Roberta's tragedy, which is not necessarily a subsidiary one to Clyde's, but rather, an independent and significant one in a subplot level. In a way, we cannot deny that Roberta's almost automatic, self-inviting death eventually obscures Clyde's responsibility in drowning her, and hence, obscures his sin as a murderer – the theme which Dreiser devotedly problematizes at the latter part of the novel. The chronological order that Dreiser employs in narrating the story, too, somewhat contributes to emphasizing Clyde's story rather than Roberta's. Yet, when looked through closely, the role Roberta Alden plays in the novel is nevertheless meaningful. It tells us, at least, the author's attention to the women's issues thus reflected in his treatment of the heroine, whose suffering he finds in the gap between female biological reproduction and social institutions.

Notes

1. Susan Wolstenholme also points out that Dreiser "could devote his first two novels to sympathetic portraits of women and in his acknowledged masterpiece sympathize with the murdered of a pregnant women," and sees this as "the paradoxes in both, Dresier's life and his work" (244).
2. Richard Lehan analyzes that the theme of "illegitimate pregnancy" is "one of Dreiser's compulsive concerns dating back to the time that he was embarrassed by his sister's promiscuity" (151).

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