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Deciphering the Meanings of Individualism in Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy and Sister Carrie.*

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Abstract:

The current paper aims at shading light on a key aspect of the American individualism in Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* and *An American Tragedy*. The problem is that many American scholars have developed their concept of individualism as the undertaking of a project or a business that would collectively benefit many other people in addition to the initiator, but some other Americans have also developed other strategies contradicting that concept of individualism. Theoretically, naturalism has been used to collect, analyze and interpret the study's data. The analysis of some characters in Dreiser's works show that the defense of the common and collective interest does not preoccupy all the Americans as imparted through many characters in *Sister Carrie* and *An American Tragedy*. Each character does his best and everything possible to reach his goal, whether other people could take profit from it or not. In sum, the findings clearly indicate that individualism in Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* and *Sister Carrie* denotes a rather selfish behavior, which is the obverse of the founding fathers' sense of individualism. They also show that this individualistic selfishness is the driving force of the American dream as underscored in *An American Tragedy* and *Sister Carrie*. Thus, the contemporary fulfillment of the American dream involves a certain sense of selfishness.

Keywords: Americans, Desire, Improvement, Individualism, Naturalism, Selfishness.

Introduction

At the outset of the American Independence, the new settlers struggled hard to create a climate in which they could defend the common interests of all the population. Together, they developed strategies through concepts to permit a great number of the inhabitants to live their dreams. Everybody worked in a way that could help both skilled and unskilled people to get something to do. Among the strategies they developed was the concept of individualism. This concept seemed to be opposed to what existed in other areas where individualism refers to the development of the egocentric self. In America, they tried to endow the concept of individualism with a new meaning. Through this new conceptualization, individualism meant any enterprise or project which could benefit a larger number of the population. That is why they put emphasis on the individuals and their participation in the community well-being and even in the nation building. Writers and other American scholars praised their nation for the tremendous changes, which occurred throughout America. The numerous factories in the urban zones are striking examples in the northern and western parts of the nation. Since the settlement of the first permanent colonies, the new settlers arrived with the ardent desire to fulfill their dreams. They arrived at different epochs and with different purposes. That desire to feel happy in what they were doing pushed them to undertake various activities. If the first are the fathers of almost all the new changes in the New World, those who followed (their descendants) struggled to keep on with that pace. The industrial revolution was considered as a new outset for the coming generations to achieve their American dream. Industrialization permitted a large number of Americans to set up businesses through which they assisted many others, skilled and unskilled, to get a job to do in order to live a better life.

The issue of individualism is developed in this paper because it is one of the key ingredients of American culture and the most representative integral part of American values. American individualism is construed as a moral, political and social philosophy, emphasizing the importance of personal, self-contained virtue as well as personal independence for collective interests. It is the emotion of one's own interests and peace of mind for the well-being of the entire community and nation. It represents a creative, pioneering and entrepreneurial spirit of the American society.

However, it is generally perceived and conceived as responsible for the alienation of every citizen from his/her relatives and friends beyond the American borders. It is therefore believed that when every citizen establishes his/her own small community, he/she may eventually concentrate on his/her own development neglecting the larger society. In other words, the problem is that several people have failed to understand that the American sense of individualism is completely different from the general egocentric “self-interest” of that concept. It is rather based on freedom and equality in the pursuit of the American dream but requiring collective inclusion as conceptualized by the founding fathers.

The objective of the study is to demonstrate that there has been a shift in the concept of the American individualism based on some literature, especially in Dreiser’s novels. If the founding fathers had focused on the principle of doing something that may help those who do not have the means to create their own wealth, this new conceptualization of individualism by the founding fathers advocated that people should rely on themselves mutually, be self-centered and reach independence collectively. However, today people are more likely motivated to do things for their own self-interests instead of the collective ones. They have no consideration for what the society could benefit from. That is why in “Paradoxes of American Individualism” Claude S. Fischer(2008) mentioned the idea developed by Robin M. Williams Jr. who said that people now talk about “individual personality rather than group identity and responsibility” (p363.) as one of the eight key “value orientations” distinctive to American culture. These are the reasons why I have chosen this topic and the selected novels, which are also striking examples of this other aspect of the American individualism. It is in this framework that the following research question is formulated: how does Dreiser reflect the meanings of individualism in his works under study?

Besides, the study is carried out in the theoretical context of naturalism. Methodologically, the paper is structured in three major section. The first section provides an overview of the definitions of individualism. The second one explicates and unveils the impact of individualism on individuals in both texts whereas the last section highlights the negative impact of individualism on people collectively as enshrined in Dreiser’s *An American Tragedy* and *Sister Carrie*.

1-The American Individualism: What is it?

Since the arrival of the first American colonies, they arrived with different dreams and expectations. Their dreams and expectations pushed them to undertake various activities leading to their happiness in the New World. If the first are the founding fathers of almost all the new changes triggered in the New World, those who followed (their descendants) strove to keep up with that pace. They launched the industrial revolution, which constituted a new outset for the coming generations to achieve their American dream. Although the industrial revolution contributed to the new conceptualization of individualism, the spirit of distinguishing their ways of life and doing things differently from Europeans also motivated the new inhabitants. That is why; they decided to Americanize the concept of individualism by relating it to the attainment of the collective interest starting from individual initiative and they wanted it to be different from European sense of individualism, which is rooted in selfishness. This new approach permitted a considerable increase in the access to jobs by the minority groups even when they continued to undergo discriminatory actions.

It is in regard to the above that Robin M. Williams Jr.(1970) in one of his famous articles writes that : “American individualism, taken in broadest terms, has consisted mainly of a rejection of the state and impatience with restraints upon economic activity; it has not tended to set the autonomous individual in rebellion against his social group” (p.485). The foregoing definition by Williams Jr confirms the inclusive nature of the American sense of individualism. At the same time, it is noticed that any individualistic culture is associated with what happens in the world to individual interests and will—not to fate, God, circumstances, or social pressure. Moreover, such a culture of individualism in the rest of the world expects the individual to be self-reliant materially and in the Emersonian sense, morally too. Nevertheless, in practice the contrary can be observed.

An analysis of the aforementioned definitions of individualism allows us to deduce that there is a deviation of meaning in the American concept of individualism. At its beginnings, this concept has changed because the core idea was based on any activity or initiative that could be undertaken by one person or a group of people, but would positively affect the life of a larger number of people in the community or city. They had in mind that no one alone could be satisfied or happy.

Whenever one can help the other, they are likely to reach full independence. That reality could be noticed when the first settlers set feet in the New World. Their actions were targeting community or group interests. Even long after the independence from Great Britain, many graduated Americans struggled to set up their own businesses that could hire other people. They did not want to wait for governmental positions since the concept of individualism articulated around self-reliance for collective well-being was promoted. No idea of the European sense of the self was in the mind of those people. It means that self-reliance differs from selfishness and it indicates self-realization for collective interests because they did not want dependency. But later on, it has been related to selfishness in contradiction with the founding fathers' inclusive nature of the concept of individualism.

In other words, American individualism during the industrial revolution advocated and emphasized self-reliance and free development of personality for collective interests. Yet, competition and the entrepreneurial spirit were the fundamental defining ingredients of the American concept of individualism. It is in such context that this study, in the below sections, tries to decipher and explicate the different implications of individualism in Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* and *Sister Carrie*.

2. Individualism and its Impact on the Individual

In analyzing the characters in Dreiser's works, we discover that they manifest a kind of individualism that is the very opposite of the founding fathers'. In Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* for instance, the protagonist Sister Carrie uses different strategies to reach a better living condition. All the ways were good as long as they could permit her to get out of the poor situation in which she lived. Though her mother was alone, she decided to leave for the city and did not return to assist her in her miserable and needy situation. She feels no pity for her own mother because she desires riches and material wealth at any cost. Alas! She is driven by the wealth that was visible with those around her. That is another reason why, she essentially wanted a billboard. As the author details it: "she wanted her gowns and carriage, her furniture and bank account...people who would bow and smile in acknowledgment of her success."(p.846.). This excerpt reveals the protagonist's pursuit of self-interest and her strong desire to live up to a new social class regardless of the harms that she may cause to other people around her ,especially her family. She therefore thinks of herself only. This attitude of the protagonist leads her to leave her poor mother for Chicago as already expressed. She does not care about the poverty of her mother. Her behavior expresses the negative impact of her understanding of individualism on her personality because the upper class people do not also care about any needy people like the heroine herself. The key motivation of Carrie is to be wealthy and be accepted in the high society of the upper class. This reality unfortunately conditions her to be selfish and pushes her to leave the village for the city thinking that the latter would be a better place for the fulfillment of her dream.

Once in Chicago, Sister Carrie looked for what she had desired while living in the village. In the city, she was living in her older sister's house. She abandoned her older sister once she noticed that her desire could not be satisfied while staying in that family. She started looking for jobs once she got aware of the position of her brother-in-law because she had dreamed of a grandiose lifestyle. That one pushed Carrie from her arrival to find a job when her brother-in-law realized that he could not take care of Carrie. She represented additional expenses. He showed Carrie that there was a possibility to get a job in the city, which is an industrialized area. She therefore worked in different factories to earn money and to buy some of the material things she saw in the big shops. Getting aware of the low salary and the difficulty where she used to work, she decided to explore other fields of interest. At this point, the reader may come to understand that both Carrie and her brother-in-law are selfish because none of them behaves in accordance with the founding fathers' concept of individualism rooted in collective well-being and development economically and socially. The type of exclusionary individualism expressed through these two characters reveals the social divisions of the American society based on class determined by the power of money and materialistic assets.

In her pursuit of the materialistic happiness, the protagonist was heartlessly moving from one man to another. It was another planned individualistic method, which Sister Carrie adopted to obtain what she wanted. She was changing men not for the love she had for the different men she lived with, but for mere self-materialistic interests. Carrie wanted to join the upper society women that is why she tried to imitate Mrs. Vance. That woman was so rich that Hurstwood thought that it is not easy for anybody to be with her: "She's too gay," said Hurstwood, significantly. "No one can keep up with her pace unless they've got a lot of money." (p.594).

When walking through the streets of Chicago, Carrie would see a young girl particularly well-dressed or particularly pretty, or both, which excited her envy and enhanced her longing for nice clothes. Carrie wants nice clothing, and wants to own material items that signify wealth, which Drouet offers her. She tried to use her beauty to gain wealth and Drouet's financial stability. When the first man, Drouet, appeared not to love Carrie despite the huge amount of money he spent for her, Sister Carrie turned to a married man, George Hurstwood. She just cared for what she thought might be better for her in the satisfaction of her desires. It would be noticed that the more Hurstwood decreased economically the more Carrie got away from him. She would finish by totally abandoning that man who lost everything for her. From the outset of their relationship, Carrie did not love George Hurstwood that is illustrated through the following words: "There was no great passion in her, but the drift of things and this man's proximity created a semblance of affection. She felt rather sorry for him--a sorrow born of what had only recently been a great admiration. True love she had never felt for him" (p.480). The general remark here is that Sister Carrie does not care about what would happen to the other people or what the society could obtain or lose because of her behavior. She has no idea or care about whether other people or even her community might suffer from the way she behaves. She trusts her beauty that is why when she meets for the first time with Drouet, the latter says: "That.....is one of the prettiest little resorts in Wisconsin. (p.4)". That is her supreme weapon to win against any "enemy" or break any barrier she could face.

In analyzing the attitudes of Carrie, Hurstwood and Drouet, it may be underlined that the new generation of Americans, who are represented through the above characters, have begun to have another view of the American individualism. This reality is confirmed by Williams (2008) when he explained that Americans were least likely to defend the individual against national interests. They were among the fewest in endorsing the idea that the individuals should refuse to support their countries when the nation was in the wrong and to say they would be willing to leave the country for better conditions. But the very opposite of this American sense of individualism is evidenced through George Hurstwood when he fell in love with Sister Carrie who imposed marriage as the only way to be with Hurstwood. Not thinking about his position in his company, he neither worries about his social situation, nor his marital status (married with two children). He just decided to leave America for Canada in order to live with the girl he desired so much.

It is important to emphasize that the American sense of individualism is highly articulated around the commitment of Americans to faith and moralism. Despite these values, it is noticed that Sister Carrie does not care about those crucial social values in her attempts to satisfy her desire. Through what she experiences on the streets of Chicago develops in her a strong envy and conditions her to become selfish. That was similar for both Drouet and Hurstwood. The two men are portrayed as being only influenced by the satisfaction of their egocentric desires (lusts). Morality and faith have no place for them. They neither care about morality nor encourage anyone to cultivate moral values because of the negative impact of individualism on their life and society. Therefore, they are not examples to follow and their understanding of individualism to achieve self-realization is the very obverse of the American founding fathers' strand of individualism. For instance the selfishness of Drouet is described by the novelist as follows:

Good clothes, of course, were the first essential, the things without which he was nothing. A strong physical nature, actuated by a keen desire for the feminine, was the next. A mind free of any consideration of the problems or forces of the world and actuated not by greed, but an insatiable love of variable pleasure. His method was always simple. Its principal element was daring, backed, of course, by an intense desire and admiration for the sex. Let him meet with a young woman once and he would approach her with an air of kindly familiarity, not unmixed with pleading, which would result in most cases in a tolerant acceptance. If she showed any tendency to coquetry he would be apt to straighten her tie, or if she "took up" with him at all, to call her by her first name. (Dreiser, 1925, p.6.)

Like Sister Carrie in *Sister Carrie*, Clyde Griffiths, the son of street preachers who live in dire poverty, is the protagonist in *An American Tragedy*. In this condition, Clyde grows up longing for material things he can never attain except through his own efforts. After a series of dead-end jobs, Clyde ventures to Lyncurgus, New York, hoping for a place in his uncle's prosperous shirt factory. From this opportunity, he thought he could be able to fill in the gap poverty caused in his life. Clyde desperately wanted to enjoy all the fruits of material gain and social status. The factory was supposed to be a way to that.

Dreiser foreshadows Clyde's tendency to place his own needs and interests over those of the others. His only care is how he can get what he desires. This is witnessed from the beginning of the story with the accident in which an innocent child was killed. Clyde, like the other people involved, does not want to be known as someone who committed such a tragedy. They feared to be arrested and tried. Another case occurred when his unwed sister Esta became pregnant, his mother, Mrs. Griffiths asked him for some money toward the "confinement." Although Clyde had fifty dollars in his pocket, he contributed a mere five, keeping the rest to buy his girlfriend a coat in return for her sexual favors. He was ready to do everything in order to satisfy his lust. This attitude of his substantiates his selfishness and his heartlessness.

In other words, he does not care about his family let alone his community. If we try to focus on the values promoted by the American founding fathers through their concept of individualism, we all know that it should be a duty for the protagonist to assist his mother by taking care of Esta. Their mother would do that task without asking Clyde if ever she had the necessary amount of money. However, we notice a strong difference between Clyde and his mother. The latter does everything to save her son from death after the trial by looking for money to organize another trial. She prayed a lot for her son's acquittal. In spite of all her efforts, she unfortunately fails in her attempts. She thus stands as the character who fully represents the spirit of the American founding fathers' sense of individualism in *An American Tragedy*.

Clyde Griffiths, a good guy turned bad, would display other acts of negative individualism when he became the supervisor in his uncle's factory. In that position, he met a girl called Roberta Alden, a hardworking, pretty, vivacious young woman whose attraction to him arose his interest in her. After a few months of casual dating, the two became lovers and Roberta, in the long run, got pregnant. In the meantime, however, Clyde has met Sondra Finchley, another girl of wealth and social prestige. That girl appeared to be the kind of girl Clyde had been always dreaming of because of her wealth. All his attentions went to that one to the point that he forgot the mother of his future child.

At that point, he started to think about the possibilities of getting rid of Roberta. The latter was thinking about their future marriage proposed by Clyde some times ago. On the other hand, Clyde Griffiths was planning how to get rid of the child so that he could kill any hope from Roberta. His best plan was to go for abortion without foreseeing the outcome of this criminal and selfish action. Roberta yet refused that solution since there was a promise for marriage between them. He invited her for a pre-wedding jaunt on one of these lonely lakes. Once they arrived, he took a boat that would easily overturn. When they got on, Roberta wanted to sit next to him in the boat but he pushed her back, causing her to lose her balance and fall into the water. At this moment, Clyde experiences a fleeting change of heart. Reaching over to rescue Roberta, however, he upset the boat, which hit her on the head, knocking her unconscious. Although Clyde might still have pulled Roberta from the water, a "voice" inside him says that fate has acted in his favor because that would be a way to turn to Sondra only and without being bothered by anyone else. Therefore, he let her sink and he returned home. Thereafter, some analysts thought that Clyde did not consciously drown his girlfriend.

In analyzing and interpreting the attitude of Clyde, the reader may construe that he is motivated and influenced by self-interests and selfish gains. He is therefore ready to attain by any means his materialistic happiness even if he has to destroy the life of the people around him as illustrated in the novel. Through this character, the novelist is implicitly putting his finger at one of the wounds of the American contemporary society, which is selfish individualism. This selfish individualism negatively alters the behavior of people and entices them to be heartless. In other words, through his novels, Dreiser intends to warn Americans against the dangers that the deviation from the founding fathers' conceptualization of individualism may have on Americans individually.

3. The Impact of Individualism on the Community

In addition to the negative impact of individualism on individuals, its impact is also felt on people collectively. It is in such context that an analysis of the different behaviors of Sister Carrie, Drouet and Hurstwood may lead to the deduction that they were creating situations to hamper the socio-economic growth of their society because the victims affected the society. For example, when Hurstwood stole the money from his company, which could lead to bankruptcy. The consequences of this theft could lead many people to lose their jobs leading families to difficult economic conditions and the entire community as whole.

When Sister Carrie abandoned Hurstwood, he lived in very bad conditions. He was seriously affected by the hard economic situation. He ate in charities and often begged at the public places. The worst happened when he committed suicide:

It seemed as if he thought a while, for now he arose and turned the gas out, standing calmly in the blackness, hidden from view. After a few moments, in which he reviewed nothing, but merely hesitated, he turned the gas on again, but applied no match. Even then he stood there, hidden wholly in that kindness which is night, while the uprising fumes filled the room. When the odour reached his nostrils, he quit his attitude and fumbled for the bed. "What's the use?" he said, weakly, as he stretched himself to rest.(Dreiser, 1970,p.846.).

Hurstwood himself had no idea and did not even care about what would happen to his wife and children when he was forced to divorce. This is also the same for Mrs. Hurstwood who did not think about what might happen to the man she deprived of his family. She was encouraged in her bad decision because she was aware of her husband's unfaithful past and did not assist that one to give up that bad behavior. Not knowing one another both women (Sister Carrie and Mrs. Hurstwood) thought that they had to use men in order to move up in the social ladder. They lived in the time in which marriage and money were interdependent. Their selfish attitudes affected many people around them in *Sister Carrie*.

Likewise in *An American Tragedy*, Clyde did not think about the consequences of his action on his community. He ignored his religious background and forgot the miserable condition of his parents. By killing a person, he even neglected the fact that the body could be discovered sooner or later, which would lead to investigations and judgment. This is illustrated through the following passage:

But here he was now upon the same platform with her as the result of her persistent and illogical demands, and he must be thinking how, and boldly, he must carry out the plans which, for four days, or ever since he had telephoned her, and in a dimmer way for the ten preceding those, he had been planning. This settled course must not be interfered with now. He must act! He must not let fear influence him to anything less than he had now planned.(Dreiser, 1925, p.696.)

He was so selfish that he did not think of the innocent child that was killed for nothing. He had no idea of foreseeing the future of that child and the possible contribution he could bring to his people and the society as a whole.

Griffiths Clyde is, because of his selfishness, depicted as a threat for the society. He was supposed to contribute to the growth of the factory by hiring more people. The hiring of more people, as advocated in the American founding fathers' sense of individualism, would enable the decreasing of the number of unemployed people. As a result, the production would increase to ensure the availability of products for people and the consumers would feel a significant decrease in the price of products too. Besides, the more products we have, the less expensive they would be. One important effect of that could be a better economic prosperity for his community and his nation at a larger scale. However, his selfishness led to the factory to serious difficulties. That is why, the narrator says, in talking about the selfishness of Clyde, that:

Again, knowing that, unless some hitherto unforeseen aid should eventuate, he was heading straight toward a disaster which could not much longer be obviated, he even allowed himself to dream that, once the fatal hour was at hand and Roberta, no longer to be put off by any form of subterfuge, was about to expose him, he might even flatly deny that he had ever held any such relationship with her as then she would be charging—rather that at all times his relationship with her had been that of a department manager to employee—no more. Terror—no less! (Dreiser, 1925,p.624)

The same idea is also exemplified through the following:

Then again his more cowering sense of what society would think and do, if it knew, what he himself would be compelled to think of himself afterwards, fairly well satisfied him that as much as he desired to stay, he was not the one to do anything at all and in consequence must flee.”(Dreiser, 1925, p.689.).

Conclusion

All in all, I may say that the concept of individualism has changed in the American society by creating a category of citizens that the founding fathers had never thought of. Dreiser's characters show a change in American way of seeing things that occurred in their nation. It is good to strive for what one desires. It is good to work harder to reach one's goal, but one should not work to destroy other people and their interests, especially one's struggle to satisfy his/her desires and dreams as it was the case for both Sister Carrie and Griffiths Clyde.

Their struggle for the accomplishment of their wishes can be considered as a way to reach their American Dream, but their hard work and success or failure are not done in an honest way. That is why, both of them regret their selfishness at the end the stories. Sister Carrie regrets because she remains unsatisfied despite the fame and the material abundance she obtains. As for Clyde, it is similar since he does not have time to live with Sondra for whom he commits the horrible crime of his first lover and his future son. Consequently, he is judged for that and sentenced to death.

Though the two protagonists individually succeeded, the founding fathers who had worked for the interest of their community would have not appreciated the selfish attitude of these characters. The protagonists never undertake any action that is for the prosperity of their society and even their nation. Concerning the foregoing, the study concludes that the power and development of America is in part due to the American founding fathers' concept and practice of individualism. One can therefore affirm without any mistake that America would not be so united and strong if their founding fathers had behaved like Sister Carrie and Griffiths Clyde who destroyed the other in order to attain their dreams.

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