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Chapter 8

AN INTERVIEW WITH DIANA SHEETS: AMERICAN NATURALISM— FRANK NORRIS AND THEODORE DREISER, TWO GREAT AMERICAN NOVELISTS

Keywords: American Naturalism, *An American Tragedy*, doubling, Dreiser, *McTeague*, Norris

MFS: What can you tell our readers about American Naturalism?

DS: American Naturalism was inspired by Émile Zola's literary movement in France, which was begun in the mid-19th century and greatly influenced by Darwinian theories of evolution. An outgrowth of realism, the emphasis of American Naturalism, emulating Zola, was on the brutish, animalistic behavior of man, on deterministic outcomes rather than the exercise of free will, on the primordial passions of the demimonde and the devastating consequences that ensue. This emphasis was in contrast to the civilized refined behavior of more privileged members of society. Naturalism stripped away the veneer of civility to reveal the social dislocations in American society in the wake of industrialization and modernization.

When we think of American Naturalism, Theodore Dreiser is the first author that comes to mind, particularly his two best novels—*Sister Carrie* (1900) and *An American Tragedy* (1925). Norman Mailer, as we discussed in an earlier essay in this collection, certainly considered Dreiser as the American writer whose fictions came the closest to embodying the Great American Novel. Some of the other writers in this tradition include Jack London, Stephen Crane, and James T. Farrell. If we broaden its scope to include the entire 20th century and writers who borrowed heavily from American Naturalism, we could include, among others, John Dos Passos, Saul Bellow, and Norman Mailer.

My favorite novel in this tradition is Frank Norris's *McTeague* (1899), followed closely by Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* (1925).

MFS: Why do you consider Frank Norris and Theodore Dreiser two of our best writers in that literary movement?

DS: Both writers were preoccupied with presenting the panoramic American story, stripping away the veneer of civility to reveal our most brutish nature. However, Norris's *McTeague* is darker, grimmer, more debased in its narrative thrust than *Theodore Dreiser's An American Tragedy*.

MFS: Frank Norris wrote about “the responsibilities of the novelist”. Did he follow his own guidance? How were his principles personified?

DS: Frank Norris published a collection entitled *The Responsibilities of the Novelist, and Other Literary Essays* in 1903. In some respects it's a manifesto of what the literary novel should be. In other respects it's an essay collection about how readers, writers, and critics should assess literature. While some of it's dated, overall it's fascinating because it explains what Norris's intentions were as a novelist and how he evaluated meaningful fiction. *The Responsibilities of the Novelist*, which is no longer under copyright, is available to read on Google Books (https://books.google.com/books?id=-j_cbol7UisC&pg=PA3&source=gbs_toc_r&cad=4#v=onepage&q&f=false).

Norris's basic arguments in this collection are represented in four essays: "The Responsibilities of the Novelist", "The True Rewards of the Novelist", "The Novel with a 'Purpose'", and "The Great American Novelist". So what are his major points? In Norris's essay "The Responsibilities of the Novelist", he acknowledges that his era, the fin-de-siècle and the dawning of the 20th century, is "the day of the novel". Why? Because "it expresses modern life better than architecture, better than painting, better than poetry, better than music". He correctly predicts "the novel will in time 'go out' of popular favor", but emphasizes that in his era it provides the best vehicle for presenting the American story (Norris, 1903c, pp. 5-6).

For Norris, the quest of the novelist, one who aspires to capture accurately his historical era, should be neither money nor fame. His objective must be to present the truth. So let's examine his arguments.

And when the last page is written and the ink crusts on the pen-point and the hungry presses go clashing after another writer, the "new man" and the new fashion of the hour, he will think of the grim long grind of the years of his life that he has put behind him and of his work that he has built up volume by volume, sincere work, telling the truth as he saw it, independent of fashion and the gallery gods, holding to these with gripped hands and shut teeth—he will think of all this then, and he will be able to say: "I never truckled; I never took off the hat to Fashion and held it out for pennies. By God, I told them the truth. They liked it or they didn't like it. What had that to do with me? I told them the truth; I knew it for the truth then, and I know it for the truth now".

And that is his reward—the best that a man may know; the only one really worth the striving for. (Norris, 1903d, p. 22)

How then does Norris suggest that the novelist present societal truth in his fiction? He presents his case in his essay "The Novel with a 'Purpose'". He begins by taking issue with the notion that "the novel must not preach" because for Norris great fiction has a mandate to

“prove something”. Norris builds this perspective by classifying novels into three types. The lowest form of narrative “tells something”, by which he means it is concerned about “things” or events in the world. By way of example he presents the adventure novel by Alexandre Dumas, *The Three Musketeers*. Next, in his hierarchy is a novel that “shows something”. For Norris this is fiction that explores “temperament”, namely, that it is concerned with the minds and thoughts of people. Within this category, therefore, is “the novel of character” of which George Eliot’s *Romola* is an example. For Norris the highest form is the purposeful novel, that is, a narrative that “proves something” about the society under examination. To accomplish this the novel “draws conclusions from a whole congeries of forces, social tendencies, race impulses, devotes itself not to a study of men but of man”. It must include the spectrum of social classes to demonstrate its point. Norris believes Victor Hugo’s *Les Misérables* is the embodiment of the purposeful novel concerned with revealing the true nature of man (Norris, 1903b, pp. 25-26).

The purposeful novel, of course, “tells something”, in other words, the story presents a series of events that constitute a narrative. It “shows something”, which enables it to “penetrate deep into the motives and character of type-men, men who are composite pictures of a multitude of men”. That’s critical because the purposeful novel “deals with elemental forces, motives that stir whole nations”. Norris adds for emphasis, “These cannot be handled as abstractions” since “fiction can find expression only in the concrete”. The purposeful novel, therefore, must examine “social tendencies”. These must be represented “by means of analysis of the characters of the men and women who compose that society, and the two must be combined and manipulated to evolve the purpose—to find the value of x ” (Norris, 2003b, pp. 26-27). This, of course, is what Norris intends to accomplish with all of his fiction, but never more so than in his trilogy *The Epic of the Wheat*, which we’ll discuss a bit later.

Finally, there’s his essay “The Great American Novelist”. Borrowing Henry James’s designation, the GAN, he considers first whether that should refer to the “Great American Novelist” or, his preference, “A Great American Novel”. He points out that the term Great American Novelist seems somewhat ridiculous since no one has ever spoken about the “Great English Novelist” or the “Great French Novelist” even though there might be “at least a half-dozen different names” in contention. It is far better, he suggests, focusing on “A Great American Novel”, as opposed to the designation of the “Great American Novelist” (Norris, 1903a, pp. 85-87). For Henry James, of course, the G. A. N. acronym referred to the “Great American Novel” while Theodore Dreiser preferred the designation “the great American realistic novel” (Buell, 2014, pp. 1 & 35).

What Norris is attempting to do is lay the groundwork for establishing one of his novels or creating the climate to ensure that his trilogy, *The Epic of the Wheat*, be acclaimed as “A Great American Novel”. Given his untimely death and his inability to complete that trilogy, today most critics would argue that the novel of his that comes closest to achieving this lofty designation is *McTeague*.

MFS: How, then, would you describe Norris’s novel *McTeague*?

DS: *McTeague* represents Norris’s most intensive portrayal of man’s bestial descent into animalistic brutality and, as such, it represents his designation of “the novel with a purpose”, namely, of revealing the “social tendencies” in order to present what he believes to be the true story of America. What makes *McTeague* a particularly fascinating read these days is that

literary fiction has become so feminized, so politically correct, so representative of progressive values to the detriment of reality that any evidence of aggressive or violent actions perpetrated by men or what I refer to as “brutish masculinity” is decried as villainous and, wherever possible, eviscerated (Sheets, 2007a; Sheets, 2007b; Sheets, 2007c; Sheets, 2008a).

Perhaps the best evidence of this trend is demonstrated in John Pettegrew’s analysis of *McTeague* in *Brutes in Suits: Male Sensibility in America, 1890-1920* (Pettegrew, 2007). First, Pettegrew begins with a characterization of late 19th and early 20th century American fiction as “hypermasculinity”. This he defines as “an animalistic mind-set embracing man’s putative instinct for violence; a ramped-up disposition, contagious through its excitation, and easily calibrated with a yearning for adventure, combat, and the experience of killing” (Pettegrew, 2007, p. 330). In his chapter “Brute Fictions”, Pettegrew emphasizes that *McTeague* is the embodiment of “the American naturalist canon” with its bestial masculinity that inexorably concludes, he suggests, “in fatal violent pathology”. Thus, Pettegrew illustrates how the character McTeague, “the brute”, “reverts back to a lower human state, a criminally degraded condition”. The novel is social Darwinism replete, suggests Pettegrew, with “its criminal anthropological variants” (Pettegrew, 2007, pp. 116-117).

For Pettegrew, the novel *McTeague* represents our societal devolution into an animalistic state, something, which he suggests in his “Introduction”, that modern man can overcome by social disposition and by force of will. This represents today’s feminized perspective that seeks to obliterate any violence, aggression, and exertion of power embodied in “manly fiction”, as well as its potential “truth-telling” claims about the world. This outlook favors fiction that socially conditions a feminized and progressively inclined audience to embrace an imaginary universe where all [male] violence and destructive behavior has been obliterated in favor of a nurturing society that is implicitly child-centric in its aims and mission. To understand the political dimensions and implications of Pettegrew’s argument, it would be necessary to read George Lakoff’s *Moral Politics* to understand the differences in worldview between conservatives—mostly men—and progressives—mostly women (Lakoff perspective in Sheets, 2008b).

But back to our subject at hand. What is the actual plot of the novel? The character McTeague is a dentist. He has a patient, Trina, whom he later marries. In the process of operating on her, the sexually violent and ravaging beast within emerges, and McTeague confronts his other self, “the brute”.

Suddenly the animal in the man stirred and woke; the evil instincts that in him were so close to the surface leaped to life, shouting and clamoring. . . . Blindly, without knowing why, McTeague fought against it. . . . Within him, a certain second self, another better McTeague rose with the brute; both were strong, with the huge crude strength of the man himself. The two were at grapples. . . . It was the old battle, old as the world, wide as the world—the sudden panther leap of the animal, lips drawn, fangs aflash, hideous, monstrous, not to be resisted, and the simultaneous arousing of the other man, the better self that cries, “Down, down”, without knowing why; that grips the monster; that fights to strangle it, to thrust it down and back. (Norris, 1982, p. 30)

Ultimately, McTeague’s “better self” wins—this time—albeit after “the brute” had “kissed her, grossly, full on the mouth” (Norris, 1982, p. 31). Trina awakens from her ether slumber unravished. However, McTeague acknowledges to himself that “the brute was there.

Long dormant, it was now at last alive, awake. From now on he would feel its presence continually” (Norris, 1982, p. 32).

Here’s a story of a rather stupid man of limited means who sets up shop as a dentist in San Francisco, although he lacks the proper credentials. Trina becomes his patient, as they become increasingly close she enters a lottery and wins \$5,000. They ultimately marry, but, as we later learn, money is Trina’s obsession, not love. Meanwhile, Marcus, who had been romancing Trina but graciously let McTeague step in, is now consumed with jealousy that McTeague will have access to Trina’s wealth. The couple marries. Marcus informs authorities that McTeague is not properly licensed as a dentist. McTeague is forced to stop practicing dentistry. So begins his downward spiral into poverty. When his marriage to Trina dissolves, he steals Trina’s carefully accrued daily earnings and income, \$400 in all, which roughly equates today to \$10,000 in cash, before leaving. Pressed for funds, she withdraws her principal from the lottery, obsessively fondling her riches as if it were a lover. Her miserly behavior makes her reluctant to spend even a penny, except when absolutely necessary. Time passes. McTeague, having exhausted Trina’s former cash holdings, returns drunk, destitute, and hungry. Trina refuses his entreaties. Enraged, he murders her, takes the remaining lottery winnings, and flees to Death Valley on route to Mexico. Marcus, who learns of Trina’s death, pursues McTeague and the money. Ultimately McTeague kills Marcus. However, before he succeeds Marcus handcuffs himself to McTeague. Stranded in the heat of the desert without water, cuffed to a dead man, McTeague awaits his certain demise in Death Valley.

It’s a riveting novel that reveals the dark side of humanity, that bestial nature we try so hard to suppress. Today, it’s regarded as “his masterpiece” (McElrath & Crisler, 2006, p. 3). But, as McElrath & Crisler noted, American and English critics had choice words for *McTeague* when it published: “vulgar”, “gruesome”, “gross”, “sordid”, “revolting”, and “stomach-turning”, to name a few (McElrath & Crisler, 2006, p. 4). Indeed, the response to *McTeague* paralleled the critics’ adverse reaction to Émile Zola’s novels when they first appeared in translation in England and America.

Why? Feminized readers, writers, and critics alike—including John Pettegrew—insist on denying the differences between men and women. All masculine traits are lumped together with hypermasculinity and an effort is made to banish aggressive or violent or even assertive behavior as potentially harmful to women and children and, by inference, society. From the progressive perspective, as Hillary Clinton suggests in *It Takes a Village: And Other Lessons Children Teach Us* (1996), the world is perceived as a place for creating and sustaining a nurturing environment for children. At its most extreme, this feminized outlook champions “safe zones” where manliness or any perceived threat thereof is cordoned off from “civilized” society. At least that’s the desired goal, although in reality there are no safe zones to which we can retreat to be safe from harm. This feminized perspective does not allow for the male view or the conservative perspective succinctly characterized by linguist George Lakoff “that life is difficult and that the world is fundamentally dangerous” (Lakoff, 2002, p. 65).

For philosophical conservatives not only does violence persist, survival necessitates strength, aggression, and the use of force in order for good to triumph over evil. It should come as little surprise, then, that literary fiction’s flight from distressful reality toward the fantasy of a virtuous realm in which everyone lives in peace and harmony has been lethal to the vitality of the novel. Absent an interest in truth and a connection to the real world, the literary novel is reduced to a children’s fairy tale that denies, rather than enriches, our understanding of the world in which we live and the pressing challenges we face today.

MFS: How does Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* compare to Frank Norris's *McTeague*?

DS: Both men began as journalists. Their novels *An American Tragedy* and *McTeague* were inspired by real-life accounts of murders published in newspapers. Both saw American Naturalism as the primary means with which to present the American story in fiction.

So what is the narrative of *An American Tragedy*? Clyde Griffiths grows up in the Midwest, the child of devoted missionaries, who enlist their children in their godly mission. Clyde flees this life as soon as he is able, taking a job as a bellhop for a hotel in Kansas City. He is exposed to city vices and enamored with a woman who trades sexual favors in return for expensive gifts. While on a joyride in a stolen car with friends, the driver runs over and kills a young girl. Clyde flees the scene and begins his life anew in Chicago. However, his flight from moral responsibility will later have grave repercussions. While working in Chicago he meets his prosperous uncle, who owns a factory in New York State. Clyde accepts a job there, but is lonely and isolated. He begins a relationship with a shop girl, Roberta, who works for him—strictly forbidden by company policies. She gets pregnant.

Meanwhile, Clyde has become associated with several of the prominent young men and women in the community. He meets and longs to marry Sondra, a wealthy and attractive young lady, who is the daughter of a manufacturer. Intent on climbing up the social ladder at all cost, he makes intricate plans to murder Roberta when his efforts to have her abort her child fail. Out on a deserted lake in upstate New York, he announces his intention to break up with her. Roberta leans forward; his camera accidentally strikes her, causing the boat to capsize. Clyde ignores her pleas for help, leaving Roberta to drown while he swims safely to shore. While nominally an accident, Clyde, nevertheless, is complicit since he had carefully planned her death in circumstances almost identical to what transpired.

Clyde is identified as the prime suspect in what becomes a murder investigation. A sensational trial ensues. Convicted, he is sentenced to death by electric chair, which the Governor refuses to commute. Neither the Reverend nor his mother believe him innocent. Clyde, at the urging of the Reverend and the entreaties of his mother, prepares a final religious statement, although it's far from clear that he has embraced what was once his Christian faith. The epilogue ends, as with the novel's beginning, with Clyde's parents engaged in missionary work. However, they have moved to San Francisco to escape the publicity associated with Clyde's conviction. With them is their daughter's illegitimate son who uncannily resembles Clyde at the novel's inception. The implications should be clear. Religion, viewed by Dreiser as a false palliative for the poor, offers no path to economic or spiritual salvation. Nor, for that matter, does capitalism since Dreiser, a Communist sympathizer, had little faith in the ability of market forces to provide opportunities for those less privileged.

Permit me to quote one passage from the boating scene—moments before Roberta's death by drowning—to convey Dreiser's style.

And the moment which he or something had planned for him, and which was now to decide his fate at hand! The moment of action—of crisis! All that he needed to do now was to turn swiftly and savagely to one side or the other—leap up—upon the left wale or right and upset the boat; or, failing that, rock it swiftly, and if Roberta protested too much, strike her with the camera in his hand, or one of the oars at his right. It could be

done—it could be done—swiftly and simply, were he now of the mind and heart, or lack of it—to success—of course—to Sondra and happiness—a new and greater and sweeter life than any he had ever known. (Dreiser, 2010, p. 512)

An American Tragedy is a panoramic portrayal of the failure of “the American dream”. It is a national story, its drama stretched between the coasts, and it begins in the heartland.

How did critics respond to Dreiser’s fiction? Irving Howe considered Dreiser as “among the American giants, the very few American giants we have had” (Howe cited by Glick, 1998). For Alfred Kazin, Dreiser was “stronger than all the others of his time, and at the same time more poignant; greater than the world he has described, but as significant as the people in it” (Kazin, 1995, p. 89). “No other American of his generation”, suggested H. L. Mencken in a commemorative eulogy, “left so wide and handsome a mark upon the national letters”. He added, “American writing, before and after his time, differed almost as much as biology before and after Darwin. He was a man of large originality, of profound feeling, and of unshakable courage” (Mencken cited in Riggio, 2000).

Nevertheless, Dreiser had his distractors. English critic Arnold Bennett, in reviewing *An American Tragedy* in the *London Evening Standard* in 1926, was dismissive, suggesting that it “is written abominably by a man who evidently despises style, elegance, clarity, even grammar”. He added, “Dreiser simply did not know how to write, never did know, never wanted to know” (Bennett cited in Streissguth, 2007, p. 164).

Perhaps the harshest criticism of all came from English publisher and editor Rupert Hart-Davis, who noted in a letter written in 1959, “Theodore Dreiser’s books are enough to stop me in my tracks . . . —that slovenly turgid style describing endless business deals, with a seduction every hundred pages as light relief”. He dismissively concluded, “If he’s the great American novelist, give me the Marx Brothers every time” (Hart-Davis, 1982, p. 122).

Nevertheless, the Modern Library’s 1998 list of the 100 Best English-language novels of the 20th century ranks *An American Tragedy* 16th and *Sister Carrie* 33rd, which suggests that lasting influence of Dreiser’s fiction.

As our readers may know, Dreiser’s previous novel, *Sister Carrie*, had its own challenges given its salacious content. The book is about a young woman’s devolution from ingénue to vamp as she pursues what might disingenuously be characterized as the American Dream. It was accepted for publication by Doubleday & McClure Company, but the offer was withdrawn until Dreiser, at the suggestion of Frank Norris, who was the reader there, insisted that the terms of the publishing contract be met. However, only a limited number of copies were printed, and the book was reviewed only because Norris personally sent copies to reviewers (Adler, 2007, pp. 69-71).

**MFS: Sadly, Frank Norris died at age 32, but left behind works that impacts us today.
In your mind, what was his greatest literary creation?**

DS: Norris’s death was premature. He was only 32 and died due to peritonitis caused by a ruptured appendix. Both *The Octopus: A Story of California* (1901) and *The Pit: A Story of Chicago* (1903) were meant to be part of *The Epic of Wheat* trilogy. The third novel in that series, *The Wolf: A Story of Empire*, was never completed due to Norris’s untimely death. *The Octopus* and *The Pit* were very successful. Published posthumously in 1903, *The Pit* sold

more than any other novel that year. Indeed, it was celebrated as “the Great American Novel” (McElrath, 1992, p. ix).

Arguably the trilogy was conceived as the means of fulfilling Norris’s dream of publishing the Great American Novel. Certainly, he envisioned the trilogy as presenting the “whole congeries of forces” including “social tendencies” in order to provide an analysis not of men, “but of man”. How would he attempt to accomplish this? The trilogy would depict the epic journey of wheat from its inception, which included tensions between wheat growers in California and the railway authorities (the first novel); the financial speculation on wheat occurring at the Chicago Board of Trade, which is embedded in a failed romance (the second novel), and, finally, the social and economic dynamics of wheat consumption in a region of Europe beset by famine (the third novel, which he had only begun working on).

Mencken, in assessing Dreiser and Norris, acknowledged that had Norris lived “fifteen years longer, [he] might have overtaken Dreiser, and even surpassed him” (Mencken, 1917, p. 71). He conceded that *Vandover and the Brute*, published posthumously in 1914, might support that argument. However, Mencken was critical of *The Epic of Wheat. The Octopus*, he conceded, had “some excellent writing” (Mencken, 1917, p. 71). Nevertheless, he objected to its turn toward mysticism. Mencken reserved greater criticism for *The Pit*, which he felt pandered to popular passion for romance.

Nevertheless, I wish Norris had had those fifteen years and more. Not only for him to complete *The Epic of Wheat*, but in order to witness how his fiction might have matured and developed.

While today Dreiser’s *An American Tragedy* is more well-known and celebrated, I believe *McTeague* is the better novel. It’s more raw, and it delves deeper into the dark psyche of our animalistic impulses. Readers who are drawn to Naturalism for its frank depiction of human brutality, will find *McTeague* a fascinating read.

Frank Norris has been criticized for his antisemitism, which is evident not only in his grotesque portrayal of the junk dealer Zerkow in *McTeague*, but also in the character Behrman, the local representative for the railway company, in *The Octopus*. Elisa New, Professor of English at Harvard, makes a case that in all of American literature it’s hard to identify a more villainous Jew than Zerkow. She provides some illustrations of how Norris demonizes Zerkow to his readers when he describes him as a “dry, shriveled old man of sixty odd” who has the “thin eager catlike lips of the covetous”, as well as “the fingers of a man who accumulates but never disburses”. These repugnant descriptions are emblematic of his distasteful characterization of Zerkow, “the Jew”, throughout the novel. Indeed, New contends that the character Zerkow is “the 20th century’s greatest golem” (New, 2013).

MFS: Very few writers have had their work transferred to the stage, opera and the film noir. Why have the novels of Frank Norris and Theodore Dreiser lent themselves so effectively to these various presentations?

DS: The novels by Frank Norris and Theodore Dreiser are melodramatic. They’re tragic. They’re luridly sensational. Here’s a case of author doubling where the writers have much more in common with one another than the differences that divide them. Their “supersized” dramas naturally lend these works to film, theater, and opera, and musicals.

The best cinematic rendering of American Naturalism in recent years is *There Will Be Blood* (2007). Arguably, Norris and Dreiser's literary influence is evident. The movie is an adaptation of Upton Sinclair's novel *Oil!*, which was published in 1927.

Four silent films were based on Frank Norris's fiction, two for *McTeague*, one for *The Pit*, and one for *Moran of the Lady Letty*. The most famous film was Erich von Stroheim's adaptation of *McTeague*, which was entitled *Greed* (1924). In all, some 42 reels were made, accounting for more than 85 hours of film. The original run time was nearly eight hours long. It was later edited down to approximately two-and-a-half hours. It's a fascinating movie, on par with Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927). Some critics regard it as possibly the finest film ever made. Mordaunt Hall, reviewing for *The New York Times* when the film was released in 1924, acknowledged its allure: "Mr. von Stroheim has not missed a vulgar point, but on the other hand his direction of the effort is cunningly dramatic (Hall, 1924.). More recently, *McTeague* was made into an opera by composer William Bolcom with a libretto by Arnold Weinstein and Robert Altman. It premiered at the Lyric Opera in Chicago in 1992. Norris's novel *The Pit* was adapted for theater (1904).

Theodore Dreiser's novel *Sister Carrie* was made into a film, *Carrie*, with Laurence Olivier and Jennifer Jones in 1952. A musical production was performed by the Riga State Operetta Theatre in 1978 with the composition by Raimonds Pauls and lyrics by Jānis Peters. *An American Tragedy* was adapted for film by Director Josef von Sternberg in 1931. German director Erwin Piscator revised it for theater and premiered it in Vienna in 1932. Three years later it was performed in the United States. Two subsequent productions have occurred in America, the last of which was in 2010. It was reconceived as a musical in 1995 with the composition by Charles Strouse, the lyrics by Lee Adams and Mark St. Germain, and the libretto by David Shaber and Mark St. Germain. *An American Tragedy* has been developed into an opera with music composed by Tobias Picker and a libretto by Gene Scheer. It premiered at the Metropolitan Opera in New York City in 2005. Picker has also composed an opera with lyrics by Scheer based on Émile Zola's novel *Thérèse Raquin* (2001), which I saw performed at the Chicago Opera Theater in 2015.

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