

**Spaces of dreams and places of destruction in
“*An American Tragedy*” of Theodore Dreiser
and in the novel by Jack London, “*Martin Eden*”**

***Przestrzenie marzeń i miejsca destrukcji
w „Tragedii Amerykańskiej” Teodora Dreisera
i w powieści Jacka Londona „Martin Eden”***

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Abstract

The turn of the 19th and the 20th centuries is a time of huge changes, both social and economic, constituting the background of the statements of naturalists writers reporting the observed changes on the pages of their novels. In America, these include Jack London and Theodore Dreiser, who, with their journalistic insight, present their heroes and their inner struggles inscribed in the surrounding reality. The main character of “An American Tragedy” Clyde Griffiths and the title Martin Eden are going through a difficult path from their childhood, the age and the state of innocence to adulthood or cognition. Gaining a life experience for both ends tragically.

Abstrakt

Przełom XIX i XX stulecia to czas ogromnych przemian zarówno społecznych jak i gospodarczych, stanowiące tło wypowiedzi pisarzy naturalistów relacjonujących obserwowane zmiany na kartach swoich powieści. W Ameryce są

to między innymi Jack London i Teodor Dreiser, którzy z iście reporterską wnikliwością przedstawiają swoich bohaterów i ich wewnętrzne zmagania wpisane w otaczającą ich rzeczywistość. Główna postać „Tragedii Amerykańskiej” Clyde Griffiths oraz tytułowy Martin Eden przechodzą trudną drogę od dzieciństwa, wieku oraz stanu niewinności do dorosłości czyli poznania. Zdobywanie życiowego doświadczenia dla obu kończy się tragicznie.

Spaces of dreams and places of destruction in *An American Tragedy* of Theodore Dreiser and in the novel by Jack London, *Martin Eden*

The end of the nineteenth and early twentieth century is not only the period of the great industrial revolution in America, but also the time of social changes in the spirit of the right to life and struggle for existence in terms of, among others, fashionable then, Herbert Spencer and other evolutionists and socialists. In literature, naturalists have a chance to present the surrounding reality on the pages of their novels. On one hand, they supported the stubbornness and aspirations of the individual to a better life for themselves; on the other they perceived all the symptoms of social pathology, which prevented many people from their own development and decent existence. In contrast to earlier literary trends, naturalism assumed that a novel should show real life exactly as it looks, without any changes introduced due to the reader's sensitivity. Naturalists, unlike the Romantics or the Realists, did not spare the recipient of drastic details concerning mainly the fate of the weakest and wronged people belonging to the low classes of the society. Writers were fascinated by the individual's struggle for survival in conditions that exceeded human strength. Particularly interesting for writers naturalists turned out to be the working class that emerged before their eyes, unbelievably exploited by the capitalists, which had to affect the level of life that deprived the human dignity. Representatives of both workers and capitalists have often become the main heroes of the prose of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

The initial effect of the naturalistic depiction of the world was the opposition of the establishment towards writers, even combined with the ban on publishing certain books. Works belonging to this trend, including those of London's and Dreiser's, were considered too "predatory", disgusting and demoralizing especially young readers. Since the heroes of these novels are mainly people entering adulthood, starting an independent life – that is far from dreams. Accustomed to the pre-existing literary standards, representatives of the older generation of American readers were not able to adopt a naturalistic narrative style, including drastic descriptions of the characters and reality they lived in, in the form of shocking and depressing relations (documents). As the American literary scholar and critic Frederick J. Hoffman explained:

"The document" was the goal set by the novelist (...) Not only mere awareness of contemporary or historical issues, but industrious and diligent re-

search into the facts, collation of facts observed, a journalistic zeal in accounting for a mass of detail: these were the order of the day. Dreiser, Norris, Crane and London had all served their time as reporters; the reportorial experience either was the sole formal training or loomed much larger than any other in the discipline of the novelist. The diligently kept – up notebook, the habit of “moving into” an area of observation, assiduous “reading in” or “doing up” a subject – these were regarded as necessary preliminaries for the naturalist literary act¹.

Among American writers who in their work were merging socialist thoughts with Darwin, Spencer and Nietzsche’s theories of struggle for existence, including the fascination for above-average and strong individuals, Jack London and Theodore Dreiser must be named. In the works of these writers, we are dealing with the vivisection of human fates observed and described in an expressive way and often “without anesthesia”. London and Dreiser specialized in presenting all evil that can cause degradation, collapse or annihilation of weaker individuals, while distancing themselves from the unambiguously negative assessment of careers of their heroes who, in the interests of their own good, could ruthlessly climb the social ladder, regardless of others². Undoubtedly, in the works of Jack London and Theodore Dreiser, it is easy to see not only the theories and ideas that were then fashionable, which influenced the crystallization of social and political movements of a democratic and libertarian nature in the 20th century but also echoes of populism, which sound well even today³.

London and Dreiser created works expressing the solidarity and care of writers for American society, which from the end of the 19th century was somehow forced to participate (actively or passively) in the process of building a modern capitalist economy. As far as possible, it is empathic literature depicting human’s faith in their own strength and dreams, to make their lives better and more beautiful, in spite of the growing problems. Unfortunately, London and Dreiser, as insightful observers of the ongoing social transformations and changes in the American economy, could not omit sensitive places on the pages of their works – at the meeting point of their heroes’ dreams about a better existence based on the work of “human hands”

¹ F. J. Hoffman, *The Modern Novel in America*, Louisiana, 1956, pp. 35-36.

² The dilemma whether an individual has the right to care for his own life (happiness), if it happens at the expense of another human being, still exists and stimulates the speculation of future generations of ordinary people, philosophers, scientists. See: Ł. Nysler, Humanism and Naturalism – contemporary argument over man, “Bez Dogmatu” 2006, No. 67, pp. 27-30.

³ See: W. Tulibacki, Morality objectified in the perspective of anthropological naturalism, “Ruch Filozoficzny” 1999, No. 3/4, pp. 307-324.

or “a bit of luck” and places of destruction caused by various disturbances of fate, reasons dependent and independent of human will. They could not, therefore, not notice many aspects of “ordinary people’s” lives, to the present day depressingly suggestive, leaving no one indifferent to their fate. Hence, as an example, insightfully (and almost vividly, with photographic precision) described in the pages of many novels and short stories, references to the myth of “equal opportunities”, persuasive accusations of the privileged class for social insensitivity, which was analyzed, among others, by Henry Steel Commager:

The impulse behind Jack London (...) and Theodore Dreiser around the turn of the century, (...) was not primarily philosophical (...) The disillusion to which they yielded so eagerly found its primary justification, after all, not in science but in economy. It was because of the air of the nineties and of the new century was already heavy with pessimism that artists found it so easy to take refuge in scientific doctrines which seemed to provide some ultimate justification for that pessimism. These doctrines (...) not only explained away evil, (...) but seemed to wash away guilt. For they shifted the responsibility for the sorry mess into which mankind had drifted from society itself to the cosmos. It was a new Calvinism, (...) denying free will to men, it placed responsibility for what seemed evil not on an omnipotent and inscrutable God but on an omnipotent and inexorable Nature⁴.

In many naturalistic novels (created not only in America), to the eyes of the readers of that time a world full of brutality, falsehood, hatred, cowardice, ruthlessness and all other atrocities that were prepared by privileged people to the rest of society was revealed⁵. The writers, London and Dreiser, interesting to us, presented these facts almost laconically, although unquestionably with journalistic accuracy, and thus leaving the reader no doubt that they raise very complex problems of an individual’s existence in American society at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, however many of them are current to this day. These “places” (“spaces”) of dreams and destruction that concern heroes from *An American Tragedy* or the novel *Martin Eden*, at least I have such an impression, “strip” us out of today’s illusions that similar experiences (agonizing over this subject) are a matter of the past.

Writers such as Dreiser or London constructed their works based on careful analysis of real facts and on-going events. *An American Tragedy* by

⁴ H. S. Commager, *The American Mind*, New Haven, 1950, p. 109.

⁵ It is worth comparing London’s or Dreiser’s naturalism with for example writing of Émile Zola. See.: H. Suwała, *Birth of Zola’s naturalism*, „Przegląd Humanistyczny” 1995, No. 6, pp. 63-72. n turn, B. Błasiak, Lycurgus and Łódź wrote about urban issues in the works of Dreiser and Władysław Reymont, „Tygiel Kultury” 2000, No. 4/6, pp. 105-117.

Theodore Dreiser and *Martin Eden* by Jack London are novels with many common features. Both refer to the great American mystification called the “American Dream”, and further they depict the devastating impact of the above mentioned dream on the lives of young people with ideals who want to realize their ambitions.

Novels selected for analysis in this article, show the real situation of the working class, its misery and hopelessness, which are opposed to wealth and privileging of the higher classes. It is on the example of episodes from the main characters’ lives that I wanted to bring closer the most important moments in them. These are the flashes when they dream of lives according to their expectations and moments lasting for “eternity” when they lose their illusions forever. As you can guess, the desires should be accompanied by joy, friendly souls and cozy places. Is this so in case of full of dreams young heroes – Clyde Griffiths and Martin Eden? And what happened when those dreams of Clyde Griffiths and Martin Eden were ruined? They are lonely and miserable; however, they accept their fate with dignity, as if agreeing with the fact that life does not have a good ending.

Martin Eden, devastated and indifferent to the world around him, cannot stand the presence of other people. Any attempt of contact, even with the closest and most devoted friends, causes him unbearable pain.

He was becoming anti-social. Daily he found it a severer strain to be decent with people. Their presence perturbed him, and the effort of conversation irritated him. They made him restless, and no sooner was he in contact with them than he was casting about for excuses to get rid of them⁶.

Martin feels completely exhausted. The immensity of work, which aim was to lead him to a happy life by the side of his beloved woman, only emphasized the senselessness of existence and shallowness of Ruth’s personality:

It was an idealized Ruth he had loved, an ethereal creature of his own creating, the bright and luminous spirit of his love poems. The real bourgeois Ruth, with all the bourgeois failings and with the hopeless cramp of the bourgeois psychology in her mind, he had never loved⁷.

Martin’s space of suffering is locked in his head. Losing the ideals he used to believe in causes apathy and conviction about the pointlessness of further life:

⁶ J. London, *Martin Eden*, New York 1915, p. 401.

⁷ Ibid. p. 395.

Physically he was all right. It was his “thinkmachine” that had gone wrong, and there was no cure for that except to get away to the South Seas⁸.

A sea voyage planned as an escape from the problems of everyday life turns out to be their final solution. He even gives up the love of a friend from old days, Lizzie Connolly, although he feels that living with her could become a salvation:

“I could die for you! I could die for you!” – Lizzie’s words were ringing in his ears⁹.

Martin Eden, however, does not want to live – he decides to commit suicide. He considers himself a wreck of a man, he does not want to experience other failures, and he cannot see the possibility of returning to the world of people.

Clyde Griffiths ends his life in a way completely different from London’s hero. Sentenced to death on an electric chair for murdering pregnant Roberta Alden, he spends his last months in the Auburn prison.

Two days later, the proper commitment papers having been prepared and his mother notified of the change but not permitted to accompany him, Clyde was removed to Auburn, the Western penitentiary of the State of New York, where in the “death house” or “Murderers’ Row,” as it was called--as gloomy and torturous an inferno as one could imagine any human compelled to endure--a combination of some twenty-two cells on two separate levels--he was to be restrained until ordered retried or executed¹⁰.

Isolated from his previous life Clyde, however, is for all the time, surrounded by the love of his mother, who does not stop, even for a moment, taking up actions in order to commute her son’s sentence.

Not having been permitted to accompany him, she had waited over for a final conference with Belknap and Jephson, as well as to write in full her personal impressions in connection with her son’s departure-- (Those nervously searing impressions!) And although anxious to find a room somewhere near the penitentiary, she hurried first to the office of the penitentiary immediately upon her arrival at Auburn and, after presenting an order from Justice Oberwaltzer as well as a solicitous letter from Belknap and Jephson urging the courtesy of a private interview with Clyde to begin with at least, she was permitted to see her son in a room entirely apart from the old death house¹¹.

⁸ Ibid. p. 404.

⁹ Ibid. p. 391.

¹⁰ T. Dreiser, *An American Tragedy*, New York 1925, p. 525.

¹¹ Ibid. p. 531.

Despite her son's guilt, Elvira Griffiths does not leave him even for a moment. The tragedy of the son becomes the mother's drama. Although she cannot change Clyde's fate in any way, she at least tries to spend as much time with him as possible. Sharing a child's tragedy is an expression of the mother's love:

"My poor boy! My beloved son! But we mustn't give way. No. No. 'Behold I will deliver thee out of the snares of the wicked.' God has not deserted either of us. And He will not--that I know. 'He leadeth me by the still waters.' 'He restoreth my soul.' We must put our trust in Him. Besides," she added, briskly and practically, as much to strengthen herself as Clyde, "haven't I already arranged for an appeal? It is to be made yet this week. They're going to file a notice. And that means that your case can't even be considered under a year¹².

In addition to his mother, Griffiths is also accompanied by a clergyman, Reverend McMillan, who, at the request of Elvira, is to give her son consolation.

(...) she was asking the Rev. Duncan McMillan, a young minister whom she had encountered in Syracuse, in the course of her work there, to come and see him. He was so spiritual and so kindly. And she was sure, if he would but come, that Clyde would find him a helpful and a strong support¹³.

(...) the Rev. Duncan setting forth for Auburn. And once there--having made it clear to the warden what his true purpose was--the spiritual salvation of Clyde's soul, for his own, as well as his mother and God's sake, he was at once admitted to the death house and to Clyde's presence-- the very door of his cell, where he paused and looked through, observing Clyde¹⁴.

Full of faith and love for his fellow human beings, the clergyman only wants to convert the sinner because he is initially completely convinced of his guilt. However, he sees the human sense of being with Clyde and supporting him.

I bring you, Clyde, the mercy and the salvation of your God. He has called on me and I have come. He has sent me that I may say unto you though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be white--like snow. Though they be red, like crimson, they shall be as wool. Come now, let us reason together with the Lord¹⁵.

¹² Ibid. p. 534.

¹³ Ibid. p. 540.

¹⁴ Ibid. p. 576.

¹⁵ Ibid. p. 577

However, with time, getting to know the boy better, Reverend McMillan begins to doubt Clyde's guilt. The conversion process of this young sinner occupies the pastor's mind more and more. Almost unknowingly, Reverend McMillan becomes attached to the boy, and his patience and honesty are rewarded by Clyde's confession of so far hidden faults. A boy through opening himself before the clergyman becomes less lonely and reconciled to his fate:

The Reverend McMillan hearing all this--and never in his life before having heard or having had passed to him so intricate and elusive and strange a problem--and because of Clyde's faith in and regard for him, enormously impressed. And now sitting before him quite still and pondering most deeply, sadly and even nervously--so serious and important was this request for an opinion--something which, as he knew, Clyde was counting on to give him earthly and spiritual peace¹⁶.

Deprivation of liberty and the threat of imminent death paradoxically make Griffiths, or rather, as they call it in the House of Death, "number 77221", return to the bosom of the family, with whom he broke the bonds in his pursuit of success. His contact with his mother is now extremely close. And what is more, Clyde gains a real friend in the person of Reverend McMillan.

Still--there was the Reverend McMillan--he was a very fair and just and merciful man¹⁷.

However, even such devoted people are not able to fill the emptiness felt by the Dreiser's hero caused by the near and inevitable vision of death. Although he realizes that he is deeply loved, the young man cannot cope with the situation in which he found himself. Convinced of the best intentions of his relatives, he feels lonely and abandoned.

Lord, it was all so terrible! He was so alone, even in these last few and elusive hours (...), with his mother and also the Reverend McMillan (...), but neither understanding¹⁸.

The authors of the analyzed novels illustrate the difficult and painful paths of the main characters to achieve their goals. It turns out that despite sacrifices and constant struggle, they are overwhelmed by a spiritual emptiness, in their opinion life is a road to nowhere, at the end of which there is only the bitterness of failure, disappointment and defeat. There is neither place for

¹⁶ Ibid. p. 587.

¹⁷ Ibid. p. 591.

¹⁸ Ibid. p. 597.

despair because of failure, nor for a happy ending – the life of an ordinary mortal only goes under the profound influence of cruel reality. And yet the heroes of Dreiser and London, although created as the average individuals of American society, are not so ordinary. They are “of flesh and blood” and are far from being perfect. Seemingly mundane, but endowed with vitality, exuberant ambition, readiness to overcome all difficulties in pursuing the set goal. They are in a way flat, yet full of stubbornness, as if uncomplicated but extremely strong, bland but desperately fighting for a better tomorrow. In other words, these characters, pre-shaped by the authors, as not distinguishing “cogs” from the social machine, evolve into the role of overly elaborated naturalistic protagonists.

The character of “a naturalist tale” must possess a violent and energetic greatness; and this greatness cannot be contained within the walls of ordinary circumstances:

Terrible things must happen to the characters of the naturalistic tale. They must be twisted from the ordinary, wrenched from the quiet, uneventful round of everyday life and flung into the throes of a vast and terrible drama that works itself out in unleashed passions, in blood and in sudden death (...) The enormous, the formidable, the terrible, is what counts; no teacup tragedies here¹⁹.

Both Clyde Griffiths and Martin Eden, according to the idea of naturalism, are ready for a long and exhausting fight to survive. For this purpose, they simply “naturally” try to overcome countless adversities on their paths, even if they are condemned to the tragic end of their journeys on earth. On the other hand, they have the features of modernist characters, full of internal contradictions, pessimism, convinced that little depends on them, and evil lurks everywhere.

In *An American Tragedy*, Dreiser describes the simple and poor life of Clyde Griffiths, the son of street preachers from Kansas City. An ambitious and hardworking boy who is ashamed of his parents, practices in several stores to be promoted at all costs, which is illustrated, among others, by the following quotes from the novel:

The boy moved restlessly from one foot to the other, keeping his eyes down, and for the most part only half singing. A tall and as yet slight figure, surmounted by an interesting head and face-- white skin, dark hair--he seemed more keenly observant and decidedly more sensitive than most of the others--appeared indeed to resent and even to suffer from the position in which he found himself. Plainly pagan rather than religious, life interested him, although as yet he was not fully aware of this. All that could be truly said of

¹⁹ F. J. Hoffman, *The Modern Novel in America*, Louisiana, 1956, pp. 43-44.

him now was that there was no definite appeal in all this for him. He was too young, his mind much too responsive to phases of beauty and pleasure which had little, if anything, to do with the remote and cloudy romance which swayed the minds of his mother and father²⁰.

...he had been conscious of the fact that the work his parents did was not satisfactory to others,--shabby, trivial. And always he was thinking of what he would do, once he reached the place where he could get away²¹.

Later in the same year, wishing to get out of school because he already felt himself very much belated in the race (...) A sign--"Boy Wanted"--since it was directly on his way to school, first interested him. Yet this interesting position, after due consultation with his mother, he decided to take²².

He was to be a bell-boy in the great Hotel Green-Davidson. He was to wear a uniform and a handsome one. He was to make--but he did not tell his mother at first what he was to make (...) But he did say that he was to have his meals free²³.

Well-groomed and handsome, he notices that his new image has a positive impact on the reception of the surroundings. He starts to be noticed by women; the first symptoms of social success appear. Unfortunately, the good streak is interrupted by a tragic accident. Clyde behind the wheel, returning with his friends from the picnic, accidentally runs over a girl who is killed on the spot. Fear of being responsible pushes him to escape the city. After short wanderings under an assumed name, our hero meets his uncle Samuel, a wealthy entrepreneur from New York. He immediately takes the job offered at the relative's factory, realizing that it may be a turn in his career that exceeds his wildest expectations. As befits the Dreiser's character, Clyde is ready for anything, just to get out of the trap and become "someone". As Henry Steel Commager writes:

To Dreiser, man was not a wild animal but a poor fool, and pity intruded itself perversely upon his pages. (...) His emphasis was rather on the remorselessness of fate than on his brutality. (...) Dreiser was obsessed with power, but it was (...) the more complicated and less amenable power of social and economic machinery²⁴.

The second hero of the naturalistic novels chosen by me, the title character of Jack London's novel, *Martin Eden*, was forced to earn his own living from an early age. A boy from a large family of a poor worker, signed on the ship and spent most of his youth at sea. A coincidence in his life played a key

²⁰ T. Dreiser, *An American Tragedy*, New York 1925, p. 2.

²¹ *Ibid.* p. 6.

²² *Ibid.* p. 16.

²³ *Ibid.* p. 25.

²⁴ H. S. Commager, *The American Mind*, New Haven, 1950, p. 113.

role as well. Through a twist of fate by meeting a representative of the upper class, Martin found himself “in the salons”. A poorly clothed, clumsy and rough sailor, throughout the evening, admired the stylish interior and the uncommon beauty of the hosts’ language and manner. Martin concentrated all his interest and delight on the house owner’s daughter Ruth Morse.

He likened her to a pale gold flower upon a slender stem. No, she was a spirit, a divinity, a goddess; such sublimated beauty was not of the earth. Or perhaps the books were right, and there were many such as she in the upper walks of life²⁵.

Meeting the girls from the upper class becomes a turning point on the paths of both young men, but the similarities between them end here. For each, a beautiful representative of the privileged class symbolizes something else. For Clyde, Sondra is a woman who can make dreams come true for a peaceful and prosperous life. Martin is strongly and selflessly emotionally involved. Ruth is everything he wants, a woman of his life for whom he wants to improve himself.

How do the dream spaces of Clyde Griffiths and Martin Eden change?

Clyde Griffiths is an ambitious man striving to make his dreams come true straight ahead without looking back. He is not a heroic type. On the contrary, he is an ordinary, uneducated boy completely deprived of a spiritual signpost, ready for anything to achieve success. Despite being raised by preachers, he did not learn morality from home. The first manifestation of his depravation is the escape right after a car accident, which resulted in the death of a random child. Initially, he shows no remorse and the only thing that troubles Clyde is to submit to a possible punishment, which would exclude his plans for the future. And these plans are very specific from the very beginning. And Clyde feels he has to focus on the present, take care of the new image, to adapt to the new environment.

And very often one or another of these young beauties was accompanied by some male in evening suit, dress shirt, high hat, bow tie, white kid gloves and patent leather shoes, a costume which at that time Clyde felt to be the last word in all true distinction, beauty, gallantry and bliss. To be able to wear such a suit with such ease and air! To be able to talk to a girl after the manner and with the sang-froid of some of these gallants! what a true measure of achievement! No good-looking girl, as it then appeared to him, would have anything to do with him if he did not possess this standard of equipment. It was plainly necessary--the thing. And once he did attain it--was able to wear

²⁵ J. London, *Martin Eden*, New York 1915, pp. 4-5.

such clothes as these-- well, then was he not well set upon the path that leads to all the blisses?²⁶

Clyde wants to have money to ensure him comfortable life and providing adequate entertainment. The boy does not think about anything important or sublime, he does not care about any ideals, he is just determined to get out of the poverty he has experienced in his family home. His eagerness to work is definitely positive about this hero. Griffiths does not wait for the proverbial “golden rain”, he takes his future into his own hands, hoping that a hard effort will result in good payment. However, the reality turns out to be more complicated and gloomy: the dreams of breaking out of poverty will not become true thanks to the right attitude. The boy quickly realizes that it is not so easy to change the designated place in the social hierarchy, so he tries to act “against the law”. A momentary breakdown, an escape that is a manifestation of cowardice and a change of the name are only small obstacles for him on the way to a clearly set goal. Here, the lack of a moral compass turns out to be very helpful – the boy does not think about what he should do, he is ruled by a strong self-preservation instinct and there is no place to discuss additional aspects of events (moral or ethical type). He knows that he must do anything to survive. It is not that he is a bad man, as the girl died in an accident. Yet, he displaces the guilty conscience and erases the memory of responsibility, because it would impede his aspirations.

In a new place, Griffiths, freed from the uncomfortable past, and given another chance by his uncle, gets to work again. He is getting better and better, which increases his ambition. Now he is not so much fantasizing about improving the standard of his life, but he wants to change it completely. He matured, became a handsome and promising man, who in addition arouses the interest of the girl from the upper classes – Sondra. From then on, Clyde sees himself as a wealthy entrepreneur, a respected personality, a member of the high society... And all this can finally become true thanks to the marriage with the rich man’s daughter.

...did not heaven itself await him? Sondra, Twelfth Lake, society, wealth, her love and beauty. He grew not a little wild in thinking of it all. Once he and she were married, what could Sondra’s relatives do? What, but acquiesce and take them into the glorious bosom of their resplendent home at Lycurgus or provide for them in some other way--he to no doubt eventually take some place in connection with the Finchley Electric Sweeper Company. And then would he not be the equal, if not the superior, of Gilbert Griffiths himself and all those others who originally had ignored him here--joint heir with Stuart to

²⁶ T. Dreiser, *An American Tragedy*, New York 1925, p. 17.

all the Finchley means. And with Sondra as the central or crowning jewel to so much sudden and such Aladdin-like splendor²⁷.

Following the story of the Dreiser's hero, at the same time we are witnessing the evolution of his dreams. We can see how much they depend on the position in which he is currently located. The dreams from Kansas City are striving for a small city, only in Chicago would they develop on a grand scale. The great agglomeration stimulates Clyde to grow, broadens his horizons, and dare to have ambitions so far completely unconscious.

For since leaving his home and work in Kansas City (...) he had developed a kind of self-reliance and smoothness of address such as one would scarcely have credited him with three years before²⁸. Clyde (...) at once wrote to his mother that he had actually secured a place with his uncle and was going to Lycurgus. Also that he was going to try to achieve a real success now²⁹.

Earlier, the boy did not even dream of rising above his class. In the case of Griffiths, the topography of his place of birth and growth fulfills the role of a barrier difficult to overcome for his expectations, a trap for dreams about freedom and independence. It is only after leaving the provinces that he frees himself from the noose of his old life. He feels a biological and mental strength in himself to build the future for himself without the ballast of a dark past.

In the case of Martin Eden, his space of dreams looks a bit different in comparison with the reasons of Clyde's actions. First of all, the professional work of London's hero was not caused by the desire to break free from a shameful (as was the case with Griffiths) environment. Martin was happy with his life in his family home and he did not dream about leaving it. His departure was the ordinary course of events related to the process of entering each normal human being into working life. The boy moved from port to port, being surrounded by people of his own kind, and not distinguishing himself from the crowd did not feel the need to make any changes. It was only an accidental meeting with Ruth Morse and the enchantment of this girl that became a turning point in the life of a young sailor. Eden experiences the feeling of love and begins to dream about sharing his life with his beloved:

He had met the woman at last – the woman that he had thought little about, not being given to thinking about women, but whom he had expected, in a remote way, he would sometime meet. (...) "Ruth." He had not thought a simple sound could be so beautiful. (...) "Ruth." It was a talisman, a magic word to conjure with. Each time he murmured it, her face shimmered before him, suf-

²⁷ Ibid. p. 307.

²⁸ Ibid. p. 113.

²⁹ Ibid. p. 125.

fusing the foul wall with a golden radiance. (...) he loved her. (...) as he gazed upon her he knew that he could die gladly upon a kiss. (...) at last he knew the meaning of life and why he had been born. (...) And he caught glimpses of their life, in the years to come³⁰.

At first, he himself was surprised by the changes he was going through. He wanted to become an interesting man who could deserve Ruth's love. Suddenly he noticed his faults that began to bother him. The coarse, staggering way of walking, so typical of sailors, became uncomfortable, just like the sense of humor so outstanding in the port pubs before, now made him feel ashamed. The new affection for Ruth also deprived him of his self-confidence he had been so proud of among the sea wolves he knew. Thanks to the girl, Martin not only did not doubt himself, but he began to dream of becoming someone better, someone worthy of her love. Under her influence, he undertook a beautiful challenge to work on himself, on his intellectual and spiritual development, in which he succeeded.

His swift development was a source of surprise and interest. She detected unguessed finenesses in him that seemed to bud, day by day, like flowers in congenial soil. She read Browning aloud to him, and was often puzzled by the strange interpretations he gave to mooted passages³¹.

Naturally, the path from the freighter's deck to the "upper-class saloons" had to be difficult, and actually for anyone but Martin, simply impossible to overcome. However, full of faith in close happiness, this simple boy initiates a fight with himself and the adversities of fate for the heart and the hand of his beloved. Driven solely by the desire to be with Ruth, this young man begins to improve his intellect, behaviour and attitude towards life. To be connected with Ruth, he was ready to do anything and he was not afraid of any effort. His work on himself in an extremely disciplined way leads to full success – Martin becomes a different man.

Spaces of destruction in *An American Tragedy* and *Martin Eden*

Clyde Griffiths, a simple boy from a small provincial town, could not understand the rules that govern obtaining success. He tried to fit into a better world that so unexpectedly appeared at hand, but he could not meet his requirements. He still felt best in the group of people from his own social class, because only among the workers he could actually "sparkle". He was undoubtedly more intelligent, which gave him an advantage over his friends.

³⁰ J. London, *Martin Eden*, New York 1915, pp. 25, 33, 58-59, 163.

³¹ *Ibid.* p. 69.

However, only people from lower origins saw changes in the appearance of the son of the preacher and appreciated the social refinement he achieved.

...he had outfitted himself with a new brown suit, cap, overcoat, socks, stickpin and shoes as near like those of his mentor as possible. And the costume became him well--excellently well--so much so that he was far more attractive than he had ever been in his life, and now, not only his parents, but his younger brother and sister, were not a little astonished and even amazed by the change³².

Among the representatives of the upper layer, Clyde was still nothing more than a parvenu. Although he tried to look good and flatter his patrons to enter their favours, it did not bring the expected results. Martin also continued to stand out in a visible way from the company which he began to spend time with. The image adopted in contacts with the Finchley family and their friends, though studied and corrected every day, was not consistent with the real nature of the boy, which is why he needed some space for his natural behavior so much. He found it only in the company of Roberta Alden, the daughter of a poor farmer, a naive factory worker for whom Griffiths appeared as a man from a dream. No wonder that the girl fell madly in love with him. Clyde, however, treated her only as a springboard from the hardships of life and an easy prey. In fact, he was thinking only about Sondra, with whom he wanted to lead a prosperous life. Unfortunately, Roberta's pregnancy and her hysterical demand for marriage complicated his plans.

For since he had been drawing closer and closer to Sondra, his hopes had heightened so intensely that, hearkening to this demand on the part of Roberta now, his brow wrinkled and his manner changed from one of comparatively affable, if nervous, consideration to that of mingled fear, opposition as well as determination to evade drastic consequence. For this would spell complete ruin for him, the loss of Sondra, his job, his social hopes and ambitions in connection with the Griffiths--all--a thought which sickened and at the same time caused him to hesitate about how to proceed. But he would not! he would not! He would not do this! Never! Never!! Never!!!³³

Wanting a relationship with Sondra, Clyde was considering getting rid of the embarrassing mistress standing on his way to happiness.

A noiseless, pathless, quarrelless solution of all his present difficulties, and only joy before him forever. Just an accidental, unpremeditated drowning – and then the glorious future would be his!³⁴

³² T. Dreiser, *An American Tragedy*, New York 1925, p. 36.

³³ Ibid. p. 298.

³⁴ T. Dreiser, *An American Tragedy*, Ontario 1964, p. 440.

In a word, Clyde allows the thought of murdering a girl he had harmed, but he cannot fully realize this dark intention. To some extent an unfortunate accident helps him. Roberta falls out of the boat herself, but Clyde, though he could, does not try to save her and the girl drowns. In fact, he has to suffer the consequences of life – he is arrested and judged.

Fate also did not spare the second of the earlier described characters. Martin Eden devoted two years to learn and as a result of hard work, he managed not only to catch up; but to definitely surpass intellectually his beloved and her limited family. What is more, he also left far behind all the authorities that the Morses used to refer to. Martin decided to use his knowledge in a practical way, namely passing it on to others in the form of literary work.

He was tortured by the exquisite beauty of the world, and wished that Ruth were there to share it with him. He decided that he would describe to her many of the bits of South Sea beauty. The creative spirit in him flamed up at the thought and urged that he recreate this beauty for a wider audience than Ruth. And then, in splendor and glory, came the great idea. He would write³⁵.

Unfortunately, none of the periodicals wanted to publish Martin's works – we read in London's novel, however, the fledgeling writer refused to back down writing more and more essays, poems, short stories and novels, then sending them to all possible publishing houses. Sure he found his own way to succeed, Martin proposed to Ruth. He won the girl's favour, but her parents were not delighted with the marriage of their only daughter with a poor boy coming from nowhere. The wedding was postponed and Martin returned to his creative work. Writing became the essence of his life. Hungry, cold, destitute, he thought about nothing but writing. The hero of London sees the fulfillment of his dreams in a much loftier way than people around him. For the entire Morse family, the peak of success is to achieve stable income at the level of the middle class, which allows a comfortable life so characteristic for the bourgeoisie. For Martin, his own work became the purpose of life. Unfortunately, in the period of the most intense work, when everyday problems are accompanied with disappointment connected with the lack of interest from the publishers, the boy cannot count on the smallest support from his beloved. Ruth does not understand him (she cannot see the fiancé's genius), and the only thing she can do is not to let him know that she is disappointed, because she expected a completely different attitude from Martin.

...he was always conscious of the fact that she did not approve what he was doing. She did not say so directly. Yet indirectly she let him understand it as clearly and definitely as she could have spoken it. (...) Her disappointment lay

³⁵ J. London, *Martin Eden*, New York 1915, p. 76.

in that this man she had taken to mould, refused to be moulded. To a certain extent she had found his clay plastic, then it had developed stubbornness, declining to be shaped in the image of her father (...) What was great and strong in him, she missed, or, worse yet, misunderstood. (...) She could not follow the flights of his mind, and when his brain got beyond her, she deemed him erratic. Nobody else's brain ever got beyond her. (...) wherefore, when she could not follow Martin, she believed the fault lay with him. It was the old tragedy of insularity trying to serve as mentor to the universal³⁶.

The fact that Martin Eden discovered his calling and refused to acknowledge the bourgeois standards of his fiancée's family, led to the inevitable breakdown of their relationship, which he could not understand. For the girl, breaking her engagement meant returning to the safe middle-class world. For Martin, the end of love became a significant defeat because it was the reason why he began to work on himself and create. Even when he gained fame and money, he was not able to enjoy them. The armor of his apathy has not been beaten by Ruth, who, in the face of the spectacular popularity of the previously despised boy, asked him for forgiveness. However, it was too late as Martin irretrievably lost the meaning of life.

Life was to him like strong, white light that hurts the tired eyes of a sick person. (...) In all truth, he was in the Valley of the Shadow, and his danger lay in that he was not afraid. If he were only afraid, he would make toward life. (...) Life was ill, or, rather, it had become ill – an unbearable thing³⁷.

The hero of London, not seeing a place for himself in a world which prevailing laws he cannot accept, simply decides to kill himself. On the contrary, Dreiser's hero, though he would like to, is not able to escape justice.

Both heroes of the analyzed novels by Dreiser and London ended the paths to their happiness in a dramatic way. Their dream of a better life (or perhaps just existence that could be tolerated worthily) did not come true. The combination of various social and human circumstances caused that both Clyde and Martin suffered a defeat that they could not (Clyde) or did not want (Martin) to get up of.

Clyde Griffiths, aiming for his goal in a ruthless manner, did not pay attention to the people of lower status standing in his way. Tangling up in relations with poor and insignificant people, he treated them instrumentally, without any respect, without thinking about their humanity. For Clyde, the goal was sanctifying the means, so the plan to remove an uncomfortable lover from his life seemed to him as a way to save himself from oppression.

³⁶ Ibid. p. 202.

³⁷ Ibid. pp. 407-409.

Although he did not murder Roberta (let us repeat that her death was the result of an unfortunate accident), however, he organized a trip to the lake and persuaded the pregnant girl for a romantic boat ride. But it was a sophisticated trick to free him from his obligations.

But how could any one even think of doing any such thing with calculation--deliberately? And yet--many people were drowned like that--boys and girls--men and women--here and there--everywhere the world over in the summer time. To be sure, he would not want anything like that to happen to Roberta. And especially at this time. He was not that kind of a person...

And if necessary strike a light blow, so as to stun her--no more--so that falling in the water, she will drown the more easily.

Do not fear!

But this--this--is not this that which you have been thinking and wishing for this while--you in your great need? And behold! For despite your fear, your cowardice, this--this--has been done for you. An accident--an accident--an unintentional blow on your part is now saving you the labor of what you sought, and yet did not have the courage to do!³⁸

Despite the fact that Clyde did not drown Roberta, the reader is convinced of his guilt for the girl's death. Griffiths himself was convinced of it until he died in the electric chair. It happened because his pursuit to achieve the goal killed in him this element of humanity, which is responsible for compassion, understanding and respect for another human being. The destruction of this hero began at the very beginning of his journey. A nice, polite and generally liked boy after a memorable car accident in Kansas City chooses to escape only to avoid uncomfortable questions and not to jeopardize his consequently built position. From then on, all his actions that were supposed to bring him happiness lead him to tragedy. Clyde does not try to change anything in himself, the only thing he worries about is his appearance, his inner life, or self-improvement are not his concern. The dream of success conveys all other aspects of his existence, and pangs of conscience are being pushed away. This young man is doomed to failure, because under the apparent disregard for others, there is a fear in him that does not allow him to risk discovering the truth about himself. Clyde remains a weak, frightened child who cannot find his place in an environment he aspires to belong to. Even a thoroughly analyzed and elaborated in every detail drastic ending of an undesirable relationship with the girl from the factory, is not carried out as planned. It means that the deprivation of this man does not reach so deeply that he cannot change. He feels guilty, but he cannot refrain from doing wrong.

³⁸ T. Dreiser, *An American Tragedy*, New York 1925, pp. 318, 340, 341, 356, 357.

The destruction of *Martin Eden* is diametrically different, although it also has a dramatic finale. This hero, on his way to success, achieves intellectual and spiritual heights. However, the position of a popular writer does not go hand in hand with personal happiness. He feels sorry that the woman he loved does not understand his choice and cannot appreciate his sacrifice. The character created by Jack London is a pure spirit, an individualist full of children's delight over the charm of the world around him. A dreamer who devotes himself completely to the idea of beauty and love. But once disappointed, he moves away from life. Surrounded by an insignificant crowd of flatterers, he ends his life on his own terms, as Ewa Kieruzalska – Gewartowska described it in the preface to the 15th Polish edition of the novel, "as a gesture of contempt for the world's smallness and the act of victory over himself".

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