

American Literature & Culture
Prof. Aysha Iqbal Vishwamohan
Department of Humanities and Social Science
Indian Institute of Technology, Madras
Mod 02 Lecture Number 10
Theodore Dreiser: An American Tragedy – Introduction (Lecture 9a)

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(Professor – student conversation starts)

Professor: So we are going to start with *An American Tragedy* by Theodore Dreiser. There are two concepts that are important with reference to this novel, realism and naturalism. And naturalism, we have been talking about this particular philosophy, this theory, its sub-genre of realism. There is realism and many a time people get confused, they think it is one and the same thing but it is definitely not. Realism is something else and what is realism, being true to life. So that means realism has no space for things like fantasy, Ok. Realism has no place for things like magic and those were the, so in that context we can say Jane Austen is a realist, yes please, saying something?

Student: (())

Professor: Yeah, George Eliot is a realist, now Ok. These are the realists of all times. Thackeray and Dickens, the great Victorian novelists they are realists; so real, in terms of what? Real life characters so there are no fairies or magicians or wizards here. So these are, he is talking about the real people in real society in actual locations. So you have Thackeray's London, you have Dickens' London and you have Jane Austen's England. Usually we call Jane Austen presenting us a slice of life. Ok so, that concept of verisimilitude which you are

very familiar with, right? So the slice of life Ok; this is what and she is an ivory tower realist, she lives in her own little world. We have seen someone else recently, Henry James who is again an ivory tower kind of a novelist. He also portrays a small section of society just like Jane Austen. So these are the kinds of, except the major difference we have talked about in Jane Austen and Henry James is that Henry James usually delves deep into the psychological aspects of his characters. Jane Austen just scratches the surface and does not probe to that extent. Otherwise they are quite similar. So that is realism for you.

Now coming to, coming to naturalism, this is a European input. We generally associate people such as Emile Zola and Claude Bernard, so these are the precursors of this entire idea, this entire movement of naturalism. I am very sure you might have come across the term *roman expérimental*, the experimental novel by, it's a work by Emile Zola Ok and in the same context he talks about how novel can be enriched as a genre if it has, there are experimentations done, experimentations by way of plot, character and setting. This is what we have been doing so far in our course.

So plot, character, focus on plot, character, setting and talking about naturalism, Emile Zola gives us a very famous term, that is the human beast; *La Bête humaine*, the French term *La Bête humaine* and you all know the human beast.

Now have you ever see an animal in his natural surroundings, not like your pet animal or the animal you keep in a cage? Have you ever seen a real animal in its real surroundings? Give me example. A monkey, so that is a real animal in real, actual surroundings. That's what you have seen at close quarters, fine. How does it behave? How do they, a group of monkeys behave in their natural surrounding?

Student: Territorial

Professor: They are very territorial, of course and, do you think they have a tendency to give way to their natural urges?

Student: Yeah

Professor: Yeah, wherever they are. Once they find themselves in the actual setting, in the actual surroundings there is no restrictions on them. Ok so there are no constraints, constraints that come from being bound by certain social conventions, by certain codes of conduct. So Henry James', now I, the reason I chose this particular novel at this particular

stage is right after Henry James where characters are always constrained by social conventions and codes and modes of behavior.

So please would you take it down? Where is the major difference between novelist like Henry James and a writer like Theodore Dreiser who represents naturalism in all his novels? So the novel in question here is *An American Tragedy* but he has also written a hugely famous, a very popular novel called *Sister Carrie*, *Sister Carrie*. Dreiser lived between 1871 to 1945, 1871 to 1945.

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Professor: Now when I give you these dates

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Professor: what are the things that come to your mind in American context, what has just gotten over and what he has witnessed?

Student: The World War II

Professor: The two world wars definitely and their impact. So his work is, in another words informed by the extremely turbulent world that he occupied. What happened just before, now 1871 an another seminal event that happened before 1871 in American History, what was that, a few years before?

Student: Civil War

Professor: The Civil War, 1861 to 1865, the American Independence happened in 1776, therefore we have Declaration of Independence, fourth July 1776, those are the dates, civil war 1861 to 65 Ok, so all these, so his characters are informed by these major upheavals in civilization in the human history. Any comments here, so what kind, then tell me what, what kind of novelist and what kind of a novel are you expecting? Because no point in just getting into the novel, that this is an American tragedy you see, tragedies are right there in the title in the novel. So this has got to be a tragedy, I mean he is not being very ironic about it. He is being very straight forward, this is an American tragedy. Ok, what are the, these, I have talked about the three major tumultuous events in American History. How would these events shape his, yeah output?

Student: Cynicism

Professor: Cynicism. Yes. Ok, I will give you another, now you know the First World War; the dates are 1914 to 18 and then immediately what followed? You have done The Great Gatsby.

Student: The Great Depression

Student: The Roaring Twenties

Professor: The Roaring Twenties and what was The Roaring Twenties, the other word for it?

Student: Jazz Age

Professor: Ok, the Jazz Age? The Jazz Age, Ok when you talk about Fitzgerald and you have done The Great Gatsby, Ok so we also talk about The Jazz Age, the Gilded Age, are you familiar with that word? The Gilded Age, what is it, why called The Roaring Twenties, why?

Student: Boom in the economy

Professor: Boom in the economy, Ok sudden boom in the economy and as you have seen in The Great Gatsby, conspicuous consumption, rampant materialism, change in social order, class distinction at its best, at its peak. Those are the key features, the hallmarks of this

particular period. Culturally of course, you had the Jazz music, that's a different kind of music, you know the movie, The Talented Mr. Ripley, you were, the other day you were, we were talking about it, right? So the Jazz music as opposed to the very traditional opera classical kind of, so what does it convey, connote? That the world is changing, the social order, the social fabric, the cultural system is changing. It was also a very fashion forward era.

Student: The Flapper

Professor: Exactly, good, very nice. the Flapper, the so-called Flapper, so those were the times, people who were like coming into vogue and fashion was actually being discussed, yeah so and the mass industrialization, Ok so people had access to fashion, they were talking, they had money to spend, and things were going very well. So that's the period immediately after the First World War, so we are into the 20. The second period that you had rightly mentioned was The Great Depression. Yeah, so after so much of consumption and materialism, you have The Great Depression, the complete downturn of economy. Now what were, all these things come into play when you read An American Tragedy? So what is happening in The Great Depression? What happened to people?

Student: (())

Professor: No money, Ok, crash of

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Student: Economy

Professor: Economy, Wall Street, Ok, people losing their investments,

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Professor: people losing their jobs. So unemployment all around, so from one end, even rich people you know, there were, there are examples of Wall Street bankers jumping off the Wall Street and committing suicide because they have lost everyone's money, Ok because of misguided, we have recently seen such a scenario in recent times also. Ok, the Lehman Brothers, yeah, Ok similar situation when people lost money and from one moment, they have everything and then next moment they have nothing. So lifetimes of savings and investments just gone, Ok so all these things come to inform an American tragedy. Therefore it is a mammoth novel, it is a huge novel, as you can see by the sheer size of it, and Dreiser is interested in all these things.

Now we will come to the tragedy part of it but we were talking about naturalism and we were talking about the human beast. Now Emile Zola gives us a term, the French naturalist, Emile Zola he gives us a term called human beast. And we have also talked about a human beast, we have talked about human beast and when we talk about animals living in their natural surroundings we talk about animals giving in to their natural urges. Now when we talk about humans behaving like beasts and giving in to their natural urges what do you think? This is what the novel is all about. What, what happens when human beings behave like?

Student: That's also influenced by the Second World War; there was so much cruelty that might be a reaction to Second World War

Professor: Ok, reaction to the Second World War definitely but the novel was published in 1925, Ok, yeah so my question is

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Professor: how did this formula of man being a human beast come?

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Professor: What are the features? If you,

Student: Anarchy

Professor: anarchy, Ok, social order, so disruption in social order, what are the other things when men giving to their, his natural urges? Greed, betrayal Ok and also Charles Darwin who gave us the theory of

Student: Survival of the fittest

Professor: Survival of the fittest so when human beast takes over, it is all about the survival of the fittest, and this is another major theme of this novel, survival of the fittest. So you don't find that in Henry James, which is so psychological, which is so interior. Here it is man in society, Ok, there you have man versus himself, right; people at conflicts with themselves. In

Isabel there is lot of internal conflicts, Ok. There are certain beliefs, principles, ideals that she upholds.

We have been talking about that, Ok. So she is not at war with the society around her, is she? No. We don't find characters at war. Even Gilbert Osmond is very happy, Ok. She picked him. Ok, that was her problem and therefore she is ready to take the consequences of it, Ok. He may have made his moves on her but then she fell for him and she took the bait and she also disregarded everybody's advice so it is not one man pitted against society. Here in naturalism, we find individual in a society and how he responds to it and usually we see a very ugly, a very beastly picture of mankind. So there are no redeeming features in people, in human beings in a naturalistic novel. Can you give me examples of other naturalistic works, anything that you have read?

Student: Miss Julie

Professor: Good, Miss Julie is a play, any novel? Ok and why do you think that it is naturalist?

Student: It described the pastoral

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Student: It describes the

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Student: the feudal society which exists

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Professor: And why do you think

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Professor: do you think you have the so called human beasts in that novel?

Student: (())

Professor: Ok and what do those beasts do? I am just trying to get your perspective on this. What do you understand that, there are human, so if you say you have read something which is naturalistic, then my question is what were the characters like?

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Student: The main character is (()), an eleven year old boy and

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Professor: Ok, give me the adjectives, don't tell me the entire plot, we don't have time, yeah

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Student: He is treated with unthinkable cruelty wealthy

Professor: Ok

Student: by his masters so I think, that was and that's the major theme throughout the novel, how the child servants are treated by the feudal lords

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Student: And there is (()) mention, there is lot of reference to like, human excreta

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Professor: human urges and yeah.

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Student: Like one of the boys had to clean

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Student: his master's shit

Professor: Yeah, so bodies

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Professor: Ok so bodies and bodies and their grosses, Ok all those things are present and described in great detail in a naturalistic novel. Would you find all this in a realistic novel? Now again I will go back which is, David Copperfield is in other ways, if you, at some level, is also about survival of the fittest. Many children would have died out of that cruelty that Oliver Twist is subjected to, Ok or David Copperfield is subjected to, or the crazy Miss Havisham in Great Expectations and you have Pip, who is treated, who is just tossed around from one place to another, and yeah so very realistic and London is very real in Charles Dickens. He has gone through all those turmoils and hardships when he was a child. So therefore no one understands a child's mind better than Charles Dickens, that's what we were told for a very long time. Now there are other things also but Charles Dickens was a very good illustrator of a child's mind. Did he talk about all these things that you just mentioned?

Student: (())

Professor: Yeah, hinted at but never explicitly, so that's the difference. The language that you pointed out, language in a naturalistic novel is extremely graphic, Ok; graphic novels actually owe a lot of debt to a naturalistic kind of novel. There was this historian Hippolyte Taine who observed that virtue and vice are products like vitriol and sugar; virtue and vice. Virtue and vice are abstractions, do you understand what are abstractions? You can't measure virtue and vice, right? One kilo of virtue and one liter of vice, we don't but vitriol and sugar, we can, they are measurable goods, they can be measured, Ok, so measurable variables, right.

But virtue and vice, how do you measure? So virtue and vice are products like vitriol and sugar. What do you understand by that? So people like Claude Bernard drew on this

observation by Hippolyte Taine that virtue and vice are products like vitriol and sugar. These are abstractions, these are qualities, these are the feelings that can be measured objectively, that can be quantified. And in naturalistic novels these things can be quantified, that a human being can have only this much amount of virtue, Ok and this much, this much of, this range of vice. So in naturalism human beings have no redeeming feature. This is one of the hallmarks of the naturalistic novel. Human beings at their basest, so therefore you will have lot of discussion about greed, betrayal, naked ambition.

The story was based on a real-life character and a real-life story. Ok, there was, there was something similar that happened, which case?

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Student: A real life murder that took place in 1906, a charming young social climber who killed his pregnant young girlfriend in order to romance a rich girl who had begun to notice him.

Professor: Ok, so a

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Professor: charming young social climber, so this was a real person, Ok. So this case actually happened, a charming young social climber killing his pregnant girlfriend because he wanted to woo a rich socialite. Ok and what will that rich socialite give him? Everything that he had always wanted, yeah but there is only just one small inconvenience in his way Ok, and that is the pregnant girlfriend and what do you do with a pregnant girlfriend if she is in your way? Yes, you push her off the cliff, Ok, so that's what he did, Ok. This is the story; this is the story of this novel in a nutshell. So the human beast, who wouldn't stop at anything, no holds barred kind of an ambition, and why, what kind of society now encourages such kinds of people? Yeah; an extremely capital, so in other words therefore it is also an inditement of rampant capitalism. Dreiser had also, so this is also we are talking about ideological meanings. It has a very strong ideological slant.

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Professor: Still the rich, and this is the beauty of Dreiser now, the rich are not heartless villains. Generally in Dickens you will find all the people who are wealthy and industrial, they are cruel. Ok, they are; the feudal lord or the feudal master that's what you were talking about. Here is the poor boy who embodies all these vices, Ok, he is the one who is heartless, he is the one who, nobody tells him to. Actually the rich people in this novel are quite indulgent of him. Ok, they know that he is a poor boy, a poor hanger on, they indulge him, they take him along, Ok. Just like your Ripley, Ok. In spite of knowing the fact, the truth, that he is not really rich, Dickie takes him along, why? Why do you think a person like Dickie would entertain anyone like, Dickie sees him through, I mean he understands that he is not, of course he never went to Princeton, he is just a poser, he is trying to be one of them. But

anyway, he and, Ripley and Dickie end up becoming friend for some time. Why? Why do you think anyone like Dickie would entertain someone like Ripley? Yes?

Student: Change

Professor: A change, A change in social scene, he is an amusing company.

Student: He indulges

Professor: Yeah, he looks up to him, so why not, that flatters his ego; that massages his ego, that's the real, yeah so our hero in this novel is also invited to all these parties. He has a rich uncle, a super-rich kind of uncle, almost like the, that elderly couple that you see in the Talented Ripley, Mr. Ripley that who are extremely rich, money is not an issue with this family at all, they have houses all over the place. They have factories all over the place. What they want is this kind of family feeling and our hero, Clyde Griffiths, Ok he is a one of the poor relations. You know who is a poor relation? One of our poor cousins coming from the backwaters and we keep in our house, our homes for a while, show him around, take him to, where will you take your poor cousin, a country bumpkin

Student: (())

Professor: Yeah, so you will take him to Phoenix Mall or you will take him to Express Avenue, yeah? And this is the first time he is seeing all these things. Just look at this world from his point of view, what will he or she observe, things you have taken for granted all these years? They don't mean anything to him but think of this person who is coming from a very rural, in America you have the Midwest that typifies everything that is provincial. Ok, not New York but suddenly a person like that is dislodged from his native surroundings and he is given a kind of very humble, lowly job in a huge city like New York, Ok so when you take your poor cousin, your poor relation to EA, what are the things he or she will first notice?

Student: So many shops.

Professor: What kinds of shops, I am sure she has seen enough shops from wherever she comes from, so rural shops...

Student: The opulence

Professor: The opulence of the shops, Ok what else? Those shops are not like the shops which she has seen back home. What is she seeing for the first time? Beautifully glittering shops with extremely expensive clothes or whatever you are showing her, Ok clothes or watches or electronic gadgets and these are the first time he is coming, he knows there is a thing called cell phone, everyone does, Ok but not the kind of variety, Ok, perhaps he doesn't

know what is a iphone. That's the difference. While he has seen lots of shops of kinds of clothes, you know the rural handicrafts and things like that. This is the very first time that he is ever, or she is ever looking at something like let's say like LOUIS VUITTON bag, Ok, this is the very first, and what does all this, what do all these things do to him or her? Create a sense of elation, elation; Ok aura is the right word, elation or something else?

Student: The feeling of being out of place

Professor: A feeling of being out of place, a total misfit, right. He doesn't belong there. He knows that he is taken around because the cousin is being very condescend, patronizing about the whole thing, you know, oh, poor thing you, you have never seen this. This is the first time, may be in her village she has seen an old Ambassador car. In this novel, you have social clubs, you have boat clubs. In Ripley you have those Jazz clubs, those opera houses, those concerts, that's the place where, he is the valet in the same hotel and he is looking at this world from a particular point and he wants to be a part of this life.

You understand? Ok, this misfit, this poor misfit who is never given an entry; but you have given him an entry point. You have shown him this kind of world exists, there is a world beyond his very humble kind of lifestyle and there is this lifestyle that is out there. What will he or she try to do? If she is sensible, she will try to work her way up if she wants to join this lifestyle. If she is not, then she will try to use someone to work and in all naturalistic novels and particularly in An American Tragedy, our hero finds a family, his very wealthy relations, his very wealthy cousin and uncle who take him in. Ok, they give him a job. They make him an assistant manager kind of job; give him an assistant manager's job in one of their many factories. And he sees himself there. He is not satisfied, Ok, why am I not one of them?

Why I am the poor relation? Ok, I know I am invited to all their parties but can I stand, can I shoulders with these people? Where are my good clothes? When I go to them, I am still wearing that same old jacket which I have been wearing for all these parties; how do I mingle with these people? So I have to; the only way out for me is to marry rich. Ok but then it is not just about marrying rich. On the way he finds this very poor factory girl. There are people, you know, the anthropological types of researchers, they have written books on factory girls. These were very poor girls.

They would also come from rural areas in America, we are talking about the time immediately after The Great Depression; so their father, their brothers, they have all lost jobs so they know that in New York, they will get something to do. So they would be hired as very lowly workers in all these big factories and shops, they would be shop assistants and this and that, and they would start earning, helping their families back home, that's what the girl here does, Roberta. Ok the girl that he sort of, you know, he befriends in the meantime before he finds the rich girl who can just take him, make him do that quantum leap, socially.

Now we are talking about naturalism here. So what happens when a boy like this meets a girl like that, both young and alone in a big city? But it is not just falling in love, falling in love has a romantic and a poetic touch to it. Our hero is not a kind of, if you can call him a hero, Ok because hero has now another definition. We are getting, now meeting a different kind of hero. He is not your young industrious Caspar Goodwood, the loyal Mr. Caspar Goodwood Ok, the good Mr. Caspar Goodwood Ok. He is very hardworking but he is, so again in Talented Mr. Ripley you know he is very hardworking but it's with a definite purpose of social climbing. So his hard work is channelized to achieve certain specific goal.

It is not the industriousness of Thoreau and Emerson, Ok. It is another kind of industriousness. It is more of capital kind of industriousness that if I work hard, if I play my cards well, I can reach a level. So again coming back to Roberta and Cliff, it is not falling in love. There is a deep physical attraction, Ok, between them. And then what is the outcome? There is sex and there is plenty of sex. However now, this is the, very interesting part of the novel, they both come, especially the boy and here my question to you is, why does Dreiser do that? The hero here comes from a deeply religious family. His mother, his parents are missionaries, Ok and they have always taught him to harbor, have no ambitions, have disdain for money and have contempt for sex. Ok, sex is just not allowed except for the reason that God wants you to, that is

Student: procreation

Professor: procreation, yes. So the girl does get pregnant, but that's an unplanned pregnancy and that's unwed pregnancy, Ok but why now have a missionary set of parents

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Professor: for this kind of boy? Yeah, please go on Rukma

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Student: So there is a,

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Student: he feels like an outsider in his peer group.

Professor: Why?

Student: Because everybody, all the children have made fun of him because he is part this weird family goes on singing on the streets, singing hymns

Professor: Yeah

Student: And his father begins each sentence with Praise the Lord

Professor: Yeah

Student: So I think he is rebelling against them all, and all those years of being made fun of.

Professor: Yes

Student: He is resolved to break out of it as soon as he comes of age. I think it is also a rebel...

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Professor: Rebelling against this unit called family, Ok, so the social unit called family. So here is a rebel from the beginning, He rebels against everything. You are told not to do these things; he will do exactly that thing. And, it is very important for, but you know another reason why I broached this topic of religion is that America is a divided country when it comes to religion. You have people who are extremely religious or a set of people, a group of people who don't have any concern with religion at all, Ok and this boy gets caught, so he does suffer from guilt pangs. Ok but guilt is only because he has been raised in a family like that. But then another incident happens, in the family, same family, what is that, involving his sister?

Ok, you have not read that point. There is a sister .There is a sister and there is a, all this happens before he comes to the Big Bad city of New York. And there is a sister, a pretty one and she finds an extremely good looking actor, you know one of those small time theater actors, stage actors, travelling Theater Company visiting their small town and she elopes with him. One fine day, she is just gone and the family is frantic. All these young children and Clyde Griffiths and parents, and then what happens to them? And then he realizes that mother goes to a very, this kind of a broken down house where extremely poor people live and there is his pregnant sister.

Sister who eloped with this man hoping to escape this very repressive kind of family, Ok family where, I mean she wants attention and all those things, people should pay her compliments for her beauty and all those things and therefore she finds this actor as a, as a

kind of way out, Ok from this very constraining society, life and then she is used and abandoned and she comes back home, not home, she takes up a house somewhere. She gets in touch with her mother. Clyde discovers that she is heavily pregnant now and now he is working as a valet. So and we are also told that valets get tip. He is a hotel worker; he is a bell boy, the exact term that is used in this because valet service is also for very high class hotels. He is a bell boy. What do bell boys do in a hotel?

Student: Waits

Professor: Not just a waiter waiting and carrying trays of food to your table, what does a bell boy do?

Student: Suitcases

Professor: Carries your luggage, he carries your luggage in an elevator and from your room and also you give order for room service, right and he will bring food to you. And you give him any kind of order, packet of cigarettes, and all those things. And let me tell you they are tipped very well because all these businessmen, they generally stay in hotels and they have all kinds of needs and these valet boys, these bell boys provide that. They know how to get and where to get exactly this kind of, you know they want to have liquor or this or that, so these valet, these bell boys know how to get it and for these services they are rewarded very generously by the patrons of the hotel.

So these bell boys are paid very well. So there is a graphic depiction of the kinds of lives these people who we think occupy a very lower order of society. They have no education, they have no family background, they have nothing to speak for them, and their official salary, hotel pays them good amount of money and I am talking absolutely in context with this novel, that they are paid well but the tips that they get, it's like phenomenal. Ok, so every, whenever you serve the person who is staying in the hotel, you are tipped. Ok, so there is always a competition for who will run the errands.

Ok, and that's why we were, that's what we were looking at in the Ripley film also, that he is cleaning somebody's coat, brushing the dust off the patron's coat, jacket and all and he gets tipped. You open the door, you get tipped. Ok so they earn a lot of money through these small, through these small services. Now what does all this money do to them, people who have no education, no?

Student: Social mobility

Professor: Yeah, so they try to, so they buy more clothes. So that's all they can do. And if they can save enough, they can also buy a motor bike. Sometimes they can take a girlfriend out for a picnic of sorts and all that, spend lavishly on girl friends. Who are the kinds of girls? In this, the in the universe of this novel, you have all these girls who are gold diggers. So you see what I am trying to tell you, not a single redeeming character, character who has anything redeeming in him or her. Ok, even the girls they pick are with them just to have a good time. How much can I get out of this boy? Ok, so he is taking me out on date, so now you are taking a girl out on a date, now it is not just about holding hands, you know what I am...Ok, but you want a girl to do certain, you call her your girlfriend and you want certain favors from her now. And the girl knows exactly that he wants favors. But what does she want now from him?

Student: Diamonds

Professor: Diamond is for, yeah Ok, but our girl here, Clyde Griffiths hook up with a girl like this, and she wants, she has set her heart on this very expensive dress that she has seen in the window display on a mannequin. Ok so, she wants that particular garment. You want a kiss, Ok I will but where is my coat, where is my dress. So and when he can't; and at the same time, remember, he also has a pregnant sister; he has to look after her, right? So now it's a difficult choice, right? The human beast, you have your sexual urges.

This girl can give you whatever you want but your mother says you are earning so much, the money should go to your sister naturally, because that's the moral thing to do, that's a right thing to do and to her unborn baby. And what will a human beast do? Gives the money away very selflessly? No. He won't, so he will definitely try to win the affections of this very flirty, flighty girl. Ok, because he is going to get some urges satisfied, that's what. And when the girl feels that she has taken enough from him and he has nothing else, she takes off, hooks with another guy who has little bit more income. So that's the way the characters are, and it's a very dismal view of humanity. Ok, so we will continue with this in our next class.

(Professor – student conversation ends)