The New Woman as Agent of Evolutionary Change in

Theodore Dreiser’s

*Hey Rub-A-Dub-Dub: A Book of the Mystery and Terror and Wonder of Life*

and *A Gallery of Women*

Adam Matthew Pasion

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Abstract

This study examines Theodore Dreiser’s unique concept of evolutionary change as expounded in his 1920 collection of philosophical essays entitled *Hey Rub-A-Dub-Dub: A Book of the Mystery and Wonder and Terror of Life*. Written and published after a period of intensive study in scientific philosophy and occult phenomena, this study uses the collection’s theoretical framework as a lens to explicate Dreiser’s rarely discussed 1929 semi-fictional collection of biographical sketches, *A Gallery of Women*, and the important role of the New Woman as an agent of evolutionary change in his fiction. Contemporaneously, prevailing scientific and evolutionary ideas in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-centuries prompted feminists to renegotiate traditionalist assumptions about gender on the basis of rational thought. This project demonstrates how Dreiser’s philosophy and fiction contribute to the renegotiation of gender roles.

Analyzing the ideas that influenced Dreiser’s philosophy including those of Charles Darwin, Hebert Spencer, Jacques Loeb, and occult theorist Charles Fort, this project traces the development of Dreiser’s naturalist and mystic philosophy through letters, biographical accounts and selections of his fiction, including *Sister Carrie*, *Jennie Gerhardt*, *The Financier*, *An American Tragedy*, and *Gallery*. This project demonstrates how American history as well as Dreiser’s *Gallery* firmly establish the New Woman as an agent of evolutionary change through the disruption of traditional gender roles.
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This clash of sounds . . . there is order in it, rhythm, a mechanical regulated recurrence, a tempo.

—O’Neill, The Hairy Ape

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Introduction: Reclaiming Dreiser’s Philosophy

Theodore Dreiser’s 1920 collection of philosophical essays entitled *Hey Rub-A-Dub-Dub: A Book of the Mystery and Wonder and Terror of Life* was published midway into his career as a published author and after a period of intensive study both in scientific philosophy and occult phenomena beginning in 1915. This endeavor was an overt attempt by a known author of fiction to articulate the ideas that informed his fiction, and more ambitiously to disentangle matters regarding the order of living things and the universe. Keith Newlin’s research demonstrates that while certain essays in *Hey Rub* received praise, the broader resonance among critical voices was rejection and derision. A review in the *New York Evening Post* reads, “[*Hey Rub* is] written wretchedly and full of vain iterations,” and another published in *Chicago News* calls it “ill informed [sic] and illogical” (*A Theodore Dreiser Encyclopedia* 189). These voices echo the tone of the critical response upon the collection’s publication.

*Hey Rub*’s untenable philosophical assumptions, its failure to add meaningful insights to contemporary scientific discourse, as well as its infamous critical reception have stigmatized the collection, but none of these facts diminish its value as a conceptual framework and lens for penetrative analyses of Dreiser’s later fiction. *Hey Rub* is Dreiser’s first organized attempt at detailing the philosophy that is operative in his novels. The value of *Hey Rub* is reclaimed not when it is used to answer the mysteries of life and the universe as it was likely intended, but instead, when it is used to expound the logic that compels his later fiction.
Dreiser’s later works written during and after this period of exploration and discovery are evidence of a recognizable philosophical shift and the assertion that reality is as much governed by mystic forces as material ones. Prior to this shift, however, Dreiser’s earlier philosophical contemplations were centered on the mechanistic philosophy of thinkers like Jacques Loeb as Louis Zanine demonstrates in *Mechanism and Mysticism: The Influence of Science on the Thought and Work of Theodore Dreiser*. Mechanistic philosophy posits the universe as a “well-ordered machine, running according to [...] physical and chemical laws” (Zanine 5). The problem that mechanistic philosophy posed for Dreiser, which will be examined in Chapter II, is that it reduced human lives to diminutive, insignificant compositions of atomic particles along with all other physical and chemical matter in the vast universe. “What is one man” Dreiser writes in *Hey Rub*, “to a thing that produces them by the quintillions, age in and age out?” (161). The “helplessness of the individual” is the aspect of mechanistic philosophy that compelled Dreiser to look beyond science for human purposiveness (Zanine 5). Zanine asserts that the author “never adopted the stark materialism . . . of the mechanists . . . [and] continued to have a deeply superstitious side to his personality” (6). Dreiser’s speculations on the supernatural were encouraged and expanded by his friendship with the occult theorist, Charles Fort, and codified in *Hey Rub*. Dreiser’s revised philosophical framework in *Hey Rub* reflects what Zanine calls Dreiser’s “intuitive perception of a supernatural entity that pervaded the cosmos” combined with the mechanistic philosophy that he subscribed to (5). For Dreiser, the merger of natural and supernatural theories resolved the problem of mechanistic philosophy: it brought humanity from a state of material insignificance to one of cosmic purposiveness.

As a later work of fiction, Dreiser’s rarely discussed 1929 semi-fictional collection of biographical sketches, *A Gallery of Women*, is a unique demonstration of Dreiser’s philosophy
enacted and is provocative in its treatment of female gender roles and sexuality. In this thesis I argue that the female protagonists of *Gallery* are not merely subjects to Dreiser’s concept of change, but rather, as constituent parts of this supernatural force, they embody and effectuate its objectives. The women of *Gallery* are, as Dreiser describes in *Hey Rub*, the embodiment of “a will to live [and] a sharply reflected chemical and physical impulse in Nature, which acts and reacts as the nature of [their] chemical and physical stimuli” (174). In addition to their connection to and resemblance of nature, I argue that the women of *Gallery* are connected to and resemble the cosmic force that propels it.

Dreiser’s *Gallery* portrayed women as agents of change during a period in American history when traditional views of a woman’s role in society were under assault by the emerging “New Woman,” which I will discuss in Chapter III. The New Woman took hold of professional and academic opportunities outside the domestic sphere—in addition to other liberties—as America’s rapid modernization and urbanization engendered new possibilities for female identity. Added to the tangible change of urbanization in the American landscape during the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-centuries, was a correlative change in the way that many Americans viewed their reality. Prevailing scientific and evolutionary ideas challenged dogma and prompted Americans to reevaluate certain prevailing assumptions on the basis of scientific rationale, including gender roles. Penelope Deutscher’s “The Descent of Man and the Evolution of Women” examines the way in which popular evolutionary thought at the *fin de siècle* “confronted the question of whether scientific and pseudo-scientific concepts of selection and species transformation offered a new means of redressing traditionalist accounts of women’s nature and social role” (36). The popular ideas of Darwin and Spencer, which this project will also examine in detail, brought into question conventional assumptions about gender roles that
were restrictive to women in that they had no basis in rational thought. While Dreiser’s philosophy diverges from Darwin and Spencer on many points, he wrote *Gallery* during the moment in American history when the renegotiation of gender was being discussed “on the basis of […] scientific validity,” and during a time in which the New Woman was at the forefront of social debate (Deutscher 37).

While Dreiser’s *Hey Rub* offered no new or conclusive ideas to contemporary scientific and discourse surrounding the work of figures like Darwin and Spencer, his philosophy remains useful for illuminating critical analyses of his later fiction. In *Theodore Dreiser: His World and His Novels* Richard Lehan explains that “as inchoate as his ideas may be, they are not inchoate in his fiction . . . Dreiser moved from idea to fiction—a fiction which is its own justification” (xiii). Donald Pizer argues further in *Novels of Theodore Dreiser* that accusations of Dreiser’s logical inconsistency in his novels and his philosophy are not entirely warranted. The “permanent center” and continuous thread that runs through Dreiserean thought is the “belief that life is a mechanistic equation” in which opposing forces are always seeking balance” (293). Pizer contends that Dreiser’s philosophy, enacted in his fiction or explicitly stated in his philosophical essays appears inconsistent only because it emphasizes the terror and turmoil of the infinitesimal individual in a cruel, universal balancing act early in his career, and later, emphasizes an aggregate view in which he recognizes the beauty and wonder of the universe’s symmetry and “underlying design” (295). Dreiser describes change as a “slow, cataclysmic process” outside of the purview of “our little earth minds,” so the wide-ranging view, which may be a more optimistic one, is largely inaccessible to the individual (11, 19). This thesis analyzes the differences between Dreiser’s portrayal of the individual woman as in *Sister Carrie*, and the portrayal of a group of women as in *Gallery*. Later in Dreiser’s career, his philosophy suggests
that the rhythms of evolutionary change can only be detected in larger populations over greater spans of time. As my analysis will show, Gallery points to an “underlying design” and symmetry to a universe that only bears the appearance of chaos.

While Dreiser’s ideas are heavily influenced by figures like Darwin, Spencer, Haeckel, Wallace and Loeb, his ambition to write Hey Rub, and later, the unfinished and posthumously published Notes on Life, are evidence of a spirit disquieted by questions that remain unanswered by these prominent thinkers. Assuming the persona of one, “John Paradiso,” a name taken from Dreiser’s previous employer in Chicago, he writes in the opening essay of Hey Rub: “I find that one history contradicts another, one philosopher drives out another” (2). While there is a wealth of critical discourse that debates whether Dreiser’s novels do or do not adhere to Darwinian or Spencerian theoretical and philosophical frameworks, Hey Rub is evidence that he felt that these theories were incomplete. His own philosophy draws from Darwin, Spencer, and various others to produce combinations and iterations of these thinkers’ ideas—all in support of Dreiser’s unique literary objectives. Ronald Martin’s American Literature and the Universe of Force and Louis J. Zanine’s Mechanism and Mysticism demonstrate how Dreiser’s unique philosophy is the amalgamation of the ideas of many, as well as a misunderstanding of some of those ideas. In a letter to his friend and author, Edward Smith, Dreiser claims that Hey Rub “contains the substone of a new and better philosophy,” and offers “a sounder approach” to understanding the world and universe (Letters 1: 346). Dreiser adds that “Someone is going to come along who will get it and make it very clear,” indicating that more work needs to be done (346). The letter shows Dreiser’s unreserved opinion that scientific philosophy alone is insufficient to explain life, paired with an admission of confidence in the soundness of his own ideas to bridge this gap.
And while history shows that his ideas did not adjust the course of either science or philosophy, a “sounder approach” to understanding Dreiser’s fiction is established.

In looking closely at the philosophical essays in *Hey Rub*, this thesis carefully examines Dreiser’s philosophical concept of change, which Lehan describes as Dreiser’s “only truth in life,” and what I will argue is the central theme of *Gallery* (*His World and His Novels* 213). While Dreiser writes in his essay “Change” that predicting the direction of change or attempting to alter its course is “beyond the limits of vision of even the philosopher and thinker,” humanity can consciously alter its response to this inevitable force and reach “the ideal state of the human mind” (22). Dreiser contends that this ideal state is one of human elasticity and pliability, acceptance and surrender, and one in which humans are “ready to abandon at a moment’s notice . . . the apparent teaching of the ages [and] . . . to step out free and willing to accept new and radically different conditions” (22). The alternative to this approach is the futile resistance to change. Dreiser explains that the “unyielding [will] die or crumble” (9). The key attributes of change that I will explicate in this project are its erratic nature and constant negation of human expressions of order and fixity. The function of these attributes throughout *Hey Rub* will help to establish a full picture of Dreiser’s concept of change and how it is operative in *Gallery*.

Integral to understanding the applicability of Dreiser’s concept of change in his fiction are the themes of mystery, wonder, and terror, which are strategically positioned in the title of *Hey Rub*. I argue that these themes are natural human responses to the force of change that controls the world and universe and are correspondingly character responses to the decisions and actions of the female protagonists in *Gallery*. Dreiser touches on all three themes, their effects, and relationships to one another in the essay “Change:”
There is something controlling, of which we are a part and not a part; there is a mystery to which we belong yet which will not show us its face. Only its impulses burst upon us from day to day and from century to century, making us weep from fear or regret, or faint with terror, or thrill wild with joy. Out of the deeps they come—the realms we do not know. (22)

Mystery is anything that is kept secret or remains unexplained or unknown; a thing or person that presents features or qualities so obscure as to arouse curiosity or speculation. Mystery is enacted in *Gallery* to the letter of the definition, and at times, directly through mysterious character traits. In the opening sketch, “Regina C----” Dreiser characterizes the protagonist as “evasive, elusive, and remote” and one who “preferred to live within herself” (445). Like change in Dreiser’s philosophy, her actions and intentions are perplexing and seemingly detached from human logic. In Dreiser’s philosophical essays, mystery is also enacted in the language he uses to describe it: “Deep below deep lie the mysteries,” and “From somewhere . . . out of demiurge [the force of change] blows” (21, 19). In *Hey Rub*, change is almost always described in these enigmatic terms. Diverging from any materialist or empirical concept of evolutionary change, Dreiser continually deifies it in his philosophical essays. This device is exemplified in the dramatic essay, “Phantasmagoria,” in which the force of change is named “The Lord of the Universe,” and is a “blind, aged and insane” deity that erratically and indiscriminately unleashes beauty, love, hate and despair into the world (189). Its actions are wholly inscrutable and therefore wholly mysterious. As this project will examine, the women of *Gallery* embody the attributes of The Lord of the Universe and in so doing, elicit feelings of mystery.

Terror and wonder in *Hey Rub* are also human responses to change, situated on opposite poles that counterbalance one another. Terror is defined as an intense, sharp, overmastering fear or anxiety. It is experienced when the force of change that “uninterruptedly flows in” is undesirable and confounds human expectations (Dreiser 19). Terror in *Hey Rub* is a human
response to undesirable change, and Dreiser’s early novel, *Sister Carrie* offers a clear example of his concept of terror through the character Hurstwood. When Hurstwood is faced with Carrie’s decision to leave him, Dreiser writes that “the sheer loneliness of his situation rushed upon him in full” and that “something colder and chillier confronted him” (*Sister Carrie* 308). The “something” is terror, brought on by an undesirable change, and the realization of his swiftly approaching demise, which is also registered physically in the temperature of the room.

Conversely, wonder is the human response to change that is desirable or beneficial, as demonstrated in Dreiser’s claim that wonder causes humanity to “thrill wild with joy” (*Hey Rub* 22). It is defined as admiration, amazement, or awe. Dreiser’s narrative interpolation at the beginning of Chapter 10 in *Sister Carrie* is a familiar passage that speaks to wonder as a human response to change. At this moment in the narrative, the desirable change that Carrie experiences with Hurstwood is the prospect of greater material comfort, greater security in the big city, and new romance. The change that Hurstwood experiences with Carrie is a departure from the mundane and a new and impassioned love that counterbalances the discontent of his domestic life. The narrator compares the “thrill” that they feel toward one another as something as natural as a blooming flower, like the rose “evolving its ruddy lamp in light and rain” (65). Their love and the blooming flower, as natural processes, are described as phenomena beyond the understanding of the “modern naturalistic philosophers,” who have but an “infantile perception” of what causes the heart to thrill or a flower to bloom (65). This desirable change has a confounding effect on Carrie and Hurstwood. For Dreiser, mystery, terror, and wonder are human responses to change dictated by the desirability or undesirability of that change.

In Chapter III, I use the themes of mystery, terror, and wonder in *Hey Rub* as a tripartite lens to examine the human response to evolutionary change enacted by the women of *Gallery*. 
Prior to my discussion of Gallery, in Chapter II I will conduct an in-depth analysis of Dreiser’s concept of change in Hey Rub to establish its qualities, attributes, and functions. I will draw on various selections from Dreiser’s work to demonstrate how his ideas were influenced by contemporary science and philosophy and how his unique concepts are deployed in his fiction. Specifically, I will examine the erratic nature of change and its constant negation of human expressions of fixity.

In Chapter III, I will turn to Gallery as a prime example of Dreiser’s philosophy of change in Hey Rub enacted in his collection of semi-autobiographical, semi-fictional sketches. I will examine the way in which change operates through the New Woman by upending contemporary masculinist assumptions about female gender roles. Gallery’s women assume various roles ranging from writer to political dissident and from intellectual to actor. Prevalent among them are lifestyles that are promiscuous and resistant to contemporary, conventional gender roles such as that of mother or wife. In fulfilling their own ambitions and desires, the New Women dictate the lives of subordinate men who are at their mercy and are always in pursuit of their favor. Their impulses, like the inscrutable force of change, inspire in their male subjects the responses of mystery, terror, and wonder. Gallery posits the New Woman as an important and purposive catalyst of evolutionary change.

In Chapter III I also endeavor to begin the effort of addressing what Newlin describes as the “cavernous gap” of criticism on Gallery that remains in Dreiser studies (Dreiser Encyclopedia 156). Gallery has received very little critical attention, and the analyses that have been conducted are largely centered on its biographical significance. Newlin describes Gallery as one of Dreiser’s “most important and most neglected . . . texts” and one that offers a unique look into Dreiser’s “conceptualization of gender and sexuality” (153). I offer that Gallery
delivers a very bold and ambitious conceptualization of women: one that posits women at the helm of civilizational progress as men try, in vain, to resist change and to protect male hegemony.

In Chapter IV, I will conclude that *Gallery* provides evidence of the shifting focus in Dreiser’s fiction from the dismal fate of the individual to the beauty and balance of humanity’s contribution, and in particular, the New Woman’s contribution to the larger objectives of the force of change. He achieves this, in part, by a shift in form: the focus on individuals in his novels to an aggregate view in the form of sketches.
Chapter II

*Hey Rub-A-Dub-Dub: A Book of the Mystery and Terror and Wonder of Life:*

Human Instruments of Change

Dreiser’s concept of change and many of the philosophical ideas in *Hey Rub* derive from the 1840s Law of the Conservation of Force, as Ronald Martin demonstrates in his study, *American Literature and the Universe of Force*. During this period scientists broadly accepted the term “force” as intrinsic to all motion and change in the physical reality of the world and universe. As the law’s title implies, force is never depleted but only transferred, such as motion to heat. Those who subscribed to the universe of force concept believed that “the total quantity of force in the universe was unchanging . . . [and] could neither be created nor destroyed” (Martin, xii). The ability to quantify exchanges of force at the micro level made possible the quantification at the macro level, and, by extension, unlimited possibility for the calculation of causality in the world and universe for scientists in the period. In the mid-nineteenth century, scientists felt as though they were on the cusp of fully realizing a non-theological, rationalist alternative theory for causality, as well as the ability to assess the order of the universe. Martin explains that while the nineteenth century understanding of the term “force” was highly sophisticated, inclinations toward its “anthropomorphic” and “holistic” possibilities were strong during the period and led to “a great metaphysical diapason,” or swelling burst of harmony (5). Martin adds that “well-respected scientists” postulated the “force-interconnectedness of all things” (5). While the term remains a central concept in science and mechanics, it has long since
been stripped of its imposing possibilities for unlocking the order of the universe. Today’s use of the term “force” in science and mechanics refers to the result of an interaction between two objects. Force is a quantity measured in the metric unit, the Newton, and its quantity has both magnitude and direction. The meaning of the word is precise, quantifiable, and void of cosmic ambitions.

Martin follows the development of the universe-of-force concept through its subsequent retirement by the science community, as the “nonempirical . . . arbitrary concept [which] possess[ed] no special relationship to reality” (Martin xiv). By the 1850s the vague and ambiguous term “force” was replaced in science with “energy,” and its philosophical articulations were replaced with equations. It did not lose momentum in non-scientific discussions, however, and remained a popular pseudoscientific, philosophical framework for analyzing the world and the universe. It became a pervasive concept of reality in American culture, introduced and popularized by the philosophies of Herbert Spencer, an English contemporary of Charles Darwin. The universe of force became a key theme in popular fiction with its adoption by figures like Dreiser and Frank Norris.

Spencer’s exhaustive work was integral to the broad acceptance of the concept of force in American culture. The influence of Spencer’s First Principles (1862) on Dreiser is one of the most widely discussed topics in Dreiser criticism. Spencer argues that force is the “fundamental element” of the universe, and that evolution is a “scheme” of force enacted (Martin xiii). What is unique to Spencer and conspicuous both in Dreiser’s philosophical and fictional works is the idea that the pattern of force is manifest in all natural and constructed, worldly and otherworldly things. Everything from the natural elements to western industrialization, social stratification to economic depression—all are as much a part of the pattern of force as the order of the cosmos.
For Spencer, the ultimate objective of force through evolutionary change is for all things to advance from the simple to the complex, from homogeneity to heterogeneity.

Spencer constructed his all-encompassing theory of force out of an intellectual tradition that preceded him in which there was no clear distinction between philosophy and science, and nothing inhibiting scientific thought from expanding into a metaphysical sphere. In *First Principles*, Spencer suggests the panoptic possibilities for the exploration of force, explaining, “The sole truth which transcends experience by underlying it is thus the persistence of force. This being the basis of experience must be the basis of any scientific organization of experiences” (32). But by the late nineteenth century, the concept’s broad intimations were brought down to size in the field of science. Martin explains that sound voices in the scientific community, like those of Ernst Mach, Peter G. Tait and Karl Pearson, criticized the concept’s vague generalizations (56). Even before *First Principles* was published in 1862, “no one attuned to science in the 1850s could have been unaware of the abandonment of the broad term *force* in favor of *energy*, or of the Second Law of Thermodynamics,” which was “damaging to the cosmic historicism of Herbert Spencer” (56). Even Spencer’s scientist contemporaries would have viewed him as more a metaphysical thinker than a scientific theorist.

While the concept of force was obsolete in the field of science when Spencer’s *First Principles* was published, its enduring appeal in American society persisted well into the twentieth century. The consequence of the transfer of his ideas from philosophy to literature was not only iteration and adaptation, but also “misunderstanding, and distortion to the point of redefinition” (Martin xii-xiii). Dreiser’s literary renderings of Spencer’s philosophy in the early twentieth century are examples of redefinition and the bending of an already-outmoded pseudoscience. But the introduction of faulty science into American literature produced a
thought-provoking byproduct: a popular mechanistic view of reality. In these early American naturalist novels that are influenced by Spencer, Martin contends that “we get the first clear intimations of how depressing, amoral, and absurd the universe can appear to man in certain nontraditional, nonanthropomorphic conceptual frameworks . . . [we get] naturalistic alienation” (xv). Arguably the greatest psychological burden for Dreiser was alienation from the inscrutable objectives of the cosmic universe, without which he felt that neither he nor humanity had purpose.

Change is Erratic

For Dreiser, the cosmic universe expresses itself through change, which humanity perceives as being erratic because it cannot decipher the logic or purpose of its movements. Dreiser’s concept of change is well illustrated in his third novel, The Financier (1912), in the instance of the 1871 Chicago fire, which demonstrates how the all-pervasive force of change is consistent with Spencer’s philosophy in that it is operative not only in nature, but in and through humanity’s constructed world. The protagonist and business mogul, Franke A. Cowperwood, navigates American capitalism in Philadelphia, where relationships and loyalties are transactional and human value is measured in assets. With currency as center of the novel, the disruption of the American financial market means the disruption of Cowperwood’s entire reality. When the fire occurs, Cowperwood is out of town exploring new railroad prospects, returning in the evening to catch the cry of a newsboy: “Ho! Extra! Extra! Chicago Burning Down!” (Dreiser 187). The narrator portrays the Chicago fire as an act of Dreiser’s concept of erratic change:
Then . . . came the storm. It burst unexpectedly and out of a clear sky, and bore no relation to the intention or volition of any individual. It was nothing more than a fire, a distant one, the great Chicago fire, October 7th, 1871, which burned that city—its vast commercial section—to the ground, and instantly and incidentally produced a financial panic. (187)

Dreiser’s description of the fire mirrors his description of change in Hey Rub, and “its impulses [that] burst upon us . . . making us weep from fear or regret, or faint with terror” (my emphasis, 22). It is compared to natural phenomena—its occurrence is unpredictable, its direction is indecipherable, and its purpose is wholly detached from human intention or volition. The storm, which appears out of clear skies, sends shockwaves through the American financial network—from Chicago to New York, Boston, and Philadelphia—reducing Cowperwood’s empire to ashes. The destruction of Chicago’s banks and commercial houses results in the loss of property assets, followed by the failure of insurance companies, whose losses are passed along to their many investors and merchants in the eastern states. Added to Cowperwood’s great losses is the disaster’s revelation of certain illegitimate business practices that ultimately land him in prison.

In “Nature, the Individual, and the Market in Norris and Dreiser,” Peter Collins suggests that Dreiser’s fiction portrays nature as “chaotic and destructive,” in a way that is consistent with “how Darwin describes nature” because humans cannot detect its broad objectives (558). Collins explains, “For Darwin, nature is only visible as order from a perspective that transcends the individual, inhuman in its distance from the everyday experience of living. The short span of a human life renders people unable to experience the organization of nature” (561-2). The idea that humans are alienated from nature’s broader purpose and objectives is an important theme in Dreiser’s later fiction generally and in Gallery specifically, where men are confused and confounded by the actions of its female protagonists. While alienated from the organization of nature, Dreiser does not contend that humans are without purpose in the universe, which I will
soon discuss further. Cowperwood’s inherently narrow human perspective precludes him from feeling any connection to the larger rhythms of nature to which all humanity and all organisms have contributed over millennia. For Dreiser, the individual is but an “infinitesimal speck of energy . . . blown here or there by larger forces” (A Book About Myself 457). Thus, the fire and the destruction of Cowperwood’s estate are merely blips in nature’s broader scheme. Cowperwood emerges as a hero, however, as he is able to survive the abusive blows dealt by the natural force of change. His survival can be attributed to his pliability, his non-resistant acceptance of the inevitable, and his ability to adjust to a rapidly-changing, natural world.

Because realism and naturalism are literary forms that describe an objective reality located within a material, temporal world, they are both intrinsically incompatible with the representation of nature’s broader, balanced objectives. These narratives cannot help but interpret the broader movements of change as erratic because they are limited in view, focusing on few individual lives over brief spans of time. Like Cowperwood, the lives of Carrie Meeber, Jennie Gerhardt, or Clyde Griffiths are too brief to reflect the larger rhythms of nature, and their stories too individual and too narrow to correspond to any universal objective. In Dreiser’s essay “Change,” he explains that, “If one could live a thousand years the value of change in connection with many things would appear swiftly enough, and the seemingly astounding would become the natural and even commonplace” (Hey Rub 20). Since the generic text of realism or naturalism cannot span a thousand years, broad connections appear as present disconnections, and the aggregate and multi-generational view that is required to see optimism and human purposiveness is obstructed by narrative limitations that can only depict individual and ephemeral experiences of chaos. Dreiser’s fiction is consistent with his concept of change in that his character representations demonstrate how truly erratic nature appears from a solitary human perspective.
Dreiser’s fifteen sketches in *Gallery* represents a shift away from individualized representation, and perhaps a narrative style that leans closer to the representation of human purposiveness by portraying an aggregate view of humanity.

The disconnect between the individual and nature’s broader objectives enacted through change is demonstrated in the sixth essay of *Hey Rub*, entitled “The Toil of the Laborer.” The essay illustrates the sights and sounds of a growing American metropolis; the commotion of new construction and the multitudinous laborers who work to bring shape to raw materials, raise new towers, and impart real change to the urban skyline. The grueling and monotonous task of the laborer bears no connection in his mind to any purpose greater than the meager wages he is paid for his work. The laborer narrator lives in a world of “Huge, misshapen, disheartening piles of brick . . . stone, wood, iron, sand, [and] cement . . . scattered about in such an aimless way as to bring to the mind nothing but a wearying sense of disorder” (92). The constituent parts of a unified, purposive whole are seen by the individual as “formlessness in the parts of the thing to be formed” (93). In time, the larger objective of the laborer’s toil is realized, but not by the individual laborers. Dreiser explains, “The labor of the excavator, the toil of the iron worker, the irritating beats of the carpenters’ hammers, the mess and disorder of the field of action, had all blended together and made this perfect thing—only they were no longer part of it” (94). This human condition is exhibited by the protagonists of Dreiser’s fiction, who toil in their stories like the laborers of the essay, dealing here with bricks or there with iron—altogether alienated from nature’s overall objective. When the work is complete, they too are unable to gaze on the perfect tower or their contribution to nature’s design and purpose through human history.

This alienation led Dreiser to interpret nature as a force that is cruelly appropriating human lives for mysterious and inscrutable ends in his philosophy. In *Hey Rub*, Dreiser portrays
the natural force of change as a cosmic, diabolical, and menacing force. Correspondingly, the women of Gallery bear all of these attributes. Zanine offers an explanation for this representation, arguing that Dreiser’s philosophy is essentially “a religious quest to find emotionally and spiritually satisfying answers to questions about human purpose and destiny that had been traditionally addressed in orthodox religion” (Mechanism and Mysticism 2). Zanine argues that in his quest, Dreiser does not dismantle religious dogma so much as establish an alternative religious equivalent to the Catholicism of his youth, seeking “emotionally and spiritually satisfying answers to questions about human purpose and destiny that had traditionally been addressed in orthodox religion” (2). Dreiser’s impetus to spiritualize the force of change began with questions that Spencerian philosophy was unable to answer for him.

The idea that the force that impels change is sinister originates in Herbert Spencer’s concept of “the Unknowable.” In his First Principles, Spencer argues “Of all antagonisms of belief, the oldest, the widest, the most profound . . . is that between Religion and Science” (17). And while Spencer’s “ultimate religious ideas” and “ultimate scientific ideas” seem to be concepts situated on opposite poles—the concrete and the abstract—they nevertheless both emerge in his philosophy as symbolic. Symbolic in this context may be regarded as an idea that can only be accepted on faith. As the belief in religious dogma hinges on symbolism, Spencer suggests that science, too, always arrives at the symbolic when applied to examples of great magnitude. Spencer writes, “We habitually mistake our symbolic conceptions for real ones; and so are betrayed into countless inferences” (29). His discussion of the curvature of the earth illustrates how humanity perceives that science is objective fact when it is, in fact, symbolic.

When, on the sea-shore, we note how the hulls of distant vessels are hidden below the horizon . . . we realize with tolerable clearness the curvature of the earth of that portion of the sea’s surface . . . But when we seek in imagination to follow
out this curved surface as it actually exists, slowly bending round until all its meridians meet in a point eight thousand miles below our feet, we find ourselves utterly baffled. (27)

When the irreverent human beholds the “great magnitudes” of science, her a priori judgement is symbolic, much like the reverent person’s concept of heaven. Spencer suggests that the ultimate scientific ideas advance into the inscrutable, where both religion and science are forced to contend with the fact that that which governs the universe is ultimately inconceivable and, thus, unknowable (28). Dreiser fixated on “the Unknowable,” agonized over the diminutive and futile state of humanity, and the cruelty of nature that would not reveal the purposiveness of life. In his essay “A Counsel to Perfection,” Dreiser characterizes nature as a “blind and fumbling force,” not because it has no purpose, but because its purpose is hidden from humanity (Hey Rub 18).

In 1915 Dreiser looked beyond Spencer and popular philosophy and became enveloped in the work of the American writer, Charles Fort, whose book, X, centered on anomalous phenomena and the idea that transcendent, spiritual forces both create and govern the universe. The original manuscript was eventually destroyed by Fort and never recovered. Zanine’s study on Dreiser’s mysticism covers a well-documented history of Dreiser’s highly superstitious and religious upbringing, as well his participation and experimentation in his adult life in occult activities like visiting fortune tellers, attending seances, as well as Ouija board and mind-reading gatherings beginning in 1915. Much to the chagrin of Dreiser’s empirically-minded colleagues, like editor H. L. Mencken, Dreiser read Fort’s works voraciously, petitioned his own publishers to print them, and encouraged his contemporaries to read them. Fort’s occult theories met a need for Dreiser which was to satisfy certain unanswered questions that still lingered after studying Spencer’s philosophies. Fort’s theories also emboldened Dreiser to codify his own supernatural hypotheses and yield to his deep-seated inclinations toward the mystical and superstitious beliefs
that were prevalent in his home as a child. Through spiritual quest, Fort made it possible for Dreiser to overcome the hopelessness of Spencer’s “the Unknowable” and to locate human purposiveness in the universe. Rather than viewing humans as nothing more than organic matter which reacts to other matter in a mechanistic and material reality, Dreiser came to believe that there was an intelligent force governing the universe to affect a mysterious purpose and universal balance. This spiritual conclusion was also enacted in Dreiser’s character, Professor Syphers, in the dramatic essay “The Dream.” Syphers, a professor of Chemistry, admits to his colleague, “A few years ago I could see nothing but disorder, chaos, the inexplicable clashing of forces. Of late I am not sure. This matter of orthogenesis now; it appeals to me very much as demonstrating an intellectual if not spiritual order, some great controlling force somewhere” (Hey Rub 61). In this later season of Dreiser’s literary career, he and Fort were of the mind that “some sort of ‘super-personality’ was using all living creatures for some larger, inscrutable process in the universe” (Zanine 133). Dreiser’s empirical confoundedness was supplanted with a Fortean mysticism, satiating the spiritual inquiry that Dreiser had long attempted to answer, in futility, through scientific and philosophical investigation.

Though Dreiser came to believe in the possibility of human purposiveness and of a mystical intention behind the natural force of evolutionary change, the intelligent force described in Hey Rub is a figure clearly antithetical to the benevolent, Christian God of his upbringing. Dreiser wrote in his diary in 1916 that this “supremely intelligent” force created humankind and is likely “using [humanity] as it uses certain other types of animals for a purpose” (129). If the function of humanity’s existence in the world and universe can be achieved through some other lifeform or means with greater ease or less resistance, no later will nature shed humanity for its lack of purposiveness. While this cosmic indifference to humanity is dismal, the possibility for
purposiveness is yet a more optimistic outlook than the vacuous existence under Dreiser’s interpretation of a Spencerian system.

Dreiser’s dramatic philosophical essay, “Phantasmagoria,” is a mapping of the characteristics, attributes, and tendencies of the natural force behind evolutionary change, qualities that are employed in his characterizations of Gallery’s women. The essay’s title, which is a sequence of real or imaginary images as in a dream, accurately represents its content and Dreiser’s renewed view of reality through a Fortean lens. The omnipotent and omnipresent force in “Phantasmagoria” named “Lord of the Universe” is a deity that oscillates between consciousness and unconsciousness as its erratic thoughts, both awake and in a dream, materialize and serve as creation by decree (Hey Rub 182). In a reversal of the Hebraic priestly account of creation in the book of Genesis, where the God of Abraham creates order from chaos—the separation of light from darkness and water from sky—Lord in “Phantasmagoria” spontaneously and impulsively thrusts “blazing suns and meteors… strange and multitudinous forms” into existence “without thought or reason” as a part of “an insane dream” (183). Like Lord in “Phantasmagoria,” Gallery’s women also embody this oscillation of mind and inexplicability of intention. In doing so, they create what is perceived as chaos in their respective social spheres. Their actions create chaos because they defy gendered conventions, assumptions, traditions, as well as other human expressions of fixity, and their brazen choices commonly defy human logic. As agents of change, the women of Gallery are connected to its broader, cosmic objectives that are hidden from humanity, an idea that is articulated in Dreiser’s essay “Secrecy—Its Value.” He writes that “our bodies are but mere implements of sorts in [nature’s] hands whereby She is constructing something, the significance or purpose of which we cannot even guess and which She is at no pains to reveal” (Hey Rub 147).
While I argue that Dreiser employs all New Woman protagonists in *Gallery* to enact the objectives of the natural force of change, some exhibit its mystical qualities more overtly than others. For example, Dreiser’s sketch “Giff” is about a “soothsayer [and] interpreter of tea leaves, dreams, and coffee grounds” whose predictions come true and serve as evidence to the narrator that there is something “solidly real” outside of the “narrow walls of all naturalistic philosophy” (*Gallery* 151). Giff is a “semi-demented” fortune teller who bears the qualities of the chaotic force that propel her actions. And while her practices are derided by the scientific and philosophical community as well as society at large, the narrator argues that “truth is as likely to shine forth through [Giff’s] temperament as through a wholly sound one” (Dreiser 154).

**Change Negates Human Expressions of Fixity**

For Dreiser, what is knowable though seldom recognized about the natural force of evolutionary change is its tendency to upend and humiliate human expressions of fixity. “If I were to preach any doctrine to the world,” Dreiser writes, “it would be love of change, or at least lack of fear of it” (*Hey Rub* 19). Fixity is the human tendency toward “stratification, stagnation, and rigidity,” the application of absolute definitions and categories to a reality that is always in flux (19). Fixity takes many forms, including religions, governments, moral codes, conventions, or assumptions about gender, and offers humanity the illusion of control amid chaos. *Gallery*’s female protagonists emerge as agents of change by dismantling these rigid definitions and categories. Welsh poet Dylan Thomas’s 1933 familiar poem, “The Force That Through the Green Fuse Drives the Flower,” illustrates the natural rhythm of change and renewal that serves as a complement to Dreiser’s concept of change in *Hey Rub*. Thomas writes, “The force that
through the green fuse drives the flower / Drives my green age; that blasts the roots of trees / Is
my destroyer” (1-3). Dreiser similarly explains that “Nature constantly replaces her handiwork,
quite as in the case of the leaves on the trees, creating newer, greener, sappier things (“Change”
19). Thomas’s later poem and Dreiser’s prose both elucidate the idea that change is a
paradoxical force in that it must take in order to give, enervate as it invigorates. In Dreiser’s
*Gallery*, preconceived notions about the role of women meet their destroyer in the New Woman,
who deconstructs gender roles such as mother and wife in order to construct new possibilities for
women. Dreiser’s philosophy, *Gallery*, and American history show that humanity was
confounded and threatened by evolving gender roles in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-
centuries.
Chapter III

Textual Analysis of *A Gallery of Women: Agents of Change*

I begin this chapter by examining the role of the New Woman in American history to contextualize Dreiser’s portrayal of her in *Gallery*. The New Woman may be generally defined as a female of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century that exhibited autonomous and independent qualities by challenging the conventional gender roles of her male-hegemonic society. The New Woman challenged assumptions about her domesticity and temperance. She was becoming educated and was participating in professional and public spheres. This change resulted in an American cultural malaise that is chronicled through novels, newspaper articles, and commentaries of the period because it threatened an American way of life. June Howard describes American literary naturalism as a form that confronts the “dislocations and disorders” of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-centuries, and “unremittingly responds to large social questions” (*Form and History in American Literary Naturalism* ix). The New Woman was one such dislocation as Americans attempted to reconcile prevailing ideas of who and what the American woman *should* be, and who she was already becoming. True to Howard’s claim, Dreiser’s *Gallery* confronts this dislocation in fifteen sketches, each featuring its own complex female protagonist. The sketches are located in an American historical and social framework that, according to Jennifer Fleissner’s *Women, Compulsion, Modernity: The Moment of American Naturalism*, is markedly “hypermasculine” and disquieted by the New Woman (6). Clare Mendes’ study of the New Woman traces the term’s origin to an 1894 article in the *North
American Review about “social purity feminist,” Sarah Grand (“The New Woman”). Mendes explains that American society’s preoccupation with the New Woman was the induction of popular discourse about uncomfortable changes in female gender roles as they relate to conventional conceptions of marriage, maternity, education, labor, and more. The New Woman was fictionalized and popularized during the late nineteenth-century in novels like Henry James’ *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881) and well into the twentieth-century by novels like Edith Wharton’s *House of Mirth* (1905) and *The Custom of the Country* (1913). The bold and autonomous female characterizations contained in these novels added shape and definition to the New Woman’s identity.

Fleissner chronicles how the historical American culture of hypermasculinity bristled at the threat posed by New Woman. Rapidly rising industrialization and urbanization and their effects on the social fabric of America—which Dreiser famously depicts in his novels—fomented commensurate change in the role of women in society, the way in which they were viewed, and how they viewed themselves. Fleissner explains that by the turn of the century, the average birthrate had declined by fifty percent, which was deeply disconcerting to the American public. In 1905, Theodore Roosevelt not only urged the nation’s men to join the military, he also “made an equal case for the duty of all young female Americans to bear children for the nation” as an expression of “reproductive patriotism” (3). Child-bearing became a nationalistic, civil duty, and a directive from the American government. The leading contributor to the sharp decline in the national birthrate was women’s entry into the rapidly growing American workforce. This trend was regarded by the president as being diametrically opposed to the domestic duties of marriage and motherhood and, in turn, placed America at the risk of “race suicide” (3).
Another contributor to the drastic shift in the role of women in society was a change in ideology. As I have previously discussed, the gaining acceptance of evolutionary thought in America began to reshape the way in which Americans viewed their reality. There is a well-documented history in feminist discourse showing that feminists of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-centuries appropriated evolutionary science as means to renegotiate the role of women in society. With the legitimacy of dogma brought into question, it followed that empirically-minded persons might also reexamine assumptions about gender that were established by dogma.

Abigail Mann’s “Of ‘Ologies and ‘Isms: Mona Caird Rewriting Authority” examines the nonfictional work of Mona Caird, a controversial feminist author of the period whose novels and essays on the New Woman were influential and remain central to New Woman discourse today. Mann explains that in Caird’s work “evolutionary ideas acted as a catalyst, giving […] women authority to ask Darwinian questions in order to offer up alternate readings of old debates about control over the female body” (43). It is, perhaps, no coincidence that Dreiser contemporaneously posits his female protagonist as agents of evolutionary change. Mann’s analysis of Caird’s nonfiction reaches a conclusion that is largely analogous to my conclusion about Dreiser’s fiction, which is that through the renegotiation of gender roles on the basis of scientific thought, women “hold the possibility of engendering change” (57).

Elaine Showalter’s “The Death of the Lady (Novelist): Wharton's House of Mirth” traces the New Woman’s development through American literature. Showalter uses Wharton’s novel as a point of departure for expounding the historical conditions that informed the New Woman’s emergence and demonstrates how the protagonist in House of Mirth, Lily Bart, is positioned in the center of a historical shift between two incongruous female experiences: the pre-industrial- and industrial-era woman. House of Mirth fictionalizes the historical transition but also,
according to Showalter, is for literature “a pivotal text in the historical transition from one house of American women's fiction to another” (134). A former, female-authored literary tradition that precedes Wharton’s novel is the sentimental novel. Originating in a pre-Civil War American history, the sentimental novel “celebrated female solidarity” through topics of domestic life, female friendships, and mother-daughter bonds (134). In the latter fiction, the New Woman in her industrialized, commoditized world begins to push on the pre-industrial assumptions associated with gender. Showalter explains that by the late nineteenth-century, the New Woman’s hunger for “education, work, mobility, sexual autonomy, and power outside the female sphere” began to bend and break social expectations and strain the female solidarity that was both historical reality and depicted in sentimental novels (134). Naturally, these uncomfortable changes that came with the New Woman were met with resistance, and thus, novels that fictionalized her were often “characterized by unhappy endings,” as contemporary writers conveyed the real-life implications of “going beyond the allowable limits and breaking through the available histories and stories for women” (135). *Gallery*, alongside preceding novels like *House of Mirth* and *The Awakening* are a part of a larger body of literature that confronts the historical New Woman in various forms in America and abroad. Dreiser’s *Gallery* is distinct in that his portrayals are shaped by his unique philosophies, which link the changes associated with the New Woman not only to evolutionary thought, but to mystic forces. Dreiser characterizes the women of *Gallery* as oppositional forces to fixed social systems, and agents that enact change and universal balance on behalf of some cosmic, intelligent personality.

In history and in corresponding fictional representations, the change that the New Woman embodies invokes resistance from the public because, for Dreiser, the social terms that she violates are expressions of human fixity. In *Hey Rub*, Dreiser writes, “How foolishly
humanity opposes change . . . and how steadily and uninterruptedly it flows in” (19).

Correspondingly, Fleissner argues that the transmuting state of woman “moves regardless, in the form of veritable swarms of . . . travelers . . . typewriters . . . telephone and telegraph-girls, shop clerks, factory hands, running into [the] millions” (4). While Fleissner sees this change as a result of history rather than of supernatural forces, she and Dreiser both view change as a force led by women occurring at a staggering and unstoppable rate and magnitude.

But why did industrialization impel women to part with traditional female gender roles? Applying Dreiser’s philosophical lens, women disrupt conventional gender roles because the conditions of increasing urbanization and industrialization are such that the domestic model is no longer compatible with the changing environment. Recall Dreiser’s observation in Hey Rub:

“See how ready Nature is to quit one form of effort for another, once its uselessness has become apparent . . . [it] drop[s] a difficult tendency . . . and pursue[s] an easier one” (20). If the fundamental human objective is survival, then perhaps the role of the virtuous matriarch—with all of its expectations—is not the path of least resistance when compared to the female wage laborer. Thus, the New Woman quits the domestic form for another, and doing so in concert with many others, imparts impactful, social change. In Dreiser’s essay “Equation Inevitable,” he writes “we are not privileged to say that God . . . wishes us to do thus or so. We can only say that changing conditions compel us to or prevent us from doing thus and so” (Hey Rub 161-2).

Fleissner also recognizes the New Woman as the agent of change, writing that “her capacity to embody the most salient feature of a post-Darwinian, technologized modernity—the changing status of ‘nature’ in human life—made her life story a site across which to map the potential future shape of history itself” (5). The movement of nature is detected through her story and new, unforeseen possibilities are realized not only for women but for humanity.
In this analysis I will examine how the women *Gallery*—as agents of change—bend and break fixed boundaries and transform the world around them by prompting others to reconsider the role of women. Their actions elicit feelings of mystery, wonder, and terror in their subjects. In Dreiser’s essay “Change” he writes, “With how many astounding changes has not life been visited—astounding only because life never seems to be prepared for the astounding” (19). As homogeneous as *Gallery*’s women are in their tendency to effect change, so are their subjects largely homogenous in their inelasticity, clinging to convention and propriety. The fluid female gender role and society’s resistance to its iterations and nuances are a part of the American historical reality that informs *Gallery*. Dreiser’s collection of sketches is a mapping of that tension and a chronicling of the movements of change in history through women.

*Gallery* was originally published in two volumes by Horace Liverlight in 1929 and reprinted by Fawcett Publications in 1962. While *Gallery* is situated later in Dreiser’s literary career, his concept and authorship of the collection of semi-fictionalized biographical sketches that elucidate the lives of women date back to an earlier time. Dreiser became the editor-in-chief of a leading women’s magazine, *The Delineator*, in 1907. In Dreiser’s brief sixteen months as editor of the magazine, he expanded a publication centered upon fashion news and sewing patterns into relevant social topics like divorce. Dreiser met H. L. Mencken during his time as editor and hired him to write a series of articles for the magazine covering domestic topics. In a 1909 correspondence on the magazine, Dreiser wrote to Mencken:

*I am trying to get together a series of articles under the general head of ‘A Woman as Seen by Others.’ I want ‘The Woman Patient’ by Her Physician . . . ‘The Woman Client’ by Her Lawyer . . . ‘The Woman Church-Goer’ by Her Pastor . . . ‘The Woman Shopper’ by Her Merchant . . . ‘The Woman Investor’ by Her Broker [sic].* (Letters 90)
What Dreiser hoped to achieve through these male observations of female subjects is not entirely clear but given the female readership of the magazine, one could surmise that he endeavored to offer his audience a reflexive view; the opportunity for women to gaze back upon themselves through the eyes of male professionals. According to Newlin, *The Delineator* was in print until 1937 when it merged with another women’s magazine, *Pictorial Review*, in 1937, but shed its coverage of socially progressive topics after Dreiser’s departure (*Dreiser Encyclopedia* 87).

Ten years later, in 1919, Dreiser’s collection of biographical sketches on influential male subjects entitled *Twelve Men* was published. In another letter to Mencken in April of 1919, Dreiser writes, “For years I have planned a volume to be entitled *A Gallery of Women*. God, what a work! if [sic] I could do it truly—The [sic] ghosts of Puritans would rise and gibber in the streets” (*Letters* 264). With Dreiser’s role at *The Delineator* long passed, it appears that Dreiser contemplated the shock that his sketches would have on moralistic, religious, and traditionally-minded audiences—to the extent that it would awaken the dead. With Dreiser’s expressed view that organized religion was a fallacy and that puritanical views on sex were highly damaging in their suppression of natural, biological inclinations, *Gallery* showcases the violation and rupture of these boundaries like a work of anti-hagiography. Its plots of dissent are, perhaps, only tragic to the degree that its readers subscribe to a traditional point of view on the role of women. Shocking, offensive, or not, Dreiser’s collection of sketches was not embraced after it was published.

*Gallery’s* sales were modest and contemporary critics who read the two-volume collection were not impressed. In the British magazine, *The Spectator*, I.M. Parson’s review of *Gallery* explains that while Dreiser needs no introduction, the collection of short stories “breeds a certain suspicion of the author’s completeness as a short story writer” and that he “lacks a
sufficient selective sense to give his work . . . its best chance” (634). Parsons was gracious to add that in spite of the collection’s flaws, that Dreiser nonetheless exhibits a “fresh outlook on life” (634). Ruth Kennel’s 1929 Chicago Daily News review was critical of Gallery, which is reflected in its derisive title: “Hell Hath No Fury Like a Woman Scorned” (22). Rollo Walter Brown’s 1930 review in Saturday Review of Literature entitled “Fifteen Women” follows in this critical vein, stating “Mr. Dreiser believes there is one kind of woman—the one who is over-troubled with sex” (707-8). Another 1929 review of Gallery by Alan W. Porterfield raises the question of the author’s sustainability: “Will Mr. Dreiser survive? Will he be read in the year 2029? If so, the Professor will then take him up” (rpt. Newlin 152). Dreiser is read in academia today, but evidence—or its lack—suggests that Gallery is not. Aside from the cursory evaluations of Gallery included in the biographical discourse of prominent Dreiser scholars like Donald Pizer, Keith Newlin, Roark Mulligan and Leonard Cassuto, the critical discussions centered on the work are sparse if not nonexistent in recent decades. Yoshinobu Hakutani’s 1979 article “The Dream of Success in Dreiser's A Gallery of Women” is a brief critical essay that analyzes nearly half of Dreiser’s sketches in less than ten pages reaching the conclusion that the single greatest fault among Gallery’s protagonists in realizing their individual American “dream[s] of success” is their “dependence on men” (243). Surely Dreiser demonstrates a preoccupation with female agency in the context of male hegemony in Gallery as Yoshinobu suggests, but there is no indication in my analyses of female figures such as the communist, the drug addict, and the adolescent that enters into a love affair with married man, that Gallery’s women are in pursuit of anything that resembles the American dream. Joseph Griffin’s “Dreiser’s Later Sketches” (1985) and Carol Nathanson’s analysis of Gallery’s sketches titled, “Anne Estelle Rice and 'Ellen Adams Wrynn': Dreiser's Perspectives on Art” (2001) offer
additional cursory evaluations of Gallery’s protagonists. None read Gallery’s New Women as significantly autonomous figures or catalysts, but rather, as reactive figures that respond to male hegemony.

Dreiser’s works are markedly female-centric and his female protagonists are on the greater part autonomous, which according to Thomas Riggio’s American Diaries is a reflection of the role of women in Dreiser’s personal life. Dreiser’s focus on women in his novels as well as his occupation as editor at a women’s magazine are evidence that women were always the center of his attention. Later in Dreiser’s career, women became his “chief partners . . . his editorial advisors, research assistants, travelling companions, and . . . prime source[s] for his writing” (Riggio 24-5). William Lengel, Dreiser’s secretary at The Delineator and decades-long friend, described his former boss as “a hedonist, a voluptuary and a varietist,” and a man that is “so truly interested in [women]” (Lengel, viii). Keith Newlin suggests that the author’s fascination with women was more iniquitous, writing that “Dreiser was a man with a wicked penchant for womanizing and with a consistent contempt for monogamy and marriage” (Dreiser Encyclopedia 154). No matter Dreiser’s polyamorous tendencies or alleged womanizing, it is clear in Gallery that his female protagonists are not beholden to any man. On the contrary, the men of Gallery are consistently subservient to female protagonists.

Shelley Fisher Fishkin has a different view about Dreiser’s female portrayals in “Dreiser and the Discourse of Gender,” arguing that he reinstates masculine stereotypes in the 1925 novel An American Tragedy. She reaches her conclusion by comparing his characterization of the protagonist Roberta Alden with the historical figure that she is based on, Grace “Billy” Brown. Billy Brown was an American skirt factory worker nicknamed after her alias love letter signature, “The kid,” short for “Billy the kid,” which she used in letters to her lover, Chester
Gillette. She was murdered by Gillette who, like Clyde Griffiths in the novel was the nephew of the factory’s wealthy owner. The two began a promiscuous relationship and Gillette subsequently murdered Billy to conceal their relationship. The prominence and wealth associated with the family name brought the case into national spotlight. Fishkin looks at the difference between fact and fiction—between Billy and Roberta—and the creative license Dreiser takes in his portrayal of this victim. As Fishkin shows, newspapers reported the story through a “masculinist prism,” characterizing Billy as a “weak, passive, dependent [and] . . . stereotypically ‘feminine’ victim” (8). Conversely, those who knew Billy reported that she excelled in her work, was promoted to inspector, and had expressed ambitions to rise the ranks of the factory. She was known for her bookishness and intellectual curiosity, and most tellingly, her sexual relationship with Gillette was allegedly consensual—an idea that was intolerable to the jury and to reporters. While Dreiser transforms Gillette from the ignorant and cold figure that he apparently was into the everyday man, Clyde Griffiths, Fishkin argues that Dreiser withholds the portrayal of a “complex and whole woman” in Roberta Alden, therefore reinstating masculine stereotypes in the novel (8). Fishkin acknowledges, however, that this is not Dreiser’s only mode of female representation, admitting that his characterization of Gallery’s Olive Brand, who is both an intellectual and sexually autonomous figure, is a woman freed from stereotypes like those that constrain Roberta’s portrayal. Fishkin concludes that while Dreiser sometimes demonstrates a progressiveness in his views about women, that he is “stymied by his obsessive jealousies and sexual compulsions” toward women and that his progressive views are “limited by his egotism” (22).

What Fishkin does not discuss in her analysis of An American Tragedy, a novel that was published only four years prior to Gallery, is that Clyde murders the meek and passive Roberta
Alden because she is an obstacle that stands between him and the prospect of romance with the spirited and independent Sondra Finchley. Clyde is enamored by Sondra, a wealthy, intelligent, and charming young woman who belongs to one of the wealthy and prominent families in the fictional town of Lycurgus, New York. Having conceived a child with Roberta, the social climate in which they live does not permit any alternative to marriage. In Dreiser’s essay, “Neurotic America and the Sex Impulse,” he writes that moralists “insist on painting our very normal natures as abnormal and so developing national neuroses” (Hey Rub 132). The resulting neurosis is evident in *An American Tragedy* through Clyde’s actions: he commits a greater trespass—murder—in an attempt to erase a trespass of a far lesser severity—sex outside of marriage. But above all this is the fact that the novel very clearly casts Clyde as a figure beholden to the magnetism and ascendency of the female character, Sondra. Revisiting Fishkin’s analysis in light of this fact, Roberta’s stereotypically feminine characterization is not applied to all women in *An American Tragedy*, but rather, is counterbalanced by a powerful and complex female characterization. Clyde’s subordination and Sondra’s superiority are a gendered power dynamic that proves a recurring Dreiserean model in his fiction.

If Dreiser reinforces masculine stereotypes in *An American Tragedy* as Fisher Fishkin suggests, he also dismantles them. Even in Dreiser’s early fiction which seems to assume an almost Dickensian moralist tone in its treatment of female characters, women like Carrie who are initially portrayed as delicate or vulnerable individuals are revealed to be the commanding forces in his gender binaries. At the beginning of *Sister Carrie* the narrator cautions the reader that “without a counsellor at hand to whisper cautious interpretations” of urban allurements to the vulnerable Carrie, she places herself in great danger (Dreiser 1). As it turns out, Carrie is herself the danger to whom her seasoned urbanites like Hurstood and Drouet should be cautioned.
against. It is therefore difficult to defend the position that Dreiser’s female protagonists reinforce male stereotypes or hegemony when his works are assessed in whole. I argue that women are portrayed as independent and autonomous from his earliest works to his latest works, but that his treatment of this detail varies in subtlety or prominence. In Gallery, Dreiser sheds all subtleties about the autonomy and independence of the New Woman. This could be the result of a change in Dreiser’s perspective on the role of women in society, or, it could reflect the social progress that occurred in the thirty years between Sister Carrie and Gallery.

The final topic that I will address before turning to Gallery is Dreiser’s style of narration in the collection of sketches, which marks an unmistakable shift when compared to his previous works of fiction. Dreiser’s early works, such as Sister Carrie and Jennie Gerhardt, assume an unconventional hybrid narrative voice. Alan Trachtenberg’s article, “Dreiser’s Presence in Sister Carrie,” studies the clumsy oscillation of Dreiser’s style between “narrative and discourse,” recognizing that he “makes[s] the story he recounts both its and his own,” objective and subjective (533). Trachtenberg is referring to the familiar tone of Dreiser’s early narration that oftentimes asserts itself with conclusive and definitive statements, then proceeds again with objective representation. Readers need not look any further than the first page of Sister Carrie to locate an example of the all-knowing, didactic narrator: “When a girl leaves her home at eighteen, she does one of two things. Either she falls into saving hands and becomes better, or she rapidly assumes the cosmopolitan standard of virtue and becomes worse. Of an intermediate balance . . . there is no possibility” (Dreiser 1). Dreiser’s early narration is resolute in its conclusions about life and assumes a hubris and didactic tone in diagnosing it. In Sister Carrie, the author leaves little space for reader interpretation. The moral or ethical condition of his characters are laid out in full detail. This didactic omniscience wanes over time in Dreiser’s
literary career and it is evident that Dreiser begins to shed didactic interpolation and take on a narrative style of focalization in his later works. The style of narration in *An American Tragedy* is more objective and less conclusive than Dreiser’s earlier novels. Dreiser’s narrative voice relinquishes the role of defining the singular way in which readers are to understand the realities contained in his fiction.

The narrative voice in *Gallery* is evidence of Dreiser’s continual movement away from didactic omniscience which is a result of his own waning confidence in his ability to define reality. In great contrast to works of fiction like *Sister Carrie* and *Jennie Gerhardt*, the narration in *Gallery* not only yields to the reader’s own judgements, but asserts and reasserts its own unreliability, reflecting both the uncertainty and disillusionment that Dreiser admittedly felt after his failure to find human purposiveness in Spencer’s theory of “the Unknowable.” This significant reversal in narrative style finds a prime example in the eighth sketch in *Gallery* entitled “Regina C----”:

> Regina C----, the figure of this sketch, never so conformed, *in so far as I could gather*. She remained indeed independent of all those binding emotions and tenderness which hold most families and friends together. She was, *according to her friends*, the victim of an incurable passion. . . . Read and *consider*. She was, and remains, *a riddle to me*. *She may, and may not, prove to be one to you.* (my emphases 431)

Added to his lack of self-assurance, the narrator further complicates his reliability in *Gallery* through his personal involvement in the sketches. The narrator is at once an objective observer, then a jealous observer, and in another sketch, a love interest. The level of involvement in the narrative can be attributed to Dreiser’s real-life experiences with *Gallery*’s subjects. The semi-biographical, semi-fictional sketches include stories of Dreiser’s lovers, friends, associates, as well as stories relayed to him. This has a paradoxical effect as his supposed first-hand accounts
of the events would seem to strengthen the collection’s authenticity, but its personal stake in what is narrated inhibits it. In great contrast to Dreiser’s early fiction, the narration of Gallery assumes a tone that lacks self-assuredness, which is then compounded by the complexity of personal involvement in the stories, altogether establishing a narrative style that is unreliable. The function of unreliable narration in Gallery is the surrender of interpretation to the reader, if not a reflection of what Dreiser believes can and cannot be known.

Change Enacted Through the Disruption of Gender, Language, and Marriage in “Reina”

Originally published in Century magazine in 1923, Dreiser’s opening sketch, “Reina,” illustrates the life of woman whose level of vitality is commensurate with her defiance of propriety. She enacts change by dismantling preconceived categories assigned to her gender, forcing others to contend with an alternative version of woman. Her disruption of conventional gender, language and marriage categories are transgressive, and common among other fictional examples of the New Woman. What sets her apart and makes her an agent of Dreiser’s force of change is how she disrupts these categories, and what the disruptions imply. Reina bears the unique qualities and erratic tendencies of Dreiser’s cosmic force of change, and she disturbs convention on its behalf. She continually upends human expressions of fixity and elicits feelings of wonder and terror in those near to her. These are the qualities that set her apart from other New Woman figures like Lily Bart or Edna Pontellier.

Reina is characterized as changeful, led by an insatiable desire for something that is newer, more interesting, and different. This desire sends her on a chase after the fulfilment of that desire, which is sometimes found in finer clothing, finer men, finer parties, cars, homes,
cities, experiences, lifestyles, and more. Her character is based on Dreiser’s sister-in-law, Myrtle Patges, and the narrator’s treatment of her character—which is one of admiration and wonder—suggests that Dreiser was intrigued by her personage and her exploits. The narrator describes her as having qualities that are “coarse,” yet full of “health, energy, humor and youthfulness” (11-12). With full knowledge of her trespasses, the narrator celebrates her “irresistible zest for life” (11).

Reina’s characterization also bears distinct correlations to the natural force of change. Her father is characterized as “semi-neurotic” and “erratic” locksmith whose actions “shock” his children (11). There is no clear indication or detail within the sketch about why he has developed this reputation, but the narrator curiously chooses to include these attributes without addressing Reina’s upbringing in further depth. The characterization fulfills the purpose, however, of linking his qualities to the deified Lord of the Universe in “Phantasmagoria” that propels change. In the dramatic play, Lord’s neurotic and erratic actions shock the lesser deities and the defenseless humans on earth, just as Reina’s father shocks his children, and in turn, Reina’s actions shock her husband, sister, and friends. Her actions, like those of her father or Lord, are only shocking because the purpose and objective of change is hidden from humanity. As an agent of change, her purpose is to defy fixity, including the conventional assumptions about gender, language, and marriage.

Beginning with gender, Reina challenges her society’s perception of what it means to be feminine. The narrator describes her as having “the habit of standing as a boy [with] legs far apart,” and one with a demeanor that is “always vulgar” (11). Propriety maintains the boundaries for women’s conduct in her society, and because of her nonconformity, her subversive behavior is received with resistance. The writer explains society’s estimation of
Reina’s conduct, which “seemed to imply disrespect” and “effrontery” (11). What is striking to readers today is that her conduct is only effrontery because she is a woman. Her speech, posture, and independence are merely rudimentary characteristics of the average male in her world. For Reina, exercising agency through the subversion of gender categories is change operative in and through her. She is “a sharply reflected chemical and physical impulse in Nature, which acts and reacts as the nature of other chemical and physical stimuli” (Hey Rub 174). The cells in her body compel her to act as nature, her source, which means that she is changeful and pliable, wholly uninhibited by concerns for proper female behavior and etiquette. This freedom and vitality is compelling to the narrator and elicits feelings of deep wonder within him. With wonder as humanity’s response to desirable change, the narrator is intrigued by her “bubbling and enthusiastic temperament” (Gallery 14).

Reina also refuses to conform to the rules of language, reestablishing boundaries for the articulation of reality. Language may be regarded as one of the most intricate expressions of human fixity with its innumerable rules and guidelines that exhaustively govern human expression and by extension, thought. As an agent of change, it comes as no surprise that Reina is resistant to linguistic conformity and articulates her thoughts unconventionally. The narrator documents her linguistic foibles: “Sven an’ me was thinkin’” and “she’s kinda long-legged, ain’t she?” (14). The narrator also explains that grammar “was not to be impressed upon Reina,” not by way of “correction, example or a stick” (13). The passage suggests that continual attempts have been made to bring her linguistic trespasses into conformity, but to no avail. Her linguistic nonconformity makes others uncomfortable because as Dreiser argues, humans love order and work diligently to maintain it as it offers the illusion of control. Dreiser explains, “If there is a seeming love of order, of stratification, of fixity . . . an equally unending force appears to be bent
on change and variation” (Hey Rub 21). Reina is an agent of that equally unending force that is bent on variation, and by imparting change to language she offers an alternative method for articulating reality.

Reina also emerges as an agent of change by subverting the institution of marriage. Her reasons for doing so, again, are uniquely tied to Dreiser’s philosophy. For Dreiser, marriage is of the most regrettable and harmful expressions of human fixity. In the essay “Marriage and Divorce” he writes, “the trouble with marriage [is] it conflicts with the law of change, or balance and equation, and hence suffers a severe and . . . destructive defeat” (Hey Rub 217). In “Neurotic America and the Sex Impulse” he argues that promiscuous sex impulses which “we are trying to suppress” are “perfectly normal” (Hey Rub 131). He believed that the idea of marriage as a sacred union was a fallacy, but moreover, that it functioned as a physical and social constraint to natural sexual behaviors that would otherwise be plural and promiscuous. Reina’s decision to marry Sven is portrayed as a youthful mistake in the sketch, engendered by Sven’s attractiveness and willingness to pay for her merriments. Much of her story is devoted to her attempts to escape this union.

Reina leaves Sven any time that the conditions surrounding their marriage are “not to her taste,” and Sven experiences these spontaneous departures like humanity experiences the cataclysmic effects of change (12). Sven’s response to this undesirable change is terror because he believes that he is “unable to live without her” (12). The sketch shows that “Every time [Sven] was getting a start somewhere, [Reina] would get dissatisfied and leave him” (24). In one such instance, after Sven has achieved noteworthy success and rank at a lumber business in Washington, she leaves unexpectedly in hopes of becoming an actor in Hollywood. Beholden to Reina, Sven surrenders his job and their stability and follows her to California. Almost
immediately after the move, she is unwilling to pander to Hollywood casting directors and
decides that acting is too much work, leaving the couple in a new and unfamiliar environment
without a means to support themselves.

Reina’s failure as an actor in Los Angeles offers interesting insights about her role as an
agent of change when compared to the actor in *Sister Carrie*, Carrie Madenda, who is a
successful in this role. In Blanche Gelfant’s article, “Naturalistic Ways of Consuming Women,”
she claims that as an actor, Carrie ultimately becomes “the goods in a department store window”
to be consumed (560). She becomes an object of universal desirability because she is able to
pretend that she is someone with universally desirable traits. Unlike Carrie, as an agent of
change, Reina cannot conform her identity to her society’s image of desirability or even
acceptability. Carrie’s choices yield admiration and acceptance because of her artificiality, while
Reina’s choices yield rejection because of her nonconformity. Off the stage, Reina also refuses
to play the role of proper woman or submissive wife, nor does she adhere to any other human
expression of fixity. Reina’s changefulness eventually brings and end to her marriage.

Together, Reina and Sven reinforce Dreiser’s notion of equilibrium that is orchestrated
by natural force of change. Their marriage represents a counterbalance of opposing forces
including change and fixity, nonconformity and conformity, and impropriety and propriety. Set
against Reina’s coarse vitality, Sven, is a “sober and industrious” lumberman (15). He achieves
reputable success at two lumber businesses in Washington and California where he transforms
course, living trees into dead, uniform planks. Like Reina’s locksmith father, Dreiser
intelligently uses Sven’s profession as a metaphor for the broader themes at play. Like the
planks of wood, Sven attempts to lovingly transform Reina’s coarseness into conformity. He
attempts to make her uniform, to smooth her edges, that she might be affixed in a row of other
planks to help shore up society’s constructed version of woman. Instead, their two antithetical characterizations emerge at the end of the sketch as unchanged and separate, yet counterbalanced.

“Regina,” Slinger of Thunderbolts

According to Keith Newlin, the sketch “Regina” is based on the life of a nurse named Miriam Taylor whose story was relayed to Dreiser by his partner Estelle Kubitz with whom he lived from 1916-1919 (Dreiser Encyclopedia 316). Regina’s story begins with a narrator’s inquisition. He is “sharply arrested” by individuals that “give themselves over to conduct which flouts most accepted rules” (Dreiser 247). Do those persons, he asks, “not fare so well as those who do so conform?” (247). Like Reina, Regina is also characterized in a way that pairs nonconformity with vivacity. Regina is “spring-like,” “vigorous,” one who “gloried in defying all odds,” and “thought and dreamed on a higher plane” (255). While her nonconformity makes possible a life of abundance, there is dark and mysterious side to Regina. The narrator adds to Regina’s characterization that “there was something cynical and sinister, and . . . erratic in all that she did” (255). Like Reina, Regina’s father is abusive and “wild,” and his abandonment of her at an early age leaves her alienated from the “binding emotions and tenderness” that young girls customarily receive from their fathers (247).

Regina is a nurse, chemist, bacteriologist, and drug addict that emerges as an agent of change by subverting the female role of nurturer. Her character combines two opposing exigencies into one: nurture and neglect, healing and harm, and comfort and affliction. It is through the coexistence of these exigencies that Regina is able to deceive and exploit her
subjects because she is paid undue trust as a female symbol of safety and benevolence in her society in the midst of World War I. Her neglect, harm, and affliction of herself and others as a nurse incite feelings of terror and mystery in her subjects, but these behaviors also impart change by forcing those in her social sphere to consider alternate possibilities for what it means to be a woman and nurse.

The opening scene of the sketch establishes Regina as a cold and devious figure. The narrator attends a party and is conversing with his friend Marie Redmond when Regina arrives. Regina nonchalantly describes how she has lured a man into an amiable conversation at a train station with the deliberate intention of having him pay her fare. He does, and when they both arrive in Manhattan—the location of the party—she excuses herself to use the restroom at the station and slips away. Regina demonstrates the lengths to which she will go to gain something as negligible as a free train ride. From the outset of the sketch, the reader learns that Regina’s mobility in the narrative is achieved through falsity. Marie, whose interactions with Regina later become the narrator’s prime source of information about the protagonist, describes her from across the room at the party as “the coldest and meanest of girls,” yet one who by the same token “appears to have charm” (249). Deception through words and appearances prove to be the tools that Regina uses to get the morphine that she needs as an addict.

Regina begins a relationship with a surgeon, Wallace La Grange, who is a foil character and one that counterbalances the protagonist just as Reina’s Sven. Regina is described as “one of those bent on breaking laws and troubling conventions for the fun of it,” and “too complex, too daring, too different from those about her” (256). La Grange is described as “a cautious, practical, medical man” who “seeks to conform ethically to the tenets of his profession (253). Once again, two opposing forces achieve equilibrium and uphold Dreiser’s concept that “Order
exists as a half of its opposite, disorder, and the one could not be well without the other” (179).

As the narrative unfolds and Regina’s bohemian lifestyle leads to recreational drug use, the divide between these opposing forces widens. Regina’s addiction to morphine leads her to steal from hospital supplies as well as money from the hospital drawer where they both work. La Grange does all in his power—including replacing missing funds with his own—to correct and cover up Regina’s trespasses. It is not long, however, before the demands of her addiction outgrow La Grange’s ability to mitigate the damage and counterbalance her iniquity.

The implications of Regina’s trespasses increase in severity commensurate with her escalating physical need for morphine, and her subversion of the female gender role of nurturer becomes more audacious and pronounced. The first significant trespass occurs when Regina decides to replace her husband’s supply of morphine with a drug called strychnia in order to supply her habit without detection. As a nurse and chemist, Regina is aware that strychnia is a white crystalline compound used to stimulate the nervous system. The narrator explains that morphine and strychnia pills are nearly identical, but their effects are wholly dissimilar, and if strychnia is administered mistakenly the unintended dose poses serious risks to a patient’s health. This very fact “had come to mean nothing to [Regina],” and those that she is charged to rehabilitate become her potential victims (261). Her chilling indifference to the well-being of others mirrors change in Hey Rub: a force that “has no objection to ordinary illuminating gas killing anyone” and remains “impartial” to choking its victims to death (12).

As Regina’s addiction progresses, the sinister qualities that link her to the insane creator deity of “Phantasmagoria” become increasingly pronounced and her actions elicit feelings of terror in her subjects. Like the cataclysmic Chicago fire in The Financier, her destructive exploits do indiscriminate harm to the undeserving with “no relation to the intention or volition
of any individual” (Dreiser 187). In one instance, Regina devises a plan to take a car ride with
La Grange to a remote area, where she will use the revolver that he keeps in his vehicle to commit
suicide in front of him. In another instance, she plans to “kill herself on [La Grange’s] mother’s
doorstep” (267). Like the cosmic force of change, there is no detectable motive for these actions,
but rather, an erratic tendency to sow disorder and havoc. Like the force of change, Regina is “a
slinger of thunderbolts, a breather of fire, [and] a master of cataclysm,” (181).

As Regina’s sketch comes to a close, her actions begin to elicit feelings of mystery rather
than terror. After leaving La Grange’s home, she is displaced and on the move from one “third-
rate motel” to another (268). She is seen “wandering about” in “soiled” clothing (268). Her
movements and whereabouts are elusive. The narrator traces the discussions and rumors of her
associates, some that claim to have seen her living a life of sobriety as a nurse in New Haven,
and others that she is back to her old schemes. The final pages are devoted to the mystery of
whether or not Regina is alive. While this remains unanswered, the narrator concludes that the
Regina he once knew had a “a capable but erratic soul” and was a woman that held an
unrelenting belief that life was not worth living if it could not be “bent to her mood” (273).

The mysteries and questions that surround Regina’s life bring her characterization into
alignment with force of change in *Hey Rub*. It is the absence of decipherable logic or purpose in
Regina’s story that link her to that inscrutable and sinister force that impels her temperament and
actions. Recall Dreiser’s rumination on change in *Hey Rub*, which may as well be a rumination
on the life of Regina: “There is a mystery to which we belong yet which will not show to us its
face. Only its impulses burst upon us . . . making us weep from fear or regret, or faint with
terror, or thrill wild with joy” (22). In a universe balanced by oppositional forces, Dreiser writes
that harmony must be counterbalanced by “contrary forces [and] decays . . . which produce
inharmony [sic]” (158). The New Woman in her illimitable forms is that contrary force and is the decay of convention, which Dreiser regards as an expression of fixity. Regina personifies her society’s worst fears about the bottomless depths of moral debasement that the New Woman may introduce to her society. As an agent of change, this trespass fulfills her duty to bend and break fixed boundaries and enables her to transform her world by introducing new and inconceivable possibilities for the role of women in early twentieth-century America—no matter how ugly and sinister they may be. Her actions elicit feelings of mystery, wonder, and terror in her subjects.

Lucia’s Homoeroticism and the Redefinition of Desire

Looking now to the way in which Dreiser’s women in *Gallery* emerge as agents of change through the disruption of conventional notions of female sexuality, I will turn briefly to Dreiser’s essay, “Neurotic America and the Sex Impulse,” to establish his views on the contemporary, prevailing sentiments about sex, and the socially constructed parameters that arbitrate the behaviors of *Gallery*’s women. The essay derides popular American sentiments about sex and describes a condition “where morality and religion . . . presumably have full sway” (*Hey Rub* 126). The resounding moral and religious voices, with their “Quaker, Methodist, Puritan, Mennonite, and Catholic” roots, propagate sexual repression, to the extent that parents teach their children “that sex does not exist” (131-2). Since Dreiser took no issue with promiscuity from a biological perspective, he demonstrates in his fiction that the adverse effects of nontraditional sexual encounters come mostly as a result of social discovery and exposure, and that the implications are always more severe for women. In the essay, “Dreiser and the History of American Longing,” Jackson Lears explains how Dreiser’s “Unwed mothers,
unfaithful spouses, unmarried co-habitants . . . become anathema in the eyes of surveillant moral police—but only if they are caught” (73). In The Financier, Frank Cowperwood’s mistress, Aileen Butler, is scorned by Chicago society after her infidelity is discovered, and in Jennie Gerhardt, the protagonist is forced to hide her illegitimate child, Vesta, from her family. Alternatively, Carrie, who is not a member of Chicago’s elite society and not beholden to it, avoids any serious consequences for her infidelity affirming Lear’s claim. For Dreiser, society propagates erroneous rules that suppress human nature, induce neuroses in those that adhere to them, and administer punitive measures for those that break them. The women of Gallery are a sexualized, antithetical force that challenge these social rules. Largely unconcerned with the social implications of crossing the sexual boundaries prescribed by their societies, the women of Gallery’s alternative, impulsive and licentious sexual behaviors are aligned with natural, biological, chemical, and cosmic forces.

Lucia’s sketch is an aesthetic and countercultural moment in Gallery that incites change by redefining the gendered boundaries of sexual identity and desire. The boundaries, alongside the women like Lucia that counteract them, achieve balance and establish a link between figures like Lucia and the force of change. Dreiser’s essay “Equation Inevitable” seeks to demonstrate that the cosmic force of change is constantly achieving universal equilibrium. He explains that humanity develops “schemes and contrivances whereby man may live in harmony,” but that these conceptions “are constantly being interfered with by contrary forces [and] decays” (Hey Rub 158). Lucia is the daughter of an unhappily wed Russian father and English mother. While her sketch posits her life as a counterweight to conventional assumptions about heteronormativity and monogamy, she also counterbalances her mother’s character, a “religious fanatic” whose “puritanism” draws Lucia further away from her at every step (106, 117). Her
sketch is the equilibrium of change achieved through the unpredictable actions of the agent, Lucia. Her impropriety is counterbalanced with the propriety of her mother and society, her impurity against the purity of the Huguenot sisters where she attends school, and her vivacious homoerotic desire and promiscuity counterbalanced against her parents’ bleak heterosexual monogamy.

Lucia is depicted as a quiet and modest student living at an all-girls Huguenot school in Switzerland above Montreux, but one who is internally “wild and free” (107). The narrator describes her as a fifteen-year-old secretly “suffering pleasurably” with an “exotic, sensuous and sensitive nature . . . boiling up” within her (115). The object of Lucia’s lust is a “white, emaciated . . . frail strange sister,” Agatha Thiel of the Huguenot order, who is a teacher suffering from tuberculosis (114). Lucia, who relays the story to the narrator, describes her first encounter with the new music teacher: “The cord knotted around her gray gown swung against her skirt as if there was nothing under it . . . her eyes very dark. She looked like some illustration of Baudelaire or Poe” (113). Agatha becomes the object of Lucia’s desire as well as the subject of her own artistic illustrations. Lucia sketches saints with “hollow cheek[s]” and “abnormally long leg[s]” grouped at the door of a cathedral and fears that her classmates and Agatha may come to realize that every face is Agatha’s (114).

The obscurity of Lucia’s desire incites feelings of deep mystery. The root of her homoerotic proclivity and fetish for infirmity and frailty remains inscrutable to narrator, but inscrutability is an attribute of the force of change. Dreiser’s philosophy clearly shows that humanity, while alienated from the knowledge of universal objectives orchestrated from the cosmos, can know change by its tendencies and learn to not resist it, “to step out free and willing to accept radically new conditions” (Hey Rub 22). Lucia embodies the tendencies of change by
counterbalancing assumptions about female sexual desire. Lucia desires a woman rather than a man. She desires frailty over strength, sickliness over health, and homeliness over beauty. She counterbalances Agatha’s celibacy and asceticism with sexual vigor and intemperance. Lucia is also a force of change that counterbalances the forces of fixity in her reality.

Lucia’s sexual desire for the chaste, virtuous, and pallid sister, Agatha, is left unfulfilled, which leads her on a quest to satiate her desire through heterosexual companionship and promiscuity while attending art school in Paris. Through this journey Lucia discovers that “sex [is] something different than love,” the former as something that she freely experiences with multiple male partners, and the latter as something that she can give to no other individual than Sister Agatha (D121). This fact haunts her as the years pass, leaving her to ponder many late nights why she cannot give her whole self to any lover. All the while, “that wavering gray figure, with a cord knotted around its waist . . . could not be eliminated” from her late night contemplations (123).

Lucia’s role as an agent of change culminates when she resists marriage to an eligible suitor, Frank Stafford. After a succession of lovers, including a Spanish dancer and French inventor, the wealthy Canadian businessman, Stafford, falls in love with Lucia. While the prospects of love and stability associated with marriage are momentarily enticing for Lucia, she is quickly faced with the foreboding implications that would constrain and suppress her wild and free temperament. Lucia suggests that she and Frank perform their vows of marriage on a boat ride to Canada. To this he responds, “It’s really not legal . . . It’s a very irregular thing to do; we would have to spend the rest of our lives explaining how it happened” (140). Lucia’s spontaneity is met with Frank’s deference for law, the institution of marriage, as well as his deep concern regarding the social implications of such an action, and thus, change meets fixity in the
sketch. The narrator writes that Frank’s “one concern . . . was for each and every severe tenet of conventionality” (141). Lucia and Frank’s conflicting temperaments which climax into “incurable differences” result in the dissolution of the planned marriage before it materializes, and Lucia escapes to Paris where she resumes a life of promiscuity (142).

Newlin concludes that the story of Lucia is an example of a New Woman’s failure, writing that “Lucia may be Dreiser’s portrait of a sexually liberated New Woman, but ironically, she is conventional . . . in her need for a man to complete her” (Dreiser Encyclopedia 239). Contrary to Newlin’s claim, it is evident in the sketch that Lucia’s homoerotic desires cannot be sated by the male form, which presents itself in the sketch through varied ages, temperaments, and social statuses. The male characters’ inability to satiate Lucia’s desire for Agatha effectively questions male compatibility with female desire and challenges conventional heteronormative assumptions about female sexuality.

Rella: Somewhere in Between the City and the Prairie

Like “Lucia,” the sketch “Rella” also positions the protagonist as an agent of change through her defiance of conventional assumptions related to female sexual desire. While the sketch does not challenge heteronormativity, it pushes the boundaries of what is appropriate and acceptable behavior between an adolescent and an adult in terms of desire. Like nearly all of the sketches that precede it, it also challenges the legitimacy of the institution of marriage. The narrator’s increasing attraction to young Rella, his wife’s cousin, is contrasted with his increasing aversion to his wife and their marriage. The narrator’s wife inhibits his ability to freely act upon on what he conveys as natural, biological, and chemical impulses.
The narrative is informed at least in part by Dreiser’s personal experience: his attraction to his former sister-in-law, as well as his intolerance for his ex-wife. The narrator explains that the story of “Rella” comes from a “sketchy transcript” that he created as it was relayed to him by an American poet who had since died (274). Newlin argues that Dreiser inserts the detail of the poet as an attempt to distance himself from the figure that the protagonist is based upon, his former sister-in-law Rosa White (*Dreiser Encyclopedia* 321).

Like many of Dreiser’s sketches in *Gallery*, there is a clear reflection of his philosophical view in “Rella” that opposing forces are always contributing to and achieving universal balance. In “Rella,” the unnamed narrator’s wife is representative of the human conception of order, and Rella, disorder. His wife represents human fixity while Rella represents change. The first-person narrator represents both: order and fixity at the start of narrative as a man who enters an unhappy marriage for conventional reasons, and disorder and change later in the narrative as a man who defies marriage and convention to fulfill his passions and sexual impulses. The feelings that Rella incites in the narrator are feelings of wonder because the change she brings is desirable and welcome. The feelings that she incites in the narrator’s wife are those of terror because the change that she brings is for her, undesirable and unwelcome. Their antithetical roles represent what Dreiser refers to as “the sting and gayety of change” (*Hey Rub* 179-90).

The narrator’s wife is characterized as a woman with “ultra-conventional” views who is preoccupied with determining “whether the men and women of her circle [are] morally, and hence socially, sound and pure” (277). Her careful adherence to prescribed religious, moral, and social precepts solidifies her role as one bound to human expressions of fixity and an “inelastic and unpliant” character (*Hey Rub* 19). On the other hand, the antipodal portrayal of Rella is natural, earthy, and sexualized. She is like the wild and blooming open landscapes of the
Midwest. Rella is “great fields of wheat and corn and oats” to be harvested (275). She inspires phallic images in the narrator’s mind: “round knobs and tumbled earthen breakers” (481). A breaker is a plow with a long, low moldboard for turning fertile land; its round knobs work to cultivate the soil in preparation for sewing seed. Rella also reminds the poet narrator of “fine upstanding trees” that protrude into skies full of “woolly clouds” that “[g]ive rise to dreams” (275). Rella is sex, nature, and change against the narrator’s wife, who is purity, propriety, and fixity. The narrator is positioned between them, obligated to his society to preserve his marriage but compelled by his nature to fulfill his desire.

“Rella” begins with the narrator’s departure from New York City to visit his wife’s family in the rural prairielands of Kentucky and Arkansas. The narrator, who is thirty, meets Rella, who is in her early teens and is his niece by marriage. He is immediately “spellbound” by her and feels “a romantic and emotional ache” at the sight of her (280). The long, quiet and tranquil days that proceed after this meeting are ones of deep contemplation. The prairie is void of urban distractions, and as the narrator gazes upon its open landscapes he is left alone with his thoughts and is forced to confront his unhappy marriage and the regrettable “ignorance and folly” of entering into this union (276). He is also forced to confront the intense and inexorable compulsions that he has toward Rella, and the way in which she compels him to change and to dismantle the expressions of fixity in his life.

As I have discussed, Dreiser’s philosophy is adamant in maintaining that sexual impulses are entirely natural and that the institution of marriage and the monogamy that it promotes unhealthily suppress biological proclivities—namely, sexual spontaneity and promiscuity. Dreiser also interprets sexual desire as a compulsion that is directly linked to the cosmic force of change, writing that “The chemistry by which we and the sex impulse are compounded is above
the knowledge and volition of man” (*Hey Rub* 130-1). If Dreiser interprets monogamy in marriage as an expression fixity and an act of resistance to change, then promiscuity and the refusal of marriage may be regarded expressions of change. As a married man that desires Rella, the narrator straddles the boundary of fixity and change and occupies a liminal space between his wife and his lover. Seemingly innocent touches between the narrator and Rella evolve into embraces, and flirtatious and suggestive exchanges of words evolve into kisses. Before long, they are embarking on secret escapades under the concealment of night skies and in the cellar of Rella’s parents’ home. Justifying his actions with Dreiserean philosophy, the narrator reflects on their deeds: “Were we, after all, but vials of fluid, compounded by another than ourselves and reacting to laws or stimuli which had little or nothing in common with our own social theories and procedures? . . . I burned. I ached” (289). The narrator views himself and Rella as physical beings acting on the physical demands and proclivities of their chemical makeup, absolving them of any moral trespasses.

While the narrator is convinced by his own biological and chemical justifications for this love affair with Rella, he is soon faced with the reality that his society expects him to uphold his marriage and abhor adultery. His wife and her family discover the inappropriate relationship and their return to New York City is immediately arranged.

The sketch ends in what may be perceived as the narrator’s defeat. As an agent of change Rella has fulfilled her role by transforming the narrator’s view of marriage. With Rella behind him and his wife before him, he reflects on his dismal state: “For here I was, wishing most intensely to be doing one thing and yet being shunted along this wretched path of custom and duty against my will . . . How indifferent, and therefore merciless, are the forces that . . . drive us all” (300). The change that occurs in the narrator is psychological and irreversible. It is the
recognition of the natural forces of change that are operative within and between them, compelling them to act in accordance with their biological and chemical impulses rather than social precepts.

Private and Public Revolution in “Ernita”

The final theme of Gallery that I will analyze is the way in which its women are agents of change through the disruption of the female gender role of domesticity. Fleissner examines the results of industrialization and consumer culture on the American family during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, and how for many, this meant a “crumbling society” that had lost its “moral authority” to a “modernizing world” (111). Family sizes were decreasing, and as previously mentioned, women were establishing a strong and ever-growing presence in America’s workforce. Resisting this change, and in an attempt, perhaps, to reinstate the female role in the home, Fleissner describes period literary portrayals of women who exhibit “obsessional domesticity” (111). House chores become the female equivalent of “men’s thirst for restless questing,” and are executed with vigor, compulsion, and a “Sisyphus-like repetition (118, 115). The over-compensatory spirit of these female characterizations (house chores with fervor) treats domesticity as the female Manifest Destiny in the home, where women are appointed to expand their own families, to instill special God-given virtues, and to redeem the world from the demoralization of modernity from within their home. Gallery’s “Ernita” represents an obsessional anti-domesticity and reclaims “restless questing” for womankind and for social and political justice.
The story of Ernita invariably challenges traditional domesticity as it challenges popular and accepted political beliefs. Ernita is the oldest of four children raised by a single mother. From a young age, she is accustomed to necessitousness and labor, working with her mother in various menial jobs so they can meet their basic needs. This struggle informs her worldview. Ernita and her mother survive without the assistance of men, and when Ernita enters adulthood, she is skeptical of men, their authority, as well as the current state of American social, economic and political life—man’s creations. She is an intellectual, and along with her mother, they become ardent supporter of socialism. With the first World War underway, Ernita describes the war as a “gross and brutal contest between capitalistic powers seeking purely material advantages” (179). These impassioned sentiments become more radical and more organized as the war progresses, and Ernita aligns her social and political convictions with communism and assumes a leadership role in the “most militant labor organization in America,” the International Workers of the World, or I.W.W., based in San Francisco (179). Highly resistant to dissenting political views, the pro-war populace castigates people like Ernita and her family, discharging them from their jobs and denouncing them from their communities. Together, they escape to a rural community outside of San Francisco that they call “The Retreat,” where they live and offer refuge to other like-minded political dissidents (184).

Ernita’s political dissent and resistance to traditional political views is mirrored in her home, where she shows domestic dissent and resistance to traditional gender roles. Shortly before entering a life of rigorous political activism, Ernita yields to marriage with a divinity student, Leonard, although she immediately and bitterly regrets the decision. While conceding to Leonard’s offer of marriage, Ernita assumes a commanding role in the relationship. This is evidenced in Leonard’s conversion. He is changed from an advocate of the war, to one that is
quickly proselytized, resulting in his radical opposition to it. His conversion does not, however, bring him favor with his wife, nor make him a desirable mate. Ernita relays this predicament to the narrator, explaining:

I really scorned domestic life [and]. . . . did not want to have a baby and settle down. Primarily opposed to motherhood . . . I feared I would be tied down, my psychology of life changed, myself turned into a household drudge. A second . . . reason for my unrest was unquestionably my lack of love for my husband. (186)

At this stage, Ernita is justifiably concerned that childrearing will inhibit, if not divest her of a purpose and calling that is far too big and too impactful to be contained within the walls of a home. Conversely, Leonard seems to desire domestic life for their family. He assumes a subordinate role and regularly complains that Ernita “d[oes] not care for him,” marking a clear inversion of conventional gender roles of the period (185). Ernita recognizes the extraordinary nature of her convictions and resents Leonard for his inability to know and feel such a strong sense of duty and purpose. She explains that Leonard “was not sufficiently definite in his convictions, or at least not sufficiently strong to establish them against mine. . . . I felt myself to be mentally the stronger, and that irritated me” (186).

In spite of Ernita’s staunch resistance to motherhood, pregnancy occurs accidentally, and while abortion is considered, her bad health prohibits the procedure. Leonard erroneously views the child as an opportunity for “the salvation of their married life,” while Ernita tends to the baby, still apprehensive of the implications of this new development (187). And at a great distance away, in Russia, “a new [political] order” is also born, which Ernita longs to nurture and add to it her labor, discipline, and aspirations of social justice (187). When the opportunity arises to join the Communist Kuzbas Colony in Central Siberia, Ernita embraces the opportunity, leaving behind her child with family members. She explains, “Whether it was motherly of me or
not . . . this was my opportunity, not only to escape from an unsatisfactory existence as a housewife, but to satisfy my passion for service—to prove that a mother could do the world’s work (188).

As a radical agent of Dreiser’s natural force of change that is relentless in her disruption of conventional female gender roles, the reader is reminded that Ernita is equally human. After experiencing significant hardships in Siberia—famine, disease and discord among fellow mercenaries—the nurturing of Russia’s “new order” rears an imperfect if not wholly dysfunctional political child. Without disavowing the spirit of Communism, Ernita recognizes its imperfections at the end of the sketch, as well as how it is a human attempt to control its reality. She explains, “In my youth and zealotry I had imagined that Communism could and would change the very nature of man—make him better, kinder, a real brother to his fellows. Now I am not sure” (205-6). Innately recognizing the need for change, both in her home and in the far reaches of the world, she is disillusioned by the method she has chosen to achieve it. The change that she seeks is ambitious: to undo social injustices propagated and reinforced by a global history of male preeminence. Those injustices include the fallacious assumption that defines Ernita’s moment in history, which is that women are only fit to be homemakers. Unfortunately for Ernita and for womankind, Communism proves inadequate to equalize the female and male gender values under its egalitarian aspirations. Ernita’s life does not fail, however, in demonstrating the need for change and the alternative possibility for female purpose that far exceeds house chores, child rearing, and submission to one’s husband. Her life also demonstrates a female vigor and determination that eclipses men’s attempts to achieve similar ends.
Ernita inspires feelings of terror in those that cannot see the world through her eyes or sympathize with her convictions. The pressure that she applies on others to contend with new possibilities for women is felt in private and public arenas and evokes feelings of terror. Her husband is terrified to lose her and to part with his own ideal of a happy home and family. He eventually breaks down, contemplates suicide, and the two divorce. The public is terrified of Ernita because of her dissenting, radical views, which result in the ostracism of her family and necessitate their move to “The Retreat” outside of San Francisco. In public and private arenas, those that cannot accept the change that Ernita brings to bear either leave or force her to leave. At the conclusion of the sketch, Ernita remains in Russia, perhaps holding onto hope for the fulfillment of Communism’s promises, or, fearful of the dire circumstances she will face if she returns to a nation and people that cannot accept her as the embodiment of disconcerting domestic and political changes.
Chapter IV

Conclusion: The Aggregate View of Change

Roark Mulligan’s article “Running with Diana: Dreiser’s Hunt of American Endogamy” reads women of Dreiser’s fiction as personifications of the Roman mythological goddess of the hunt, the moon, and nature, Diana, and in Greek mythology, Artemis. Mulligan highlights the ambivalent and paradoxical role of women in Dreiser’s fiction, and ties their unpredictable natures to a transcendent purpose—the mythological deity. Dreiser pays homage to the deity in a poem that bears her name, “Diana.” He writes, “Are you truly friendly / Oh, Diana / To the aspirations / And the souls / Of men?” (Moods: Cadenced, & Declaimed 53). The answer is no. Change and its New Woman agents are not mindful, much less friendly to the aspirations of men. In Mulligan’s study of Diana, he too recognizes Dreiser’s women as figures who “shape society,” and wield power and influence that is “central to social order and change” (143).

Individually, Dreiser’s fifteen New Woman portrayals appear as fifteen accounts of chaos, disruption, and dislocation. The individual outlook is dismal, blind to what Dreiser perceives as the universe’s underlying design, yet conscious of the way in which the New Woman is dismantling the conventions, customs, and traditions, which create a false sense of control. “Our little earth minds,” Dreiser writes, “cannot but view as astounding those larger natural phenomena which in the endless duration of time come swiftly enough, however incalculably slow they may seem to us” (Hey Rub 20). The present chaos, disruption, and dislocations are necessary in Gallery as Dreiser’s New Women force the “old or unyielding”
customs and conventions to “die and crumble” so that a new a way of viewing reality and of living can be forged (*Hey Rub* 20).

While the holistic view of fifteen women does not achieve the multigenerational, sweeping view of a large human population that may be required to detect the purposiveness of humanity within the broader rhythms of change, the aggregate view offered by *Gallery* is a movement away from the individuality of traditional realism and naturalism toward that broader view. Looking across the fifteen sketches, the underlying design and symmetry beneath the chaos is detectable, and its collective purpose, which is to impart social change through the disruption of fixity is apparent. What is more apparent is that tangible, revolutionary change did occur historically through the New Woman. She arrived in “veritable swarms” of female professionals, academics, socially and sexually autonomous women that renounced their so-called domestic duty for something new; something of their own creation.

History and *Gallery* firmly establish that the identity and role of women during this era underwent a process of evolution and that the fabric of American society evolved with it, irrespective of human resistance. The New Woman in history and in fiction required that her society be elastic, a reality that Dreiser writes “we must accept whether we will or not” (*Hey Rub* 23). Whether the New Woman’s thrust for change was merely a reaction to a changing environment, such as American urbanization, or if it was as Dreiser suggests, that humanity “is an instrument through which a force were calling for freshness and change,” its inevitability requires humans pliability. In Deutscher’s study of the New Woman, she cites early twentieth feminist, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, who writes, “Nothing so important to the women’s movement [as the theory of Evolution] has ever come into the world” (3). An analysis of
Gallery and of Dreiser’s philosophy seems to suggest an inversion of this claim: nothing so important to evolution [as woman] has ever come into the world.
Works Cited


