

GRADUATE RESEARCH PAPER

ART HISTORY

AR 311 American Art II

NATURALISM OF HOPPER, SOYER, AND SHAHN IN  
COMPARISON WITH WRITINGS BY ANDERSON,  
DREISER, AND NORRIS

by

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Spring Semester

1979

Naturalism is as much a way of thinking about the world as of representing it. I intend to describe and illustrate naturalism of the twentieth century. Edward Hopper, Raphael Soyer, and Ben Shahn present distinct and personal ways of mirroring that something called nature. Hopper, Soyer and Shahn exemplify naturalism in three different ways, yet with a thread of continuity. Their work will be illustrated by photographs with additional support shown by the literary naturalists, Sherwood Anderson, Theodore Dreiser and Frank Norris.

In 1900, America could look back on a phenomenal half-century of progress. Vast fortunes had been accumulated and a whole new urban, industrial population had been created. The conflicts and inequities brought by our astute industrial growth were expressed in an art and literature of protest under the auspices of naturalism.

Except for its subject matter, American painting until early in the twentieth century had not in any essential way been distinguishable from European. Cole, Homer and Eakins adopted modes of vision that were fundamentally European and used them successfully to interpret specific American experiences. During the first half of the twentieth century this situation was gradually reduced and reversed. In 1900 the artistic expression was considered provincial and timid, but by 1950 the antithesis of this was prevalent. American artists and their public slowly became more acutely aware of European modernism and they found ways to equate new techniques with their continuing desire to produce and progress as well as to record what life in this country had been like.

The Eight was the first officially organized group of the twentieth century artists dedicated to the development of a style expressive of the American experience. Later, this group was known as the Ashcan School of New York Realists. The group included William Glackens, John Sloan, George Luks, Everett Shinn, Ernest Lawson, Maurice Prendergast and Arthur B. Davies, the eighth being Robert Henri. As a group they were particularly concerned with the diverseness of urban life. Such men as Henri, the leader of this revolution against academic jurisdiction of style, teaching and the rights of exhibition, is notable in the history of American Art less for his own painting than for his defense against elitism and traditionalism.<sup>1</sup> A self-governing, humanistic approach to art was encouraged by his progressive attitudes and he enlightened a generation of younger artists to violate unyielding aesthetic formulas of organizations such as the National Academy. Henri and his group effected a fundamental split with the methods and rules of that tradition in the name of democratic individualism in art. Production of art for its own sake was not stressed and art of didactic, socio-political or experimental consequence was not advocated.<sup>2</sup> Instead they sought to assimilate their art with what they knew and witnessed around them. While the academies dwelt on art based on previous art, the Eight were concerned with art drawn from life. They left the sanctity of their studio and toured the streets. Deliberately, they captured people in unguarded and relaxed moments, sitting alone in oppressive apartments, hurrying across busy city intersections or casual windowshoppers. These new artists were attacked for floundering in the ignoble; common people about their everyday business were considered beneath artistic consideration.<sup>3</sup>

Henri was the student of Thomas Anschutz at the Pennsylvania Academy and Thomas Anschutz was the protégé of Thomas Eakins. Thomas Eakins' art like that of the Eight was still traditionally based on the realistic observation of nature and life. Henri's paintings of the period, 1900-1910, reflect an aptness for acute observation of worker-peasants, society ladies, Spanish dancers, gypsies, immigrant children and various street scenes.<sup>4</sup>

The members of the Eight had only one real common commitment and that commitment was to the principle of artistic nonconformity. Their actual styles varied greatly and they did not cling together to preserve their newly found fame. They followed their own courses; they painted what they wanted to and encouraged other artists to do the same.

Underlying their various personal styles, the painters of the Ashcan School brought to their work a mutual enthusiasm for humanity that was fluently articulated by their leader Robert Henri.

The crisis in national and cultural identity precipitated by the Depression decisively affected the emerging American artists of a new generation. Some felt the need to preach traditional values of the rural, Puritan-Calvinist, independent farmer or worker in a society where rural types and their way of life were rapidly being encompassed by the spread and complexity of urban life. Nostalgia appealed to the part of the public that feared the loss of small town rural life or the surrendering of its political isolationism. The paintings of those who followed in Henri's tradition were most popular in this context.<sup>5</sup>

One of the urban counterparts to Henri's tradition was Raphael Soyer. Provincial in his style as well as in his subject matter, he chose working girls, city derelicts, and selected city pedestrians.

Conventional illusionism and stylization were the techniques most favored to express these scenes and views.

One of the painters of Henri's own school was realist painter, Edward Hopper. He worked with the familiar and the unexceptional. He did this to admonish the aesthetic mysteries and riddles of the modernists. The scene that was presented by all of this was not humanly reassuring and the reality it disclosed was umbrous and obscure.

To contrast reactions, the modernists had begun to react negatively to the machine and to the new scope of power. Hopper was one of the artists that told the story of spiritual vacancy and disillusion behind the American story of success and achievement.

Edward Hopper was one of the most striking of the first naturalists. His art from the beginning (1905) had been opposite to the general trends of modernism. He offered a new kind of objectivity instead of subjectivity, a purely representational art was presented instead of abstraction; and, his art was based on American life instead of on international influences. He surrendered to the raw American experience and modified it by his own character of vision. His art coincided in time and with the same temperament as some of the literary naturalists, specifically, Sherwood Anderson.

Anderson's novel, Winesburg, Ohio, (1919) becomes his ludicrous museum for small town lives; the small town becomes a vehicle for criticism in American life. He presents the idea that American values are degenerating. He contrasts natural beauty with moral beauty by showing the beauty of nature outside and the ugliness of nature within. This novel deals with the small town as a microcosm and exposes hypocrisy, frustration, loneliness, immense boredom and aborted lives.

Perhaps it is mocking the Protestant ethic that made American great--hard work, thrift, sobriety, early to bed, early to rise and sexual nothingness, which makes an American feel good. These values, in Anderson's view, help to maintain the boxey houses, the loneliness, depression and dreariness. He reveals these results because of the shift from ruralism to industrialism, people who weren't meant for big city life, who became losers in Winesburg, Ohio.

Winesburg, Ohio presents man's tragic ignorance of blind forces. The characters tend to be inarticulate and dumb and people try to live blindly by values they have been taught. The imaginative, progressive and the sensitive have fled Winesburg, and its vitality has gone with them.

Anderson's story, "The Strength of God--concerning the Reverend Curtis Hartman," in Winesburg, Ohio, makes an apparent parallel between Edward Hopper and Sherwood Anderson. Reverend Hartman in Winesburg, Ohio was pastor of the Presbyterian Church and by his nature, a very silent and reticent man. It was always a hardship for him to stand in the pulpit before the people to give a sermon. On Sunday mornings he went into a little room in the belltower of the church and prayed; "Give me courage and strength for thy work O Lord!. . ."6 This room had but one window.

On the window, made of little leaded panes, was a design showing the Christ laying his hand upon the head of a child. One Sunday morning in the summer as he sat by his desk in the room with a large Bible opened before him and the sheets of his sermon scattered about, the minister was shocked to see, in the upper room of the house next door, a woman lying in her bed and smoking a cigarette while she read a book.<sup>7</sup>

. . . In the soul of the minister a struggle awoke. From wanting to reach the ears of Kate Swift, and through his sermons to delve into her soul, he began to want also to look

at the figure lying white and quiet in the bed. On a Sunday morning when he could not sleep because of his thoughts he arose and went to walk in the streets. When he had gone along Main Street almost to the old Richmond place he stopped and picking up a stone rushed off to the room in the belltower. With the stone he broke out a corner of the window and then locked the door and sat down at the desk before the open Bible to wait. When the shade of the window to Kate Swift's room was raised he could see directly into her bed but she was not there.<sup>8</sup>

Anderson is showing human and sexual nature in man and the spiritual being torn apart by his carnality. "Thou Shalt Not" be overwhelmed by Kate Swift's bare neck and bare shoulders, or think about the beauty in a woman.

Hopper is a "Thou Shalt Not" painter. "Thou Shalt Not" use texture or paint for fun, or leave anything unfinished or unstated. Typical of an American (or English) "Thou Shalt Not" attitude is, an unwearying interest in the opposite sex. In Hopper's paintings this finds an outlet in repeated Peeping-Tom situations, like the story of the clergyman in Anderson's Winesburg, Ohio who knocked out a pane from the stained-glass window in order to spy on Kate Swift lying in a bed in a room across the street or a hidden place within a room from which one can safely observe a woman undressing or stripping, or a naked woman standing or sitting on a bed looking out of a window. When there is no woman in view, a mysterious lighted window suggests she may soon appear<sup>9</sup> (Figs. 1 and 2).

In Hopper's paintings, the individuals almost become transformed into symbols and lose some of their reality as they begin to define their environment. This process has taken place in the naturalistic novels of Zola, and as illustrated by Anderson, affected some of the American naturalist writers.

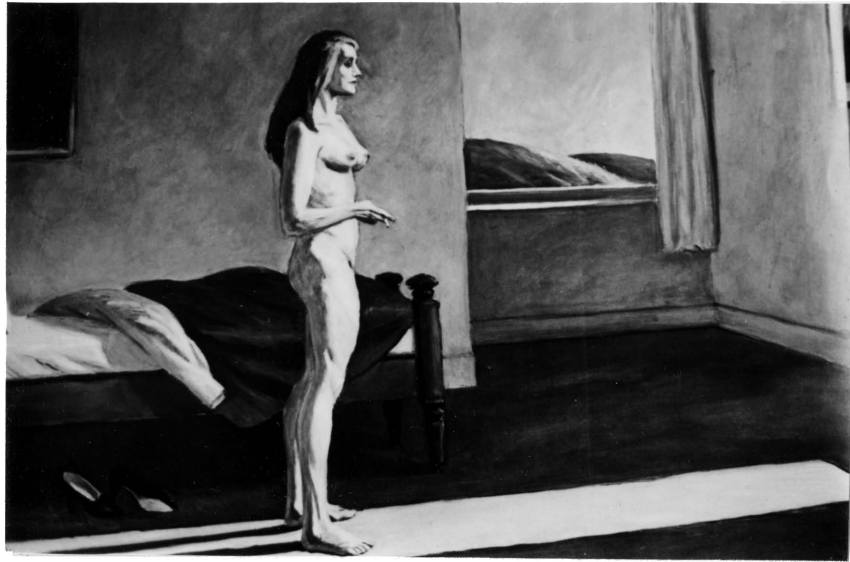


Fig. 1. Edward Hopper, A Woman in the Sun, 1961.  
(Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Albert Hackett, New York City)



Fig. 2. Edward Hopper, Morning in a City, 1944.  
(Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Lawrence H. Bloedel, Williamstown, Mass.)



Hopper's paintings possess a naturalistic power that in no way rely upon enchanting painting techniques for effectiveness. His men and women are saturated in sobriety. He puts forth a concise unflourished statement in his paintings that becomes his trademark. "If you cannot stomach my kind of plain speech, go to the sentimentalists with their cute pinks and blues, maudlin tenderness and decorative pretentiousness."<sup>10</sup> He does not build temples for the human spirit; rather, his scenes look very much like what they are, expressions of human striving in all its disarray. This disarray and occasional uncleanliness is pointed up by the pristine clarity and order of his composition. He presents common denominators in a monumental way.

He is the perfect counter-agent for those who attempt to diminish the American scene to a flirtatious fretwork of antiquated railings, dilapidated surfaces, pseudo-primitivism and all other jargon of worn out statements. The color he uses is austere and makes little attempt to be deceiving. The pleasure of painterly technique is nonexistent. The subjects are completely unremarkable--a deserted street, a semi-deserted restaurant, people lounging in an office. But what turns Hopper's isolated moments into majestic events is a vision which monumentalizes urban banality and attires its alluring passivity in sloping drapes of light. Office at Night (Fig. 3) illustrates that an aloneness is deepened by light. Light is comparable to a wedge thrusting and holding people back in their own personal darkness, under the relentless glare from overhead. Perhaps this is symbolic of the confinement suggested when working overtime. The clerk's body



Fig. 3. Edward Hopper, Office at Night, 1940.  
(Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Minn.)

prominently female, is contrasted with the file cabinet by which she stands, while her boss is in consort with the desk. The blank wall divides them while they are intermingled with the things around them. It is the light that makes the essential pictorial impact; it emphasizes the sterility of the wall, combining to create as depressing a setting as one can find in this era.

Light is a fundamental part of Hopper's paintings. Its exact source, nature, direction and color are as fully understood as the objects on which it falls. It is an active element in the pictorial concept; it reveals the character, color and the surface. Light that Hopper uses gives, as well as defines, all the relationships within his paintings by creating definite patterns of light and shade. It acts as an integral element of design. Objects, both animate and inanimate, are joined together by light. Their close relationships are precisely

hinted at by subtle continuities. Falling on his figures, light reveals, and at the same time isolates them.

As light is a fundamental part of Hopper's paintings, Anderson depends on portraying particular thoughts about the human condition in his writings. Through this portrayal he is able to set up character relationships and direct them.

In Hopper's night scenes, light becomes a principal actor. In Nighthawks (Fig. 4) the lunch counter is an oasis of light in the midnight city; strong light falls on the interior and its occupants and bars them from the outside world. The customers appear to be bored with life, passing the time, forgetting or evading their problems over a cup of coffee. This painting is an impressive summary of Hopper's esthetic. The figures and objects are instantly believable, and with study, it is easy to see the skill of their selection and grouping. It exemplifies plastic discipline combined with a powerful and unlamenting romanticism to dignify homely reality.



Fig. 4. Edward Hopper, Nighthawks (detail), 1942.  
(The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois)

In Winesburg, Ohio, "The Philosopher - concerning Doctor Parcival," Anderson depicts all humanity being nailed by life.<sup>11</sup> Anderson feels we are nailed by our biology, our sex, and our environment. We are nailed by the whims of chance, the lack of freedom, and by the failures of other human beings. Distortion is brought out by industrialism, industrialism obliterates humanity.

Dr. Parcival tells George Willard, "The thing to learn is to know what people are thinking about, not what they say. . . ."<sup>12</sup>

In Nighthawks (Fig. 4), Hopper shows how the customers are feeling by their listless appearance; it is as if they are being nailed by the everyday demands imposed by life itself.

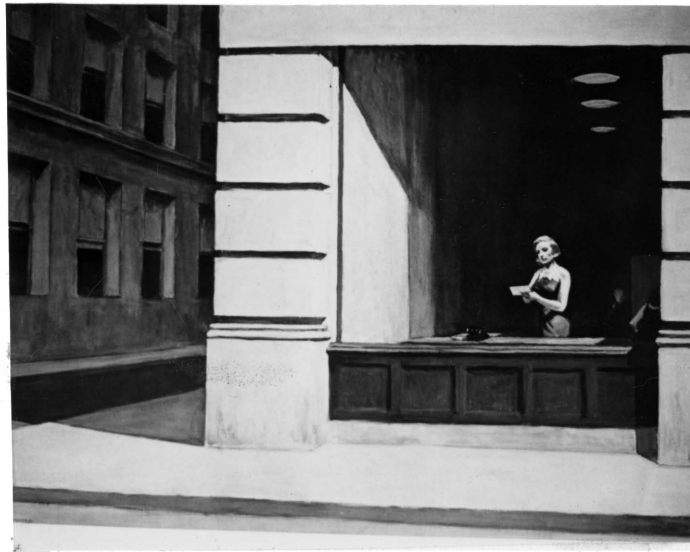


Fig. 5. Edward Hopper, New York Office, 1962.  
(Private Collection)

In New York Office (Fig. 5), the economy of statement is especially pointed out. Light from overhead floods the premises, concentrating on the flatness and heaviness of the corner of the building and throws into relief the relationship between the woman draped in warm light and the casting light that suggests a spectator's view on the left wall.

This could be another example of Anderson's Peeping-Tom situations in a more obvious way.



Fig. 6. Edward Hopper, High Noon, 1949.  
(Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Anthony Haswell, Dayton, Ohio)

Hopper maintained that what he wanted to do was simply ". . . to paint sunlight on the side of a house."<sup>13</sup> High Noon (Fig. 6) emphasizes this extreme simplification with utter clarity. With almost pure geometry, he reveals dominant straight lines, acute angles, and the resounding pattern of sunlight and shadow. There is also an element of frugality in this painting. He tells a simple story; light enhances this plain and modest house. The figure becomes drenched in a light as if to soften the austerity of the rectangle in which the female figure stands. The sense of her aloneness is deepened by this ever-pervasive light.

Hopper maintains that he simply wants ". . .to paint sunlight on the side of a house,"<sup>14</sup> and he does so directly.

In Winesburg, Ohio, Anderson also tells a simple story. Winesburg, Ohio is shown as a small town America. Anderson describes through his short stories crucial American values degenerating. Anderson simply attempts to break down walls that divide one person from another and celebrates small-town life in the lost days of good will and innocence.<sup>15</sup>

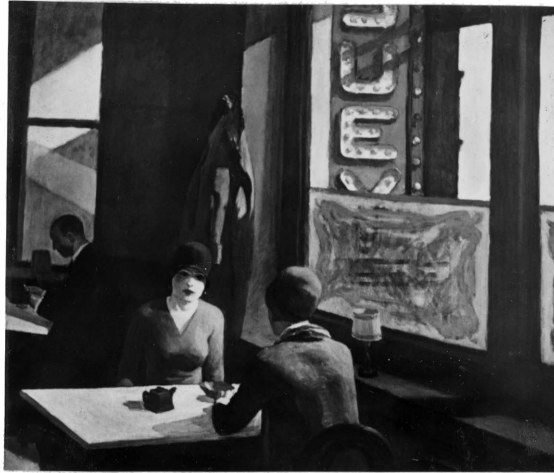


Fig. 7. Edward Hopper, Chop Suey, 1929.  
(Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Albert Hackett, New York City)

Hopper is not a colorist. He does not revel in the pleasure of the texture of pigment, and does not produce in his viewers an immediate, clear, happy and emotional response. In Chop Suey (Fig. 7) he ununiquely selects a dull, uninteresting aspect of American life, figures we would never look at twice and perhaps miss entirely. By choosing unusual compositions and viewpoints and by introducing an evocative title like Chop Suey and by making a fascinating mystery of the fall of light, he makes these two women something interesting by transforming the dailiness of life.

In Winesburg, Ohio, "The Untold Lie - Concerning Ray Pearson," Anderson affirms the fact that there is no escape from the tragedy of

life. Human life can be ugly and it takes courage to meet life which is going to be tragic.<sup>16</sup> This is a story about two farm hands, Ray Pearson and Hal Winters, husking corn in a field at dusk. They are ordinary characters; people we might never consider looking at twice. Anderson makes a single moment of aliveness in this story when there is a sudden reaching out of the two characters through walls of inarticulateness and misunderstanding.

In Chop Suey (Fig. 7), Hopper through his low keyed palette suggests that human life can be tragic and ugly; but penetrating the table between the two women with light breaks this oppressive setting. Like the men, Ray Pearson and Hal Winters, in Winesburg, Ohio, who have relational problems, this intervening light on the table in Chop Suey, suggests an estranged contact between two women, as if they are beginning to extend themselves to each other.

Hopper's paintings of America are imbued with unsentimental loneliness. They present a somberness, a realization that existence is serious and at times desolate. Despite rigid demands, a radiance is imbued by everyday life, a haunting enchantment of life itself. Hopper's world is real, unromantic, and stoic. It offers no remedies, making neither compromise nor concession. He could be considered America's conscience and he remains an example of the virtue of independence. He shares with other great realists in American painting a heartfelt regard for the here and now with a desire to understand it intimately and express it clearly.

The qualities that seem to move him are loneliness and a bitter-sweet mixture of beauty with man-made ugliness. He maintains a consistent and overall mood, and this mood is filled with silent and

arrested motion. When analyzing Hopper in relation to his naturalistic contemporaries, it is made clear that no other has achieved the same distinctness of style and the same skill in rendering a unique version of the world.

Like Hopper, Anderson is moved by loneliness. Despite the rigid demands that life imposes, he sees the enchantment of life itself illustrated by natural and moral beauty. He enhances the beauty of nature outside by contrasting it with the ugliness of nature inside. In Winesburg, Ohio, "Respectability - concerning Wash Williams," the ugliness of nature within is presented. Wash Williams hates women and pities men. As a result all that is left is Wash Williams, the telephone operator of Winesburg who was the ugliest thing in town.<sup>17</sup> In Winesburg, Ohio, "The Untold Lie - concerning Ray Pearson" shows the ugliness of nature outside. Ray Pearson and Hal Winters meet in a cornfield and talk about the fact that they have both gotten girls "in trouble." Outside nature is contrasted with human biology. They cannot get close to the natural beauty in cornfields. They must accept the burdens of life like crying children, nagging, and torn coats; human life can be ugly.<sup>18</sup>

Hopper's Americanism comes about not only from the subjects he paints, but he also reiterates some of the native passion for observing. In terms of a social statement, Hopper's performance deserves the word, monumental. If his version of the human is grim and succinct and only slightly warm and magnetic, it still possesses an elusive energy. It proclaims a stubborn density opposed to the idea of sudden, unnatural destruction.



In Winesburg, Ohio, "Tandy - concerning Tandy Hard," Anderson says that to synthesize human love you must transcend it.<sup>19</sup> This story illustrates how Anderson's writings, like Hopper's paintings, speak for themselves. Anderson had that gift for summing up, for pouring a life time into a moment.<sup>20</sup>

Social realist painting in the 1930's and early 1940's was itself a product not only of the visual explorations of Hopper, but of the political and economic crisis of the great Depression. The Depression, though traumatic and tragic, forced a new kind of search among American artists for their cultural identity.<sup>21</sup> In the 1930's one of the notable social and romantic realists was Raphael Soyer. Soyer described the naked truth and the effect of the Depression in his paintings.

Raphael Soyer has said:

My art is representational by choice. In my opinion, if the art of painting is to survive, it must describe and express people, their lives and times. It must communicate. I consider myself a modern artist, an artist of today, because I'm influenced by the thoughts, the life and the aesthetics of our time. I am also an inheritor of many great painters who preceded me and made tradition living, on going and ever renewable like nature itself, by finding dynamic contemporary and personal ways to depict and interpret their life and their time.<sup>22</sup>

Soyer's philosophy about art is quite comparable to the way in which Theodore Dreiser perceives<sup>23</sup> that the literary world should unfold to the reader. Dreiser sees the world as a rewarding and destroying realm in which the strong and alluring were most likely to be victors and the weak, dull and ignorant were apt to be deprived of the interesting aspects of life. Dreiser felt that crudity and ugliness were necessary. He could not write in the spirit of early

Americans or see the fun in life. He was true to something in life about him and felt the naturalistic truth was always wholesome.

Dreiser's novel, Sister Carrie, is an epic of city life, of transient idealists surrounded by industrialism and its anonymity. Carrie was a midwestern girl and a dreamer like Dreiser. After leaving home at eighteen there was one of two things she could choose to do: either she could fall into saving hands and become better; or, rapidly assume the cosmopolitan standard of virtue and become worse. Dreiser implies that in the throbbing big cities there were hundreds of Carries. It was Carrie's nature to move up in the world and take the best possible seat that was offered to her. Before Dreiser, no novelist had so faithfully and minutely rendered life in the sprawling cities--the streets, saloons, restaurants, hotels, department stores and theaters. It was the first full-scaled city-novel that was a most detailed account of the way a few individuals adapted and were a part of this growing metropolis.<sup>24</sup>

At first this book was thought of as a scandalous account.<sup>25</sup> With Drouet, the first of the two men with whom she was involved, there was no struggle or passion. A steak dinner and ". . . two soft, green handsome ten dollar bills"<sup>26</sup> do the trick. Carrie was overwhelmed by Drouet's finesse and the white napery, silver platters and the displaying of his arms with knife and fork in hand ready to cut. "As he cut the meat his rings almost spoke. His new suit creaked as he stretched to reach the plates, break the bread and pour the coffee. . . ." <sup>27</sup>

Dreiser is attentive to descriptive detail; those little insignificant things that lure Carrie to perpetuate the relationship. A

thread of innocence runs throughout this novel. It is the innocence of being impressed by details, prices, and restaurants that persuades her that she is in love.

Dreiser pays close attention to working men and working women and stresses the agonies of capitalism. Carrie steps up and out of the machine-girl working situation and thus the hardships and misery of the working class is amplified. In a naturalistic way Dreiser is presenting and describing human needs and the way his characters fulfill them.

Thus in life there is ever the intellectual and emotional nature--the mind that reasons and the mind that feels. Of one come the men of action--generals and statesmen; of the other, the poets and dreamers--artists all.<sup>28</sup>

By using the human language as his agent, Dreiser describes the emotional and intellectual nature, the mind that reasons and the mind that feels.

As Dreiser uses his verbal vocabulary to show the emotional and intellectual nature, Raphael Soyer presents the same elements visually. As Dreiser presented Carrie as a midwesterner and a dreamer because he was like that and knew that character best, Soyer painted things he knew best in a purely personal style. Dreiser talks about Carrie's reaction to the other machine girls. She is not impressed with them because they seem satisfied with their lot. They lacked imagination, and fit into the common ranks. Her taste for dress was naturally better, she was not used to slang, and she disliked listening to the girl next to her who was rather hardened by experience.<sup>29</sup> Dreiser magnifies through use of intricate detail the simplistic and humanistic qualities that the machine girls have.

Soyer takes a similar situation, The Waitresses, (Fig. 8) and capitalizes on the simplistic, humanistic and realistic qualities in it. This picture shows how Soyer's people live in a world of subdued color, curbed motion and meticulous design. There is a uniformity and predictability in their job, but there is an individuality about it because he selectively chooses moods, expressions and gestures that speak of their jobs. These women who were working girls and housewives were not the fashionable. These works were not satirical and carried no message for or against the social order. They were motivated by love of the changing spectacle and by the absorption in womankind, her occupation's actions and gestures of that particular day and age (1935-1955).



Fig 8. Raphael Soyer, Waitresses, 1954, Lithograph.

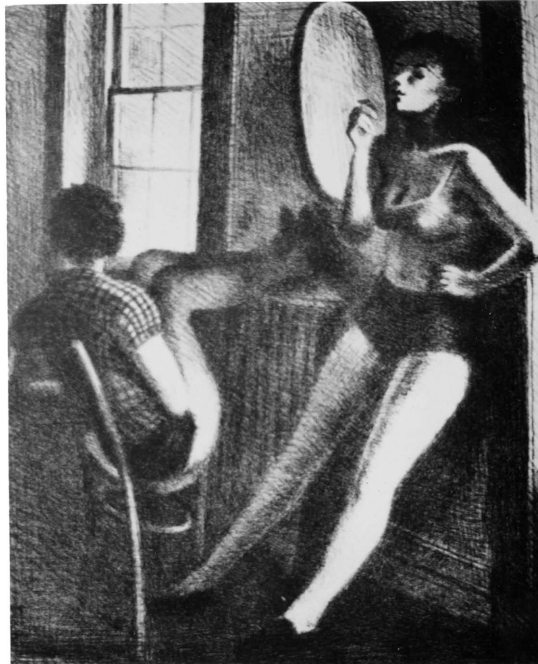


Fig. 9. Raphael Soyer, Dancers Resting, 1936, Lithograph.

The Dancers Resting (Fig. 9) is yet another truism of Soyer's private vision. Again, like Dreiser, he is making apparent a new depth of emotion. The emphasis is now on the feeling rather than on the rendering of actualities. The planes are simplified and pronounced, and there is a classic feeling in its formal arrangement of curves and straight lines and its ample treatment of forms.

The naturalistic emotional truth that Soyer discloses is centered around women where oftentimes he presents a pervading mood of quietness and introspection (Figs. 10 and 11). The passive faces show meditative brooding and a strain of sadness. These young women have no conventional glamor; they lie on couches or unmade beds or they are half-dressed. In these examples they are lazy looking, their hair is tangled yet there is an undertone of muted sensuousness.



Fig. 10. Raphael Soyer, Pensive Girl, 1963, Etching and Aquatint.



Fig. 11. Raphael Soyer, Woman at Table, 1963, Etching.

Like Soyer, Dreiser discloses naturalistic emotional truths about Hurstwood, Carrie's eventual husband. "Instinct and reason, desire and understanding were at war for the mastery. . . ."<sup>30</sup> Dreiser presents unconventional glamor specifically through the gradual decline of Hurstwood. He was presented at first as a wealthy man with a perfectly appointed residence to accompany him. Fine furniture was in his house, arranged as soothingly as the artistic perception of the occupants warranted. Rugs were soft, there was a grand piano, a number of small bronzes and rich upholstered chairs and divans.<sup>31</sup> Dreiser describes the sadness, the meditative brooding and the loss of refinement through Hurstwood's decline. Hurstwood's hair was uncombed, he looked haggard

in his dull colored bathgown.<sup>32</sup> He continued to rock away his troubles in the chair in the corner of their apartment.

Observations of natural attitudes and gestures that are not trite mark Soyer's work. His women are seen with warmth and intimacy and an attention to sentiment (Fig. 12). The features are not standardized and his eye for character oftentimes carried him beyond the limits of objective realism into a free and pliable emphasis on physical idiosyncrasies. This figure painting shows a decisive maturing of his style. It is no longer sharp-edged; the female figure is saturated in sunlight. This light has become a major factor that reveals and models the forms. Light tends to simplify, suppress the details and unite all the elements, and unlike Hopper, a sensuous pleasure in the handling of the pigment is manifest.



Fig. 12. Raphael Soyer, Woman and Plant, 1966.  
(Collection of the Artist)

As Soyer puts emphasis on physical idiosyncrasies through observations of natural attitudes and gestures, Dreiser is compelled by the way tiny stimuli can massively affect human behavior. In the park, the mood generated by the bebuttoned officer, the children, the distant sound of the city makes possible the unreal conversation about marriage, and leaving Chicago.<sup>33</sup> Dreiser depicts and emphasizes Carrie's sentiment by describing things such as these.

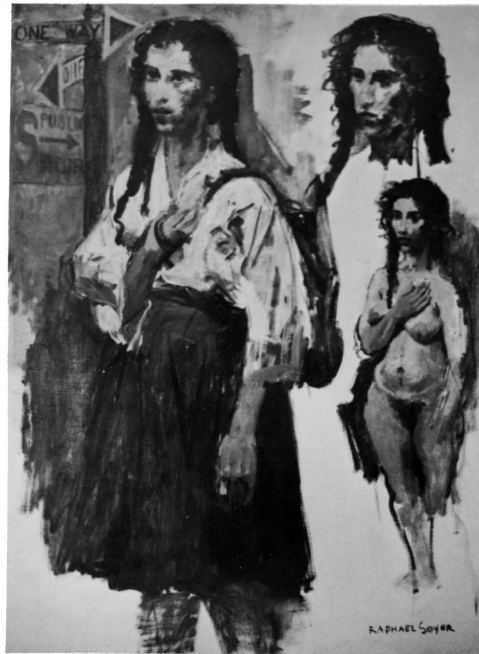


Fig. 13. Raphael Soyer, Studies of Diana di Prima, 1966.  
(Collection of the Artist)

In the Studies of Diana di Prima (Fig. 13), a feeling of energy and life is conveyed in an atmosphere of deprivation and bleakness. In this painting Soyer finds a dynamic, personal and contemporary way to depict and interpret her exactly as he found her. She was not transformed into a dream woman. She is exposed with all her imperfections,



yet she is painted with a tenderness and it seems as though he understands her frustrations and failures as well.

Dreiser's close attention to miserable detail help to set a scene that is similarly deprived and bleak. Hurstwood hints to Carrie that twenty-two cents for steak is steep; he thinks she is using too much butter on her food. These miserable details eat the heart out of Carrie.<sup>34</sup> They blacken her heart and grieve her soul. Like Soyer who exposes his characters without transforming them, Dreiser exposes all the imperfections and inadequacies of Carrie and Hurstwood's life together. Despite this, Carrie **still** conveys a feeling of energy and life.

Dreiser wrote about **the people he knew**. He dreamed himself into the lives of other people. **He wrote about the hardships** in their lives, but contrasted those hardships **with an aspect** of wealth that he elaborated on through the use of **intricate, picturesque detail**.

"Your work is what you are. You look at the world through yourself,"<sup>35</sup> Soyer said. **His naturalistic** attitude is due to the fact that he believed there was a **certain** coldness, hardness and dissociation in the life of New York City. **But this is** the city he knew; these are the people he saw all the time, and he **knew** what he was painting. His paintings and lithographs are distinguished by a warm feeling of humanity and by a vibrant suggestion of atmosphere. He captures the feeling of the casual, spontaneous moment in the lives of his characters and makes them intimate presences. His idea was to put people--men, women and children in their natural context who belong to their time. So it was with Dreiser as well.

Social Realism in the 1930's was America's first mass identification with social protest in the visual arts even though novelists like Theodore Dreiser (1900) searched for and exposed alleged corruption.<sup>36</sup> The Social Realists who came to the front assumed that the world could be changed through the kind of awareness and education that art provides. They were making a point and had the feeling of confidence about their ability to do something about the world.

Many of the Social Realists grew up in an atmosphere of poverty and alienation and in an environment entirely devoid of works of art. Unbelievably, Ben Shahn rose from a Brooklyn slum to achieve the status of an elder statesman of the arts. Because he was the son and grandson of wood-carvers and socialists from Tsarist Russia, it was natural for him to develop his point of view. "I hate injustice--I guess that's about the only thing I really hate."<sup>37</sup>

Ben Shahn is a painter of social protest, but not the boisterous, banner headline protest that makes its point with a whopping noise. His protest is more incisive; it stays longer and scars more deeply. He paints the lives, times and grievous disasters of the man in the street. He painted victims; he felt we were all victims, the murderer, the murdered. They were set against stark and realistically suggestive backgrounds such as tenements and tacky structures.

Like Shahn, Frank Norris also described the lives, times and ugly disasters of the man in the street. He wrote about victims of environment that were set against realistic backgrounds; backgrounds that included innocence, economic determinism and urbanism.

Frank Norris's writings runs parallel to the visual explorations of Shahn. Norris feels that much of life is ugly and he presents a bold

kind of truth in his novel McTigue (1899). In McTigue, the ununiqueness of man is stressed; men are envisioned as ants and they cease to have significance; no one is important and the here and now appears to be a doldrum. Romanticism was an idealistic way of thinking; it was limitless, infinitely good and affirmed the dignity of man. Norris introduces Naturalism because Romanticism does not make one come to terms with real life. Realism shows individuality and the cultivation of uniqueness. Naturalism makes one look and think about things more rationally.

Norris inflates the ordinary trivial situation and suggests the Darwinian nature of his characters and how they revert to primitivism through his verbal vocabulary. McTigue, the main character in the novel, is described as a **primitive**, ordinary character with enormous hands,

. . .that were covered with a fell of stiff yellow hair; they were hard as wooden mallets, strong as vises, the hands of an old-time car boy. Often he dispensed with forceps and extracted a refractory tooth with his thumb and finger. His head was square-cut, **angular**; the jaw salient, like that of a carnivora.

McTigue's mind was as his body, heavy, slow to act, sluggish. Yet there was nothing vicious about the man. All together he suggested the draft horse immensely stupid, docile, obedient. . . .<sup>38</sup>

McTigue looked out of the window and watched people go down the street--the street never failed to interest him. He was fascinated by urban non-beauty, and the ant hill of unknown unnamed people mesmerized him.<sup>39</sup> Shahn's work in its vocabulary of forms, in its sparseness of visual language seems akin to McTigue. Norris's photographic naturalism, like Shahn's, for its effectiveness depends on selection and juxtaposition.

Shahn can be represented as a combination of three unhallowed views: as an abstractionist, a non objectivist, and as a realist. He believed that there was a certain validity to the argument that the realistic merely imitated and recalled realities to the beholder of paintings whereas the non-objective painter brings him to a direct new visual reality. But, he believed that further realities were created within a picture through abstract art that went beyond just what the eye could see. The realities of human relationships, of man's emotional and spiritual life, the realities of political decency and of social injustice all affect men's lives, behavior and sensitivity.

The expressive and abstract language of line, shape, and color helped to present the form and meaning in Shahn's work. In his Poster for the C.I.O. (Fig. 14), the young boy is pictured as an emaciated, forlorn figure, depicting the unknown, unnamed people like Norris's McTigue who is enthralled with the anthill of unknown, unnamed people.



Fig. 14. Ben Shahn, Poster for the C.I.O., 1946.  
(The Museum of Modern Art, New York)

Norris presents realism by giving a person and one-sided perspective of small town life. Naturalism and Social Darwinism<sup>40</sup> are not just ideological notions, they are reflections of a certain kind of reality. Norris's characters are presented clearly, but this in itself does not define them; they are felt as fictional personalities pulled from a world of unusually distinct individuals.<sup>41</sup>

Concerning realism in art, Shahn believes that perspective is a personal and a one-sided view of things. He sees a room from only one small vantage point. Independently from his own myopic and one-sided perspective, the room itself as well as each object in it has a completely whole, unobstructed, objective existence.

There are other kinds of "truths to nature" that may be presented by Shahn in several aspects that viewers may see as an incredibly superficial account. In Spring (Fig. 15), the figures appear flat and out of proportion with the fence that offers a new dimension of perspective, but then Shahn believes reality is different to everyone, that the possible scope of truth has not been entirely spanned and its pursuit is still highly worthy of enterprise. He feels there is much to be learned and crystallized in art, and that there might arise out of these efforts a resurgence of humanism.



Fig. 15. Ben Shahn, Spring, 1946.  
(Room of Contemporary Art Collection, Albright-Knox Art Gallery)

Shahn presents satirical motifs in his paintings. He is humanistic, emotional and very personal in his work. He makes use of native themes and makes visual past memories through his art a personal commentary. He is less passionate than he is compassionate and he satirizes instead of denounces. The Red Stairway (Fig. 16) has its genesis in a childhood memory. This picture deserves direct scrutiny and rewards it. This magical realism becomes a formative part of his work. The amputee ascending the stairs depicts a sense of hopelessness while the younger figure in the lower right corner alludes to a new life, a new generation.



Fig. 16. Ben Shahn, The Red Stairway, 1944.  
(City Art Museum of St. Louis)

Like Shahn, the element of satire is also presented through the relationships of Norris's characters in McTigue. Maria Macapa, McTigue's friend, cannot help speaking reflexively of her flying squirrel.<sup>42</sup> Trina, McTigue's wife, cannot let go of her money and give up her pack-rat behavior,<sup>43</sup> and when McTigue wants to go back to the Panamint quartz mine, a great wind pushes against him and he feels as if he's walking up a steep hill.<sup>44</sup> This is a comparative image of

Shahn's The Red Stairway. Norris satirizes about the idea that there are compelling forces between people because of things.

The Lucky Dragon Series by Shahn (Fig. 17) is an eloquent group of paintings that describe an historical catastrophe which had befallen a Japanese fishing trawler.<sup>45</sup> Beyond the story content, in Shahn's emotional outlook, he felt it was always most important to have a play back and forth between big and little, light and dark, smiling and sad, and the serious and the comic. The height of the reaction is when the emotions of anger, sympathy and humor all work at the same time. He plays one against the other trying to keep a balance. A Score of White Pigeons (Fig. 17) illustrates this.



Fig. 17. Ben Shahn, A Score of White Pigeons (Lucky Dragon Series) 1961. (National Museum, Stockholm)

Like Shahn, Norris uses contrasts in his writing in the same manner. He interplays emotions and objectives to maintain a proportional balance. By contrasting extremes of wealth and poverty, he gives attention to urbanism; and by showing Marcus, McTigue's closest friend, to be self-sacrificing<sup>46</sup> and Trina as a pack-rat,<sup>47</sup> he contrasts good and evil. Similarly to Shahn's representation of Japanese fisherfolk, feelings of anger and calm, trust and distrust, humor and anxiety interact to maintain a proportional balance.

Shahn, in his work, defends chaos because he sees it as the mysterious and the unknown road. To him it is the ever-unexpected, the way out, freedom and man's only hope. It is the poetic element in a dull and ordered world. As any order of being unfolds through space and time, it absorbs, reflects and digests its environment. As any order pursues its own way, developing its individual shape and form, so there are other such orders unfolding too, wholly independent of each other. The disorderly element, the unpredictable, unforeseeable item is the moment of impact between two such orders. It is the moment of chaos.<sup>48</sup>

In comparison to the dull and ordered world that Norris in his novel suggests by describing McTigue mesmerized by the small town street view when looking out of his window, he presents chaos by showing the economic determinism of Trina, McTigue and Marcus. Chaotically and individually they selfishly strive to procure and protect the money they each feel entitled to.

Shahn records this chaos in another way, through his photographs. What pleased him most about the camera was its unique ability to preserve the transient, the fleeting image, and a fragment of feeling.



Textures and planes could reveal the interplay of light and shadow and the "shape of content." Shahn's pictorial elements and Norris's descriptive elements make the everyday and the commonplace compelling.

In his novel, Norris in a sense stops time by describing unblinking photographic type situations that are naturalistic. Through description, he projects a sense and a feeling of place and the mood becomes almost tangible to the reader.

Shahn's pictures reveal a sympathy, a tolerance, and an empathy that he had for people--he had a sense of life about him. He gives in a sense snapshots in words. His photographs project a sense of place but not necessarily a particular vicinity. The photographs are part of a period that reflected an economic and social attitude born of hard times (Figs. 18, 19 and 20).



Fig. 18. Ben Shahn, Streetscene: Somerset Ohio, 1938, Photograph.



Fig. 19. Ben Shahn, Waiting Outside Relief Station:  
Urbana, Ohio, 1938, Photograph.



Fig. 20. Ben Shahn, Streetscene: Hatchez, Mississippi,  
1935, Photograph.

After travelling over many sections of the U.S.A., and retracing his steps, he came to know the people, their beliefs and temperaments. His own painting had then turned from what is called Social Realism into a sort of personal realism.

With the camera Shahn made a personal statement about the human condition. To his way of seeing, man's world was an easily traceable graph of unfortunate ironies of detachment; among overcrowding of bleak

disguises, camouflaging human warmth, and of windows and doors that overlooked barren desolation.<sup>49</sup>

Similarly Norris's characters in McTigue possess individual power of personality or circumstance or both. Suddenly, and usually by accident, they lose control first of their environment, then of other people around them, and finally of themselves. Man needs to be reminded he is of ultimate value before he witnesses his own debasement.

As Norris wrote this way, so Shahn felt this way:

. . . society needed more than anything else to be reminded that man is in himself ultimate value. It needs to be reminded that neither the pressure of events nor the exigencies of diplomacy can warrant the final debasement of man. Art is neither use nor appointed task: but given human compulsions, some intellectual stature and great competence, it can perhaps bring man back into focus as being of supreme importance. . . .<sup>50</sup>

Hopper, Soyer, Shahn, Anderson, Dreiser and Norris are eminent figures of naturalism in American artistic expression of the twentieth century. They approach life and view it harshly and uncompromisingly with a new vigor, enthusiasm and intellect. Their statements as artists and writers through their work is monumental in that they are not representational in the older academic sense, but their work is permeated with personalism and barren truth, and represents the result of their lives.

#### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Emily Wasserman, The American Scene - Early Twentieth Century, New York: Lamplight, 1967, p. 1.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>3</sup>John W. McCoubrey, I. Von Hartz, T. Chiu, P. Pierce, S. Seixas and R. Morton, Modern American Painting, Alexandria: Time-Life Books, 1970, p. 13.

<sup>4</sup>Wasserman, The American Scene - Early Twentieth Century, p. 2.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 10.

<sup>6</sup>Sherwood Anderson, Winesburg, Ohio, New York: Viking, 1960, p. 147.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 148.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 150.

<sup>9</sup>Lawrence Campbell, "Hopper Painter of Thou Shalt Not," Art News, October 1964, pp. 44-45.

<sup>10</sup>Jacob Getlar Smith, "Edward Hopper," American Artist, January 1956, p. 26.

<sup>11</sup>Anderson, Winesburg, Ohio, p. 57.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>13</sup>Edward N. Heller, "Hopper Alone in America," American Artist, January 1976, p. 103.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 103.

<sup>15</sup>Anderson, Winesburg, Ohio, p. 15.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., pp. 121-127.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., pp. 202-209.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., pp. 143-146.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>21</sup> McCoubrey, Hartz, Chiu, Pierce, Seixas, and Morton, Modern American Painting, p. 93.

<sup>22</sup> Lloyd Goodrich, Raphael Soyer, New York: Fredrick A. Praeger, 1967, p. 5.

<sup>23</sup> Theodore Dreiser, Sister Carrie, New York: New American Library, 1961, Chapters 1 and 2.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 472.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 471.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 61.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 60.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 462.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 54.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 75.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 83.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 328.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., pp. 141-142.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., pp. 329-331.

<sup>35</sup> Israel Shenker, "Raphael Soyer: I consider myself a contemporary artist who describes contemporary life," Art News, November 1973, p. 55.

<sup>36</sup> Dreiser, Sister Carrie, p. 468.

<sup>37</sup> Alfred Werner, "WPA and Social Realism," Arts and Artists, October 1975, p. 28.

<sup>38</sup> Frank Norris, McTigue, New York: New American Library, 1964, p. 7.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>40</sup> A Darwinian theory that the origin of species is derived by descent, with variation, from parent forms, through the natural selection of those best adapted to survive in the struggle for existence.

<sup>41</sup> Norris, McTigue, p. 343

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 86.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., p. 64.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., Chapter 20.

<sup>45</sup>Shahn's "Lucky Dragon" series illustrates the catastrophe which had befallen the Japanese fishing trawler, "Fukuryu Maru" ("Lucky Dragon"), in 1954. Fishing for tuna and shark out of Yaizu, its home port, the boat had sailed toward the Marshall Islands and ended up close to Bikini Atoll where, unknown to the boat's crew, the United States was testing its new H-bombs. On March 1, 1954, the "Lucky Dragon" was covered with radioactive ashes. One of the most poetic pictures Shahn painted entitled "A Score of White Pigeons" (Fig. 17) records the end of the funeral ceremony for the "Lucky Dragon" crew members, when a flock of pigeons was released by Japanese students.

<sup>46</sup>Norris, McTigue, p. 48.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid., p. 164.

<sup>48</sup>Ben Shahn, "In Defense of Chaos" (Being an Address Given at the International Design Conference in Aspen), Ramparts, December 14, 1968, p. 12.

<sup>49</sup>M. R. Weiss, "Ben Shahn Photographer," Saturday Review, November 7, 1970, p. 26.

<sup>50</sup>Ben Shahn, "Man is of Ultimate Value," Time, March 16, 1959, p. 62.

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