Benson, Leach, and early chapters of Dreiser
Study/Discussion

For most of the present generation, the U. S. economy has been losing manufacturing jobs and increasing employment in the service sector, including sales. The economy depends heavily on consumption. Even though the U. S. was a burgeoning manufacturing power in the late 19th-early 20th centuries, mass consumption was the ultimate outlet for much of that production, and a revolution in selling practices was needed then (as now, with the introduction of internet sales) to vent the massive supplies of goods the economy spewed forth. Economic stability at anything close to full employment depended then, as it does now, on confident, interested, happy consumers of U. S. goods, both at home and world wide.

How did the selling operations of the US cope with this challenge? What institutions, practices, and authority structures did they invent or borrow to make selling efficient?

Did they do it the same way Carnegie and the Big 5 Meatpackers did?

To what extent was it necessary to overcome resistance, both in the sales staffs and in consumers, to make them want to buy enough goods? How did the stores attack this problem? Do you see them pioneering practices that are still in place today? Did they make any big mistakes? Did they undermine old values? create new dangers?

Is there a difference between the way Leach and Dreiser account for the desire for goods that consumed young women such as Carrie Meeber who aspired to possess and wear the latest fashions in clothing? What does Benson add on this question?

Contrast what these authors see as effective ways of motivating workers.

Oral Presentation (3-5 minutes each)

Imagine you are a lawyer called to represent a young middle class woman caught shop lifting in a major department store around 1910. She stole a beautiful silk purse and a jeweled comb, not out of hunger obviously, but from a irresistible desire to possess the goods. This is not a trial, but a hearing before a judge, as your client will enter a guilty plea. Your judge, descended from staunch Puritan stock, believes that frivolous luxuries have subverted urban morality. Your goal is to present the crime as something forgivable. In addition to other arguments, you can refer to women’s roles as part of your defense.

Lawyer _______________________

Imagine you are a representative from the department store management, appearing before the same judge. You naturally hope to avoid any unpleasant publicity. What will you urge him to do in this matter? Give him some arguments to defend your position.

Store manager ___________________