

# THEODORE DREISER’S SOCIAL CRITICISM IN AN AMERICAN TRAGEDY

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**ABSTRACT.** DREISER’S NOVELS ARE ACCUMULATIONS OF DETAILS ABOUT THE SOCIAL BACKGROUND AND THE PERSONAL CONSTRAINTS OF HIS CHARACTERS. HIS OBSERVATION LED TO THE CREATION OF AN AMERICAN TRAGEDY IN WHICH HE PRESENTED A NEW AND CRITICAL VIEW OF THE AMERICAN SOCIETY. IT IS OBVIOUS THAT DREISER AIMS AT EXPOUNDING THE SOCIETAL NORMS AND THE ASPIRATIONS OF SOCIAL AND FINANCIAL SUCCESS IT ENFORCES UPON YOUNG PEOPLE. CLYDE GRIFFITH, THE FICTIONALIZED CHESTER GILLETTE IN DREISER’S NOVEL AN AMERICAN TRAGEDY SYMBOLIZES THE PURSUIT OF THE AMERICAN DREAM AT THE TURN OF THE CENTURY AND HE WAS JUST THE PRODUCT OF HIS ENVIRONMENT, A VICTIM OF THESE GOALS THAT SOCIETY TAUGHT HIM TO STRIVE FOR: THE DESIRE FOR MATERIAL AND SOCIAL SUCCESS . AN AMERICAN TRAGEDY IS NOTHING BUT A PIECE OF A SOCIAL CRITICISM OF THE AMERICAN OBSESSION WITH MONEY AND HIGH SOCIAL STATUS AND IS BASED ON AN HONEST ACCOUNT OF AMERICAN LIFE. DREISER’S TALENT LIES IN THIS VERY OBSERVATION AND UNDERSTANDING OF HIS SOCIETY AS A WHOLE.

**KEYWORDS:** NATURALISM, OBSERVATION, CRITICISM ,MONEY, SOCIAL STATUS

## 1. Introduction

In 1884 Henry James announced that fiction had to create an “illusion of life” in order to be successful, his aesthetic of realism consisting in the accurate representation of the psychological and material realities of the American life. One of the most outstanding representatives of American realism, Theodore Dreiser explored in his novel entitled An American Tragedy the hallowness of the American quest for material success. As a naturalistic novel, Dreiser’s American Tragedy is characterized by a massive documenting of the economic as well as social realities of the society. As Irvin Howe says” No other novelist has absorbed into his work as much knowledge as Dreiser had about American institutions: the mechanisms of business, the stifling rhythms of the factory, the inner hierarchy of a large hotel, the chicaneries of city politics, the status arrangements of rulers and ruled. For the most part Dreiser’s characters are defined through their relationship to these institutions.” [Howe in An American Tragedy by Theodore Dreiser:817]

According to Lars Ahnebrink the naturalists consider that man's action is controlled and determined by external forces such as physical, social and environmental factors."Naturalism, he says, is a manner and method of composition by which the author portrays life as it is in accordance with the philosophic theory of determinism(exemplified in Zola's L'Assommoir). In contrast to a realist, a naturalist believes that man is fundamentally an animal without free will. To a naturalist man can be explained in terms of forces, usually heredity and environment which operate upon him[ Ahnebrink:52]

Dreiser's novels illustrate this definition but the author partly accepts the principle of determinism and believes that man is not completely an animal. In *Sister Carrie* he says: "Our civilization is still in a middle stage, scarcely beast, in that it is no longer wholly guided by instinct; scarcely human in that it is not yet wholly guided by reason." [ Dreiser, *Sister Carrie* :70]

Human beings are helpless, controlled by instincts and social forces and both *Sister Carrie* and *An American Tragedy* illustrate this theme. Carrie from *Sister Carrie* and Clyde Griffith symbolize the pursuit of the American Dream at the turn of the century. According to this concept, through hard work and morality, anyone can become rich, irrespective of his/her humble origins. But Dreiser's characters do not rely on hard work or morality to become successful. Carrie succeeds mainly because of her relationship with men, while Clyde reaches success by making friends with the upper class elite.

## **2. Social Criticism in Dreiser's Novel *An American Tragedy***

Dreiser's observation led to the creation of *An American Tragedy* in which he presented a new and critical view of the American society.

Like *Sister Carrie*, *An American Tragedy* is nothing but a piece of a social criticism of the American obsession with money and high social status and is based on honest accounts of American life. In *Sister Carrie* Dreiser presents the life of his own sister Emma and *An American Tragedy* was based on real cases of murderers who were "motivated less by hatred than by the passion to rise in society and thus, as Dreiser saw it, was a recurrent and bloody indictment of the nation's false standards"[Swanberg: 253]. These murderers were Carlyle Harries who killed Helen Potts in 1891; Chester Gillette who killed Grace Brown in 1906 and Reverend Clarence Richeson who murdered Avis Linnell.

But, as Denby puts it, "The greatness of *An American Tragedy* is that Dreiser took this crime sensation and dissolved the violent but meaningless frame of the story into its innumerable constituent episodes, the social condition of murderer and victim and friends; the moments of obsession, doubt, and rage; the slowly forming moral hardness; the evasions, the hundred hesitations and velleities; the acts rejected as well as those committed. No such story is truly banal, Dreiser seems to be saying; there is only inadequate representation of what happened".[Denby:2]

Clyde's life is followed from a young age until his death and it is divided into three Books which seem to explain the predetermined factor which led to his inevitable execution. In Book One, Dreiser presents in minute detail Clyde's poor, uneducated and religious background. In the opening chapter the Griffith family are presented as singing religious songs on the streets of Kansas City in their attempt to spread the message of God.

Clyde’s feelings of embarrassment and resentment are obvious:”...he and his parents looked foolish and less than normal-“cheap” was the word he would have used if he could have brought himself to express his full measure of resentment of having to participate in this way- and that he would not do it anymore if he could help.” [ Dreiser, *An American Tragedy*: 12]

He is even more embarrassed by his sister Esta’s pregnancy outside of marriage and her abandonment.

An important event which foreshadows Clyde’s tragedy is his relationship with Hortense Briggs which ends with a car crash in which a little girl is hit and killed. Clyde was now a bell-boy at the Green Davidson, the largest hotel in Kansas where he experienced a world of wealth and immorality he had never been familiar with. After the car crash, in order to avoid arrest he has to flee Kansas City and at this point Book One ends.

In the opening chapter of Book Two, Clyde is again a bell/boy, this time in Chicago and three years have passed since the car crash.

Here , Samuel Griffiths, his wealthy uncle offers Clyde a job in fictional Lycurgus where he will meet Roberta Alden, the character based on Grace Brown. As Dreiser puts it, “his was a disposition easily and often intensely inflamed by the chemistry of sex and the formula of beauty...he was surely tempted at times, especially in these warm and languorous summer days, with no place to go and not an intimate to commune with. [Ibid., 239].

Soon after that, Clyde is attracted to Sondra Finchley, the daughter of a wealthy local family. He begins to wonder how to break off with Roberta, when she realizes she is pregnant. They try to abort the pregnancy but as they fail Roberta pushes for Clyde’s consent to marry her.

Clyde doesn’t agree to marry Roberta and tries to find any possible alternative and realize his dreams of social and financial success by staying with Sondra.

He accidentally sees an article in a newspaper entitled “Accidental Double Tragedy at Pass Lake-Upturned Canoe and Floating Hats Reveal Probable Loss of Two Lives at Resort Near Pittsfield-Unidentified Body of Girl Recovered-That of Companion Still Missing” and begins to consider this alternative solution.

He meets Roberta and they go on a trip to the Adirodacks where they rent a rowboat on a secluded lake where Roberta will drown.

Book Two ends with Roberta’s death, while Book Three consists of the time after Roberta’s death including Clyde’s arrest, trial and execution.

Even until he is executed, Clyde doubts his guilt: ”He had a feeling that he was not as guilty as they all seemed to think...They had not been harassed, tortured, mocked by the ill-fate of his early life and training, forced to sing and pray on the streets as he had in such a degrading way, when his whole heart and soul cried out for better things. How could they judge him, these people, all or any of them, even his own mother, when they did not know what his own mental, physical and spiritual suffering had been?...”[Dreiser, *An American Tragedy*, 798]

Dreiser’s novels are accumulations of details about the social background and the personal constraints of his characters.

His characters seem to be driven, as W.A. Swanberg puts it, by “ignorance and inability to withstand the pressures of the shallow American yearning for money, success, fashion-dreams about Dreiser himself was indeed an authority [Swanberg:254]

It is obvious that Dreiser aims at expounding the societal norms and the aspirations of social and financial success it enforces upon young people. Then it is the fault of society that it

had encouraged such a murder as Dreiser says that “...society misunderstands each real-life counterpart of Clyde Griffiths: each youth who kills while pursuing the prize of “success” through a desired girl’s love is unjustly seen by society (and its laws) as a cold-blooded murderer, whereas he is driven to the desperate deed by the lure of wealth combined with the chemically explainable force of sexual instinct. This force is so overwhelming in effect that it makes each “American Tragedy” murderer a victim of extreme emotions which he cannot control and which he did not create. They were created by contacts, and so came upon him as a disease may come upon you”. [Orlov :91]

Dreiser’s talent lies in this very observation and understanding of his society as a whole.

### 3. Conclusion

Clyde was just the product of his environment, a victim of the goals that society taught him to strive for: the desire for material and social success as Dreiser was deeply influenced by social Darwinism and Zola’s theory according to which man was the product of social processes and forces. But we must not forget that the American naturalists also considered that human beings were controlled by the environment, the pessimism and deterministic ideas of naturalism pervading the works of Dreiser. The novel is a tragedy since Dreiser’s character, driven by instinct and a little bit of revolt, strives for a tiny amount of freedom and fails, his desires leading to moral ruination instead.

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