

“THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL CLASS” IN THE NOVEL “THE AMERICAN TRAGEDY” BY THEODORE DREISER

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Abstract: "The American Tragedy" (1925) by Theodore Dreiser is a powerful exploration of social morality, class struggle, ambition, and the complexities of human desires. The novel focuses on the moral dilemmas faced by the protagonist, Clyde Griffiths, and the tragic consequences of his actions. Several themes related to social morality are central to the book, and the novel critiques the societal norms and values of early 20th-century America.

Key words: The influence of social class, Clyde's ambitions, class mobility, the role of social class in relationships, Clyde's crime and social class, the deterministic nature of social class

In Theodore Dreiser's novel *An American Tragedy* (1925), Clyde Griffiths is a character whose ambitions and desire for class mobility drive much of the plot, ultimately leading to his tragic downfall. His story reflects the tension between social aspiration and the harsh realities of class structures in early 20th-century America.

Here are the key aspects of social morality explored in *The American Tragedy*:

1. The Influence of Social Class

One of the central themes of *The American Tragedy* is the effect of social class on individual morality and behavior. Clyde Griffiths, the protagonist, is born into a poor, working-class family but strives to rise above his station. He becomes entangled in a world of wealth and privilege, which brings out his ambition, material desires, and moral compromises. His aspiration to climb the social ladder leads him to make decisions that are morally questionable.

Class Division: The novel critiques the rigid class system of the time, where the upper class has access to opportunities and comforts that the lower class can never attain, often leading to moral corruption in the pursuit of success. Clyde's actions show how one's social environment and the pressures of class can lead individuals to make unethical choices.

American Tragedy, social class plays a crucial role in shaping the characters' lives, motivations, and actions. The novel, published in 1925, revolves around Clyde Griffiths, a young man from a lower-class family who struggles to navigate the complex social and economic hierarchies of American society in the early 20th century. The influence of social class can be seen in various aspects of the novel:

Clyde's

Ambitions:

Clyde Griffiths is born into a poor, religious family but dreams of rising to wealth and social prominence. He sees the upper class as a symbol of success, freedom, and personal fulfillment. His pursuit of the American Dream, the belief that anyone can rise in society through hard work and determination, is complicated by his lower-class origins. His desire for wealth and social status leads him to associate with wealthier individuals, such as his romantic interests, but he remains acutely aware of the social divide between himself and the more privileged characters.

Dreiser highlights how Clyde's lower-class background influences his actions and decisions. For example, Clyde is often uncomfortable in high-society situations, feeling like an outsider despite his desire to fit in. His longing for wealth is not just for material gain but for the perceived freedom and power that come with it. However, his struggle for social mobility is hindered by both his inability to fully fit into the upper class and his limited means.

Clyde Griffiths starts the novel from a lower-class background. He is the son of poor, religious parents, and initially, he lacks significant opportunities. However, he is deeply ambitious and yearns for a life of wealth, status, and success. From an early age, he dreams of escaping his family's poverty and achieving the kind of luxury and social standing he sees around him, particularly in the lives of wealthier individuals.

Clyde's ambitions are fueled by a combination of personal desire and a romanticized view of success. He is dazzled by the apparent ease with which people in higher social classes live, and he longs to be part of that world. This desire for class mobility becomes his guiding motivation, but his understanding of the true nature of class distinctions is shallow and naive. He believes that wealth and social success are keys to happiness and fulfillment.

Class Mobility:

Clyde's desire for upward mobility is central to his character and the narrative. After some initial failures and mistakes, he is given an opportunity to work for a wealthy family, the Griffins, which exposes him to a higher social class and introduces him to new opportunities. However, this experience also reinforces the social divisions between him and those with whom he associates. Though he tries to blend in, he remains an outsider, unable to fully penetrate the world of privilege.

Clyde's ambitions eventually lead to a romantic entanglement with two women—Sondra Finchley, an upper-class woman, and Roberta Alden, a working-class girl. His desire to marry Sondra and elevate his status clashes with his earlier romantic involvement with Roberta, leading to a tragic sequence of events. Clyde's attempts to reconcile these relationships and maintain the appearance of upward mobility become key to his downfall.

The Tragic Outcome:

Despite his ambition and efforts to climb the social ladder, Clyde is ultimately unable to fully escape his lower-class origins. His romantic and moral failings, combined with his inability to navigate the rigid class structure, result in his downfall. Clyde's ambition leads him to make a series of rash decisions, including his involvement in Roberta's death, which causes his eventual arrest, trial, and execution.

In the context of *An American Tragedy*, Clyde's story serves as a critique of the American Dream and the social mobility it promises. While Clyde's ambition initially seems like a positive force, his failure to understand the true nature of class structures and the limits of personal aspiration leads to his tragic end. Dreiser suggests that, despite one's ambitions, the class system is a powerful force that cannot be easily overcome.

Conclusion:

Clyde's ambition and desire for class mobility drive the central conflict of *An American Tragedy*. His story is a tragic commentary on the limits of social mobility in early 20th-century America, where class distinctions were deeply entrenched. Though he dreams of escaping poverty and achieving success, his inability to navigate the complexities of class, coupled with his moral failings, ultimately leads to his demise. Dreiser's novel portrays Clyde as a victim of both his own desires and the social system, which does not allow for easy or unchallenged movement between classes. In Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy*, social class plays a significant and complex role in shaping the characters' relationships, motivations, and actions. The novel explores the life of Clyde Griffiths, a young man from a poor background who aspires to rise above his station by entering the upper class, and his relationships with two women, Sondra and Roberta, as well as his family.

The Role of Social Class in Relationships

Social class also plays a significant role in Clyde's relationships with women. His initial affair with Roberta Alden, a working-class girl, contrasts sharply with his later attraction to Sondra Finchley, an upper-class woman. Roberta represents the lower class and is seen by Clyde as an obstacle to his upward mobility. He becomes increasingly distant and contemptuous of her, eventually deciding that he needs to rid himself of her to pursue a higher social standing through Sondra.

The contrast between Roberta and Sondra highlights the stark social divides in the novel. Clyde's emotional and moral deterioration is tied to his internal conflict between his love for Roberta and his desire for social advancement through Sondra. In the end, Clyde's treatment of Roberta, culminating in her murder, underscores the power dynamics at play and the way in which social class influences his behavior and decisions.

1. Class Divide and Romantic Relationships

The novel also portrays the class divide in Clyde's relationships with the women in his life. Roberta, a working-class woman, is another key character in Clyde's life. She becomes pregnant with his child, but Clyde is unable or unwilling to fully acknowledge their relationship. His desire for social status makes him view Roberta as an obstacle to his future, especially once he meets Sondra. This reflects the role of class in shaping how Clyde perceives and values the women in his life.

His treatment of Roberta versus Sondra also underscores how social class influences his perceptions of worthiness, respect, and affection. He is willing to discard Roberta because of her lower social status, and his manipulation of her reveals how social class creates power imbalances within relationships.

2. Family and Social Class

The social class of Clyde's family also affects his decisions. His parents, who are religious and conservative, represent a working-class world that seems restrictive to him. Clyde's desire to escape their influence and establish himself in a more glamorous and affluent world is a significant driver of his actions, even leading him to make morally questionable choices. The distance he creates from his family as he ascends the social ladder mirrors his internal rejection of the values and constraints imposed by his lower-class upbringing.

3. The Role of Wealth and Success

Wealth and social status are presented as key markers of success and desirability in *An American Tragedy*. Characters are often judged based on their wealth and social position, which in turn affects their opportunities and relationships. The novel critiques this obsession with class, showing how it leads to the moral decay and tragic consequences for Clyde. His disregard for the consequences of his actions, particularly in relation to Roberta's death, is rooted in his desire to climb the social ladder and leave behind the constraints of his working-class origins.

4. The Tragic Outcome

Ultimately, Clyde's relationship with social class leads to his tragic downfall. His desire to escape his class and to be with Sondra, whom he perceives as the key to his ascent, drives him to murder Roberta. This act of violence reveals the destructive power of social class divisions, and the novel suggests that Clyde's inability to reconcile his ambitions with the reality of his circumstances is what leads to his tragic end. Dreiser paints a grim picture of the American Dream, showing how the pursuit of wealth and social standing can destroy relationships and lead to moral corruption.

In summary, social class in *An American Tragedy* is not just a backdrop for the characters' interactions but a driving force that shapes their lives and relationships. It creates moral dilemmas, divides characters, and ultimately leads to the downfall of the protagonist. Dreiser critiques the obsession with social mobility, demonstrating how it

can lead to ethical compromise, manipulation, and violence.

Clyde's Crime and Social Class

In *An American Tragedy* by Theodore Dreiser, Clyde Griffiths, the protagonist, is involved in a crime that becomes central to the novel's exploration of social class, ambition, and morality. Clyde's crime is the murder of his lover, Roberta Alden, which he commits after she becomes pregnant and threatens to expose their affair. The crime occurs in the context of Clyde's desperate desire to climb the social ladder and achieve the wealth and status that he believes will bring him happiness and fulfillment.

The theme of social class is central to the tragic events that unfold in the novel. When Clyde finds himself in a situation where he must choose between two women—one who represents his lower-class background and one who embodies his aspirations for wealth—he ultimately takes drastic action. The murder of Roberta is, in part, a result of his desire to escape the constraints of his social class and gain access to the privileges of the upper class. The novel explores the consequences of Clyde's attempt to transcend his class and the social pressures that lead to his downfall.

Additionally, Dreiser's portrayal of Clyde's trial and eventual conviction for Roberta's murder reflects how social class impacts the justice system. Clyde's privileged social connections, particularly through his association with the Finchley family, contrast with Roberta's working-class status. The portrayal of the trial demonstrates how the legal system and public opinion are shaped by social class, with Clyde's fate being influenced by the way society views him and his crime.

Clyde's Crime:

Clyde's crime is both deliberate and accidental. Initially, he attempts to solve the problem of Roberta's pregnancy by arranging for an abortion, but when this fails and Roberta insists on keeping the child, Clyde's fear of social disgrace leads him to contemplate drastic measures. He eventually decides to kill her by drowning her in a lake, hoping that her death would make the problem disappear. This act, however, is marked by a sense of moral confusion. Clyde is not a cold-blooded killer, but rather someone who is deeply conflicted, caught between his desire for a higher social position and the desperate measures he feels forced to take to achieve it.

Social Class and Its Influence on Clyde:

The novel examines Clyde's crime in the context of his social aspirations and the rigid class structure of early 20th-century America. Clyde is born into a poor, working-class family, and from a young age, he is acutely aware of the social inequality that surrounds him. He dreams of wealth and success and is determined to climb the social ladder. Throughout the novel, his interactions with various social classes highlight the disparities between his desires and the opportunities available to him.

Aspiration vs. Reality: Clyde's crime stems from his desire to escape the lower social class in which he was born. His ambition is to enter the elite world of wealth and

status, which is represented by his relationship with women like Sondra Finchley, an upper-class young woman, and his manipulation of his relationship with Roberta to conceal his social climb. However, Clyde's lack of solid moral grounding and his inability to comprehend the consequences of his actions result in his downfall.

Class Mobility and Tragedy: Dreiser critiques the American myth of upward mobility. Clyde's tragic end reveals how the social class system, with its rigid divisions, limits the true possibility of social advancement for individuals like him, especially when they lack the proper connections or moral integrity. His crime, born out of a desire to maintain his social image, ends up reinforcing the very class barriers he sought to transcend.

Moral and Social Implications: The novel critiques the idea that social success can be easily attained, especially for individuals like Clyde who are not equipped with the privilege, wealth, or social connections necessary for success. His crime is a result of his inability to navigate the complexities of class boundaries and his misguided belief that he could overcome these barriers through deceit, manipulation, and violence.

In conclusion, Clyde's crime in *An American Tragedy* is intricately tied to his social class. His actions are shaped by the pressures of his class aspirations, and his downfall underscores Dreiser's critique of the American Dream. The novel illustrates how social class constraints can lead to moral failure and tragic outcomes, particularly when individuals like Clyde, who are desperate to rise, make decisions that betray their own humanity in the pursuit of status.

The Deterministic Nature of Social Class

In Theodore Dreiser's novel *An American Tragedy*, social class plays a crucial and deterministic role in shaping the characters' lives, particularly that of Clyde Griffiths, the novel's tragic protagonist. Dreiser explores how the rigid social structures of early 20th-century America contribute to Clyde's downfall, emphasizing the ways in which one's social standing, or lack thereof, can limit opportunities, dictate behavior, and influence moral choices.

Dreiser's novel emphasizes the deterministic nature of social class, illustrating how characters' fates are shaped by their class backgrounds and societal expectations. The narrative suggests that Clyde's tragedy is not solely the result of personal failings but also a consequence of the rigid social structure that dictates opportunities and outcomes. His inability to escape the confines of his social class, despite his ambitions, demonstrates the limitations and barriers imposed by society.

Dreiser's naturalistic style presents Clyde as a victim of both his desires and the social environment in which he operates. His fate is not entirely of his own making, but is shaped by the circumstances of his birth, his social aspirations, and the expectations placed upon him by both his family and society at large.

Conclusion

In *An American Tragedy*, Theodore Dreiser critiques the American Dream by demonstrating the powerful influence of social class on individuals' lives. The novel shows how social mobility is constrained by class barriers, and how the pursuit of wealth and status can lead to moral corruption and personal destruction. Clyde Griffiths' tragic journey reflects the broader social and economic dynamics of early 20th-century America, where class divisions were deeply entrenched and difficult to overcome. Ultimately, Dreiser illustrates that social class is not just a backdrop for the narrative but a driving force that shapes the characters' choices, relationships, and destinies.

Social Class as a Determinant of Opportunity:

Clyde Griffiths is born into a poor family, and his early experiences are shaped by his lower-class status. Although he aspires to rise above his humble beginnings and achieve wealth, success, and respectability, his social position consistently limits his options. Dreiser presents Clyde's desire for social mobility as an essential part of his character, but he is constantly hindered by his class background, which influences the choices he makes.

For example, Clyde is introduced to the world of wealth through his uncle, Samuel Griffiths, who represents the upper class. However, Clyde's failure to navigate the social complexities of this new world, combined with his lack of education and experience, positions him as an outsider. As the novel progresses, Clyde is unable to break free from the constraints imposed by his class. His aspirations to marry into a higher social class — first with the wealthy and respectable Sondra Finchley, and later with Roberta Alden, who represents a working-class background — ultimately lead to his moral decline and tragic fate.

Class and Moral Responsibility:

Dreiser also explores how social class influences moral decision-making. As Clyde ascends the social ladder, he becomes increasingly willing to abandon his own moral principles in pursuit of wealth and status. His relationship with Roberta, who works as a factory girl, is dictated by class tensions. Clyde feels burdened by the responsibilities of his relationship with Roberta, seeing her as an obstacle to his aspirations of marrying Sondra. The class difference between him and Roberta makes him view her as disposable, and when faced with a moral crisis — deciding whether to marry Roberta or find a way to rid himself of her — Clyde ultimately chooses to commit murder. This decision is deeply rooted in his desire to avoid the social and economic repercussions of maintaining a relationship with someone of a lower social class.

The novel suggests that Clyde's moral deterioration is tied to his ambition to transcend his class position. His actions are driven by a sense of entitlement and the belief that his desire for success justifies his choices, even when they harm others. The novel critiques the superficial values of the American Dream, suggesting that the pressure to succeed and rise above one's social status can lead to destructive, unethical behavior.

The Inescapability of Social Class:

Ultimately, Dreiser's depiction of social class in *An American Tragedy* highlights the deterministic nature of social mobility. While characters like Clyde yearn to escape their social position, Dreiser emphasizes the difficulty of breaking free from the constraints of one's class. The novel suggests that social class is not only a matter of wealth but also a system of values, expectations, and moral codes that define a person's opportunities and limits.

Clyde's tragic fate — his conviction for murder and eventual execution — is not just a result of his personal flaws but also a consequence of the unforgiving nature of the social structure. Even when he attempts to rise in social standing, his past and his actions cannot be undone, revealing the deep consequences of being born into a lower class in a society that values success based on wealth and status.

In conclusion, Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* critiques the American Dream by highlighting the deterministic role of social class in shaping individual lives. Through the character of Clyde Griffiths, Dreiser explores how class status limits opportunities, influences moral decisions, and ultimately leads to tragic consequences. The novel demonstrates that while individuals may strive to transcend their circumstances, the social systems they navigate are often too powerful to overcome.

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