

**“THE CORRUPTION OF THE AMERICAN DREAM” IN THE NOVEL
”THE AMERICAN TRAGEDY” BY THEODORE DREISER**

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Abstract: In *An American Tragedy* by Theodore Dreiser, the theme of the corruption of the American Dream is central to the narrative and its exploration of social ambition, personal failure, and moral decay. The novel follows the life of Clyde Griffiths, a young man who dreams of achieving wealth, status, and success in American society. However, his quest to reach the upper echelons of society ultimately leads him to moral corruption, tragedy, and, ultimately, ruin.

Key words: The American Dream and Its Corruption, Clyde's Desire for Social Mobility, The Role of Social Class, Moral Corruption and the Pursuit of Wealth

The book presents a critique of the so-called "American Dream," which promises that anyone, regardless of their background, can succeed through hard work and determination. However, Dreiser reveals how this dream is often an illusion, especially for those without the right connections or wealth.

Moral Consequences of Ambition: Clyde's desire to achieve success and wealth leads him to make compromises on his personal values. He engages in deceitful and immoral actions, including abandoning one woman for another and even committing murder, in order to secure his place in society. The moral disintegration of Clyde illustrates the dangers of placing material success above ethics and integrity.

In *An American Tragedy* by Theodore Dreiser, the theme of the corruption of the American Dream is central to the narrative and its exploration of social ambition, personal failure, and moral decay. The novel follows the life of Clyde Griffiths, a young man who dreams of achieving wealth, status, and success in American society. However, his quest to reach the upper echelons of society ultimately leads him to moral corruption, tragedy, and, ultimately, ruin.

The concept of the American Dream is critically explored, showing how the pursuit of success, wealth, and social status can lead to moral corruption and personal downfall. The protagonist, Clyde Griffiths, embodies the struggle for the American Dream, but his journey reveals the dark side of that aspiration, emphasizing the novel's critique of the ideals that underpin American society.

The American Dream in *An American Tragedy*:

The American Dream, traditionally defined as the belief that through hard work and determination, anyone can achieve success and upward mobility, is a central theme in Dreiser's novel. Clyde Griffiths, coming from a poor and humble background,

dreams of escaping his working-class life and attaining wealth, power, and social respectability. His desire to improve his status drives him to abandon his family, pursue relationships with wealthy women, and seek positions that promise success.

However, Clyde's vision of the American Dream is rooted in materialism and social climbing. Rather than focusing on personal integrity, values, or human connection, he fixates on the external symbols of success, such as wealth, status, and social acceptance.

The American Dream and Its Corruption

The American Dream in *An American Tragedy* is portrayed as the ideal of success through hard work, ambition, and determination. This dream is particularly appealing to Clyde, who comes from a poor, working-class family. He yearns for a better life, one that includes wealth, social respect, and material comfort. However, Dreiser critiques this ideal by illustrating how the dream becomes distorted and unattainable through a combination of social pressures, personal flaws, and the moral compromises Clyde makes to pursue his goals.

As Clyde strives for success, he becomes increasingly willing to sacrifice his morals and humanity to achieve his goals. His relationship with two women—Roberta Alden, an innocent factory girl, and Sondra Finchley, a wealthy socialite—illustrates this moral decay. Clyde's pursuit of Sondra, who represents a higher social class, leads him to manipulate and deceive both women. Ultimately, his desire for social advancement results in the tragic death of Roberta, whom he kills in an attempt to rid himself of the complications she represents in his pursuit of Sondra.

The novel critiques the American Dream by showing how Clyde's obsession with external success leads him to moral compromise and his eventual downfall. His actions—driven by a desire for personal gain—reveal the hollowness of the American Dream as it is often portrayed. Dreiser suggests that the Dream can be corrupting, particularly when it is detached from values of honesty, integrity, and personal responsibility.

Social Class and Inequality:

Dreiser's portrayal of the American Dream also highlights the deep social and economic inequalities of the time. Clyde's rise and fall demonstrate how the system is not as meritocratic as it is often claimed to be. Despite his aspirations and efforts, Clyde is ultimately trapped by his social class and the systemic barriers that prevent true equality. His failure to achieve the Dream—despite his hard work and attempts to fit into elite society—also reflects the limitations of a system that promises equal opportunity but, in reality, is skewed in favor of those born into privilege.

The novel suggests that the American Dream is more of an illusion than a practical reality. The corruption of the Dream is evident in how it distorts Clyde's values, pushing him to manipulate and murder, all in the pursuit of a shallow version of

success.

Conclusion:

An American Tragedy serves as a powerful critique of the American Dream, showing how its pursuit can lead to moral corruption and personal destruction. Dreiser exposes the flaws of the Dream by portraying Clyde Griffiths as a tragic figure whose ambitions ultimately destroy him. The novel suggests that the pursuit of material success, when disconnected from ethical considerations and genuine human values, can lead to tragic outcomes. It raises questions about the true cost of ambition and the societal structures that make the American Dream seem more attainable for some, while it remains out of reach for others.

Clyde's Desire for Social Mobility

Clyde's desire to climb the social ladder is initially driven by an idealistic vision of success. He believes that wealth and status will bring him happiness and fulfillment, and he is willing to do whatever it takes to achieve them. This leads him to manipulate relationships, forsake personal integrity, and abandon those who are less socially advantageous, such as his poor family and his love interest, Roberta Alden, whom he ultimately abandons to pursue a wealthier, more socially acceptable relationship with Sondra Finchley.

Clyde Griffiths is the central character whose intense desire for social mobility drives much of the narrative. Clyde's aspirations to rise above his humble beginnings and achieve wealth, status, and social acceptance are key to understanding his actions and motivations throughout the novel.

Background and Desire for Status: Clyde grows up in poverty and is raised in a religious, lower-class family in the small town of Kansas City. His father is a strict, rigid man who does not support Clyde's dreams of a better life. Clyde becomes deeply dissatisfied with his family's social standing, desiring the luxury and prestige that he observes in the wealthier classes. This longing for a better life is fueled by his exposure to the affluent world of the Griffiths family, with whom he stays as a young man.

Clyde's Pursuit of Wealth and Social Acceptance: Clyde's obsession with social mobility begins in earnest when he moves to the city to work for the wealthy Griffiths family. His desire for a luxurious lifestyle and to be seen as a respectable, upper-class individual motivates him to constantly seek ways to advance his status. He is not just motivated by the desire for material wealth, but by the deeper yearning to be accepted by society's elites and to break free from his impoverished past.

Romantic Relationships as a Means of Social Advancement: Clyde's relationships with women also reflect his social ambitions. He becomes romantically involved with several women throughout the novel, but each relationship is tied to his desire to climb the social ladder. His affair with the beautiful, wealthy Sondra Finchley is a clear example of his ambition to secure a future among the upper class. In contrast,

his relationship with Roberta Alden, a working-class girl, represents his desire for affection and companionship, but he views her as a hindrance to his upward mobility. His decision to kill Roberta—who is pregnant with his child—stems from his fear that she will impede his potential marriage to Sondra, a woman of higher social standing.

Tragic Consequences of His Ambition: Clyde's desire for social mobility ultimately leads to his downfall. His willingness to betray people, lie, and even commit murder in pursuit of his ambitions illustrates the tragic consequences of his obsessive yearning to escape his past. Dreiser's novel critiques the American Dream, suggesting that the intense pursuit of wealth and status, without regard for morality or the well-being of others, can lead to personal destruction.

Clyde's Psychological Conflict: Throughout the novel, Clyde experiences an internal conflict between his desire to succeed and the guilt and fear associated with his actions. Although he is driven by a need for social elevation, he is not entirely devoid of conscience. This tension between his ambitions and his moral dilemmas ultimately reflects the larger theme of *An American Tragedy*—the destructive nature of unbridled ambition in a society obsessed with class and status.

In summary, Clyde Griffiths' desire for social mobility in *An American Tragedy* is a central force that shapes his actions and leads to the novel's tragic events. His relentless pursuit of wealth and status, coupled with his moral failings, highlights Dreiser's critique of the American Dream and the destructive potential of unchecked ambition.

The Role of Social Class

Dreiser emphasizes the importance of social class in Clyde's downfall. He is constantly aware of the gap between his working-class origins and the upper-class society he desires to be part of. Throughout the novel, Clyde is shown to be torn between his ambitions and the realities of his background. His attempts to transcend his social class ultimately lead to his moral collapse, as he is forced to choose between his desires and his responsibilities. Dreiser suggests that the American Dream's promise of upward mobility is not only difficult to achieve but also comes at a high moral cost.

In Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy*, social class plays a significant role in shaping the lives, desires, and actions of the characters. The novel, published in 1925, explores the complexities of American society, ambition, and the interplay of personal aspiration and social constraints. The influence of social class can be seen in several key ways:

1. Class Mobility and the American Dream

The novel examines the tension between ambition and social class, particularly through the protagonist, Clyde Griffiths. Clyde, born into a lower-middle-class family, aspires to rise above his station and achieve the material success and social status

associated with the upper class. His desire for wealth, prestige, and a better life motivates many of his decisions throughout the novel, including his relationships with women and his eventual crime. The novel critiques the American Dream, suggesting that while social mobility is possible, it is not guaranteed and often comes at a moral or personal cost.

Clyde's rise through social circles (especially in his employment at a wealthy hotel and his affair with the socially superior Sondra Finchley) highlights the opportunities and limits imposed by social class. His ambition leads him to attempt to reconcile his desire for luxury and success with the realities of his humble origins. His downfall, however, shows the dangers of aspiring to a higher class without fully understanding its complexities and the ethical compromises it may require.

2. Economic Inequality

The disparity between different social classes is a constant undercurrent in the novel. Clyde's family, from a religious and somewhat impoverished background, contrasts sharply with the more affluent and socially influential families he encounters, like the Finchleys. This inequality shapes the characters' interactions and aspirations. Clyde's lower-class origins make him acutely aware of his social status and influence his attempts to fit into upper-class society. His relationship with the women in his life—particularly his love for Roberta Alden (a working-class girl) and his affair with Sondra Finchley (a wealthy, socially established woman)—illustrates the divide between the classes and the expectations placed upon individuals based on their social standing.

3. Morality and Class

Dreiser uses social class as a lens through which to critique the moral standards of different social groups. The upper class, represented by characters like Sondra Finchley and her family, is often depicted as self-assured, superficial, and unaware of the struggles faced by lower-class individuals like Clyde and Roberta. In contrast, characters like Roberta, who come from working-class backgrounds, face strict moral judgments regarding their sexuality and behavior, reflecting the class-based double standards of the time.

Clyde's sense of morality is also influenced by his desire to climb the social ladder. His actions, driven by ambition, often blur the lines between right and wrong, and the novel suggests that the pursuit of class mobility can sometimes lead to morally questionable decisions. This is most evident in his involvement in Roberta's death, an act that he justifies through his desire to maintain his social standing and protect his future with Sondra.

4. The Tragic Consequences of Class Struggle

The novel's tragic elements are deeply tied to the social pressures that characters face. Clyde's failure to fully navigate the expectations and boundaries of the different classes results in his downfall. He becomes entangled in a situation where he cannot

escape the consequences of his actions because of the rigid class structure. His inability to reconcile his ambitions with his social reality, and his belief that his desires for upward mobility entitle him to act outside societal norms, ultimately leads to his ruin.

Roberta Alden, a working-class woman with whom Clyde becomes romantically involved, also represents the harsh realities of class division. She is dismissed and disregarded because of her lower status, both by Clyde and society at large. Her tragic end emphasizes the vulnerability of working-class women, whose lives are determined by the whims of men from higher social classes, and the lack of social support for people in her position.

Social class is a key determinant of personal fate. The novel critiques the American Dream by showing that while ambition and hard work can lead to success, the reality of social class and its associated constraints often creates insurmountable obstacles. Dreiser's portrayal of Clyde Griffiths' rise and fall highlights the moral, emotional, and psychological costs of attempting to transcend one's class, revealing a society in which social class structures profoundly affect individual lives and actions.

In Theodore Dreiser's novel *An American Tragedy* (1925), the themes of moral corruption and the pursuit of wealth are intricately woven into the narrative. The novel follows the tragic life of Clyde Griffiths, a young man from a poor, religious family who becomes entangled in a web of moral decay as he relentlessly strives for social and financial success. Dreiser explores the consequences of this pursuit of wealth and status, emphasizing how it leads to the erosion of personal integrity, ethical values, and ultimately, tragedy.

Moral Corruption

At the heart of *An American Tragedy* is Clyde's moral deterioration. He begins as an ambitious but morally unsure young man, eager to escape his humble beginnings. His desire for a better life leads him to make increasingly questionable decisions. Clyde's initial attraction to wealth is tied to the belief that it will provide him with happiness and social status, making him feel superior to the people around him. However, his choices often involve deceit, manipulation, and exploitation of others.

Moral Corruption and the Pursuit of Wealth

As Clyde's ambition grows, so does his willingness to betray his values. His relationship with Roberta, a poor factory girl, becomes a symbol of the corruption of his moral compass. When he becomes involved with Sondra, a wealthy, socially prestigious woman, Clyde chooses to disregard his commitment to Roberta, leading to a tragic series of events. The pressure to maintain his image of success and avoid scandal results in Clyde's eventual decision to murder Roberta, viewing her as an obstacle to his desired future.

For instance, Clyde becomes involved in a romantic relationship with two women—Roberta Alden, a working-class girl, and Sondra Finchley, a wealthy and

glamorous socialite. His moral corruption is evident when he leads Roberta on, while simultaneously pursuing Sondra for her wealth and status. When Roberta becomes pregnant and insists that Clyde take responsibility, he decides to eliminate her to preserve his chances of marrying Sondra and climbing the social ladder. This ultimately leads to the murder of Roberta, an act that exemplifies Clyde's moral collapse as he chooses his ambitions over human life and ethical principles.

Dreiser presents Clyde's moral failings not as the result of innate evil, but as the consequence of a society that values wealth above all else, pushing individuals to sacrifice their integrity to achieve success. Clyde's internal struggle between his desires and his conscience highlights the corrupting influence of materialism and the consequences of prioritizing personal gain over moral responsibility.

The Pursuit of Wealth

The pursuit of wealth is a central driving force for Clyde throughout the novel. Growing up in poverty, Clyde is acutely aware of the barriers his lower-class status imposes on him. He believes that wealth will bring him freedom, respect, and a sense of worth. Dreiser presents this pursuit of wealth as a seductive, almost all-consuming force that shapes Clyde's actions and decisions.

Clyde's ambition to climb the social ladder leads him to seek employment at a wealthy hotel, where he befriends influential figures who promise him success. However, the world he enters is not one of hard work and virtue, but one in which people are judged by their material success. Clyde's obsession with attaining wealth becomes so intense that it clouds his judgment and ethical compass. He is willing to sacrifice his values, relationships, and even lives to achieve the status and comfort he desires.

The novel critiques the capitalist society of early 20th-century America, where the pursuit of wealth often trumps all other values. Dreiser paints a grim picture of a world where personal integrity is undermined by the relentless desire for financial success, and the wealth-driven ambitions of individuals often lead to exploitation and moral decay. The tragic outcome of Clyde's life—his eventual conviction and execution for Roberta's murder—is a sobering commentary on the dangers of unchecked ambition and the corrupting power of materialism.

In *An American Tragedy*, Theodore Dreiser examines the destructive effects of moral corruption and the pursuit of wealth. Through the character of Clyde Griffiths, Dreiser shows how the desire for social mobility and financial success can lead individuals to compromise their ethical values, resulting in personal and social ruin. The novel serves as a critique of a society that prizes material success over moral integrity, demonstrating the tragic consequences of a life driven solely by the pursuit of wealth.

The Tragic Conclusion

Ultimately, Clyde's pursuit of the American Dream leads to his downfall. His actions, driven by a desire for wealth and social status, lead him into a moral abyss, where his judgment becomes clouded by his fear of failure and his desperation to maintain a facade of success. In the end, Clyde is convicted of murder and sentenced to death, symbolizing the collapse of his dreams and the inherent flaws in the pursuit of success at any cost.

In *An American Tragedy*, Dreiser presents a sobering critique of the American Dream. Through Clyde Griffiths' tragic journey, the novel illustrates how the pursuit of material success and social mobility can lead to moral decay, personal destruction, and the corruption of one's values. The ideal of the American Dream is shown to be not only elusive but also dangerous when pursued without ethical considerations, revealing the deeper societal and psychological forces at play in the quest for success. Dreiser's novel ultimately suggests that the American Dream, in its purest sense, is a mirage—an unattainable ideal that often leads to tragic consequences for those who chase it blindly.

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