

ANALYSIS

An American Tragedy (1925)

Theodore Dreiser

(1871-1945)

“Then in 1925 came *An American Tragedy*, his great masterpiece and his great success.... The story was based upon the actual trial of Chester Gillette for the murder of Grace Brown in 1906. Dreiser so extended and elevated it that what had been a minor tragedy in Herkimer County came to seem a matter for the whole nation. He went back in the life of Clyde Griffiths...to a time when he was twelve, innocent and well-behaved, in the care of pious parents... If he has ambitions, they are no more than every American boy is encouraged to have. He should rise in the world and make his mark in it.

But nobody tells him how to rise. His father and mother are unworldly and ineffectual. He has little schooling. His work as a bell-boy in a large hotel in Kansas City brings him every day in contact with careless money and easy habits, tantalizing him. In another country he might have been satisfied with his place in life. In the United States this would have been lack of enterprise. Clyde has no resources in his own mind, nor any work to be deeply interested in. Lacking a definite character, he is pulled here and there by circumstances. He has an indefinite, hungry longing for a world of luxury and beauty from which he feels shut out and which is all the more tempting for that reason. His theory of success, as in itself a merit, confirms his longing. The traditional American ideas of democratic equality and of the worth of plain people have less effect on him than the enormous pressure of modern advertising, which insists that he be happy. Nobody tells him what to be. Everybody tells him what to have.

So far as he can see, rising in the world goes as much by favor as by desert. When he is invited by a rich uncle to come to work in his factory in Lyncurgus, New York, Clyde accepts full of hope that his kinship to his new employer may be an advantage. Technically he is in the position, classical in America, of beginning at the bottom with no more than a chance to work up, but actually he is his employer's nephew and distinguished from the other employees in the factory. As employer Samuel Griffiths expects Clyde to earn his own way; as uncle he invites the boy to his house and introduces him to a society he would otherwise not have met. Living in two worlds, Clyde is divided in himself. At his age he naturally finds the two worlds symbolized by two girls: Robert Alden in the factory, whom he instinctively loves, and Sondra Finchley whom he cannot help aspiring to in fashionable Lyncurgus. Baldly stated, this was the shabbiest kind of conflict between love and snobbism. Dreiser would not see it or state it baldly.

Clyde's cloudy will, which lets him drag on between the two girls till the situation seems desperate and then leads him to commit a bungling murder, is hardly the affair of a single wicked moment any more than of a long guilty plot. His whole life has prepared him for his dreadful, stupid act. And the whole of America, Dreiser argued, had conditioned and directed Clyde's life. The first volume of the novel traces the confused steps, no one of them criminal, which bring Clyde to the point where he could become a murderer. There is still a second volume needed to tell the full story of how he is condemned and put to death. The civilization which has by precept and example furnished him with a character unable in an emergency to save him from his weakness, turns on him once he has yielded to it and punishes him as utterly as if he had been free to choose and had deliberately chosen to do evil. Nor is his punishment laid on him by even-handed justice concerned only with upholding the law. All the officials active in the case, the journalists who make it a sensation, the public siding with him or against him: these are persons shaped by the same civilization, driven by ambitions, pulled by private sentiments. The course of his punishment is as many-sided and as bewildering as the history of his crime.”

Carl Van Doren
The American Novel 1789-1939, 23rd edition
(Macmillan 1921-1968) 256-58

“In its larger features the construction of *An American Tragedy* is as solid as a bank building. It is very long, to be sure, but there is little in it which is not functional, not a part of Mr. Dreiser’s ponderous design. I was very nervous for fear that the roof would fall during a couple of sagging chapters early in the second volume; but, no, he slowly swung his heavy timbers into place, restored his tension and retained it to the end. The structure of a novel he has mastered. It is the structure of a sentence which has remained as mystery to him. Often he plunges into a sentence head foremost, ‘trusting to God Almighty to get him out of it’; and is vouchsafed no divine aid. And yet the work as a whole is massively impressive. I do not know where else in American fiction one can find the situation here presented dealt with so fearlessly, so intelligently, so exhaustively, and *therefore* with such unexceptionable moral effect.”

Stuart Sherman
The Main Stream
(Scribner 1927) 144

“His difficulty is that his mechanistic naturalism compels him so to select and manipulate facts of experience as to deny, through his narrative, that human life has any meaning or value. The attempt is suicidal, and the more consistently it is carried out the more completely is Mr. Dreiser forced to divest his creatures and their actions of any distinctively human quality and meaning. The more successful he is the more skillfully, faithfully, and consistently executed on the naturalistic level than any of its author’s earlier novels, and precisely for this reason it contains no single element of tragedy in any legitimate sense of the word, and it impresses thoughtful readers as a mere sensational newspaper story long drawn out.”

Robert Shafer
Humanism and America
Norman Foerster, ed.
(Farrar & Rinehart 1930) 165-66

“The best of Theodore Dreiser is in this book. It is an epic of one important aspect of American life, its crass materialism, its indifference to all that is not glitter and show, its irresponsibility for the youth, its condemnations instead of understanding, its thirst for punishment instead of prevention, its hypocrisy, its ruthless savagery, and the ferocity of its mobs and courts of prosecution. There is less naturalistic detachment and more of the fire and brooding pity for men who live with such impoverished ideals. It is an indictment without malice.”

Harlan Hatcher
Creating the Modern American Novel
(Farrar & Rinehart 1935) 55

“The plot is based on an actual New York murder case. Clyde Griffiths, son of street evangelists in Kansas City, desires to escape his family’s drab life and to win wealth and social position. Becoming a bellboy in a hotel, he plunges into the worldly society of his fellow employees, but this life ends as the result of an automobile accident for which he is legally culpable. Providentially he meets his wealthy relative Samuel Griffiths, who is attracted by the youth’s engaging manner and employs him in his collar factory in New York state. Here Clyde enters into a liaison with Roberta Alden, a working girl, and almost simultaneously falls in love with Sondra Finchley, who seems to him to represent the dazzling ‘four hundred’ of the small town. Roberta discloses that she is pregnant and demands that Clyde provide for her. In a frenzy he plans to murder her, and takes her to a deserted lake resort. They row out on the lake, where, though Clyde lacks the courage to complete his plan, the boat is overturned, possibly by accident. He swims away, leaving Roberta to drown. After a lengthy trial, he is condemned to death.”

James D. Hart
The Oxford Companion to American Literature, 5th edition
(Oxford 1941-83)

“In *An American Tragedy* (1925), Dreiser provides a third approach to this all-absorbing social-biological problem. Clyde Griffiths is totally lacking in either the artistic gifts of Wiltla or the strong personality of Cowperwood. He is more like Carrie and Jennie in that his attitude toward life is passive; but he lacks their inner poise. From start to finish of his short career he is a victim of the social and biological forces which operate upon him. His instinct for fulfillment is not only thwarted by the forces

without himself; his inner weakness makes even the development of a Carrie or a Jennie impossible. Thus, by choosing for his central character a boy who had practically no strength within himself through which mastery could be achieved, Dreiser in this novel throws all his emphasis on those forces of biological and social necessity which had shaped the careers of his stronger characters in spite of their protests. But by removing the only opposition that the individual can supply, the force of his own will for mastery, Dreiser here descends to the lowest possible plane of pure mechanistic determinism.

The scene of the drowning of Roberta Alden is carefully planned in order to remove the factor of will as an instrument. Clyde plots his act with the greatest care and carries it to its climax with apparently self-directed intention. But his hesitancy at the final moment transforms the murder into an accident, and his swimming away makes his act passive. The description of this story as a 'tragedy' is almost ironic, even though Dreiser probably intended no irony. For the fate of classical tragedy there were now substituted the necessities of social and biological mechanisms. But the result is less tragic, in the classical sense, than are almost any other of Dreiser's novels because the opposition of man to his destiny, in whatever terms, is not even provisional. To raise necessity to the level of tragedy there must be at least the illusion of possible mastery. In *Carrie* and *Jennie* and *Cowperwood* this illusion is present; in *Witla* and *Clyde* it is not."

Robert E. Spiller
Literary History of the United States, 3rd edition
(Macmillan 1946-63) 1203-04

"The great advantage of *An American Tragedy* (over Dreiser's other novels) was that it was dramatized rather than reported in events. For the first time and the only time in Dreiser's career he had a subject that could be presented dramatically for at least three-fourths of its length. As a result, this novel, despite its tremendous size (840 closely printed pages), has much the best integrated dramatic structure of any Dreiser novel.... Basically the story is without novelty; in fact, at first glance it even appears unpromising. But in the hands of a writer of Dreiser's sympathies and tragic sense, it becomes a great one. He explored every possible mutation of his theme; he probed more deeply and developed greater significance from the simple human story than had been done by any American who handled a similar theme before him."

George Snell
The Shapers of American Fiction
(Dutton 1947) 244-45

"With the publication of *An American Tragedy* (1925), Dreiser made his only genuine bid for critical acceptance... This novel is the crucial test of Dreiser's excellence, the final challenge to those who would insist that the defects of his manner vitiate its merits. Despite its great length, *An American Tragedy* is simply constructed. Its three parts might be labeled 'Description of Cause,' 'Act,' and 'Reconsideration of Cause.' More than in any other of his novels, Dreiser here took advantage of what may be called a 'crucial scene.' Beginning there, he determined to explore exhaustively the reasons for it; what circumstances, environmental and psychological, should have led to the death of Roberta Alden? How should that death be interpreted, socially, legalistically, morally? The most painstaking of the explanations is the social, which takes up all of the first part of the novel.

Clyde, like other Dreiser heroes and heroines, is a victim of a world in which he is unfortunately placed. His mother and father, street evangelists, teach a religious sanction for poverty which is more than mildly distasteful to him. Crime consists of a series of accidents which follow from simple attempts to satisfy inhibited desires. In addition to being poor, Clyde is starved morally. He is not capable of more than the crudest discriminations, and the hotel rooms which he serves as bellhop do not provide him with any education in moral distinctions. Clyde's experiences thus reinforce his dislike for his parents' preachments. On the other hand, everything newly real and vital for him seems beyond his reach. He cannot be both conventional and morally proper. He is convinced of the impropriety of proper behavior, but he is also physically weak; he is not a strong, brave man, but a moral coward. His instinct is to flee, so long as flight is possible. Society, says Dreiser, stimulates desires which convention makes it difficult to satisfy. Clyde is born poor, and for the poor there is not hope except through one or another kind of amoral stratagem. But a man must be strong if he should hope to violate convention in order to live according to the American

standard. He must make and exploit his own opportunities; he must ruthlessly disregard any principle that interferes. Clyde is not capable of ruthlessness; he is a conscientious weakling.

What all of this is supposed to prove, Dreiser does not say; the burden of inference is in favor of social criticism, as the leftists have correctly insisted. The way out for Clyde is found when he meets his uncle, who owns a factory in Lycurgus, New York. He is taken into the factory, first as a common laborer, then as a department foreman. On the level of Clyde's own social origin and background there are drudgery, poverty, and secret meetings with Roberta Alden, a fellow worker. Too late for comfort, Clyde meets his relatives and is accepted into their society. His affair with Miss Alden has already secured his doom, when he decides that he has a chance for a more gracious and a more brilliant life. The pathetic Miss Alden is a most pitiful victim of both levels of Clyde's opportunity: as the object of Clyde's sexual interest, she becomes pregnant; as the poor but faithful daughter of poor but righteously indignant parents, she is unacceptable in the society of the Griffiths and the Finchleys.

After several half-attempts to solve what on these terms is not solvable, Clyde arranges a trip to a lake, where Roberta is drowned. He does not kill her; the death is accidental. But Clyde is morally responsible for her death—or he is at least convinced that he has killed her before he goes to his death in the chair. All of this—every detail of it—is exhaustively and grimly reviewed before a jury of Roberta Alden's friends and countrymen in the trial scenes. Belknap and Jephson, in the face of invincible odds, argue for Clyde's moral cowardice; he did not commit a crime, they say, because his courage failed him and because he was inherently incapable of such courage to begin with. He is not morally culpable because he is morally weak. The argument does not succeed; it has no chance of success, in the face of political conditions and local prejudices.

Finally, in the long dreary stretches of time between imprisonment and execution, Dreiser revives the issue of religion in a way quite unusual for him. Clyde's mother is brought from the streets of Denver to New York, where she displays a singular devotion and tenacity of purpose. The character of the Reverend Duncan McMillan is introduced: an earnest, self-sacrificing, persistent cleric, who wears down Clyde's moral resistance to the point of open confession and almost to the point of secret admission of guilt. Religion is not attractively presented here, but Dreiser has come a far way from his earlier amateurish dismissal of it as 'Bunk!'

An American Tragedy is a naturalist *tour de force*. It succeeds in spite of its lumbering sprawling self. The method is saturation by overemphasis and detail, rather than enlightenment through selection and discrimination. There is nothing that quite escapes being crude in this novel; the more 'refined' its settings, the cruder its achievement. As the novel proceeds the character of Clyde gains in everything but depth: scarcely anywhere in fiction do we know so many facts about a character, or know them from such frequent repetition. But Clyde neither has nor deserves dimension. He is what Dreiser, then Belknap and Jephson, then McMillan, say he is. He has no feeling or insight that is not borrowed. He is the creature of an indefatigable and an earnestly exhaustive omniscience. The crudities of language (not quite so offensive here as in earlier Dreiser novels) argue insistently a fundamental crudity of mind, which is quite unable either to create an inner subtlety of character or to resolve the contradictions of inference which occur throughout as the reader plods steadily through this mass of slowly accumulating fact."

Frederick J. Hoffman
The Modern Novel in America
(Regnery/Gateway 1951-63) 53-56

"*An American Tragedy*, that plethoric book with which Dreiser came at last to his kingdom. The underprivileged boy, son of narrow and ignorant evangelists, is supposed to be a victim of American class discrimination and economic inequality: as the 'poor relation' of the owner of a collar factory, he has a foot in each of two worlds and feels at home in neither. 'Getting ahead' is the only religion he knows, 'parties' the only satisfying activity; for him the light of the ideal is refracted only through a woman's eyes. How, then, can he be expected to tie himself to a pregnant shopgirl who has now lost all the charm she ever had for him, at the very moment when his affair with the beautiful, wealthy, and socially prominent Sondra Finchley is making such unexpected progress.

Clyde did not drown Roberta at Big Bittern, but whether it was conscience or lack of nerve that blocked him, who shall say? Technically, the girl died in an accident, an accident from which the lover who wished her dead made no attempt to save her. But no strong defense could be built upon such a foundation, especially when the prosecution was being conducted by a politically ambitious (though not really dishonorable) man. In *An American Tragedy* Dreiser attempted a complete picture of a trial—what happens in the courtroom and what happens behind the scenes. He was never greater than when probing the degree of guilt in Clyde's own mind. The boy who was a murderer and yet no murderer can find no certitude at any point: he is unsure of himself and he is unsure of God. Even when he has given the Reverend Mr. McMillan his 'testimony,' he is still tormented by doubt.... That young men can grow up in America with no higher ideals than those of a Clyde Griffiths is a national disgrace if not a national tragedy; and surely there can be no question that the book is deeply moving. A mechanist who fathers characters whose lives are without meaning and who are pushed about by forces completely outside their control has no right to move us so much! But Dreiser...is a very inconsistent mechanist."

Edward Wagenknecht
Cavalcade of the American Novel
(Holt 1952) 289-90

"Based on a real case, that of Chester Gillette, who in July, 1906, murdered Grace Brown at Big Moose Lake in the Adirondacks, the book shows Dreiser sometimes following the 'facts,' at other moments transcending them in an interpretation of his own. Clyde Griffiths' boyhood reproduces some of the details of Dreiser's own earlier years.

Clyde revolts against the piety and poverty of his family life in a western city; he becomes a bellboy in a luxurious hotel, is involved in an automobile accident, and takes to flight; a distant relative, owner of a collar factory in upper New York State, gives him employment and hope for advancement. But Clyde's weak nature pulls him down. He seduces one of the working girls, then falls in love with a young woman in a higher social set. To save himself he plans to murder the working girl, who has now become pregnant. What he plans comes true by accident when a sudden lurch of the boat throws Roberta Alden into the water and she drowns. Clyde is accused of murder, and Dreiser's best pages describe his trial, conviction, and execution. Clyde is portrayed as a weakling, but Dreiser rather blames society and the industrial system for corrupting persons like Clyde."

Max J. Herzberg & staff
The Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature
(Crowell 1962)

"Interested in the function of law as an instrument of punishment for social and moral wrongs, and eager to discover the source of moral wrong, Dreiser studied a number of sensational murder cases until a plot for his novel formed. In the early 1920s, he digested factual material, visited the sites of a famous crime in upstate New York, and started to write *An American Tragedy*. Issued in 1925, it was an immediate best seller despite its formidable length. Mencken wryly thought the public liked its bulk; it occupied the average reader a full winter. Other critics damned its sensationalism in dealing with a sordid love triangle. But Dreiser used this setting to state fully his literary Naturalism and philosophical determinism..."

Ignorance and repression of man's natural instincts were the sources of unmoral acts and the villains of human misery.... He saw immorality and the world's practice of paying lip service to a public standard of conduct while allowing another in the privacy of the hotel's rooms.... Dreiser's careful descriptions of motivation, and his painfully constructed characterizations, made the scenes surrounding Roberta's death and Clyde's capture some of the finest in modern American literature.... He was not technically guilty of murder, but he wished her dead and left her to drown. His own ignorance, nervousness, and indecision left a damning trail of evidence that quickly led to his capture and trial for murder.

The lengthy trial scenes, often overlaid with detail and courtroom speeches, showed the remorseless web of events in which Clyde was caught. He was defended on the grounds of a specious kind of insanity, amounting to an admission of moral cowardice that prevented his having the strength to murder. He was prosecuted largely for political reasons so that the county attorney and his machine could be returned to

office. His opponents were not above planting false evidence. The trial was a national sensation, a conflict between morality and immorality, religion and godlessness, slick city life which Clyde supposedly represented and the bitter rural element from which Roberta came. The latter element composed the vindictive jury.

Clyde was convicted and sentenced to die after his new-found society friends abandoned him. His mother's tortuous efforts to save him by running a kind of fund-raising side show, her painful interviews with the governor, the deadly silence from the rest of the world and Clyde's former friends composed the book's grimly remorseless conclusion. Still uncertain of what he did or why, Clyde confessed his religion, implicitly accepted his guilt, and was electrocuted.

Why was this 'an American tragedy?' Dreiser insisted that he had told a story and described a way of life typically American because of its false values and repression of normal instincts. He bitterly objected to Hollywood's portrayal of Clyde as a sex maniac in the first motion picture made from the novel. That film makers considered this necessary only proved to him the truth of what he had said about America. Clyde was at the mercy of the nature that gave him his desires and drives, but a society of false values motivated him toward crime. These standards heightened his innate weaknesses. Society made him poor, contrived the stultifying religion that warped his youth, set the social and financial standards that made him think money and social status were life's only goals. Society had devised the legal system that persecuted rather than prosecuted him. It fed the sensationalisms that insured him an unfair trial.

Loneliness and the yearning for some kind of self-expression were Clyde's salient characteristics. The ease with which he acquired false values, the force of society in manipulating him, the indifference of nature to his fate, were the book's chief themes. To do exciting things without being responsible for them, to rise above humdrum labor and daily living, motivated Clyde and millions of faceless Americans.... Like other of Dreiser's characters, Clyde discovered that his desires were not only ill-defined but insatiable. The more he climbed in society, the greater were his confinements. The wider his identification with life and the greater his personal fulfillments, the more complicated were his restrictions and obligations. Success subtly bred its own end, for as he grew 'better' he grew more selfish and blind to enemies and problems. He thought it selfish for his mother to want his money to help his sister. Why should he go without new clothes to pay for her mistake? He thought it selfish of Roberta to cling to him when he had a chance to enter society. The real tragedy was not that men acted so but that their backgrounds and heredity combined with society to make such actions inevitable. Chemistry and false social values... Like Carrie, Clyde was not wicked, but weak.

In *An American Tragedy*, Dreiser combined his monumental scheme of natural and social determinism with a pity for the ensnared individuals that made much of the book very moving. That Clyde found the cheap hotel glitter so fascinating, and the flashy patrons even more impressive, was a telling comment on his human situation. That he unconsciously treated Roberta cruelly and accepted her love as merely his due made his stricken mistress a tragic figure. That he found the empty Sondra Finchley so attractive because of her money, social position, and flirting ways, complete with inane baby-talk, was simply pathetic.... But this pity arose not from authorial preaching or the moralizing asides that marred so much of Dreiser's early work, but from the fabric of narrative....

An American Tragedy's sure tone and lack of confusion and preachiness showed how far Dreiser had come since *Sister Carrie* and *The 'Genius.'* He combined a rather lofty detachment with patient detail to make the book engrossing. But the old defects of style showed through in his tendency to use long sentences, awkward phrases, repetitious wordings, and to include documentary material like courtroom speeches. Though thousands of people read, admired, and defended Dreiser's point of view and subject matter, few defended his style. In a single page, Dreiser often committed every heresy known in the English language, and whole sections of books like *The 'Genius'* and *The Stoic* are labored and unreadable. He brought to his task almost no formal training and often wrote badly because he did not know good writing. He worked into his style the colloquialisms of the speech he heard, which irritated many purists. He depended on an almost oceanic rhythm in his longer novels to produce stylistic and emotional effect....

Dreiser's early concept of nature as an enemy of man now underwent subtle change. He no longer saw it as entirely indifferent or consciously cruel. He accepted its scope and force. He wished now to find a way to join man and his world to the larger process of life in general. Harmony would be his future watchword.... *An American Tragedy* aroused more discussion over Dreiser's Naturalism than his style. Both his friends and readers found his view of life a curious mixture of sentiment, determinism, and individualism."

H. Wayne Morgan
American Writers in Rebellion: From Mark Twain to Dreiser
(Hill & Wang 1965) 175-80

"When Clyde dreams at last of being trapped by vipers and horned monsters in a narrow divide, Dreiser is offering, in a eclectic statement, a conclusion inevitable from the onset—for Clyde, the American Dream has become the American nightmare.... If the orthodox thought *An American Tragedy* subversive, they were not mistaken. The book challenges the basis upon which their prosperity was reared; moreover, it insists that the attainment of the American Dream is possible for some only because it is impossible for many. When Clyde falls, he falls from the shining pinnacle of the American Dream, and in his fall he sunders the heart of the American moral tradition.

Dreiser shows genius and daring in giving Clyde a virtuous early environment rather than a sordid one. He thus affirms that the custom-decreed American way of life is Clyde's undoing, not some bizarre exception to it. Hereby he underscores the failure of conventional American morality, as promulgated by church and state—the handmaiden of an impossible idealism.... Dreiser's title for Clyde's story stresses that the most typical thing that can happen to an American is the destruction of himself in the pursuit of riches. Mrs. Griffiths does not understand how Clyde's fate came to pass. Nor does society understand. So men must go on repeating the same mistakes, lamenting the sorrows of a harsh destiny...."

John J. McAleer
Theodore Dreiser: An Introduction and Interpretation
(Holt 1968) 127-281, 45

Michael Hollister (2015)