



## From American Dreams to American Tragedies — Theodore Dreiser's Ponderation on American Society and Ruination of Morality

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### Abstract

Theodore Herman Albert Dreiser is one of America's greatest naturalist writers. He believed that human beings are helpless in the grip of instincts and social forces beyond their control, and he judged human society as an unequal contest between the strong and the weak. Both of his masterpieces *Sister Carrie* (1900) and *An American Tragedy* (1925), which were mostly based on his personal experience, expanded and clarified those themes. By comparing Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* and *An American Tragedy*, this thesis analyzes the author's exploration of the possibilities of 20<sup>th</sup> century American life with its material profusion and spiritual doubt of the life value.

**Keywords:** American dreams, American tragedies, Comparison, Morality

### 1. Historical background

#### 1.1 About the author

Theodore Herman Albert Dreiser was the ninth of 10 surviving children in a family whose perennial poverty forced frequent moves between small Indiana towns and Chicago in search of a lower cost of living. In 1943, he wrote to one of his friend, "unlike yourself I am biased. I was born poor. For a time in November and December once I went without shoes. ... And for this reason... I regardless of whom or what, am for a social system that can and will do better than that for its members—those that try, however humbly—and more, wish to learn how to help themselves, but are none-the-less defeated by the trickeries of those who believe that money distinguishes them above all others."

Therefore Dreiser's own harsh experience of poverty as a youth and his early longing for wealth and success would become dominant themes in his novels, and the misadventures of his brothers and sisters in early adult life gave him additional material on which to base his characters. He was more concerned with society's effect on a person than with man apart from his environment, and his treatment of the social forces, which produce the murderers and prostitutes, as well as the business successes, is still modern to the society nowadays.

#### 1.2 About America in early 20th century

The decade of the 1920's was a period marked by an exciting acceleration in the tempo of American life. Industrialism produced financial giants, industrial proletariat, the degeneration of morality and distortion of comprehensive philosophy of the world or of human life. And the word "American dream" became a representation of that age. Average Americans believed that, "the possession of money would certainly solve all earthly ills. You could see it in the faces of the people, in their step and manner. Power, power, power—everyone was seeking power in the land of the free and the home of the brave."

And even the author himself "was dreaming of love and power too." The years during and after World War I when Dreiser wrote *Sister Carrie* (1900) and *An American Tragedy* (1920) were troubled ones. The war changed the outlook of all Americans in very significant ways. It took away some of their provincialism, it intensified the pessimism and

disenchantment with what was peculiarly American, and it led to widespread expatriation. The general prosperity characterized the 1920's proved to be insecurely founded, and ended with the stock-market crash, prelude to the serious economic depression in American history. And in this case, "the enduring writing of the first quarter of the 20th century is, more often than not, critical of the quality of American society. Its tone is satirical, the stereo-typed American is made a figure of fun or an object of pathos, the American dream is shown to be illusory."

But Theodore Dreiser did not such a tone in his own novels. He just tried to treat human beings scientifically, rather than intuitively with the poetic insight so much prized by writers of the 19th century. However, when he finished *Sister Carrie* in 1900 and sent it to a publisher Mr. Doubleday who would take a vacation with his wife, Mrs. Doubleday "was horrified at the idea of his firm's being associated with such an immoral book." They only printed a thousand copies and even didn't send them to any bookstores. Dreiser could not accept this and for several years he was unable to write anything. Then Dreiser devoted himself entirely to commercial work for almost six years since 1908, and became very successful. At that time he got a conclusion, "We like realism but it must be tinged with sufficient idealism to make it of a truly uplifting character... We cannot admit stories which deal with false or immoral relations, or which point a false moral, or which deal with things degrading, such as drunkenness."

## 2. The themes of Dreiser's writing

American naturalists, as Dreiser, emphasized that world was amoral and human beings were controlled by the environment. The pessimism and deterministic ideas of naturalism pervaded the works of Dreiser. He offered vivid pictures of the lives of the down-trodden and the abnormal they exhibited frank treatment of human passion and sexuality, and he portrayed men and women overwhelmed by the blind forces of nature. He was deep influenced by social Darwinism and the theory of Zola that man was the product of social processes and forces and of an inevitable kind of social evolution. Dreiser's tone was always serious, never satirical or comic. It was fitting, then, that his best works were based on his own experiences or those of his immediate family, like *Sister Carrie*, or are fictional re-creations of actual happenings, like *An American Tragedy*.

## 3. Comparisons between the two works

### 3.1 The similar settings

Dreiser's first novel, *Sister Carrie* (1900), is a work of pivotal importance in American literature and is the first masterpiece of the American naturalistic movement in its factual presentation of the vagaries of urban life and in its ingenuous heroine, who were unpunished for her transgressions against conventional sexual morality. The book's strengths included a brooding but compassionate view of humanity, a memorable cast of characters, and a compelling narrative line.

In the first chapter of *Sister Carrie*, Dreiser described "She (Carrie) was eighteen years of age, bright, timid, and full of the illusions of ignorance and youth." and "a half-equipped little knight" who was "venturing to reconnoiter the mysterious city and dreaming wild dreams of some vague, far-off supremacy" This young naive rural and lovely girl was just used by men and then learned to use them in turn to realize her ambition to become a successful Broadway actress. At the beginning of the 20th century, the big city in American like Chicago where the story took place were full of people from rural areas and even from overseas. They swarmed into industrial areas in search of jobs. Carrie was among the crowd and together with others longing for their dreams—wealth, success, and satisfaction of original desires.

Quite similar to *Sister Carrie*, *An American Tragedy* (1925), Dreiser's longest novel, also told a story about the life of a young person who was longing for his new life in the metropolis. "The center of this immense novel's thick texture of biographical circumstance, social fact, and industrial detail is a young man who acts as if the only way he can be truly fulfilled is by acquiring wealth---through marriage if necessary." The antihero was named Clyde Griffiths. The novel began with Clyde's shabby background, recounts his path to success, and culminates in his apprehension, trial, and execution for murder. Dreiser's labyrinthine speculations on the extent of Clyde's guilt strengthened his searing indictment of materialism and the American dream of success, and that was also the theme of *Sister Carrie*. The author offered the main characters in these two works a similar living background and social environment because he himself was very familiar with the taste of how a green hand struggled in society. (At the age of fifteen, in Chicago Dreiser once had a series of badly paid jobs as a dishwasher, porter, and shipping clerk.)

### 3.2 Different attitudes

Although the protagonists' background settings are similar to each other, Dreiser took up different attitudes towards his characters. In *Sister Carrie*, the author showed deep sympathy and respect for all human beings, and the essential dignity he had found in even the most ineffectual defeated man or woman. He did not judge people as good or evil seemingly. Though Carrie made use of her lovers and transgressed the standard of sexual morality, which was hard to be accepted by the contemporary women, she was not described as a prostitute by Dreiser. Also set the first chapter as an example, when Drouet paid court to Carrie on the train to Chicago, "the instincts of self-protection and coquetry

mingling confusedly in her (Carrie) brain.” For a young lady as Carrie who had just left home and made her first entrance into a strange world, “there was something satisfactory in the attention of this individual with his good clothes.” Carrie’s behavior was conducted on personal goals. As what Dreiser described when Carrie had found a job in a large wholesale shoe house, “She now felt that life was better, that it was livelier, sprightlier... her blood still flowing pleasantly. She would live in Chicago... She would have a better time than she had ever had before--she would be happy.” She just wanted to live in that city and be happy. She abandoned her poor sister because she did not want to be like her and Drouet could provide a better living condition, again she left Drouet because Hurstwood was much more wealthy than Drouet, later she abandoned Hurstwood after she made her own fortune. All the changes in her lives followed her dreams, her original desires. So it was difficult for readers to get somewhat of a dividing line for what degree of Carrie’s desires was acceptable and what was not, and for when Carrie was still pure and when she became morally depraved. The declining morality of Carrie, is just like Eve. It is too hard to resist the temptation of the apple—the misdirected view of social value—the veneration for power, money, success and luxuries.

Dreiser created Clyde Griffiths in an impersonal, calm, or even cruel way, which is quite different with the attitude of sympathy towards Carrie. From Clyde Griffiths’ whole experiences readers could see that the author treated life as a vicious trap, a cruel game. To be frank and almost clinically direct, Dreiser portrayed human beings as animals driven by fundamental urges ----- fear, hunger, and sex. Such thoughts could be found and proved in his following words, “Of one’s ideals, struggles, deprivations, sorrows and joys, it could only be said that they were chemic compulsions, something which for some inexplicable but unimportant reason responded to and resulted from the hope of pleasure and the fear of pain. Man was a mechanism, undevised and uncreated, and a badly and carelessly driven one at that.” It was also the foundation for Dreiser to shape the image of Clyde in whom the author threw his pessimism on human defects such as greed, selfishness, indifference and depravity. Clyde Griffiths believed in American dreams and in the values promised by American society—comfort, opulence, dignity, and security, that was why he left home to Lycurgus, why he wanted to abandon Roberta who had been pregnant and began to dream of a wealthy and glamorous marriage that would secure for him the life he so desperately wanted. He pursued his success and realization of his dreams without considering how it was won. Here Dreiser expressed a view of the determinism of the inner and subconscious desires, a view of social and environmental determinism by Clyde’s stories.

#### 4. Comparisons of the characters

##### 4.1 Comparison between Hurstwood and Carrie

Readers could also find the author’s ideas that human beings were helpless and governed by their instincts and the forces of environment by comparing Carrie with Hurstwood, another important character in *Sister Carrie*.

Hurstwood was a sharp contrast to Carrie. Through the story, Dreiser showed readers Hurstwood’s fall along with Carrie’s rise. For example, Dreiser wrote about Hurstwood that he was “a very successful and well-known man about town” and he had “a good, stout constitution, an active manner, ... fine clothes, clean linen, jewels...”, all that the poor rural girl Carrie, who went forward to Chicago possessed “a small trunk, a cheap imitation alligator-skin satchel, a small lunch in a paper box, and a yellow leather snap purse”, lacked in and thus longed for. Therefore Hurstwood and Carrie were strikingly defined into different classes---the upper and the lower. However, they each possessed what the other one needed. Hurstwood was eager to get love and enthusiasm of the youth from Carrie, and Carrie was drawn closer to Hurstwood because his dashing outward look and gentle manner were in accord with her conception of a comfortable life. And here, Theodore Dreiser showed readers a social stage on which love, enthusiasm, and even marriage could be used, could be exchanged.

In the view of a certain stratum of society, Carrie had gained what she was longing for—a better living condition and new life style. However, her satisfaction was crashed by what she saw on a new level of her life, which was built up by the money Hurstwood stole from his employer and did not tell her about this. The new world interested Carrie exceedingly. In chapter 31 the author described, “With a start she awoke to find that she was in fashion’s crowd, on parade in a show place -- and such a show place! Jewellers’ windows gleamed along the path with remarkable frequency. Florist shops, furriers, haberdashers, confectioners--all followed in rapid succession.” And such a fashionable place made her feel that she did not belong to it. She began to realize her unfavorable situation and the limitation of what Hurstwood could afford. To those people as young as Carrie, a new situation might mean opportunity and potential success for themselves. She accepted new changes rapidly with excitement and was looking forward of adventuring in the outside world. Carrie’s desire was aroused and stirred tremendously for more fashionable and luxurious life style. In this sense, Carrie was advancing mentally compared with Hurstwood’s stillness or even falling back.

However, the author did not want to discuss who was right and who was wrong. Once he wrote to a contemporary English writer, he said, “they are so serious, so pathetic, so—in the main—somber and so beautiful. They are so full of a genuine understanding of life and of a kind of sane sorrow because of the fact that in general things are so necessitous, so hopeless, and so unrewarded. And yet there is a courageous and hence impressive joy in the amazing and ebullient beauty that informs the necessitous and inexplicable and unescapable business which we know as living.” So there must

be some reasons for everything—self-preservation for different goals determines people's action. Though the balance between Carrie and Hurstwood was upset (Hurstwood began his plummet that would accelerate along with Carrie's gradual social climb), the contrast between them climaxed when Carrie had become the most popular star on newspaper but Hurstwood was just a poor reader, Dreiser did not want to blame anyone of them. The author felt that people only did what they had to do to follow their circumstances. Their behaviors were controlled by external and internal forces, environment or heredity but not by free will. For instance, Carrie's struggle against lowliness, her leaving from Hurstwood, or Hurstwood's being enchantment with Carrie and subsequent defalcation, superficially were determined by their will and discretion, but the will was often enslaved on account of different reasons such as different social status or great disparity in living condition.

Hurstwood was a multi-functional mirror of society. Concerning the development of characters in this novel, Hurstwood was the most changeable one, even more varied than Carrie. He appeared as a successful bar manager at the beginning, then a job hunter, scab driver and street beggar. From the top level of society, he gradually fell down to the lowest layer. Through portraying such a person, Dreiser depicted the social scenes, the modern life in general,

When Hurstwood stayed at his managerial position, he acted the way what a wealthy person did. With steady work, financial security, peaceful family life, plenty of friends, he enjoyed his free life style. Besides, he found new love---young beauty Carrie, to make his life more colorful and interesting. Dreiser also used him to narrate the extramarital affairs, which was considered especially immoral. Then he played a stealing by chance. Here, he became a criminal at large somehow. In New York, Hurstwood was weak both physically and financially. His experience in managing his business and family belonged to those less competent adventurers in such a metropolis. He wanted to try his best, however, the reality was not so favorable to him. Later, he changed to be a job loser and had to seek jobs as what Carrie did in the past. His suffering this time together with Carrie's, were used by the author to show the difficulties for people to get living into the modern city.

When Hurstwood became scab in a fierce strike, he felt sympathy for the workers at first. But soon he decided to take advantage of this matter—he went to the company and got the job easily. Dreiser spotted light on workers' desperate attempt to improve their living conditions and described how scabs behaved. The striking motormen and conductors claimed that “they had been wont to receive two dollars a day in times past” but “more ‘trippers’ had been introduced which cut down their chance of livelihood one-half”, and “when the rush or busy hours were over, they were laid off. Worst of all, no man might know when he was going to get a car.” With all such situation together with Hurstwood's degeneration into a beggar, his roam in streets for money, his suffering from coldness at winter night and his suicide in a room of a dirty four-story building, what Dreiser wanted to do was to give people various visions of the realities, including the most pain-burning sight. The author didn't mean to criticize this or that, but only wanted to tell the truth, to tell those who had been used to the “complacent, optimistic tone of the popular poets and novelists” what the real American society was. He was writing with mixed feelings because he himself, who had experienced the hardships of earning one's living in the society, was just quite clear of different aspects of the social life. And it also proved Dreiser's theme that was the desire to change one's own living conditions that urges everyone living in this society. Therefore it would not be fair to tell who are right.

#### *4.2 Comparison between Clyde and Carrie*

Carrie's stories are mostly based on the author's own family or personal experiences. However in *An American Tragedy*, the stories of the protagonists are much more complicated. And this time it is based on the facts taken from a contemporary newspaper story, a fact sensitively handled may well blossom into a truth. The sensational murder trial reported in 1906 became a profound revelation of the generally unperceived canker at the heart of American life. And by comparing Clyde and Carrie's last scenes of lives, readers can easily get the full taste of process from American dreams to American tragedies.

In *An American Tragedy*, when Clyde stumbled toward the electric chair, the last thought in his mind was, Would no one ever understand—or give him credit for his human—if all too human and perhaps wrong hungers—yet from which so many others—along with himself suffered? The context of those words was just another evidence of the author's pessimism complex—in the situation that Clyde had been described as a cold-blooded hypocritical seducer and aforethought murderer by public and he could not get away with his guilt and would be sentenced to death at last, there still existed hope for him, that was, if he declared his conversion to the true faith, he will insure forgiveness in heaven. And that was all what he could do at the end of his life. Even so, Clyde felt puzzled about himself, about what he had been searching for in his ephemeral lifetime. and about the world he was trying so hard to live in.

However, this death scene is not the last chapter of this novel. When readers go on with their reading, they will be back in the same place where all the stories began—Clyde's birthplace, the beginning of his dreams (actually of his nightmares and death)—Kansas City. And also the same with Chapter 1, the pathetic family was still singing a feeble hymn. But the old father was frailer, the mother still stood strong but her face was seamed with lines of misery. Instead of their son, the eight-year-old grandson stood beside them asking his grandmother for a dime to buy ice-cream. And the

grandmother gave it to him and thought that they must not be too strict with him—perhaps that was their mistake with Clyde. But readers are quite clear that people would continue pursuing their goals and dreams which are granted by American social value that “nowhere else was the power of money so naked and brutal, nowhere else would young people grow up so without communal ties, cultural traditions or ethical standards which they could oppose to it, nowhere else, ...would they have nothing but the cheap Hollywood films they had seen, to turn to for exemplar or advice in moments of crisis.” And if the value is not changed, Clyde’s tragedy would continue. Watching the view of the little boy’s back, readers will feel that everything has turned back to the very beginning. Here again, Dreiser emphasized the helplessness of human beings and the ineluctable social forces.

In the last chapter of *Sister Carrie*, Carrie was sitting in the Waldorf and looked outside at the snow. She felt sorry for the people who had no places to go. At the same moment Hurstwood was waiting outside a cheap hotel hoping to get a room. The novel returned to Carrie at the end and showed that she was still not satisfied with her life. She was used to think that those luxury gowns and carriage, her furniture and bank account were just what she was dreaming of. Then she thought that she only need the life represented by these luxuries. But finally, “time proved the representation false.” She felt lonely and perplexed that why she could not get her happiness that all what she wanted. She continued to sit in her rocking chair and stared out the window “waiting for that halcyon day when she should be led forth among dreams become real,” though the dreams would become a farther step once and again, “if accomplished, would lie others for her.” Dreiser, in a dramatic shift in the last paragraph, switched from the third person to the second person. This resulted in the author speaking directly to readers. They would feel that they are all like Carrie, desperate for the next best thing, eager to forget the past, and longing for the future that is on the other side of the windowpane. But the author did not blame this kind of endless pursuit. As what he wrote, “If honest labor be unremunerative and difficult to endure, if it be the long, long road which never reaches beauty, but wearies the feet and the heart, if the drag to follow beauty be such that one abandons the admired way, taking rather the despised path leading to her dreams quickly, who shall cast the first stone? Not evil, but longing for that which is better, more often directs the steps of the erring. Not evil, but goodness more often allures the feeling mind unused to reason.” Dreiser showed the readers a seemingly illogical conclusion that it was the goodness of human beings led the degeneration and ruination of morality, and also the goodness tempted the “blind strivings of the human heart” to crave the realization of their ceaselessly changed desires. Men and women with their pure spirits and aspirations for beauties strive for a better life, but lose their way in the metropolis finally, only gain endless discontent and loneliness, and feel vain and weary, just as what Carrie felt in her rocking-chair before she started her new pursuit, and what Clyde thought in the electric chair before he had to end his transitory life.

## 5. Conclusion

*Sister Carrie* and *An American Tragedy* are certainly enduring works of literature that displayed a deep understanding of the American experience around the turn of the 20th century, with its expansive desires and moral ruination. The characters struggled for self-realization in the face of society's narrow and repressive moral conventions, and they often obtained material success and erotic gratification while a more enduring spiritual satisfaction eluded them. These two long novels gave Dreiser the prime form through which to explore in depth the possibilities of 20th-century American life, with its material profusion and spiritual doubt of the life value. Dreiser himself knew how brutal society could be and the truth that what reality was. And he gave plenty of evidence in these two works, where readers could see his compassion and empathy for striving human beings and his ideas of ponderation on the relationship between American society and morality value—a vicious circle started with a temptation from the so-called success based on a flashy social value standard and ended in the vacuity and even perdition of the soul, was controlled by the reality and environment but not one’s will.

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