

Gender And The American Dream: Opportunities And Limitations In The Novel “An American Tragedy” By Theodore Dreiser

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Abstract

Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* (1925) exposes the myth of the American Dream by revealing its gendered limitations. Through the protagonist Clyde Griffiths and the women in his life—Roberta Alden and Sondra Finchley—Dreiser illustrates how class and gender restrict social mobility. While Clyde, as a man, can exploit relationships for advancement, women face insurmountable societal penalties, particularly regarding sexuality and economic agency. Dreiser's naturalist approach underscores how systemic forces, rather than individual merit, determine fate. This paper argues that the novel critiques the American Dream as an unequal construct, offering enduring insights into gender and class disparities in American society.

Keywords: American Dream, gender inequality, naturalism, social mobility, Theodore Dreiser, *An American Tragedy*, class struggle

Introduction. The American Dream - the belief that anyone can achieve prosperity through hard work and determination - has long been a foundational myth of American society. However, Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* (1925) offers a devastating critique of this ideal, particularly in its examination of how gender shapes one's access to opportunity. Through the tragic story of Clyde Griffiths and the women in his life, Dreiser exposes the fundamental inequalities that make the American Dream an unattainable fantasy for many, especially women. This article explores how Dreiser's novel reveals the gendered nature of social mobility in early 20th century America.

Methodology. Gendered Access to Opportunity. The novel's protagonist, Clyde Griffiths, embodies the male pursuit of the American Dream. His story demonstrates that while the path to success is difficult for men of his class, it remains possible through a combination of charm, opportunism, and manipulation of women. Clyde uses his relationships with women as stepping stones - first with the working-class Roberta Alden, then with the wealthy Sondra Finchley. This pattern reflects the greater social mobility available to men, who could leverage romantic relationships for economic advancement in ways largely unavailable to women.

Results. In contrast, the female characters face insurmountable barriers. Roberta Alden, a factory worker, represents the limited options available to working-class women. Her sexual relationship with Clyde, which would have been seen as a youthful indiscretion for a man, becomes a life-ruining scandal when she becomes pregnant. Dreiser's portrayal of Roberta's desperation highlights how women bore disproportionate consequences for sexual activity, with few avenues for redemption or advancement.

Discussion. The illusion of Female Agency. Even Sondra Finchley, who occupies a privileged social position, ultimately has little real agency. While her wealth protects her from the worst consequences faced by Roberta, she remains trapped by gender expectations. Her value lies in her beauty and family connections rather than her own abilities or ambitions. The novel suggests that for women, even wealth cannot fully overcome the constraints of gender roles.

Naturalism and Determinism. Dreiser's naturalist approach reinforces these gendered limitations. The novel's deterministic worldview suggests that characters' fates are shaped by forces beyond their control - including gender norms and class structures. This is particularly evident in the novel's climax, where Clyde's accidental killing of Roberta is portrayed as the inevitable result of social pressures and gender inequalities rather than purely individual choices.

The Gendered Structure of the American Dream. In *An American Tragedy*, the American Dream appears as a seductive but ultimately unattainable promise, particularly for those outside established power structures. For male characters like Clyde Griffiths, the Dream is defined by material success, upward mobility, and the conquest of status. However, Dreiser portrays this pursuit as inherently flawed—built on illusion, desperation, and moral compromise.

For women, the Dream is even more elusive and far more dependent on relational status. Roberta Alden and Sondra Finchley, the two central female characters, embody contrasting gendered pathways within the same social framework. Roberta, a working-class woman, adheres to traditional values—romantic love, motherhood, and marriage—as a means of securing a future. Her lack of economic power, however, renders her vulnerable to exploitation and abandonment. In contrast, Sondra represents wealth, beauty, and elite social access. Yet her position too is constrained; she is only desirable within boundaries of idealized femininity—grace, passivity, and social decorum.

Dreiser's narrative suggests that while men are the agents of mobility, women are often relegated to the roles of gatekeepers or casualties of male ambition.

Clyde Griffiths: A Masculine Tragedy Shaped by Gender Expectations. Clyde's downfall is not simply a failure of moral character, but a result of internalizing a toxic version of masculinity tied to materialism and dominance. His pursuit of Sondra is driven less by love than by what she represents—status, wealth, and legitimacy. When faced with Roberta's pregnancy and the threat it poses to his aspirations, Clyde resorts to violence, driven by fear of social failure rather than by rational planning.

Dreiser paints Clyde as a product of societal pressures: the desire to conform to an ideal of the successful American man leads him to suppress emotion, disregard moral constraints, and ultimately destroy both himself and others. This tragic trajectory underscores how the American Dream, when filtered through gendered expectations, can become a destructive force.

Female Agency and Social Constraints. Roberta Alden's role in the novel is pivotal in exposing the vulnerabilities of women within the American class system. She lacks the social capital to demand security, and her trust in love and marriage is betrayed by a patriarchal structure that grants Clyde authority and impunity. Her demise is emblematic of how women—especially working-class women—are silenced and erased when they threaten the ambitions of powerful men.

Sondra, on the other hand, demonstrates limited agency within her social role. While she can attract and influence Clyde, her character is largely ornamental—a projection of ideal femininity rather than an independent actor. Her emotional detachment from Clyde's trial and her quick dissociation from scandal highlight the fragility of social alliances based on image and class rather than substantive moral bonds.

Dreiser's Critique of a Gendered Society. Dreiser does not merely document these gender dynamics—he critiques them. His detailed psychological realism and naturalist framework illuminate the oppressive social structures that entrap both men and women, albeit in different ways. Through his characters, Dreiser deconstructs the American Dream as a narrative that privileges male ambition while sacrificing female agency and wellbeing.

Ultimately, *An American Tragedy* becomes a study in the **moral bankruptcy of a dream that excludes empathy, equality, and ethical responsibility**. It reveals how gender roles are instrumental in maintaining class divisions and how the promise of success, when defined by superficial markers, can lead to moral ruin and existential despair.

Conclusion. *An American Tragedy* presents a scathing indictment of the American Dream as a gendered construct. Dreiser demonstrates how the promise of upward mobility is fundamentally unequal, with men like Clyde having at least the possibility of advancement (however slim), while women face systemic barriers regardless of their class position. The novel remains profoundly relevant today, as contemporary discussions about the gender pay gap, reproductive rights, and class mobility continue to grapple with many of the same issues Dreiser identified nearly a century ago.

Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* presents a critical exploration of the American Dream through the intersecting lenses of **gender, class, and social ambition**. The novel interrogates the promise of social mobility and self-made success by illustrating how these ideals are unequally distributed and constrained by gender roles and societal expectations. Through its unflinching portrayal of gender inequality,

An American Tragedy challenges us to reconsider the myth of the American Dream and acknowledge the persistent ways in which gender shapes opportunity in American society. Dreiser's masterpiece serves as both a historical document of its time and a timeless commentary on the intersection of gender, class, and ambition.

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