
A Controversial Theory of the American Dream in An American Tragedy and Sister Carrie

When it comes to those immigrating from places across the globe, America can bring a life full of opportunities and the foundation for one to build a life for themselves. The American Dream is, “the ideal that every US citizen should have an equal opportunity to achieve success and prosperity through hard work, determination, and initiative” (Merriam-Webster). These opportunities can vary from a job with good pay, a fundamental education, or a roof over one’s head. Without immigrants, the United States would not be the success it is today. Immigrants help increase our economy and enable the United States to have a sustainable employment system. Wealth is something we all desire to achieve, and this is one of the reasons why so many immigrants travel far and wide to come to the United States. Desiring wealth is virtuous to an extent, as some will go to drastic measures to achieve wealth, which can easily be a façade known as the “American dream.”

Theodore Dreiser is one of many American novelists who believe that this is the case. Theodore Dreiser was an American novelist who was a firm believer in naturalism. He wrote about social issues arising in America, such as poverty. He was raised into a family of poverty which caused him and his family to move between Indiana and Chicago to maintain a low-cost lifestyle. His family being deprived of materialistic wants inspired his works of literature. *Sister Carrie* demonstrates how the desire for materialism can manipulate an individual. 'An American Tragedy shows how one’s guilt does not lessen an individual’s indictment of materialism' (Hussman). In these two stories, the “American dream” is a cover-up for materialism to get in the way of someone’s life. In both works of literature, drastic measures are taken to prosper in the “American dream” of wealth and success. Theodore Dreiser demonstrates that the 'American Dream' is contradictory in *An American Tragedy* and *Sister Carrie* by developing characters that have materialistic and misguided lives that prevent them from conquering it.

Sister Carrie commences when eighteen-year-old Caroline Meeber takes a train to Chicago from Columbia City to begin a new life full of prosperity. While on the train, she meets Charlie Drouet, a member of the upper middle class. As he is checking her out, she discovers the courage to speak to him and she exchanges her phone number with him for his card. When she finally arrives in the colossal city of Chicago, she desperately looks for a job. She travels to multiple stores in the area asking if they have a job position available for her, and everyone tells her no. After a strenuous search, she finds a job in a shoe factory where she only earns \$4.50 a week. In the 1800’s when *Sister Carrie* took place, there was an inequality between men and women. Men were treated with respect and dignity, and women were treated like objects that men could toy around with. Carrie is a victim of being subjected by a man, but goes along with it because of her “American dream.” She is unhappy beyond belief at her new job because she is only punching holes into pieces of leather. She cannot wrap her head around this American society that devalues women. This is also proven to be true when she hears women speaking about how great their weekends were on her second day of work. She also overhears that young men took them to expensive places throughout town. While she is confused how women can subject themselves to this kind of behavior, she is jealous because she wishes she had money to buy the materialistic things she desires. As winter comes around, Carrie lost her job because she became too ill to work and could not afford warmer clothing for the cold weather.

The only way she could receive money was when she went out to eat with Drouet and he gave her \$20. While she has a little gleam of hope, she thinks she must go back home because she is not getting anywhere in Chicago.

Carrie demonstrates that she has an unhealthy fascination with wealth. She is hypocritical because she was angered by the young women in the shoe factory speaking to young men in a certain way so they could get money from them, but realistically, the same thing was happening with her and Drouet. 'Men treated her as a commodity because she already 'sold' herself to her employer, so men believed they could give her money for their needs' (SparkNotes Editors). The American dream should have been route to freedom, but it is strenuous labor. She was miserable at her job at the shoe factory because she pondered about the things she could not afford, including the shoes she produced at her job. She often told her roommates, Hanson and Minnie, about how miserable she was at her job because she was not making much money. She realized she could not even afford car fare, which frustrated her. Now that she is seeing Drouet who is funding her stay in Chicago, Minnie and Hanson want Carrie to leave their apartment because she is "no longer representing an opportunity for profit" (SparkNotes Editors). At this point, she was so desperate for money that men, specifically Drouet, paid her for physical intimacy.

Carrie, still desperate for her "American dream," moves in with Drouet and becomes his mistress in exchange for Drouet buying her clothes and taking her to a show. This is practically equal to modern-day prostitution, and the American dream she once longed for is gone because she sold and devalued herself. She meets Mrs. Hale who teaches her to "distinguish between degrees of wealth." (SparkNotes Editors). This is because Carrie automatically assumes that a beautiful mansion filled with wealth also contains happiness, when this is simply not the case. Carrie's misguided direction in life led her into making poor decisions for materialistic objects, such as putting her self-worth behind money. However, she met people comparable to her. Julia and Jessica lived comfortable lives, but they, like Carrie, were not satisfied with what life has given them. They were saddened by the fact that they could not travel to Europe for luxurious vacations in the summers. All three of these individuals had consumed themselves with the obsession of consumer society. Despite the amount of money that all three women have, they will never be content because there will always be more things that they cannot afford. Instead of feeling thankful for the things that they have that others might not have, they wallow in self-pity for not having the best of the best. Carrie did not dedicate herself to the "American dream," and instead took the easy way out of it by selling her body. She is a prime example of being misguided, because even though she was doing wrong, no one bothered to correct her. Julia was no better, as her unhealthy desire to be in the upper-middle class of society led her to committing herself to an intimate life with her husband in exchange for this materialistic position.

Along with Carrie's despicable acts of subjecting herself for money, she also leaves Drouet for Hurstwood because she believed Hurstwood was wealthier and had a higher social status. She portrays women as selfish objects throughout this story, because she travels from man after man for more money and "opportunities." Carrie and Hurstwood's relationship demonstrate that instead of Carrie having a feminine desire in a relationship, she had a desire for luxurious needs. When Hurstwood confessed his love for Carrie, she did not confess back because she did not love him for him, but for his money. Carrie lost her identity because she consumed herself with the inclination for ornate objects. The reasoning behind this common theme throughout the novel could be because of when it was written, but it still objectifies and

undermines women regardless. Julia begged her husband for a season ticket for a race, but only wanted these tickets so she could flash her new wealth around town with her daughter, Jessica. Hurstwood is also in a “committed” marriage with Julia but sleeps with Carrie to fulfill his desires. While they were not the same desires that Carrie and Julia have, it is still a desire. Hurstwood abused his wealth for his physical needs, proving that he is also a misguided individual.

An American Tragedy also demonstrates an individual with a misguided life, causing them to act in a selfish and greedy manner. Clyde Griffith was misled in his early life, as 'he grew up being rebellious, going against his family's poverty, and dreaming of running away and having materialistic items' (Delaney). He often spoke about 'walls,' which is irony in a sense because walls usually refer to being enclosed and isolated. However, Clyde referred to walls as the possibility of freedom in the future. When he became of age, he traveled to Kansas City and was offered a job as a bellhop in a luxurious hotel. On his first day of work, he was anxious and concerned that this was not something he was supposed to do, but knew he was on the correct path to achieve the American dream afterwards. Clyde's parents were supportive of him working in this hotel, but are unaware of the negative effects it is having on him and his personality.

Clyde's fascination with materialism becomes more prominent as the story progresses. He dreamt of receiving guidance from his rich uncle and had an odd desire to drive around town with attractive women. Heggland spoke to Clyde about the importance of having a wealthy appearance. Proceeding with the idea that Clyde was not well-educated and had been misled during his early life, he followed in Heggland's footsteps even though he knew it was not wise of him to do this. His fortune made him begin to take advantage of women and become full of himself. He believed that he was superior to his co-workers, and this did not go unnoticed. He stated that he would rather not date a woman at all than date a woman who was not attractive, meaning that he believed that he was too good to have someone on the 'same level' as him. He was still aware that he was not as rich as he portrayed himself to be, but he was still determined to live a glamorous life.

Clyde demonstrated that materialism is more important than the American dream and his family when he committed actions that he felt guilty for such as choosing his desires over his mother. His mother needed money, and instead of giving the money to his mother who had done nothing to wrong him, he spent the money on Hortense. Hortense was a woman whom he was interested in, and he hoped for his needs to be fulfilled in return for giving her money.

'Clyde's excessive sensibility was slowly beginning to devour him' (Bucco). Clyde went on a road trip with Hortense and others and started to feel a need to be fulfilled. The actions he committed was more for the thrill of it than the act itself. He not only attempted to be with Hortense, but also rode in Sparger's car without permission. He was beyond jealous of Sparger and Hortense getting to know each other, and kissed Hortense on the way home. He had no remorse for others, and instead, only cares about himself. His fortune brought a temporary rush and left permanent selfishness. He also showed his unconditional selfishness when Sparger crashed 'his' car and the first person Clyde thinks of is himself and he flees the scene. He did this in 'hopes of deserting misery, punishment, and disappointment' (Bucco).

After the 'Kansas City fiasco, Clyde realized that his fortune depended on himself and his circumstances' (Bucco). He was brought to the Union League Club where he met his rich uncle and quickly learned where his place was. He became aware that there were individuals richer

than him, and that he was not all that. However, laborers in the club were jealous that Clyde was 'full of class and connection" (Bucco), when that was just the way he attempted to portray himself. He decided to leave the Kansas City lifestyle to move to New York.

When he arrived in New York, he learned that no one was interested in his association with his rich uncle, and becomes lonely because of this. He decided to get a job at the shirt collar factory owned by his uncle, and while it seemed like Clyde was finally going to start working hard to chase the American dream, this was not the case. He met Roberta, who also worked at the factory, and fooled around with her. He fooled around with Roberta for his own selfish needs when he had an interest in Sondra Finchley, the daughter of a different factory owner. When it seems like he finally is learning to chase after the American dream he initially sought for, he is, yet again, distracted by materialistic wants and women. Once Clyde impregnated Roberta, she wanted him to step up as a man and marry her. "Meanwhile, Clyde was becoming increasingly popular with the upper class, and finally had a chance to make Sondra his" (Oglesby). His selfishness got in the way of his morals when he wanted Roberta to get an abortion because he did not want to give up his position in the imaginary hierarchy. He took drastic measures to make this abortion happen, such as going to out-of-town physicians and drugstores and pleading for help. However, no one responds to his begs and he began to feel hopeless.

"Clyde viewed marriage to Roberta as a dismal ending to all his bright dreams" (Bucco). Roberta threatened to expose Clyde if he did not marry her, so after hearing about drowning accidents at a lake resort, he took Roberta there to get married. Clyde dreamt about the death of Roberta, hoping that she would drown and so he could live the rest of his life with Sondra. After Clyde takes Roberta to the lake, the boat capsizes and she drowned. "Ironically, the boat capsized accidentally, but Clyde did not answer Roberta's call for help" (Bucco). His determination was no longer focused on the proper direction to success, but to get the "girl of his dreams." He needed to arrange an accident or else it would have look too suspicious on his part. While he did not cause the accident, he did not do anything to stop what happened. Roberta screamed for help but Clyde did not answer. His life in a dream made him face difficulties in the real world.

The story takes an impactful turn as much of the end seemed to speak about Clyde plotting an abortion for his baby with Roberta. Roberta insisted that he could not destroy the embryonic life that they have created together. While "Roberta's condition temporarily shocked Clyde into reality, failure soon drowned his renewed sense of superiority: her demands were harsh and she also deserved blame for their intimacy (Bucco)." His obsession with women and fortune lead him to lose sympathy for Roberta's incident because he desperately wanted eternal happiness with Sondra. Roberta lied to the doctor and said that she was married and poor, even though Clyde and Roberta never eloped. Clyde hoped that Roberta's fabrications would help gain him sympathy, reduce cost on his part, and protect his name and reputation. He was still paranoid and anxious that his bad decisions would hurt him in the end. Due to the circumstances of the situation, Clyde seemed guilty for the murder of Roberta. This is ironic because he did not cause her death, but he did not do anything to prevent her death from taking place.

His selfishness persisted towards the end of the story. Mason, the District Attorney, claimed that there was too much evidence against him. Clyde deceived and manipulated others to get what he wanted, so it was no surprise that the fingers were pointed towards him. Out of fear, he changed the truth, even though the truth would have made him innocent. His altercation of the

truth made him sound guilty, and was arrested for his “crime.” Mason wanted Clyde to be punished for his actions. This was rightfully so, because Clyde kept distorting his dream world with reality. Once in jail, he realized how alone he was. While he was surrounded by many individuals throughout the story because of his social status at the time, he was at an all-time low in jail because there was no one in the vacant cell but him. His social status no longer had value. He threw away his American dream for women, fortune, and selfishness. His growing greed influenced his poor decision making, and ultimately led to his execution by an electric chair.

The examples demonstrated in *An American Tragedy* and *Sister Carrie* leads to the ultimate question: Is the American Dream real? While it was real at one point, it was dead after a long period in these stories. Happiness was prominent when there was less fortune and greed involved. True success was nonexistent once those who received fortune let it get to their heads. The American Dream is not determined by how hard one works to achieve their dreams; it is mainly achieved by luck. For example, Clyde received a sizable amount of his triumph from his job at a bellhop at a luxurious hotel, where he was in the right place at the right time. For Carrie, it was when she met Hurstwood that she found her true success. She was fortunate to have met Hempstead, or else she would not have had a happy ending. The pressure that both Carrie and Clyde went through did not benefit them in their expedition towards the American Dream. Carrie felt that selling her body was the only way for her to gain money and a social status. Clyde felt that egotism and greed would lead him to a respectable social status and attractive women on his side. They were both preoccupied in their pursuits to success with the American dream. It was also learned that selfishness and greed could lead to severe consequences. At the end of *An American Tragedy*, Clyde’s self-indulgence led to his execution.

Theodore Dreiser demonstrates that the 'American Dream' is contradictory in *An American Tragedy* and *Sister Carrie* by developing characters that have materialistic and misguided lives that prevent them from conquering it. The American dream is certainly contradictory, but can be attained with complete perseverance and ambition, something that Carrie and Clyde initially had, but quickly lost.