

## **THE EVOLUTION OF TYPICAL IMAGES AND CHARACTERS IN THE NOVEL AN AMERICAN TRAGEDY WITHIN A SOCIO-HISTORICAL CONTEXT**

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**Abstract.** *This article examines the evolution of typical images and characters in Theodore Dreiser's novel *An American Tragedy* within a socio-historical and philosophical framework. Drawing on the principles of literary naturalism, the study analyzes how heredity, environment, and social forces shape the fate of the protagonist, Clyde Griffiths, and other key characters. Particular attention is paid to the concept of the "American Dream" as a dominant ideological construct and its destructive influence on individual consciousness and moral choice. The article explores the psychological, social, and ethical determinants of crime in the novel, emphasizing that Clyde's tragedy represents not only a personal failure but also a systemic crisis of American capitalist society. Through an analysis of major and secondary characters, including female figures and institutional representatives, the study reveals Dreiser's critique of social Darwinism, religious dogmatism, and the punitive justice system. The findings demonstrate that *An American Tragedy* functions simultaneously as a personal drama and a socio-historical document, exposing the inherent contradictions of American society in the early twentieth century.*

**Keywords:** *Theodore Dreiser; An American Tragedy, American realism, literary naturalism, American Dream, socio-historical context, typology of characters, psychological determinism, social inequality, moral crisis, social Darwinism, crime and punishment, individual and society.*

### **Introduction**

At the beginning of the twentieth century, American literature began to engage in an intense philosophical and social analysis of human destiny. In particular, representatives of the naturalist movement advanced the idea that human fate is determined by heredity, environment, and social forces. Theodore Dreiser is one of the most prominent representatives of this trend, and his novel *An American Tragedy* (1925) embodies the dramatic intersection of the American Dream and naturalistic philosophy. This article examines how naturalism and the American Dream collide

tragically in this novel and analyzes the role of society in this process. In the novel, Dreiser explores the factors that led the protagonist Clyde Griffiths to commit a crime and emphasizes that Clyde's tragedy is not merely personal, but a tragedy of American society as a whole.

According to scholars, Dreiser is regarded as "one of the greatest representatives of North American realism of the modern era" [11, 74]. His work incorporates the achievements of the finest writers and philosophers of earlier periods. In his literary career, he relied on the traditions of realism and naturalism represented by O. de Balzac, L. N. Tolstoy, F. M. Dostoevsky, A. Dumas, É. Zola, and M. Twain. As a realist writer, Dreiser raises questions about the role and place of the individual in society and deeply examines various aspects of human psychological and social existence.

As R. P. Warren rightly notes in his article, Dreiser became a literary genius concerned with all issues related to the essence of human personality and success: "The works of this genius encompass two central themes of his era—the nature of success and human nature—and these themes are interconnected" [15, 356].

In his works, Dreiser addressed the problem of moral decay in contemporary American individuals and society. As M. O. Mendelssohn observes, the writer "dared to descend into the depths of his homeland's moral hell" and within that hell managed to discern "a distinctively American individual" [9, 17].

Drawing on the views of N. R. Shakirova and Michael Kowalewski, it is noted that: "It is no coincidence that representatives of American realism turned to depicting the destructive tendencies of human nature. In striving to portray reality truthfully and openly, they could not ignore the external aggression and violence present in human life" [16, 38].

At the center of *An American Tragedy* stands Clyde Griffiths, described as "an ordinary American youth with a typically American outlook on life" [1]. His virtues and shortcomings are characteristic of society as a whole. By criticizing the "American Dream," Dreiser exposes its moral, political, and religious dimensions. Enchanted by the dream of a beautiful life, Clyde proves powerless before the lure of wealth and ultimately commits a crime. Dreiser attributes this tragedy not only to Clyde's weakness but also to the values of the society that led him down this path.

Dreiser himself states: "The first part of the book was deliberately and specifically devoted to portraying such social calamities as might naturally overwhelm, restrain, distort, and intensify the emotions and desires of a highly sensitive young man almost wholly subject to material impulses" [2, 528].

Dreiser portrays Clyde not as an inherently corrupt individual, but as a personality shaped by social and psychological influences—an approach that contrasts with the views expressed by R. Lehan [7]. The author particularly reveals the socio-psychological impact of society on the worldview of the young Griffiths, demonstrating that "the road to failure leads through crime" [12, 16]. From this perspective, the author of *An American Tragedy* may be considered a successor to the traditions of F. M. Dostoevsky, as both writers share a commitment to presenting crime as a product of specific social conditions.

From a psychological standpoint, Dreiser depicts an infantile and egoistic youth in his novel. Clyde Griffiths's tragedy is not only that of American society but

also a deeply personal one. It is the tragedy of a person who failed to mature fully as an individual, who lacked even emotional closeness with his parents, and who was “completely defenseless and exceptionally vulnerable in the face of life’s hardships” [9, 23].

E. A. Morozkina emphasizes that the concept of illusion occupies an important place in Dreiser’s aesthetic system [10]. According to the writer, illusions protect individuals from the cruelty of the world and help preserve an interest in life; however, the loss of these illusions leads to the fragmentation and destruction of personality.

In the novel, characters who exhibit fanatical devotion to religious dogma are portrayed as people trapped in the past, wasting their time and hindering the development of both society and the individual. It is precisely the parents’ dogmatic upbringing that forces the young Clyde to seek a better life.

Female characters play a significant role in Clyde Griffiths’s tragedy. Each woman in his life represents a reflection of his inner struggles and social aspirations. While Clyde’s adolescent infatuation with Hortense may be viewed as the awakening of “id” desires within his psychological mechanism, the appearance of Roberta marks the prelude to his instinctive impulses [18].

It may be noted that Roberta, to some extent, also attempts to use Clyde, hoping to achieve material security through him. Nevertheless, many scholars of Dreiser’s work, such as A. P. Shpakova, evaluate Miss Olden as a pure and innocent character [17, 233].

Sondra, however, stands out as the figure who most intensely stimulates Clyde’s desires. She embodies sexual passion, wealth, and social status: “Sondra is the ladder by which Clyde can ascend to the highest level of society; through her, success appears attainable. It is precisely through this image that Dreiser’s mastery of psychological portrayal in *An American Tragedy* becomes most evident” [6].

The character of Samuel Griffiths embodies the ideology of social Darwinism in Dreiser’s *An American Tragedy*. He prides himself on his status as a “self-made man” and believes that advancement in society is reserved only for strong, determined, and hardworking individuals. As F. O. Matthiessen notes, “the socio-economic conflicts in *An American Tragedy* are linked to the social Darwinist philosophy characteristic of Herbert Spencer” [8, 50].

On the basis of this philosophy, Samuel offers Clyde a temporarily low position, ostensibly allowing him to prove himself and rise. In reality, however, Clyde’s “emotional sensitivity and weakness doom him to failure in a materialistic society” [8]. Through the character of Griffiths, Dreiser criticizes social Darwinism and demonstrates that success in life is not always determined by merit.

Traditionally regarded as the most important work in Dreiser’s oeuvre devoted to the problem of crime, and having already acquired symbolic significance through its very title, *An American Tragedy* is interpreted simultaneously as a personal tragedy and as a socio-historical document [11, 75].

Dreiser sharply criticizes the imperfection of the punitive institutions of American society. In his view, “American prisons... are not instruments for combating crime but rather breeding grounds of criminality” [2, 123].

Mason is not particularly interested in values such as truth; rather, he is concerned with how a murder case and public sentiment can serve his own career ambitions. The case against Clyde becomes for Mason a “golden opportunity” [1, 503], one that he regards as “a case likely to determine his future” [1, 504–505].

Clyde is unjustly found guilty of deliberately and consciously murdering Roberta. Through this, Dreiser exposes ambition as a hidden driving force behind human actions [5, 122]. As a strong personality, Mason realizes his ambitions, while Clyde, due to his weakness, loses and is sentenced to death.

Clyde’s death coincides with the birth of a child who resembles him. Within the family system, Clyde is replaced by his nephew, the little Russell. Russell resembles Clyde not only in appearance but also in temperament. The final section of *An American Tragedy* concludes with a significant contrast to the opening chapter: Mrs. Griffiths—Russell’s grandmother—now understands the child’s physical needs. She gives him money for ice cream and thinks, She must be kind to him, more liberal with him, not restrain him too much, as maybe, maybe, she had—She looked affectionately and yet a little vacantly after him as he ran.

“For his sake.” “I must be kinder to him, more generous to him; perhaps, perhaps I have restrained him too much before—” [1, 814].

This seemingly small and simple act indicates Mrs. Griffiths’s recognition of her past mistakes and her desire to become better [4, 42–56].

**Conclusion.** It may be stated that in *An American Tragedy*, Theodore Dreiser conducts a profound analysis of how the long-standing socio-ideological myth of the “American Dream” exerts a destructive influence on human psychology and destiny. As a writer, he explores not only the inner world of the individual protagonist Clyde Griffiths but also, through this character, reveals the moral and social contradictions of society as a whole—particularly the capitalist American system. For Dreiser, the primary task of literary creation lies in uncovering the complex layers of human psychology and the conflict between human aspirations and social conditions, and this novel fulfills that task at the highest level.

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