

Theodore throughout
his career, dreiser
wrote for



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Theodore DreiserTheAmericanDreamCourtney ConnorsEnglish III CPMr.

BreslinThrough the social criticism of Theodore Dreiser, the plight of the poor is compared against the actions of the rich. In both *An American Tragedy* and *Sister Carrie* Dreiser presents characters who are driven “ by ignorance and in ability to withstand the pressures of the shallow American yearning for money, success, fashion — dreams about which Dreiser himself was indeed an authority” (W. A. Swanberg 254). Throughout his career, Dreiser wrote for a variety of periodicals in order to earn enough money to support himself. His success there lead him to write novels, which in turn guided his path to fame and fortune. Mirroring the life and ambition of Dreiser, the characters in *An American Tragedy* and *Sister Carrie* demonstrate the same goals and hopes for their lives. Like Dreiser, both Clyde and Carrie came from modest roots.

In American society at the turn of the century, however, it is money that ultimately makes the man. As a result, both characters spend their lives working their way into this mold, even at the cost of compromising themselves. Within the book *An American Tragedy*, a poor boy is working his way up to become known. In his society, a name is known for the amount of money its holder makes. His actions in and out of work reflect what his social life of popularity will become.

He strives for richness and a life of prosperity, but it is not always what he wants. His choices with love have to be that of wealth and success or he is dishonored. This character, Clyde, takes a series of miscellaneous jobs to

help him succeed. His first high paying job was as a bell hop in a hotel frequented by the rich.

From there he went on to work at the shirt factory owned by his extremely wealthy uncle, Uncle Griffiths. Beginning in the wash rooms, Clyde eventually worked his way into a managerial position keeping tab of the payroll. While at the shirt collar factory Clyde engages in a relationship with Roberta, one of the workers under his charge.

Clyde then falls in love with Sondra, a woman of the upper class. Not long after, he discovers that Roberta is pregnant. Rather than jeopardize his own rise into the upper class, Clyde must find a way to get rid of Roberta. His only thoughts are that of murder, but he lacks the courage to do it himself.

Instead, he leaves her to drown after their boat overturns during an outing.

Clyde is caught and then imprisoned, given the death penalty. In *Sister Carrie*, Carrie Meeber is a young woman traveling from her country home to the city to live with her sister.

Upon arriving, she is fascinated by the fast and flashy city lifestyle. Carrie soon discovers, however, that it is only the wealthy who can enjoy this side of city living. Rather than work as a lowly employee in a shoe factory, Carrie allows Drouet, a rich man who is drawn to her inexperience, to support her. Soon thereafter, however, Carrie meets Hurstwood, a similarly wealthy man who, without her knowing, is already married. Hurstwood falls in love with Carrie and, in an attempt to convince her to run away with him, steals a large sum of money from his workplace and runs off, taking her with him. Hurstwood ends up returning the money and the couple eventually move

to New York. There Hurstwood is unable to find work and Carrie grows increasingly unhappy with their lack of money and incognito state. Carrie then pursues work in the theater as an actress, becoming a celebrity almost overnight. As Carrie catapults into fame and fortune she forgets Hurstwood, which in turn leads him to suicide at the novel's end.

What both novels portray is the pursuit of the American Dream at the turn of the century. The idea behind the American Dream concept is that, through hard work and moral goodness, anyone can rise from poverty into riches. "If they can do it, so can I." Dreiser's characters, however, are not completely moral and reliant on hard work to gain their success.

In this society the ends justify the means. Carrie, for