



Female Characters And The American Dream: Gendered Limitations In Theodore Dreiser's An American Tragedy

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ABSTRACT

Theodore Dreiser's "An American Tragedy" explores the unequal nature of the American Dream through the experiences of its female characters. This article examines Roberta Alden, Sondra Finchley, and the maternal figures in the novel in order to analyze how gender and class restrict women's opportunities. The study argues that Dreiser portrays female ambition as limited by social expectations, economic dependence, and patriarchal authority. Through these characters, the novel reveals that social mobility was not equally accessible to women regardless of their social position.

Keywords:

character, novel, perspective, women's relationship, power, ambition, meaning, religion, material success.

Introduction. Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* is widely recognized as an important exploration of ambition, inequality, and social pressure in American society. Although many scholars focus primarily on Clyde Griffiths, the women surrounding him also reveal important aspects of the novel's social criticism. Characters such as Roberta Alden and Sondra Finchley demonstrate how opportunities available to women were shaped and restricted by gender expectations and class divisions. Through their experiences, Dreiser suggests that social mobility in America was never equally accessible to everyone. This article examines the different female figures in the novel and argues that their limited choices expose the unequal and gender-dependent nature of the American Dream.

Literature Review. *Roberta Alden: Limited Aspirations and Social Pressure.* Roberta Alden represents the limited possibilities available to working-class women in early twentieth-century America. Her job at the factory provides a degree of financial independence, yet it does

not offer genuine advancement or long-term security. Unlike Clyde, whose ambitions continue to expand, Roberta remains trapped within a narrow social and economic environment. Employment gives her survival rather than opportunity.

Methodology. For women of her social background, marriage frequently appeared to be the only realistic path toward a more stable future. Because of this, Roberta views her relationship with Clyde not only emotionally but also as a possibility for social improvement. However, this dependence places her in a vulnerable position. Once she becomes pregnant, the risks she faces extend far beyond personal embarrassment. Her reputation, economic stability, and future prospects are all threatened simultaneously.

Materials and discussion. Dreiser illustrates how society judges male and female behavior differently. Clyde is able to continue moving within society despite his actions, whereas Roberta faces isolation and hopelessness. Her tragic death ultimately symbolizes the

destructive consequences of a system in which women possess little control over their own futures.

Sondra Finchley: Privilege and Restriction. Sondra Finchley appears to enjoy freedom because of her wealth and social position, yet Dreiser gradually reveals that her independence is limited by the expectations of elite society. Although she has access to privilege, comfort, and influence, her value continues to be connected to beauty, social image, and marriage.

Sondra demonstrates intelligence and social awareness through her interactions with others. She understands how to navigate social relationships and maintain her status within upper-class culture. Nevertheless, her choices remain closely controlled by family authority and social expectations. Once Clyde becomes associated with scandal, her apparent freedom quickly disappears. Her family intervenes immediately, showing that even privileged women remained dependent upon patriarchal structures.

Through Sondra, Dreiser suggests that wealth does not necessarily guarantee personal autonomy for women. Her experience reveals another form of limitation hidden beneath social privilege.

Results. The maternal characters in the novel provide another perspective on women's relationship with power and ambition. Clyde's mother attempts to find meaning through religion and moral devotion rather than material success. Although she possesses a degree of authority within her religious environment, this influence remains socially limited and disconnected from economic power. Mrs. Griffiths, by contrast, represents female authority within an upper-class household. She influences family reputation and domestic decisions, yet her social position depends largely on the status of her husband and family. In both cases, women gain recognition indirectly rather than through independent achievement. Dreiser uses these older female figures to demonstrate how earlier generations often accepted restricted social roles as normal. Their experiences contrast with the younger

women who seek broader opportunities but continue to encounter structural barriers.

Conclusion. In *An American Tragedy*, Dreiser portrays the American Dream as deeply unequal for women across different social classes. Roberta's experience demonstrates the dangers created by economic dependence and social judgment, while Sondra's story reveals the hidden limitations existing even within privilege and wealth. The maternal figures further illustrate how female influence was traditionally confined to indirect or domestic forms of authority.

Taken together, these characters show that women's ambitions were restricted not simply by personal circumstances but by broader social systems that controlled access to independence, security, and recognition. Dreiser's novel therefore remains relevant because it highlights how gender inequality continues to shape opportunities and social mobility.

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