

# The Reflection of Determinism in Dreiser's Novels-Based on An American Tragedy

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## Abstract

**This thesis makes an analysis of Theodore Dreiser's novel An American Tragedy on the bases of environmental, biographical and cultural determinism. An American Tragedy tells a story about Clyde who receives sentence because of murdering his innocent and poor girlfriend only because he builds love relationship with a wealthy girl. In the fast-developing Chinese society, people like Clyde exist, who should learn to devote their own time and talent to seeking work and and make it thrive.**

## Keywords

**Determinism; An American Tragedy; Dreiser's novel.**

## 1. Introduction

An American Tragedy is generally considered as a realistic novel which condemns the dark side of social reality. Living in fast-developing America, the desire for big fortune has seriously impacted one's ideology [1]. The ambitious but immature Clyde Griffiths, born in a poor family in a very small town, feels shamed with the religious missionary work and takes a job as a bellboy at a local hotel. In order to get into the upper class, he builds love relationship with Sondra, he abandons his poor girlfriend and is sentenced to death. In essence, one's destiny is determined by inner weakness. Thus this thesis starts from the natural determinism and to explore what determines Clyde to do so.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Definition of Determinism

Determinism is the theory that all human actions are caused entirely by preceding events, and not by the exercise of the will [2]. In literature determinism is reflected as naturalism, and limited to a belief that human beings are determined by environment and heredity. It opposed to the freedom of the will, so the individuals have no choice in a certain environment. Their actions are determined by various forces such as outer environment, their preceding deeds and inner psych.

### 2.2. Research on Determinism

Biological determinism is the view that biological or even genetic factors are the main or even the single cause of important behavioral difference among people [3]. From mental health perspective, a person's poverty or wealth results from something inside a person, which can be transmitted genetically. Literary determinism is another aspect of determinism, which refers to human beings who live in a "universe that reveals free will as an illusion, our decisions and the like and also our actions flowing from them are the effects of certain ordinary causal sequences" [4]. Owing to the influence of Darwinism, Jack London puts determinism analysis into his novel the Call of the Wild to validate the importance of changing environment. In China, Liu Jun in his study Determinism Analysis in Naturalism Literature states his view about geography environmental determinism. The essence of the natural environment is the decisive factor of

the productive activities of human beings. Behavioral determinism, theoretical determinism and historical determinism can also be included. However, This thesis is going to analyze Dreiser's novel from biological, environmental and cultural determinism.

### **3. Analysis on Determinism in An American Tragedy**

#### **3.1. The Living and Social Environmental Factors**

Naturalists put much emphasis on one's living environment and they strongly believe that one's living environment influences his fate greatly. Therefore, the paper starts with exploring the crucial role played by the birth and living conditions of the main character. Clyde is born in a very small town, whose parents are strongly religion-worshipped. He is ashamed of the modest mission work in the street without much payment. In a money-worship society, Clyde's mind is grained with the great pattern of success that one must climb the social ladder from lower to upper class. As a bellhop in the Green-Davison hotel, he is strongly impressed by the grandeur of the buildings and luxurious life the upper class possess.

When it refers to the life in Chicago, Clyde hopes to attain his economic aim with the assistance of his wealthy uncle. However, they put him aside with contempt for his poverty, let alone help him. Clyde has been stuck in a dilemma, on the one hand, he should not have any relationship with the lower class people, on the other hands, he feels very solitary and desperate of his low pay and monotonous life. When he gets into the party in his uncle's department, he sees many celebrities and rich women, who do not even take a glance at him. He feels he was expelled from their world. At the moment he is anxious about his future, he is taken up by Sondra Finchley accidentally, who opens a door for Clyde to enter his beloved paradise. He is gradually lost in the sweet words, the comfortable living conditions, and the exhilarating entertainment. Later on, he makes great struggle to abandon and even murder the poor Roberta with the great temptation of his lavish economical living conditions. Choosing Roberta means he must revert to his initial position, which he can not bear at all.

#### **3.2. Innate Talent and Flaws**

Depending on his talented beauty, Clyde quickly has contact with the luxurious life of the upper class. He dreams that one day he can become one of them. He obtains many friends and is respected and eulogized by his good-looks. Even Sondra, a beautiful and wealthy young lady is attracted by his charm. She takes Clyde into a party of the youth of upper class. He is inclined to establish his identity as a member of upper class; he exaggerates his family conditions and tries his best to look like a distinguished man. In fact, Clyde, with an innate weak will, can just see the current entertainment without pondering over the serious consequences when the outer forces impel him. He is so indecisive and easily influenced by outside environment and people around. In front of a material world full of temptations, he soon loses himself. He even kills his beloved Roberta.

#### **3.3. Insatiable Desire for Money and Pleasure**

At the moment he begins to make modest activities in the street, he dreams to be a wealthy gentleman, getting rid of poor environment. These original desires become the foundation of his rapid advances in career. As he struggles for years in the society, all kind of desires are breeding in his mind rapidly. He is fascinated with owning money and social status. He craves for a certain lover who only belongs to him, instead of the worldly prostitutes. Falling in love with a beautiful, amiable girl, Roberta, he could have stopped this endless pursuit and enjoy this precious happiness, but he can not help it.

His needs have come to a new stage, especially when he is indulged in the strong passion of Sondra, the glory of being admired and the temptation for the wealth and rank forever. The strong attraction of the outside world has buries his morality

### 3.4. The Epitome of American Culture--- American Dream

As the American economy grows rapidly, the country is considered to be “a land full of opportunity” in many people’s eyes. Many youth are influenced by the prevalent concept that a working girl marries a wealthy young man or a poor young man marries well a rich girl and thereby to achieve luxury and superiority. It is this pattern of “American dream at that time” that gives Clyde a life-long pursuit of the quick way to be rich through the way of association with celebrities. Clyde, living in the poor family, influenced by this kind of cultural belief, feels himself “above the type of labor which is purely manual”[5]. He is always dreaming that he will be taken by someone, contributing to his success.

## 4. Conclusion

It is universally acknowledged that there is no doubt that man is doomed to be influenced by the surroundings, innate characters and prevalent cultural beliefs. However, confronted with the passive environmental factors, man can use his strong will to conquer the adversity. There are many people nowadays in China who have given up the bottom line of merits under the lure of modern society. Bear in mind that we are all supposed to adopt an active and positive attitude towards life and build a terrific castle on our own hands.

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