



# An American Tragedy

*Theodore Dreiser*

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## **An American Tragedy** Theodore Dreiser

Theodore Dreiser (1871-1945) is one of the giants of American letters.

One of his biggest battles involved "An American Tragedy," a sprawling book based on a real murder case that occurred in New York at the beginning of the 20th century. Dreiser used the Chester Gillette/Grace Brown episode as the basis for a story that strongly criticized America's infatuation with materialism and social status.

The ambitious but ill-educated, illusioned, and immature Clyde Griffiths is raised by poor and devoutly religious parents who force him to participate in their street missionary work, and on reaching young adulthood takes low-status jobs as a soda jerk and then as a bellhop at a top Kansas City hotel. There, his more sophisticated colleagues introduce him to alcohol and prostitutes.

Clyde enjoys his new lifestyle and becomes infatuated with the mercenary Hortense Briggs, who exploits this characteristic of Clyde by compelling him to buy her an expensive jacket in exchange for love, even though she clearly does not want him to be her partner. Hortense instead wants another person named Sparsen, and this is clear to Clyde who is immediately and extremely jealous, but Hortense repeatedly reassures Clyde that she loves him, though she really wants him just for the jacket...

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