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CATEGORY 3- LITERATURE

**A THEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF CHARACTER
DEVELOPMENT OF CLYDE GRIFFITHS IN THE NOVEL “AN
AMERICAN TRAGEDY” BY THEODORE DREISER**

Research Question: To what extent can the protagonist Clyde Griffiths’ character development in the novel “*An American Tragedy*” by Theodore Dreiser be analyzed in terms of the Seven Deadly Sins?

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I - Introduction

An American Tragedy by Theodore Dreiser was published in December 1925 in two volumes which contain 3 subsections termed as “books” (B) and each starting from a new chapter (Ch). Each book has recurring themes and possess parallels among each other to tell the story of Clyde Griffiths, a young American who grew up in a poor evangelist family that only taught the “*word of God*”. Armed with nothing but faint religious prohibitions, Clyde represents the ordinary man with no exceptional qualities and his characteristics are used to portray the dark side of the American Dream. Moreover, the novel illustrates how an ordinary man’s hunger for wealth and status can overwhelm his moral sense. The themes of ambition, class, morality and how the pursuit of success can lead to self-destruction are explored from a multi-dimensional perspective. The story is masterfully crafted with realism to reflect the human nature and the author gives intriguing reasons as to why the moral sense becomes weak, by mostly tying it to Clyde’s religious upbringing.

Religion is one of the major themes in the novel and plays an important role in the narrative progression as Clyde drifts away from his families strict Protestant beliefs that fail to guide him in the harsh world of industrial capitalism. Clyde’s religious upbringing leaves him ill-equipped to deal with the temptations of the outside world and as he is climbing the socio-economic ladder, he becomes increasingly willing to compromise his moral principles in order to achieve his goals. Furthermore, his growing indifference to religion is a reflection of his increasing moral ambiguity which ultimately leads to his downfall.

The seven deadly sins are a classification of vices in Christian teachings and have a strong tie with the novel because the protagonist exhibits every sin as he is dragged away from his religious beliefs. Pride, envy, gluttony, greed, lust, wrath, and sloth all play a big role in Clyde adopting a set of false values which lead to his figurative destruction. I believe it is appropriate to make a theology-based character analysis due to Clyde's religious background and prominence of religion as a theme in the novel. Therefore, the research question is generated as; To what extent can the protagonist Clyde Griffiths' character development in the novel "*An American Tragedy*" by Theodore Dreiser be analyzed in terms of the Seven Deadly Sins?

II – The Seven Deadly Sins

i. Pride

Pride is a complex emotion that represents an excessive belief in one's own abilities and is the mother of all vices in Catholicism [1]. The protagonist -Clyde Griffiths- possesses a hunger to climb the socio-economic ladder that stems from his self-deception of being worthy of greater things than the world he was born into. "*Who were these people with money, and what had they done that they should enjoy so much luxury, where others as good seemingly as themselves had nothing?*" (B1 Ch7) This wealthy environment Clyde encounters while working in Kansas City illustrates the differences caused by social class. The social class that Clyde's parents inhabit and the ones that his fellow bellhops inhabit are quite similar to society in general, but Clyde is aware of the differences in income and in attitude that make the latter lifestyle more affluent and engaging. [2] Therefore, Clyde is dissatisfied with his family's social status and way of life while

working as a bellhop, thinking of their ways as being “*beneath him*”. He progressively rejects a religion-based morality and adopts a Machiavellian approach to becoming wealthy and successful quickly, thinking of his background as a mere hindrance to his ambitions without taking into consideration that he has no redeeming qualities. Furthermore, Galatians 6:3 ESV states: “*For if anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself.*”, and that is exactly what Clyde does. Without accomplishing a remarkable deed in life, he is proud of his standing and always believes he is entitled to more. Additionally, Clyde is proud of his good looks and utilizes his charisma to charm his way into better positions. These characteristics of Clyde are especially prominent in his relationship with women which is mainly illustrated in his interest in Sondra Finchley; the embodiment of young, sophisticated wealth which Clyde perceives as the golden ticket to becoming a member of the upper class. However, he is also in a lustful relationship with Roberta Alden, a poor factory worker, in which he tries to hide their relationship because he believes it would negatively affect his social standing and his relationship with Sondra Finchley. Clyde does not even bother to think of the ethical considerations of abortion when Roberta gets pregnant and even focuses on how he will get out of this situation without harming his pride. He ultimately convinces himself that he can get away with murdering Roberta and protect his social standing, which further reflects Clyde’s Machiavellian approach and his drift from his family’s strict Protestant beliefs.

ii. Envy

Envy is sorrow, sadness or anger at the excellence of someone else. St. Augustine referred to envy as the “diabolical sin” as it seeks to destroy what is good [3]. Clyde is plagued by an entrenched sense of envy throughout the story. From his humble beginnings in a Kansas City soda fountain to

his employment in Lycurgus, the protagonist constantly compares his circumstances to those of others, particularly those in positions of power, and feels inferior as a result. In Book 1, rhetorical questions are utilized as a literary tool to express Clyde's feeling of envy towards the amenities possessed by the upper class: *"Why should all these people be riding around in their own carriages, automobiles, and carriages with liveries and all that sort of thing? And why shouldn't he?"* (B1 Ch8). This quotation shows that Clyde yearns for the lifestyle of the wealthy guests of the Green Davidson and his envy stems from his desire to attain the luxuries they possess. Therefore, Clyde starts imitating their lives -which he envies- by going to dances and movies, driving cars, and spending more money. His life becomes a series of imitations, as he is always imitating a level of sophisticated wealth, he deeply desires but does not possess. While working at the soda fountain, he wishes to imitate the young men he served: *"To be able to wear such as suit with such ease and air!"* (B1 Ch4) and at the Union League Club, he believed that *"if he tried now, imitated the soberer people of the world, and those only, that someday he might succeed..."* (B2 Ch3). His envy further exacerbates his inability to form authentic connections in his relationships, as he is always trying to portray a certain image to others (that is far from reality). Most notably, Clyde puts on a facade of sophistication and wealth to impress Sondra Finchley, a woman he both envies and loves. When he first encounters Sondra, the protagonist is immediately struck by her beauty and the luxurious lifestyle she embodies. He sees her as a symbol of everything that he is not and desires her as a symbol of status and success. As the story progresses, Clyde makes jumps from one social class to another and the individuals he envies changes throughout the novel. However, the unfillable moral void within Clyde makes it impossible for him to be content with what he has. This is illustrated when he finally achieves his dream of being with the gorgeous Sondra, but still

feels unsatisfied and unfulfilled. His envious feelings create a bottomless pit for “*more*” (more money, more status, more beautiful women...) which lead to his self-destruction.

iii. Gluttony and Greed

Gluttony can be defined as overindulgence in material possessions and is a corruption of moral reasoning as it disregards balance and moderation. Gluttony is a deadly sin because of Roman Catholic traditions and many proverbs in the Christian Old Testament speak of the destructive consequences of gluttony (Proverbs 23:20-21; 28:7). Even though this sin is associated with an excessive amount of food or liquor, Clyde does not exhibit gluttony primarily in the form of overeating but displays a deep desire for material pleasures and an inability to control his impulses. Whereas greed is a more general term used to coin a strong and selfish desire to have more of something, most commonly money or power. Due to the similarity of the deadly sins, a simultaneous analysis on gluttony and greed would be appropriate for analysis.

The Green-Davidson hotel, “*than which no more materially affected or gaudy a realm could have been found anywhere between the two great American mountain ranges.*” (B1 Ch5) becomes the first dangerous influence on Clyde’s evident desire for luxury and extravagance. The handsome atmosphere of the hotel is a mascara of the harsh world of industrial capitalism which itself molds and enforces behavior with dour insistence on those who are armed with nothing but faint religion such as Clyde [4]. The protagonist drifts from the strict protestant beliefs of his family -he always internally rejected- to a life that permits worldly obsessions but prevents him from growing as a character. Clyde does not change, he always finds something or someone to obsess over, and the

right stimuli goads him into a state of relentless, breathless longing. His obsession over Hortense Briggs is replaced by an obsession over Roberta Alden which is replaced by an obsession over Sondra Finchley because of the aforementioned characteristics of Clyde as well as his objectification of women. Furthermore, Clyde becomes enamored by Sondra Finchley due to the level of material comfort she possessed. He spends money recklessly -often beyond his means- in order to impress Sondra and her friends. Clyde's gluttonous/greedy actions are reflective of the deeper psychological issues he possesses and stem from his desire to prove himself to both others and himself. His poor upbringing pushes him to constantly crave more than he has which transforms Clyde into a more erratic individual. He is increasingly isolated from those around him as he is unable to control his impulses and engages in acts without thinking of the consequences. Clyde has no ideas or consciousness of his actions, yet he yearns to exercise the endless freedom he believes the upper class holds. However, he is too dazzled by the lure of money to care, or even notice that wealth will not offer him the transcendence he so deeply desires. Clyde's uninflected absorption of luxury creates an uneasy tone that is used to dramatize how individuals become gluttonous/greedy by materialistic values and illusory opportunities of the American Dream.

iv. Lust

Lust is defined as "*the disordered desire for inordinate enjoyment of sexual pleasure*" according to the Catechism of the Catholic Church and is an internal sin. Clyde manifests self-gratification in the form of sexual pleasure throughout the novel, as he is driven by his primal urges and consumed by his physical attraction to women. One of the turning points of the novel is when Clyde chooses to go to dinner and later to a brothel with his fellow bellhops. This event is symbolic of the conflict between the authority of the family and the desires of the protagonist. His lust

triumphs over his parents' repressive morality and serves as a literary device to convey the significance of lust in Clyde's decision-making process. The visit to the brothel - portraying the darker side of human nature- is a consequence of Clyde's manifestation of sexual desire which began as early as his employment at the soda fountain. While mixing simple drinks at his first job, Clyde benignly concludes that an expensive style of dress, hence, a certain amount of money is needed to win girls: *"No good-looking girl, as it then appeared to him, would have anything to do with him if he did not possess this standard of equipment."* (B1 Ch4). Therefore, his lust initially created the dynamic for his social aspirations. In the mind of Clyde Griffiths, the idea of "achieving" sex is deeply intertwined with personal consumption and display. His views on women which were primarily formed in the hedonistic environment of the soda fountain in which Green Davidson led him to see women as mere objects of his desire. He views them solely through the lens of physical attraction or social gain and never considers their feelings or desires. Moreover, Theodor Dreiser reflects on the relationship between characters through a "ratio". Roberta is to Clyde as Clyde is to Sondra, and Roberta is to Clyde as Clyde was to Hortense.[5] All are motivated by a desire for a better life but are separated by the amount of contact they have with wealth and luxury. The author reinforces the ratio by creating parallels between Clyde's meeting with Roberta and Sondra. While canoeing one day, Clyde sees Roberta and asks her to accompany him: *"Oh, please don't say no. Just get in won't you?"* (B2 Ch15) In the later chapters, Sondra waiting in her chauffeur-driven car requests Clyde to accompany her just as Clyde asked Roberta: *"Won't you get in, please, and let me take you where you are going."* (B2 Ch23) The similarity of the scenes reduces characters to mechanistic relationships and suggests that physical attraction (i.e. lust) is the only emotion that can eliminate social barriers. Furthermore, the effect of lust in the narrative progression is palpable because of the effect it has on social barriers. Clyde did not belong

to the elegant and wealthy society unlike the rest of the Griffiths, yet he was not in the same social class as the workers because of his social superiority. His tall and handsome figure is undoubtedly similar to Gilbert, but not as refined. Clyde lived in a “*social gray area*”. However, he mingled with the women on opposite ends of the social hierarchy while trying to escape from this “social gray area”. He became sexually involved with Roberta and saw her primarily as a means of satisfying his physical desires, simultaneously, he fell in love with Sondra Finchley and desired her as well. Alone on Crum Lake, he daydreams of resorts, dancing, and boating with Sondra, but falls to daydreaming about the beauty of Roberta right after. He believes that sexual conquests and relationships with beautiful women will help him achieve the social status and acceptance that he craves. Overall, Clyde’s lust is a manifestation of his deeper spiritual emptiness. He is unable to find meaning in his life beyond his own physical pleasure, and his lust serves as a distraction from his own internal emptiness, a way to fill the void within him.

v. Wrath

Wrath is a powerful emotion characterized by intense anger and a desire for revenge or punishment. It is often associated with feelings of hatred, bitterness, and resentment towards others. In contrast to the other deadly sins, wrath is the least prominent deadly sin in Clyde’s actions as he tends to suppress feelings of frustration or anger to maintain his prudently crafted persona. His facade of politeness and charm masks the deeper feelings of resentment, which he is unable or unwilling to express openly. Instead, the protagonist consciously chooses to manipulate others to achieve his goals and is morally indifferent to the consequences of his actions. However, when Roberta gets pregnant, he begins to harbor wrath toward her as she becomes an obstacle to his social aspirations and an obstacle preventing a meaningful relationship with Sondra Finchley.

He becomes increasingly hostile towards her and even considers having her killed as he slides day by day, into moral annihilation. The scene in which Roberta drowns has a haunting tone: Clyde's consciousness, never full to begin with, is divided between murder and guilt while deranged further by the dark beauty of the lake and the empty woods that offer haven and escape [6]. *"And Clyde, as instantly sensing the profoundness of his own failure, his own cowardice or inadequateness for such an occasion, as instantly yielding to a tide of submerged hate, not only for himself, but Roberta—her power—or that of life to restrain him in this way. And yet fearing to act in any way—being unwilling to—being willing only to say that never, never would he marry her—that never, even should she expose him, would he leave here with her to marry her—that he was in love with Sondra and would cling only to her—and yet not being able to say that even."* (B2 Ch29) Without a shred of empathy, Clyde hated the "power" Roberta possessed but his wrath was not purely motivated by his feelings towards Roberta but also directed toward the circumstances that prevent him from achieving his social and romantic aspirations. Clyde's mannerisms are reflective of the nuanced nature of wrath as an emotion while the haunting portrayal of the consequences of unchecked frustration and the destructive power of human emotion is highlighted in this scene. Clyde's consciousness is consumed by a sense of failure and cowardice as he is unable to reconcile his own desires with the harm he has caused. In the moment of Roberta's drowning, his meticulously crafted persona is stripped away, revealing the dark and dangerous impulses that lie beneath. This scene additionally portrays Clyde's lack of commitment in his actions as he fails to kill Roberta in a premeditated manner or even expresses his unwillingness to marry her before the day of marriage. Wrath is a powerful emotion that requires a certain level of commitment to act upon it. Furthermore, the lack of commitment in Clyde's actions result in wrath becoming a less prominent sin in the novel.

vi. Sloth

Sloth -also referred to as *acedia* in *Summa Theologica*- is a state of spiritual and physical laziness that is one of the most insidious of the deadly sins [7]. At its core, sloth is a sin of inaction, thus, Clyde displays sloth in his lack of ambition and failure to shape a sense of direction in life. He drifts from one job to another, never truly committing to anything or showing any enthusiasm for his work. When Clyde moves to Lycurgus to work at his uncle's factory, he initially has great ambitions and plans to work hard to succeed. However, he soon becomes complacent and prefers to spend his time daydreaming about his romantic affairs rather than working. Clyde is aware of the advantages he has from *gilt by association* (due to his resemblance to Gilbert), yet he never fully capitalizes it to attain a high-ranking position in the factory of the Griffiths. He is content with others making decisions for him and is generally uninterested in taking initiative even when trying to acquire what he desires. "*The slacker craves, yet has nothing...*" (Proverbs 13:4) is true in the context of Clyde's life as his desires are grand yet his initiative to seize his desires are minimal. He craves to attain wealth and a respectable social status without putting in the work. Instead of choosing perseverance, Clyde becomes increasingly reliant on a male version of the Cinderella myth in which Sondra acts as Princess Charming who will spirit him into the ranks of the rich by marriage [8]. Furthermore, the protagonist grows adept at making good impressions: He presents himself as "*very adaptable*" to Samuel Griffiths (B2 Ch4) and as "*agreeable*" to Gilbert Griffiths (B2 Ch6). Because Clyde does not believe in working hard to prove himself to the Griffiths and only tries to "*win his way into his good graces*". (B2 Ch11) The disciplined regimen imposed by the Griffiths' business makes Clyde radically unfit to work in the factory, hence, he quickly abandons hope in the long, grueling climb through the business hierarchy. His sloth extends to his personal life as well; he has little interest in the women he dates and is unwilling

to commit to any of them because he does not put in the effort to build meaningful connections. Moreover, Clyde is often dishonest and manipulative in his relationships, which exemplifies his sloth and lack of commitment. Clyde refuses to take responsibility for his actions, especially when it is difficult or unpleasant to do so. When he impregnates Roberta Alden, Clyde shifts the blame onto her in an effort to distance himself from her. And when he gets sentenced to trial for the murder of Roberta Alden, Clyde does not fight for his freedom or attempt to clear his name. His sloth drives him to accept his fate which ultimately leads to his death.

III - Conclusion

In answering the research question: “To what extent can Clyde Griffiths’ character development be analyzed under the context of the seven deadly sins?” this essay draws the conclusion that the seven deadly sins have a palpable effect on Clyde Griffiths’ character development. Theodor Dreiser dramatizes the ways in which individuals are imperiled by blind belief in the materialistic values and illusory opportunities of the American Dream. Therefore, the novel details the figurative destruction of one’s selfhood by false values through the lens of Clyde Griffiths, a character who was armed by nothing but faint religious prohibitions before entering the cruel mechanistic world of capitalism. His drift from religion is a recurring theme across all 3 books and ties them together to show the reader that Clyde does not “grow” as an individual. The deadly sins all have an effect on the protagonist. Pride prevents Clyde from setting realistic expectations for his life and being content with the circumstances he was born into. Envy leads Clyde to be in a constant search for “more” which lead to his self-destruction. Gluttony/greed causes an unquenchable desire for worldly obsessions in Clyde and blinds him to the fact that wealth and status will never offer him the transcendence he wishes for. Lust distracts him from the empty

emotional void within him and focuses his attention to a meaningless sex life. Wrath is a powerful emotion that causes Clyde to commit the heinous act of murdering Roberta, whereas sloth prevents him from taking initiative and accomplishing his ambitions. Therefore, it is self-evident that Clyde is a corruptive character which is all reflected in him.

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