

American Literature & Culture
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Mod 02 Lecture Number 11
Theodore Dreiser An American Tragedy (Lecture 9b)

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(Professor – student conversation starts)

Professor: So we have been talking about the social backdrop and also the social, political background of that period when this novel was written, 1925. We have been talking about the major incidents, major events that have been taking place during this time, during Dreiser's age. We know the novel was published in 1925 and we have already talked about the social conditions of that time. You remember the war and the immediate effects, the aftereffects of the war, the First World War and then how America became a booming economy and then after that there was a period of Great Depression that was 1929 onwards.

Ok but this novel which was written in 1925, it looks to a certain section of a society, actually presents a very broad panoramic view of the American society. This is something you have to write, understand. Very broad, so you have extremely rich people as symbolized by the Griffiths family. Yeah, please, please keep on, be interactive, the Griffiths, so you have the hero Clyde Griffith, Ok. Sondra, Sondra is the so-called heroine of the novel and she comes from the extremely wealthy family. Ok, yeah, so we have, we have people like the Griffiths

and Sondra occupying the upper echelons of the society, Ok. Then we have at the bottom, lowest rung, see there are two brothers and the

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Student: Asa and

Professor: Yes, yes, yes.

Student: Samuel Griffiths

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Professor: So Clyde Griffiths' father happens to be a missionary. We have already been through all this and we have already seen the separation and the destructive effects of the so-called attitudes and you have to now tell me

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Professor: because I am just assuming you know a lot about these things

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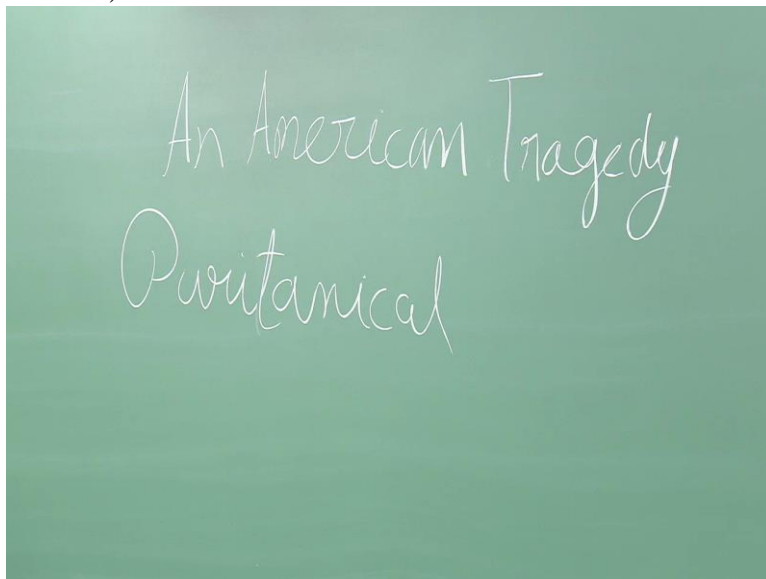


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Professor: what is Puritanism and puritanical behavior?

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Professor: What is it? And why is Puritanism so important for us in context of this novel?

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Professor: Austere, austerism

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Professor: and

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Professor: extreme emphasis on purity, and purity in observing particularly physical chastity, Ok, sexual purity. Those are extremely important things to remember.

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Professor: That his parents are

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Professor: totally driven by puritanical tendencies Ok and therefore his sister, what is his sister's name?

Student: Esta

Professor: Esta, Ok, what happens to her, she gets pregnant? She elopes, she gets pregnant, she comes back. She is abandoned. Now we are talking of this panoramic view of the American society. So you have the other Griffiths, you have Clyde Griffiths who, let us consider a little bit, upper middle no, I am sorry, the lower middle class. They are definitely not the upper middle but the lower middle class but then we have dirt poor people also here and who are those dirt poor people; the likes of the, the likes of Roberta's family and who is Roberta here; Roberta Alden, the factory girl, Ok? Her parents are extremely impoverished

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Professor: farmers. There is nothing there except dirt,

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Professor: Ok so that's the level of that poverty. So we have been talking of, so now, a complete and then you have men, women of all kinds. You have those people, there is this girlfriend that he makes when he is still back home, what's her name?

Student: Hortense

Professor: Hortense, Ok we have also seen if you have read, been reading the novel, what kind of a girl is she? So it's not like a very sympathetic portrayal. So we are looking at that; in realism, there is sympathy; there is empathy for characters. So these are the main differences. These are the distinctive elements, realism and naturalism.

In naturalism, you have

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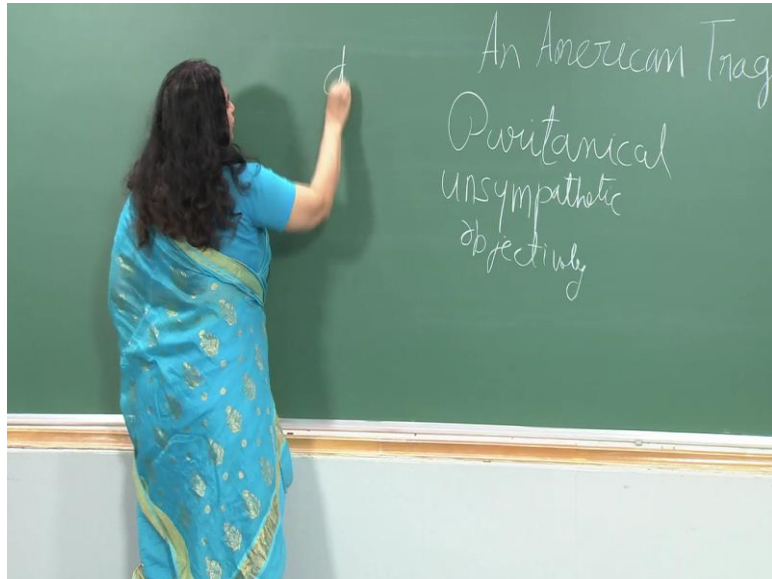
Professor: unsympathetic characters very objectively drawn. So you have a girl like Hortense

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Professor: and let me tell you, Dreiser is extremely condemning of mankind. He is nowhere, the most sympathetic character happens to be who, in this novel? Not even Roberta, not even Roberta but only Clyde Griffith's mother who is a missionary and that is very surprising considering Dreiser's own attitude towards religion, his complete antipathy and apathy, so that was the kind of person he himself was. He ran off to Hollywood. He didn't have, he didn't meet success for a very long period because he would write graphic novels, graphic in the sense about human depravity. So he, therefore we credit him, that being one of the most

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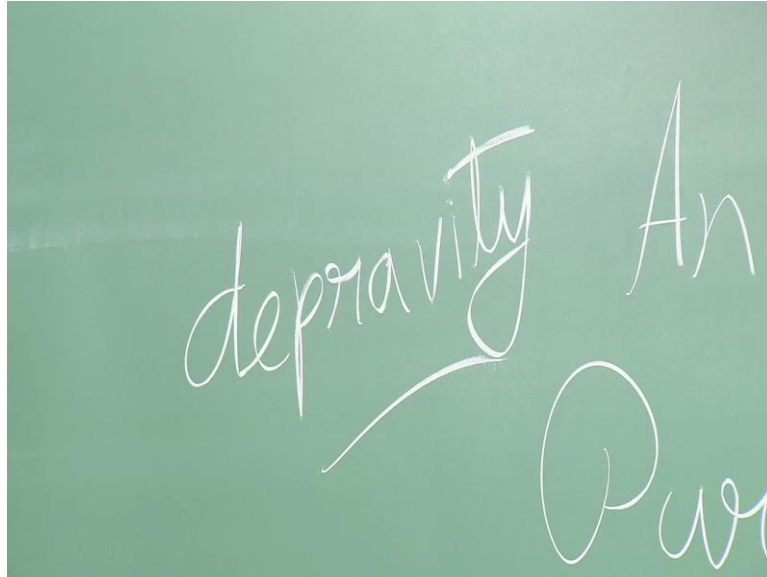
Professor: foremost writers of naturalism in America and about human depravity.

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Professor: And the novels used to be all those unpublished novels

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Professor: were so deprived in nature

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Professor: that publishers would refuse because, because again remember, we were still in those puritanical times. Ok and therefore his first novel was a success, Sister Carrie, however it was a very controversial kind of success because it was banned in several places because of the graphic sexual depiction in the novel. And this is something we find even in American Tragedy. Many feminist scholars have read Jane Eyre as a portrayal of doppelganger tendency where Bertha Rochester, the mad woman in the attic, which is also a title of a, no idea?

Student: (()) book

Professor: Ok, yeah it is the title of the feminist theory book, *Ok* by Susan Gubar and [Susan/Sandra] Susan Gilbert, *Ok* so mad woman in the attic is the doppelganger of the heroine Jane Eyre. Why, why is she a double, you have read Jane Eyre? Extremely alike and at the same time, you know, expressing several overlapping tendencies, you have, you know *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, you have a doppelganger there, *Ok*. The two boys are almost, they can pass off as each other. So in Jane Eyre, the repressed Bertha and the repressed, the suppressed Jane Eyre, they are not much of a difference, that's the idea. *Ok*, because when you read *Wide Sargasso Sea* by Jean Rhys, that's the theory, that Bertha in the beginning was as good as Jane Eyre. She was literally, slowly driven mad by her husband and because of the oppressive social conditions, sexual oppression, women's oppression and all those, gender oppression those kinds of things.

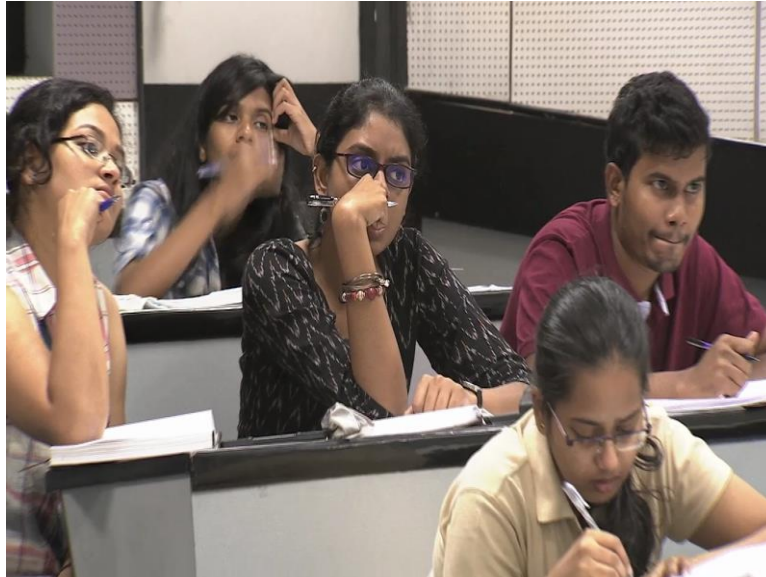
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Professor: Can you think of more doppelgangers?

Full of, literature and cinema is full of doppelgangers, you just have to look for it.

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Professor: You must have come across this phrase very frequently, this character mirrors the other character, what does it mean? It's not like a double role. It's like a character that is there Ok, who is so much like this guy. Now Esta's character is almost like a literary double of Roberta at a later stage, why? Roberta is the girl who gets abandoned, pregnant and abandoned by Clyde Griffiths. Now why is she up double? Both Esta and Roberta, they come from what kinds of families? Very deeply religious, deeply religious, a small town, Ok, family values are ingrained in them. They are both pretty, they are both ambitious, but they don't know what to do with their ambitions and their prettiness, Ok, what do they do? Both of them fall into wrong hands. And both of them think that this affair can take them out of their abject poverty, Ok. It doesn't happen. In one way both these girls are also social climbers, not

to the extent Clyde Griffiths is, but then these two are also trying their best because for Roberta, Clyde Griffiths because, by virtue of being, his being related to the very wealthy Griffiths, he is upper class. You get the picture? For the Griffiths, he is not. The other day, we were talking about poor relations, poor cousins, Express Avenue and all those kinds of things. Now again go back to those ideas that Clyde Griffiths is a poor relation and he is looked down upon by the rich Griffiths but not by, by Roberta because for Roberta, and so, there exists a binary.

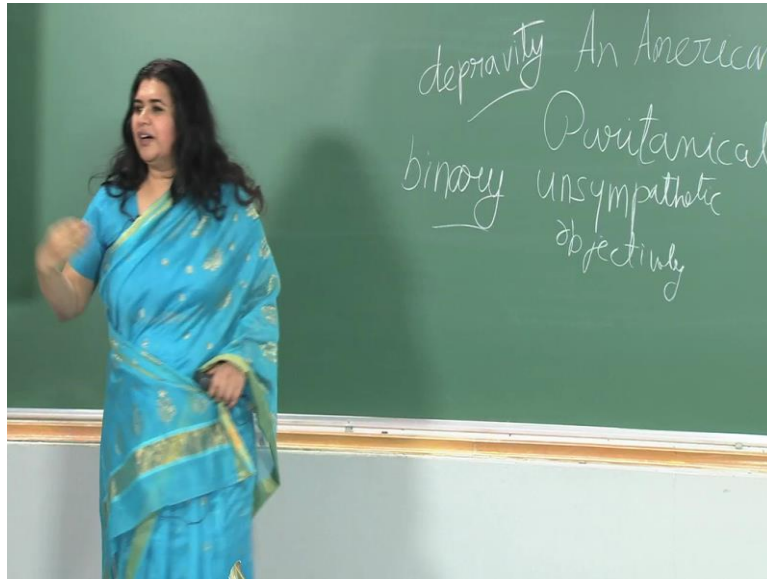
In naturalist literature there is always these codes

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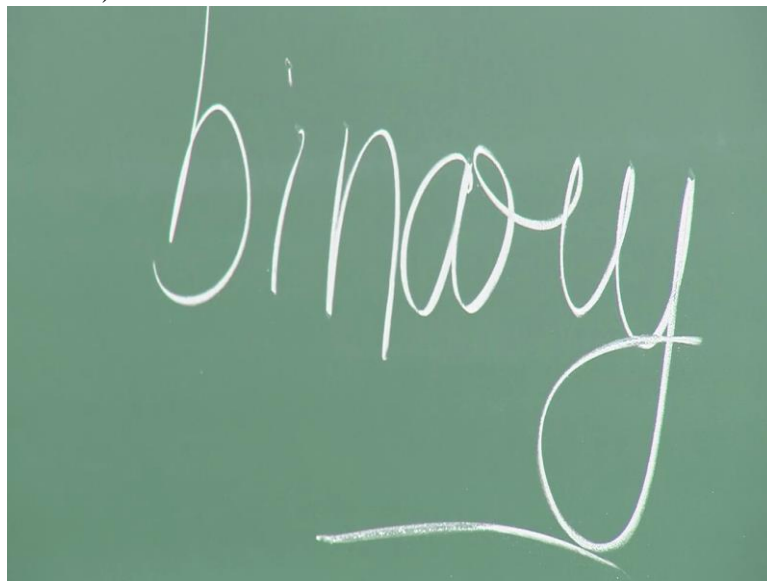
Professor: that exists very strongly and funnily enough,

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Professor: even in the structure, when you look

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Professor: at the factory structure,

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Professor: why am I going to the factory so fast? Let me also take you to the hotel lobby; hotel lobby where our hero is a bell boy and you told me anyway the other day, bell boys carry luggage up and down, Ok. So what are they doing? Can they stay up there? Who stays up there in the hotel? The paying customers; the patrons; can people like these bell boys ever dream of staying a room, in the executive suite of Park Sheraton Hotel? They can't. Where is their rightful place; in the lobby, on the bench. Ok, in the lobby, on the bench. Ok, so don't you think those special hierarchies are established? Ok, don't you always find these things around you everywhere? Don't you, Ok? The topmost person of any institute always occupies the topmost floor? That's the hierarchy. Look around yourself and there are hierarchies all over. This is nothing new.

So Dreiser establishes this pattern from the beginning. So you have to look for, you are doing formalism with me. What is formalism, it's all looking at language clues. When he comes to the factory in New York, Ok, those luxurious places and all those things so what happens? Factory is extremely posh, he knows that. And where is he made to work; in the lowest of the low basement. Just start learning the process of collar manufacturing, remember? Ok and those things are done in the lowest bottom, literally even in the lower bottom of the factory's physical structure. The higher people, the topmost; Uncle Griffith and his son; what is his son's name?

Student: Gilbert

Professor: Gilbert, good, so Gilbert Griffiths stays somewhere at the top, their offices are located at the top. The factory people are located and the collar manufacturing, now what is

this collar manufacturing? Have you ever heard of such a thing in Indian society, in Indian, yeah so what is collar?

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Student: Collar is (())

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Professor: Yes but why collar? Don't you think collars are anyway a part of the shirt?

Student: (())

Professor: Ok but, separately collar. Collar manufacturing, they are not calling is shirt manufacturing. Collar manufacturing, people aspire to reach a certain class of society, therefore they wore collar. So, therefore such a menial job but it added certain kind, so class distinctions are all over the place. That's the idea. What kind of car you drove, what kinds of food you eat, what kinds of clothes you wear, this novel is full of those references if you have

read it. If you have read it, it is all over there. Ok, so literarily double, we had talked about Esta and we have talked about Roberta. Both girls of extremely poor family both lower middle class girls, both fall into wrong hands, get seduced by playboy type of buys and get pregnant and abandoned.

Student: similar character, who the boys are talking about,

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Student: who is abandoned and whole thing, Ok?

Professor: Exactly

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Professor: this is very important. There is another girl's character. The boys talk about, the bell boys talk about this character that there was this girl and the man just abandoned her in the hotel and didn't even bother to pay the

Student: (())

Professor: yeah, do they feel sympathy for her?

Student: They are admiring the man who did this.

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Professor: They are full of admiration for the man

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Professor: who has done this job, admirable job?

Student: Very smart move

Professor: Very smart move and they ridiculed the girl who has let such a kind of thing

Student: This is exactly Clyde thinks of first

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Student: when he hears about his sister's

Professor: Exactly,

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Professor: Exactly, yeah.

Student: How they ridiculed then? It is not so funny anymore when he sees his own sister.

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Professor: But when Roberta gets into the similar situation then what are his views? You haven't read the point. What does he say? Ok, so what? Even my sister has been through it. Who came to help her? And whatever my sister did, she can do as well. Ok, that means this is a way of life in a certain class of people. Now I will just do a flash forward leap, not flashback but flash forward in the same novel. Again a spoiler, so we know Roberta dies. Roberta dies because, she is pregnant with a child and I won't tell you how she dies but Clyde Griffiths is accused of murdering her.

Whether he murders her or not, that's up to you to decide, Ok or well whatever clues you get through the novel and whatever conclusions you draw. But Clyde is defended by a particularly sympathetic lawyer. He has a defense attorney, as they call it, right? So he has a defense attorney and there is this government lawyer also who is fighting for the dead girl, Roberta. These are also again two very distinctly drawn, two kinds of men. So the man who is defending Clyde Griffiths happens to be in a novel a very liberal man, Ok and once upon a time he too has got a girl into trouble the same way.

What is the, therefore he is extremely sympathetic towards Clyde Griffiths'' predicament that what can a young man do in such a situation? Perhaps it was the only way out. But the attorney says that I was saved or defended by my family wealth, family money. He comes from a very wealthy family, we are told, and the family could pay for the girl's abortion, Ok and let the boy go scot free. That's his, yeah. Now what does it tell you about the social conditions?

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Professor: If you have money you can get away.

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Professor: So money again at the root cause of all things.

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Professor: So money again at the root cause of all things. Social conditions, again we all, we know that Dreiser is one of the

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Professor: most Marxist of all writers.

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Professor: He was a free thinker. Dreiser himself had several such relationships. He couldn't bear to stay with his own very small town conservative wife. He made the mistake of marrying when he was quite young and he abandoned her. He divorced her quite early and then he lived in relationship, in and out of relationship with several women and he never felt guilty about it. Now we are talking again about puritanical element here. What was Dreiser rebelling against? Dreiser absolutely believed that such kind, puritanical and puritanical codes of morality are outdated.

Ok so this is important, this is the major theme. Yes, social distinction, class distinction, socialism, money all these things are very much there but puritanical morality cannot be the way of life in twentieth century. He was also extremely condemning of a society where young women had to bear the burden of being unwed mothers and be socially ostracized for it. Now his contention was that, let's assume a girl gets pregnant, and she is; she is in trouble and she is pregnant and she, the only way out for her is, in those times, to marry the guy. And what if the man is unwilling to marry? Then (commi) I mean do whatever, Ok but that's not, but she will be facing social ostracization for the rest of her life.

This was what Dreiser was against. He said there are several cases in society around us all the time. Why should the poor girl bear the brunt of it? Society has to change its attitude towards such girls. Because when a girl gets into a trouble of this kind, then it is both men and women responsible. It's a collaborative effort, joint effort. It's not just the girl's fault. However, it is, as a by way of redressal, it is also not true that, force the reluctant boy to marry her. Because

what will this kind of marriage lead to? More misery, more tragedies, Ok you never know what will happen to such kind of girls after they are, boys are forced to marry under such circumstances. What is their married life going to be like, that is the question. So why do this at all, why not just change our outlook towards such girls. Now tell me what is your comment?

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Student: We see most the men who are abandoning the girls here, the pregnant girls, most of them are not talked about afterwards. They are going scot free, completely scot free. And like he is not offering a solution at all

Professor: There is a solution no.

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Professor: There is no solution if you are talking about poetic justice, then Dreiser says where is poetic justice? And that's the question that I would pose it here also. Where is social justice or where is poetic justice? Ok so what is required is change your outlook, change your, because he only talks about the girls who are abandoned and left behind, not about boys. So when your society itself is like this, made like that, what are you going to do about it? So better change your puritanical way of thinking, so all his works are consistently a rebellion against puritanical way of life.

Student: Madam, this is more of doubt.

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.Student: In this period were abortions legal?

Professor: Not at all, not at all.

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Professor: All these things happened much, much late, I think it was 1960s onwards. Yes, therefore it was Counter Culture and the times of sexual liberation. It was absolutely not legal. So all abortions were performed illegally and you had to pay literally through the nose. If you have the money, you can get away with it. Hospitals wouldn't do that for you. Because again puritanical way of life, deeply religious way of life that you don't kill a life, right? And by aborting an unborn fetus you are killing a baby. That was the idea. So Dreiser was all for it. He said it's a mistake.

And why is it, it's not just a mistake, he never thought that sexual liberation or licentiousness of any kind, puritanical, puritanical people if you remember Milton's period, they were extremely against licentiousness, remember that? This is the idea that people have to be extremely moral in their day-to-day life and also on stage. Therefore theater was banned. This is a vehicle for corruption, remember? We don't want theater. Theater, even in Plato's times the idea was theater and stage, it breeds corruption. It shows all kinds of things. Oedipus is marrying his mother, what kind of people are you? So poets and theater people are corrupt people who instill wrong ideas in the minds of public.

So that was the idea. So, arts and artists corrupt the society and that's what they say? Even with Clyde Griffiths, what is the first thing he does after becoming bell boy and earning money? He starts watching films, yeah and his puritanical family doesn't approve of watching, nobody should go for these. There, very significantly, it is an actor that got, that

gets Esta pregnant. Ok, so this is, this is a double shame for a family of this kind, puritanical family that you have to go and mess around with an actor of all the people.

So, so you have Esta, you have the girl who gets abandoned in hotel and then you have Roberta so three kinds of girls who mirror each other and Dreiser is never sympathetic towards anyone. He is never condemning towards the men who do these things. In fact Clyde Griffiths actually think quite sympathetically of the boy who got his sister pregnant. Yeah, he says that Ok, what could he have done? My sister is equally responsible. So that means the onus of preserving morality or chastity whatever is always on, this is what Dreiser wanted to draw our attention to. That both men and women are equally responsible, therefore one has to change outlook towards women because finally they get into trouble, yeah. But he doesn't say that like, in social, very preaching sort of way.

Student: (()) justification

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Student: for not giving the (())

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Professor: Yes

Student: To (()) has to provide for herself is she had taken such a step.

Professor: So all characters are assessed very objectively. Nobody is ever given any kind of sympathetic treatment except the mother who suffers throughout. You have another instance of a double in the form of Clyde Griffiths and his cousin Gilbert Griffiths. If you would read that point, you would know, yes please

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Student: It is mentioned that they look very alike

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Professor: Right. They look alike; they are almost of the same age, almost of the same build

Student: That is mentioned in the first part itself that he imagines somebody

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Student: somebody of his own kind enjoying all the leisures that he cannot

Professor: Yeah

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Professor: what only I had this, what only I was born, several throughout the novel you have language mirroring language throughout. When he thinks of everything, so when he meets this person, if only I had this, if only I had enough money I would get Hortense, I only I had money I would get Sondra, Ok. If you read the novel very carefully there is lot of language repetition, linguistic replication. Ok, if only. Many a times, this phrase repeats several times in the novel, if only, that means what? What is it about?

It is the novel of desire

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Professor: ambition. He keeps on

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Professor: desiring things throughout the novel.

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Professor: Did you notice that? How much he desire things? And all those are material objects, absolute he wants, he wants, he wants, he wants, good clothes so that if only he had good clothes, he would look better than Gilbert, remember? If only I had a, you know, I can groom myself in a better way; because of his hotel industry experience, hospitality industry experience he has already learnt that what is good grooming all about. That what kind of people, that he has acquired expensive taste by observing extremely rich people.

So he knows what is luxurious clothes, what are luxurious clothes, what is expensive wine, what are expensive cars, so he knows all this. If only I had the money and all these things I would get a girl like Sondra. If only I had all this, I would get a girl like Sondra. If I were like

Gilbert and why is it that I was not born in Gilbert's place? It's a matter of accident that I was, so all these desires lead to ambition. And ambition for, he wants to work towards that, he wants to and he is hardworking; we are told he is hardworking but he is absolutely ill-qualified and that's what his uncle tells him in the beginning, you remember? Do you know typing? You don't know.

It is like asking someone, do you know C++? Ok, you don't know. Then you are not of any use to us, right? Do you know typing? No you don't. Do you know accounts? No you don't. Do you know this thing? No you don't. So all you can do is just sit in a bench and observe a bunch of girls who are into manufacturing collars. So I will make you a supervisor. But it comes with a condition. What is that condition? There should be no socializing with these girls. Now you are making a young, hot blooded attractive male in charge of these factory girls Ok, who are all very young, in the early twenties and the boy is also 22, 23 something like that. And then you have put all these people; in one room put all these people together in one room and then giving strict instructions to everyone that there shouldn't be any mixing outside working hours.

There shouldn't be socializing outside, again puritanical code of, yeah. So what happens as a result of this? Does he stop dating Roberta? He doesn't. But how does he meet her? He starts meeting her outside the working hours, and in dark alleys, dark streets, may be going for movies, may be going to some other city. Ok, what is Dreiser telling you? If you don't allow free mixing of boys and girls then they; it's not that they are going stop mixing they will find other devious ways which are more dangerous. Now tell me, the American Tragedy, the title, titles are always important,

Portrait of a Lady, right so portrait gives you

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Professor: some kind of

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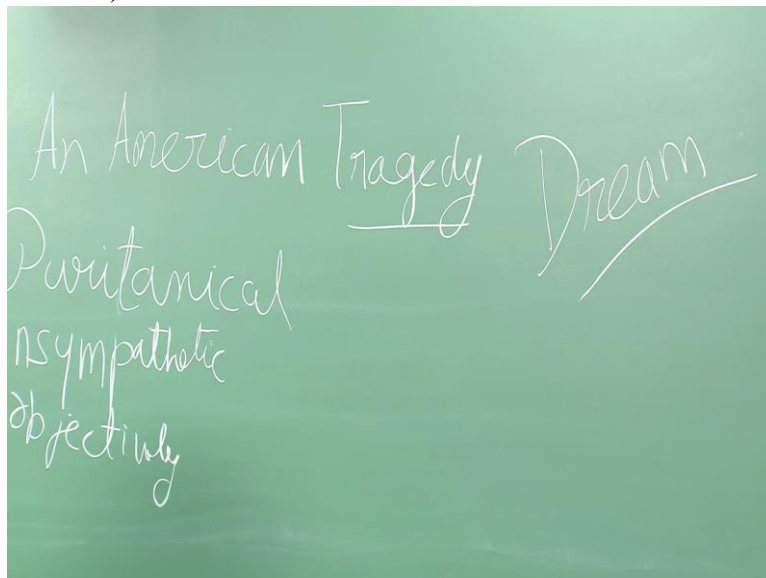
Professor: a close view of a person, Ok here you get a portrait of Isabel Archer in that novel. Therefore the title is important. An American Tragedy, why American? A tragedy like this is a tragedy anywhere, what's so American about it?

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Professor: Actually what Dreiser is telling you is that American Dream has turned into an American nightmare.

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Professor: It is not just a tragedy; it is

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Professor: not a dream anymore. It's a nightmare. Now what is, quickly tell me what is an American Dream, it is also a play by Edward Albee by the way, Ok the guy who wrote Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? And The Zoo Story, but American Dream, the concept of American dream, who are those people?

Student: (())

Professor: No, who, who, I mean, as in writers?

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Professor: The writers who told you

Student: Fitzgerald, Fitzgerald told

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Professor: Oh no, no, Fitzgerald is again is critic-ing, people who upheld the idea of American Dream,

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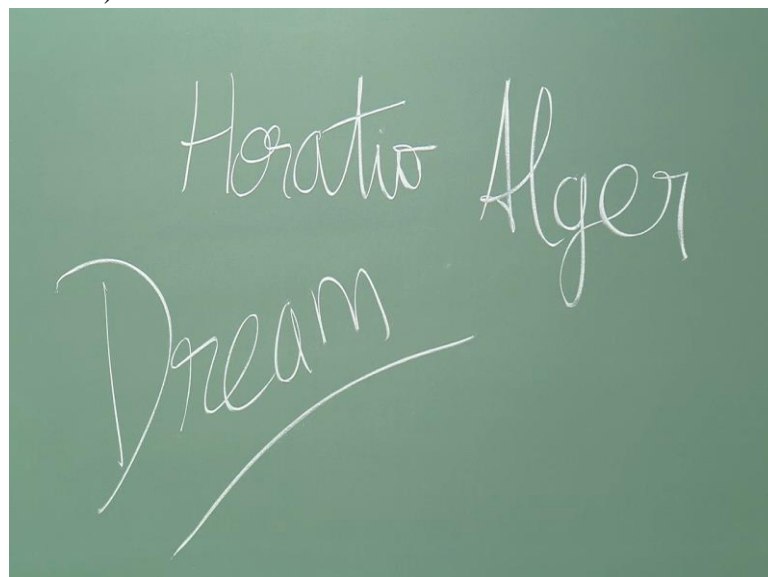
Professor: who originally coined the word The American Dream and who gave us the concept of American Dream? American Dream means that anyone who is industrious, determined enough and hardworking enough can reach the, can attain success, can attain material and spiritual, they don't talk about spiritual so much but they can attain success in American society by virtue of hard work and industriousness and if you are disciplined enough to dedicate yourself to attain this dream. And what is an average American's dream? A house of their own, you know picket fences, a picket fence, yeah house well furnished with all the amenities like a refrigerator, a car; car is at the, yes, washing machine and a good, well equipped kitchen but car. Car symbolizes, so cars are here all over the place.

They have, remember, car, the ultimate symbol of success in America, what happens with car in the initial stages? There is a huge...why car? You see, that's the importance. Car, you think, that you know, it is a gateway to success and freedom and all those things. A young people, if a person like you owns a car, then you are like a cool dude on campus, Ok. So this is like a passport to attain whatever you want, you are this kind of a magnet to everyone, to whom everyone would be drawn because you have this thing, Ok. Your other things may not matter but you have a car. So car symbolizes the ultimate in success. Now (beca) with this car, Clyde Griffiths and his friends get into a situation from where there is no way out. He is always on the run.

Ok, he gets into an accident. There is a death, death of a child. They run over a child. Some of the friends, who are in the car, they also die. They meet with an accident, and after that, some of them are taken away, arrested and this boy is on the run. Then he finds there is no way out for him so he should go and end up with his uncle Griffiths. He is actually running away from the law and car gets him into it. So American success, therefore you look at it, the inversion of American Dream. All the symbols that suggest, connote success in America, actually they backfire for him. Because that is what Dreiser says, that when you just chase money and success and the concept of American Dream so blindly this is how you are going to end up.

So American Dream, basically the concept was given to you, Horatio Alger

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Professor: and Benjamin Franklin, these are

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Professor: the architects of the notion of The American Dream and therefore in The Great Gatsby, there is a point. Gatsby, Gatsby's diary reveals to us that he has been following certain points very diligently, Ok. Read, read newspapers, read books, read whatever you can, Ok, then wash yourself, twice a day or something, take bath twice a day, then do this, do this, do you remember the list of things? And those are a straight lift from the people who, the precursors of The American Dream; the people who gave the notion of The American Dream. You want to be success, you should be clean in mind and body, invent a

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Student: Have a time-table and all that.

Professor: Exactly

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Professor: yes. That's the idea, that you follow the success model and the success model are given by people like these. So these aims are evoked, invoked several times in all works on American Dream but here, this novel is the inditement of the hollowness of The American Dream. Anyone can be, if you are ambitious enough, you can be successful but then you are going in a very dangerous territory according to Dreiser. Dreiser was 49, perhaps in his late forties, 48 or 49 when he wrote this novel and he said I am done with it and I know how the amount of flak I am going to get from this book. Because again this was, this was stepping into the same old familiar territory of sexual and moral excesses and then getting into trouble and all and he thought this book is also going to get banned and I am not going to make anything. But then the book became a roaring success because the times may be, were different by then. People started appreciating what he was telling. Any comments, any questions?

So what is the takeaway from here? This is a novel of desire and ambition, Ok. The entire novel works on system of binaries, this versus this, religion versus sexual modes, puritanical versus sexual modes. So there has to be equal justice for all and I mean, or maybe there is justice for the chosen few who are very rich and therefore I gave you the example of that attorney who has done the same thing but got away with it, literary doppelganger, so you have doppelgangers of Roberta types and Esta and then you have people like Clyde Griffiths and Gilbert Griffiths.

The cousins resent each other because both of them; Gilbert is absolutely contemptuous of him, that a man like him looks like me. What will be my social status now? Tomorrow if he wears good clothes then he can even pass off me, and he is something that. Because of his snobbery he does not like that, where as Clyde would love to become like Gilbert. You should also know that when Sondra picks Clyde Griffiths, why does she do that? Why would a girl from such an upper class society even date someone like him?

Student: (())

Professor: She does it initially to prove a point to Gilbert who has snubbed her several times, yeah because in Gilbert's society Sondra is nothing. Ok, for Gilbert, Sondra is just another rich girl, a rich pretty girl

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Student: (()) show off their wealth, and the older

Professor: Yeah, old money, new money, yeah

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Student: Like the mother feels that,

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Student: Mrs. Griffiths feels that

Professor: Distinction very clear.

Student: She does not think much of the Finchleys, Sondra's family

Professor: Yeah,

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Professor: so even among the rich people there is this snobbishness, the existing old money, new money, that you have seen in *The Great Gatsby* also, Eastside, Westside, yeah? So east egg, west egg yes; so you have that distinction, now you know that here also so the idea that Sondra picks this boy, gets interested in this boy because she has been consistently turned down by Gilbert, so again this versus that, that doppelganger that exists. Ok and also the idea of American Dream turned into an American nightmare that is an American Tragedy, so therefore the title. We will stop here