**Syllabus for IDH2930, Spring 2017**   
(Un)Common Read: *An American Tragedy*  **by Theodore Dreiser –** #4 on Time Magazine’s list of top 100 English language novels, 1923-2005.

**Credits:** 1 ; **Instructor:** Greg Stewart  
**Writing or Math Req:** None   
**Gen Ed:** None. Student assignments and expectations: meet once per week/present a topic during the second half of the course with a two page, single spaced writeup one week prior.

An American Tragedy was published in 1925 and was Dreiser’s third book and first commercial success. He was nominated for (but did not receive) the Nobel prize in literature in 1930. As an American author, he was held by many to have had enormous influence on writers who came after him. Dreiser wrote about people without conventional morals who were sexually promiscuous. Dreiser often battled censorship. He lived as he wrote, with numerous affairs, sometimes carrying on more than one at a time. Time Magazine lists An American Tragedy as #4 on their list of 100 best English language novels published since 1923 (the year Time started) until 2005.

Student Assignments: At first meeting, agree at what pace we should read the book (divided into 10 weeks or, more optimally, within the first eight weeks.) Meet each week for 50 minutes to discuss, as the book is being read, what insights students are finding into issues which interest them. Two possible examples:

Clyde Griffiths starts off rigidly moral due to his upbringing, but then becomes seemingly without restraint when he starts as a bellboy at the Hotel Green-Davidson. Have you known anyone in college who had a similar transformation?

As an example of the many threads the students can identify in the book, consider the life of the rich in America in 1925 as depicted in the book. Look up information on the web about the distribution of wealth in the US in 1925 vs today. What other comparisons can you make?

After the book is at least 50% read, each student picks a topic to discuss for 15 minutes (e. g. what is a ‘tragedy’ and does An American Tragedy fit the definition?) with 10 minutes of group discussion afterwards, with two topics/class. They distribute a (minimum) two page, single spaced summary of what they will say 1 week prior. Given interest, we will also view the movie by Paramount Pictures based on An American Tragedy: “A Place in the Sun”, starring Montgomery Clift and Elizabeth Taylor (winner of 6 Academy Awards and the first Golden Globe award for best motion picture – drama) outside of class (attendance optional) and discuss how the movie changes/enhances our understanding of the book’s contents.

Professor Stewart likes to read and discovered Theodore Dreiser’s books in the American Literature section at the University of Konstanz while working in Germany and hungry for books in English to read. The Titan and The Financier are also good reads by Dreiser.