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An American Tragedy

by

**Theodore Dreiser
1925**



MonkeyNotes by Ray Mescallado

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KEY LITERARY ELEMENTS

SETTING

Taking place in the United States in the first quarter of the twentieth century, *An American Tragedy* follows.....

CHARACTER LIST

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Clyde Griffiths - A young man who aspires to rise out of poverty but commits murder to pursue this goal.

Asa Griffiths - Clyde's spiritually dedicated but otherwise dissolute father.

Elvira Griffiths - Clyde's spiritually dedicated and psychologically strong mother.

Hester "Esta" Griffiths - Clyde's older sister, who becomes pregnant out of wedlock.

Samuel Griffiths - Clyde's uncle and Asa's brother, a successful businessman who owns a collar factory in Lyncurgus, New York.

Oscar Heggland - A bell boy at the Green-Davidson who befriends Clyde.

Thomas Ratterer - A bell boy at the Green-Davidson who befriends Clyde.

Hortense Briggs - A friend of Louise Ratterer who Clyde romantically pursues.

Willard Sparser - A friend of Heggland who borrows his boss's Packard for the fatal automobile trip.

Elizabeth Griffiths - Samuel Griffiths' wife.

Myra Griffiths - Samuel Griffiths' older, more reclusive daughter.

Bella Griffiths - Samuel Griffiths' younger, more social daughter.

Gilbert Griffiths - Samuel Griffiths' only son and Secretary of the Griffiths Collar Company, he bears a strong resemblance to Clyde.....

There are 4 pages of additional characters identified in the complete booknote.

CONFLICT

Protagonist - The protagonist of a story is the main character who traditionally undergoes some sort of change. Clyde Griffiths is the central character of the novel, the one whose progress we follow throughout the novel.

Antagonist - The antagonist of a story is the force that provides an obstacle for the protagonist. The antagonist does not always have to be a single character or even a character at all. In a large sense, American culture is the antagonist. However, individual obstacles to Clyde's goals are pointed out over the course.....

Climax - Clyde kills Roberta, ensuring that her pregnancy will not spoil his chances

Outcome - Clyde is found guilty, sentenced to be executed, and dies on the.....

SHORT PLOT/CHAPTER SUMMARY (Synopsis)

An American Tragedy follows the life of Clyde Griffiths from late childhood to his infamous death. Beginning his life as the impoverished son of street missionaries, young Clyde aspires to a more affluent life with luxuries, fine clothes, and a woman who'll love him. As a young man, Clyde achieves a measure of this as a bellhop for the Green-Davidson hotel in Kansas City until a car accident involving the death of a little girl forced him to flee the city.

Traveling and working under a different name, Clyde winds up in Chicago and meets his prosperous uncle, Samuel Griffiths. Samuel invites Clyde back to the city of Lyncurgus, New York, to work at.....

THEMES

Major Themes

The defining theme of *An American Tragedy* - indeed, the basis for its title - is the contradiction of American ambition. Dreiser has stated repeatedly that the desire to rise up socially and financially in modern America often holds the very seeds by which such desires are denied. This holds especially true for the poor of America, who are most desperate to attain a higher status and least equipped to properly do so. In pursuing a better life for himself, Clyde is doing exactly what's expected of him by American society - however, in murdering Roberta, he overstepped the boundaries of the society in which he wanted to excel. Was murder a necessary part of his actions - and thus, an acceptable part of the American dream? No, but Dreiser structures and writes.....

Additional themes are discussed in the complete booknote.

MOOD

The mood of *An American Tragedy* is that of any other tragedy - somber, reflective, often emphasizing the inevitable turn of events that leads to the hero's downfall.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION - BIOGRAPHY

Theodore Dreiser's most ambitious and critically acclaimed novel is strongly autobiographical in nature, reflecting his own upbringing though not the eventual trajectory of success his life took. Herman Theodore Dreiser was born on August 27, 1871 in Terre Haute, Indiana, the son of fiercely dogmatic German Catholic father and a German-Moravian Mennonite mother. His childhood was poverty-stricken as the family wandered the Midwest, his father often in search of employment. Dreiser left home at sixteen and managed to attend Indiana University for one year. In 1892, Dreiser began a career in journalism, moving around the Midwest and eventually settling in New York.

His first novel, *Sister Carrie*, was based partly on his own sister, who had run.....

LITERARY / HISTORICAL INFORMATION

The novel was inspired by two personal histories: Dreiser's own early life, recounted above, and the murder trial of Chester Gillette. Like Dreiser, Gillette's immediate family was involved in charity and spiritual work - in their case, the Salvation Army - and move frequently. Also like Dreiser, Gillette was given a chance to pursue a better education than his early life permitted, but did not stick with it. Leaving school, Gillette went to work for his uncle, the owner of the Gillette Skirt Factory in Cortland, New York.

Grace Brown escaped the tedium of farm life by following her sister to Cortland, working in the Gillette factory. The two become involved in 1905 and by 1906 Grace became pregnant. She demanded.....

CHAPTER SUMMARIES WITH NOTES

BOOK ONE

Book One covers the early years of Clyde's life and is set in Kansas City. It's useful to see Book One as a prelude and prolonged foreshadowing of Book Two, as Clyde's early life helps establish patterns that makes Clyde's actions in *Lycurgus* seem even more inevitable.

CHAPTER ONE

Summary

The novel begins by introducing a family of six who preach on a busy street in Kansas City: Asa and Elvira Griffiths and their children. Though elder daughter Hester leads a hymn, elder son Clyde is conspicuously uncomfortable. Clyde is actually uncomfortable about many things: with the night's performance, with his parents' decision to work as street missionaries, with his family's poverty-stricken situation as a result of their mission work, with the way other boys tease Clyde about his family's work and their lifestyle. And while appearing devout, young Hester is motivated more by the attention paid upon her for her singing than any deeper spiritual calling. After two hymns and separate addressing of the audience by both Asa and Elvira Griffiths, the family return to their home, a mission house. The parents' enthusiasm and optimism for their night's work is not reflected in their children.

Notes

The story begins at dusk as people return home from work, emphasizing the industrial capitalist system which has come to dominate America as well as symbolically evoking a darkening of the human spirit because of this system. The spiritual work of the Griffiths brings little solace to those who witness it; if anything, people are wary because they question the wisdom of parents who would force their children to do such work. Such opinions are not entirely unfounded, as we are quickly made aware of the ambivalence the older children, Esta and Clyde, hold about their parents' evangelical efforts.

CHAPTER TWO

Summary

Asa is a sensitive yet dissolute individual, while Elvira has a sterner, more directed personality. While Clyde has an emotional and romanticizing quality taken from his father, he is ashamed of the poverty and shabbiness of his family's missionary travels across the American Midwest. The constant moving and devotion to missionary work has kept the Griffiths children from a solid education and, often, from the bare necessities of survival. Currently, the family live in Kansas City on Bickel Street, in a building whose front half is used for meetings; various mottoes adorn the main hall, including those warning of the evils of alcohol.

While Asa was the one first inspired to evangelical work, Elvira became equally devoted upon marrying him. And despite the many people around Clyde who praised God, he is himself skeptical of the Lord's role in the world, given his family's situation. The one thing about his family that intrigues Clyde is Samuel Griffiths, a brother of Asa's who owns and runs a successful collar factory in *Lycurgus*, New York. Though poverty-stricken and poorly educated, Clyde aspires to a better station and disdains the more menial work that would be immediately available to him. This vanity is further compounded by his growing interest and confusion over the opposite sex, which despite his good looks, only makes him more aware of his lower social standing. Thus, young Clyde is depressed and unsure of how to proceed.

Notes

Where the first chapter creates a tableau that conveys the overall themes of the novel, the second chapter sets out some of the specific motifs that will unfold. The signs warning against alcohol foreshadow Clyde's descent into vice as Book One progresses. The parental dynamic is made clear: while both are quite devout, Asa is the ineffective romantic dreamer and Elvira is the practical pillar of strength. Clyde takes after his indecisive and

idealizing father, though unlike Asa he seeks material - not spiritual - fulfillment. This fatal combination of traits and ambitions are the core of the novel's tragedy.

We are informed of Samuel Griffiths and the collar factory in Lycurgus, symbols of the lifestyle to which Clyde aspires and the setting for Book Two. Further, Asa and Samuel are the first clear example of Dreiser's "doubling" motif, using certain similarities to highlight significant differences that emphasize his themes. While these men are brothers, their lives have taken radically different directions: one is destitute, unconcerned with appearances, and devoted to spiritual work; the other is rich by devoting his life to the creation of an important marker of social status, the collar.

CHAPTER THREE

Summary

Contributing to Clyde's dark mood is his sister Esta running away with a man. Despite her religious demeanor, Esta has similar weaknesses as Clyde - longing for material goods and romance, wishing to lead a more traditional youthful life - but lacks his resolve. So when a "masher" (a term used for what we would today call a "player") set his sights on Esta, pledging love and fidelity, she becomes easy prey. One Saturday night, Clyde returns home to find his mother concerned about Esta's whereabouts. Clyde eventually finds a letter on Esta's bed and shows it to his mother before reading it; she shares the letter with Asa, and refuses to reveal its contents to Clyde or the other children. After conferring on their own, Clyde's parents reveals that Esta has left them, but they hope she will soon return. She further warns her children that, if asked, Esta had gone to visit relatives in Tonawanda. All this further reinforces Clyde's belief that the mission work is not as effective as his parents claim.

Notes

We see more doubling that foreshadows future events. Esta is a stand-in for Roberta Alden in Book Two - both become pregnant outside of wedlock. Similarly, the masher (we later learn his name is Nixon) is a double for Clyde, who also whisks his pregnant girlfriend away from her family and abandons her, albeit in a more fatal manner. Clyde's lack of forethought - that is, finding Esta's letter but not being told its contents - is an example of his inability to control the events around him, most notably in planning Roberta's murder but also in the accident that ends Book One. Clyde's already well-established doubt about his parents' mission work - and in a broader sense, the pursuit of spiritual fulfillment - is dealt a huge blow by Esta's actions. He would not seek spiritual peace until the end of the novel. Further, the use of deception to cover up bad appearances is first established by Elvira's warning to her children regarding Esta's whereabouts. In a sense, her admonishment for her children to lie is no different from Clyde's later lies about his family.....

OVERALL ANALYSES

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

While characters have the potential for growth and change, very few actually undergo this. Part of this is the thematic concerns Dreiser stresses, especially regarding the way social and especially class circumstances have a way of defining people's behavior. Even traits that seem different from social expectations - the touching generosity of Sondra Finchley, the conflicted allegiances of Reverend McMillan - are shown to.....

PLOT STRUCTURE ANALYSIS

The structure of the plot is meant to be symmetrical, each Book providing the same basic cycle. Each Book begins with Clyde about to enter a new phase of his life: Independence as he matures in Book One, Lycurgus in Book Two, Prison in Book Three.

Further, each book ends with a death that also signals an end to that part of his life: the death

THEMES - THEME ANALYSIS

The themes as described in an earlier section are played out in each book of the novel, but also build in scope and consequence as the novel progresses. If anything, the major and minor themes are elevated from one book of the novel to the next, taking on greater import until they truly become issues of life and death. For example, consider the tension of

AUTHOR'S STYLE

Dreiser's writing style is not the most compelling aspect of his work. Even admirers of his novels admit that Dreiser's style is clumsy, overworked, lacking in subtlety, and even dully ungrammatical at times. However, there is also a critical consensus that *An American Tragedy* is a great work of literature, provoking the question: what makes it so great if it's often a chore to read?

While it is often difficult to wade through some of Dreiser's impenetrable prose, there is a.....

IMPORTANT QUOTATIONS - QUOTES

The novel begins with these lines:

Dusk - of a summer night. And the tall walls of the commercial heart of an American city of perhaps 400,000 inhabitants - such walls as in time may linger in a mere fable. (1)

The emphasis on dusk and summer night evokes a sense of exhaustion and heat, of the long hours of uncomfortable toil by American workers. From there, the emphasis on walls shows a kind of closed-off mentality, of a nation besieged or seeking protection. The notice of how many people are possibly living behind those walls is a typical Dreiserian touch in journalistic detail.

Describing Clyde's childhood, we find:

The principal thing that troubled Clyde up to his fifteenth year, and for long after in retrospect, was that the calling or profession of his parents was the shabby thing that it appeared to be in the eyes of others. (8)

Describing missionary work as "the shabby thing that it appeared to be" is quite poetic, evoking the shame Clyde felt in precise terms, a clear distinction between appearance and reality, and how in this case, appearance and reality are the same in Clyde's estimation. He cannot see the spiritual fulfillment that his parents understand their missionary work to truly be. Instead, he opts to see the world as a series of acquisitions which equate happiness, as seen here:

And yet, before he had ever earned any money at all, he had always told himself that if only he had a better collar, a nicer shirt, a good suit, a swell overcoat, like some boys had! (13-14)

The emphasis isn't only on acquiring certain goods - all focused on surface appearance - but also on the *simplicity* of the equation. For the young Clyde, as for the older Clyde, wealth equals happiness, material goods equals fulfillment. Such a straightforward view of the world helps him mark his personal progress - or lack thereof - throughout the course of the book.....

SYMBOLISM / MOTIFS / IMAGERY / SYMBOLS

Dreiser does not use many abstract symbols or motifs in his story, wishing to make them as natural and realistic as possible.

The genie and the bird are the two most fanciful symbols employed in the novel, made palatable to the realism of the novel by tying them closely to the imaginative flights Clyde's mind takes while.....

IMPORTANT / KEY FACTS SUMMARY

- **Title:** *An American Tragedy*
- **Author:** Theodore Dreiser
- **Date Published:** 1925
- **Meaning of Title:** The American pursuit of affluence and wealth is often the source of an American's downfall.
- **Setting:** Midwest America, then upstate New York.....

STUDY QUESTIONS / QUIZ

1. Who committed the real-life crime upon which *An American Tragedy* is based?
 - a. Theodore Dreiser
 - b. Carl Grahm
 - c. Chester Gillette
 - d. Leopold & Loeb
2. What city is the setting for the first Book of the novel?
 - a. Denver
 - b. Lycurgus
 - c. Kansas City
 - d. St. Louis.....

Answer Key

1. c 2. c

ESSAY TOPICS / BOOK REPORT IDEAS

1. Compare the real-life story of Chester Gillette to the story Theodore Dreiser writes. What are the significant similarities? What are the significant differences? Citing specific examples, what is gained or lost by these decisions: that is, how does a decision to change a certain aspect of the Gillette case better serve Dreiser thematically or dramatically?
2. Consider the structure of the novel, especially the way each Book re-iterates and magnifies the.....

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