

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for An American Tragedy by Theodore Dreiser

Book Information

Theodore Dreiser, An American Tragedy
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This novel reveals the corruption and destruction of one man who forfeits his life in desperate pursuit of success.

Topics: Community Life, Civic/Economic Progress; Community Life, Social Iniquities; Community Life, Wealth/Riches; Popular Groupings, College Bound; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 9-12

Main Characters

Alvin Belknap and Reuben Jephson lawyer partners who defend Clyde against Mason

Asa Griffiths Clyde's father, a religious man who earns little money and frequently moves his family

Clyde Griffiths the main character in the story, a young man who rebels against his religious and impoverished upbringing; he tries to climb the social ladder at the expense of his poor girlfriend's life and is convicted of murder

Elvira Griffiths Clyde's mother, a devoutly religious woman who must come to grips with her son's guilt

Gilbert Griffiths Sam's conceited and self-assured son, who dislikes and disapproves of his cousin, Clyde

Hester (Esta) Griffiths Clyde's older sister, who escapes her depressing home life by running off with an actor, only to be abandoned by him when she becomes pregnant

Hortense Briggs an acquaintance with whom Clyde falls in love; she strings Clyde along so that he will spend his money on her

Mr. and Mrs. Alden Roberta's poor parents, who farm for a living

Orville Mason the district attorney who prosecutes Clyde and uses the publicity to further his career

Reverend Duncan McMillan a Syracuse minister who visits Clyde often while he is on "death row" and who diligently tries to convert Clyde to become an unconditional Christian

Roberta Alden a subordinate of Clyde's at the factory with whom Clyde has an affair that encumbers him when a romance with Sondra blossoms; he is accused of murdering Roberta

Samuel Griffiths Clyde's rich uncle, who owns a collar company in Lycurgus, New York, and who hires Clyde to give him a chance to better himself

Sondra Finchley the daughter of the Griffiths' rich neighbors with whom Clyde becomes infatuated; he later plots murder to keep himself free to marry Sondra

Vocabulary

cataleptic a person with a lack of response to the environment, lack of awareness, and muscular rigidity

gauche clumsy or lacking grace or tact

histrionic excessively dramatic or emotional

proselytize to attempt to convince a person to convert from one belief or faith to another

sycophant a person who tries to advance himself by flattering influential people

Synopsis

Clyde Griffiths is a young man who has been raised by devoutly religious parents who live in poverty. His family has moved from city to city, setting up a mission at each place. As a result of these moves, Clyde and his siblings have received a very sporadic and inadequate education. Clyde has grown to resent this way of life, and as a teen-ager, he seeks to escape by finding a job that pays decent money.

Clyde does manage to gain independence when he takes a job as a bell-hop at a prestigious local hotel. His job gives him more opportunities but exposes him to a less moral world. He acquires his first girlfriend, but her interests in him are mostly self-serving.

An unfortunate car accident which kills a young girl

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forces Clyde to run off to Chicago where he meets his rich uncle, Samuel Griffiths. This uncle still feels some guilt over the manner in which his brother, Asa, Clyde's father, was left out of the family inheritance. To soothe his conscience, Sam offers Clyde the opportunity to work in his shirt collar factory in New York State.

Clyde, who is eager to live the privileged life of the eastern Griffiths, moves to Lyncurgus. Within a few months, he is promoted to head of a department. Soon, he falls for a young woman, Roberta Alden, who works in his department. Strict company rules forbid him to socialize with Roberta, but Clyde, who is desperate for companionship, pursues her nevertheless. Clyde and Roberta fall in love and carry on a secret intimate relationship.

During this time, Clyde attracts the attention and favor of the wealthy young socialites of Lyncurgus, largely due to his prominent family name, but also because of his good looks and manners. He is smitten with the beautiful Sondra Finchley, who eventually develops an affection for him.

As Sondra and her affluent lifestyle become the focus of Clyde's ambition, he realizes he must end his relationship with Roberta. But Clyde, who is somewhat cowardly, finds this difficult since he pities the underprivileged Roberta. She then becomes pregnant, and Clyde's efforts to fix this problem fail. In desperation, he plots her murder and its cover-up.

When the moment to kill her arrives, he hesitates to deliver the death blow as intended. She reaches for him, and while trying to escape her grasp, and her grasp on his life, Clyde hits her with his camera. Ironically, the canoe then capsizes, and Roberta drowns while Clyde watches.

Clyde, now free, joins his wealthy friends at a nearby resort, but the trail of evidence quickly leads the police to him. He partially admits his involvement with Roberta in order to avoid facing Sondra as an alleged murderer.

Clyde persistently maintains that Roberta's death

was accidental, but an overly ambitious prosecutor, armed with overwhelming circumstantial evidence, wins Clyde's conviction. Clyde is sentenced to death and, after seemingly coming to grips with his guilt, he is executed.

The story ends as Clyde's mother shows her grandson the kind of consideration which may have prevented Clyde's tragic demise.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

Why doesn't Asa ever ask his brother Sam for financial assistance?

Asa has little in common with his father and two brothers. He probably felt shunned by the family when he was left a mere pittance as an inheritance. Even though it seems Asa has little pride, he still prefers to have nothing to do with the other members of the Griffiths family. He probably accepts their differences and goes on his own way, never thinking to impose himself on anyone else. He feels the Lord would provide for the needs of him and his family.

Literary Analysis

Does Clyde ever solve the conflict of whether or not he is guilty of Roberta's death?

All along, Clyde insists to himself that he did not intentionally hit Roberta or cause the boat to capsize, although that is what he had planned. When he confesses the facts to McMillan, McMillan is convinced Clyde is guilty. Still, Clyde thinks he is not as guilty as everyone thinks. Even in the end, he struggles with this question. After Clyde is executed, McMillan also questions whether Clyde truly was guilty.

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Inferential Comprehension

In *Lycurgus*, Clyde was caught between the low status of his impoverished background and the social prominence of his family name. What could Clyde have done to help solve this problem?

Clyde's problems started when he was extremely lonely, yet he couldn't decide where to turn for companionship. His uncle seemed compassionate toward Clyde, and perhaps Sam would have been sympathetic toward Clyde's situation had he understood what was happening. If Clyde had appealed to Sam, he might have received help deciding in which direction to turn. At least Sam would have been aware of the situation, and Clyde would have known if he should leave Lycurgus or if he had a chance to be something.

Constructing Meaning

Predict how Clyde's death will affect McMillan's life.

McMillan is greatly disturbed after witnessing Clyde's execution and seeing the look in his eyes. He questions his decision to influence Governor Waltham's decision not to grant Clyde life imprisonment instead of the death sentence. McMillan will most likely be tormented by his decision for the rest of his life. He will probably experience many sleepless nights and envision the look in Clyde's eyes as he was electrocuted. He may even avoid counseling prison inmates from now on.

Teachable Skills

Understanding Characterization Clyde struggles throughout the book with his yearnings for the opposite sex as well as his desire to climb to the top of the social ladder. Ask the students to discuss why he is so obsessed with these things. Is it due to his deprived upbringing? What else may have caused these feelings? Why couldn't he be happy with Roberta? Would Clyde have been satisfied if he could have married Sondra?

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors Clyde's first jobs are as a bell-boy for ritzy hotels in large cities. He makes a good deal of money for someone with no advanced education in the

1920s. Ask the students to estimate what Clyde's pay would be if he had a similar job today. They should also research the history of the bell-boy. Was it a more popular job in the past than it is now? Have the duties changed considerably? Are there any famous people that first started out as bell-boys?

Recognizing Cause and Effect Clyde's decision to attempt to murder Roberta has a ripple effect on everyone in his world. Ask the students to write down everyone who is affected by Roberta's death and in what way. For example, the Griffiths of Lycurgus suffer socially and move their business to Boston. This also affects everyone who works for them. Mason most likely wins the election because he prosecuted Clyde's case. After the students have listed every situation they can think of, ask them to compare and discuss their lists.

Recognizing Feelings When Roberta and Clyde discover that Roberta is pregnant, they both just want "a way out" of the situation. This is an excellent discussion topic for the students. Have them put themselves in Roberta and Clyde's shoes and explain what they would have done in the same situation. Would they have wanted an abortion? Would they have talked things over right away and made compromises and decisions immediately? Would they have denied the situation the way Clyde did? Ask them to make a decision and think through how such a situation would affect them, their family, and other people in their lives. Can they identify with Clyde and Roberta's feelings?