HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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An American Tragedy 1931

Josef von Sternberg (1894-1969)

> In and of itself, is a masterpiece—but not only in and of itself.
> —Herbert Ihering, 1931

OVERVIEW

Released two years after the Wall Street Crash, Josef von Sternberg's *An American Tragedy* marked a hiatus in his preoccupation with formalist exploration and aesthetics of glamour in the seven-film cycle with Marlene Dietrich; it was a realist take on a well-publicized real-life murder case, adapted from a 1925 novel by Theodore Dreiser.

Naturalist Source. Dreiser's 850-page naturalist novel was based on the murder of Grace Brown by Chester Gillette in 1906. The three parts of the book covered Gillette's background, the events culminating in death, and finally the trial. The title evokes American Dream in order to problematize the particular 'tragedy' as uniquely American—not just one that happened to take place there. The main question of *An American Tragedy* is whether an individual's action is a product of their environment or their free will; among the issues the novel addresses are ambition, class, upward mobility, the legal system, and justice.

The Director. Dreiser's first pick for a director was Erich von Stroheim; subsequently, Sergei Eisenstein was slated to direct the adaptation but things didn't work out despite months of preparations (Merck, 2007: 3). Ultimately, Joseph von Sternberg was chosen as the director. This project was a far cry from his last film, *Dishonored*, a spectacular and quirky spy story; on the other hand, von Sternberg was no stranger to crime films, his *Underworld* (1927) was the progenitor of the gangster genre. It would be his second realist film after his debut gem *The Salvation Hunters*. *An American Tragedy* would be one of several literary adaptations he directed: *Underworld, The Docks of New York, The Blue Angel, Morocco*, and 1935's *Crime and Punishment*.

Courtroom Drama. *An American Tragedy* is an early—talkie—courtroom drama (the final third of the film deals with the trial). Many surprising details of the court scene were actually a result of von Sternberg being faithful to the novel and the real events (Herman, 2: 16): a rowboat, aboard which the incident took place, was indeed brought to the courtroom to provide a demonstration; Gillette's mother was employed as a reporter by a newspaper; and Gillette did smile as the judge imposed the death sentence. Evidently, the real event was even more peculiar than the sometimes farcical representation in the film—even the victim's fetus was incorporated into the trial exhibits (Herman).

Crime, Novel, Film. *An American Tragedy* was better received in Europe compared to the USA. In his 1931 review, Herbert Ihering maintained that *An American Tragedy*, "in and of itself, is a masterpiece—but not only in and of itself (Ihering, 1980: 26)". He felt that thanks to the screening, das Marmorhaus "reached a new importance as a premier theater (27)."

"Written in the Jazz Age, filmed first in the Great Depression, then at the height of McCarthyism," (Merck, 5) the novel and its two adaptations continue to be compared for their merits. Irving Pichel, who played the District Attorney, would make his directing debut the following year with *The Most Dangerous Game*. Two decades after the release of *An American Tragedy*, Pichel wrote an interesting essay for a scholarly publication. The occasion was the release of the second adaptation of the novel, *A Place in the Sun*, by George Stevens. Pichel thought that this 1951 film's approach was more universal (Pichel, 1952). To this

day, *A Place in the Sun* has remained better known, thanks in part to its stars Montgomery Clift and Elizabeth Taylor.

The Gillette case from the turn of the century and Dreiser's novel, which takes place at the beginning of the twentieth century, have both intrigued the fans of the true-crime genre (D'Imperio). Tobias Picker's opera *An American Tragedy* premiered in 2005; the same year Woody Allen's *Match Point* (which involved a similar love triangle) was released.

Author vs. Auteur. Dreiser wanted to spotlight the role of conditions on the individual and consequently, point to the American Dream and society as the real culprits. Von Sternberg had other thoughts; in his memoirs, he remarked: "I eliminated the sociological elements, which, in my opinion, were far from responsible for the dramatic incident which Dreiser concerned himself" (Von Sternberg, 1965:41). Consequently, Dreiser was extremely unhappy with the adaptation, so much so that he sued the studio—and eventually lost. This interesting lawsuit is from a bygone era when cinematic works could be—legally—expected to be faithful to their literary sources. Then again, the judge of this trial concluded that von Sternberg's film was sufficiently faithful.

The tension that shaped the filmmaking process was not only between the writer and the director; other key players were the studio and the Motion Pictures Producers and Distributors Association (MPPDA). The film industry's self-censorship mechanism, the Production Code, would be fully enforced in 1934, but the MPPDA was influential and concerned enough to particularly alter scenes related to abortion in *An American Tragedy*. Hence, this is not a film like *The Scarlet Empress* or *The Blue Angel*, in which von Sternberg's vision was more or less unchallenged. "The studio's desire for a sympathetic hero, the MPPDA's pressure for a clear moral vision, and Dreiser's desire to retain the opening and closing of his novel undermined Sternberg's characterization; producing incoherence, rather than ambiguity" (Merck, 101). Retrospectively, von Sternberg referred to it merely as "an assignment." (Bogdanovich, 1997: 241). Still, it is a riveting character study from the pre-Code era and its universal concerns make it no less pertinent today.

CHARACTERS

Clyde Griffiths. Son of Salvation Army preachers, Clyde works menial jobs before he becomes a supervisor at his rich and haughty relative's factory. His interest for co-worker Roberta weakens as soon as he meets the socialite Sondra. The love triangle leads to Roberta's death—and ultimately, his own.
Roberta Alden. Roberta works in the collar factory under Clyde's supervision. They have a clandestine affair; after she gets pregnant, Roberta pressures Clyde to do the right thing. He plans murder; their lake excursion ends with her death.
Sondra Finchley. Young, beautiful, and upper-class Sondra blows Clyde's mind. The character has approximately ten minutes of total screen time and not a lot of dialogue. In the 1951 film adaptation of *An American Tragedy*, *A Place in the Sun*, this is a more prominent part and is played by Elizabeth Taylor.
District Attorney Mason. DA Mason pushes hard for the guilty verdict and attacks Clyde from a variety of angles to demonstrate the inconsistency of his statements. He even brings the rowboat to the courtroom. Mason is played by actor and director Irving Pichel (directorial debut the following year, with *The Most Dangerous Game*).
Mrs. Griffiths. Clyde's mother is a selfless Salvation Army missionary. She makes a plea on behalf of her son, which moves the governor, but does not make him stop the execution.
Jephson and Belknap. Clyde's somewhat eccentric lawyer and his partner base their defense on the moral weakness and cowardice of Clyde.

SYNOPSIS

Son of missionaries, Clyde Griffiths wants the best of everything. He drifts in and out of menial jobs until his wealthy relative places him in his textile plant. Here, Clyde meets Roberta, a worker who has just moved out of her parents' farm. The two have an affair—clandestinely, as the workplace does not allow co-workers to fraternize. Then, Clyde meets the young socialite Sondra and the two begin to flirt. Things

get complicated with Roberta's pregnancy and her demand to set things straight. Clyde doesn't want to lose Sondra, whom he sees as his ticket to high society—and finally decides to eliminate Roberta. A lake excursion ends with her drowning: a well-covered and extensive court trial dissects Clyde's role in her death. Ultimately, the verdict is guilty and Clyde Griffiths is sentenced to death.

SCENES



Number Seven. Clyde Griffiths, son of Salvation Army missionaries, is an ambitious hotel bellboy. Except for his good looks that earn him generous tips, there is little that is remarkable about Number Seven. One evening, as Clyde and his co-workers are returning from a night of socializing and drinking, the drunk driver of the car hits a little girl and causes her death. Although he is not responsible for the accident, Clyde is afraid of possible consequences and flees the scene. His mother urges him to dutifully contact the police; nonetheless, he leaves the town in panic.



Foreman. Clyde travels as a stowaway and drifts in and out of menial jobs; he washes dishes at a restaurant and gets reprimanded for his inefficiency. Poor performance is not Clyde's only problem—his apprehension about authority and law enforcement continues. He happens to be at a pool saloon when there is a police raid; at first he is hesitant, then, escapes from a window. Eventually—and fortunately, it appears—a distant relative, his rich uncle, deems it appropriate to employ him at his manufacturing plant. Clyde begins working as the supervisor of a group of young female workers whose job is to stamp detachable collars. He appears relatively relaxed in his new position, which brings him some authority.



Farm girl. Clyde begins to flirt with one of the new workers, Roberta, who has only recently moved out of her parents' farm. The workplace does not permit fraternization between co-workers, so the two keep their affair secret. Roberta is happy, sincere, and loving; initially she is reluctant to become intimate with Clyde, in spite of his persistent attempts to coax her to let him spend the night at her place. When he coldly gives her the cold shoulder, she is distraught and finally gives in. Clyde stare triumphantly, after Roberta caves in as a reaction to his tactical withdrawal. For the couple, things are fine for a little while—until he meets Sondra.



Social Climber. Sondra Finchley is a young and beautiful socialite who possesses everything that Clyde longs for. He is delighted when she invites him to a party at her home. Their relationship rapidly advances and the two go on leisurely outings. Sondra does not feel ready to introduce him to her parents—which would have elated Clyde—nonetheless he is having the time of his life speedboating and horse riding with her. Cylde is exhilarated.

Crisis. Roberta is pregnant and urges Clyde to marry her. Now that he is fully concentrated on Sondra and the chance to make it to the upper class, he stalls Roberta. Her phone calls and letters increase the pressure on Clyde; he suddenly decides to get rid of her. It is not clear what his plans are, but he is obviously prompted by the headline-making news of a fatal boating accident.



Death. Roberta accepts his invitation for a lakeside excursion, thinking that he would finally propose. Following the picnic, he takes her out on a canoe, saying that he would like to take her photos. She senses something's afoot and asks him repeatedly about his shadowy stare. Clyde bluntly confesses that his original intention was murder; he says that he has changed his mind and is ready succumb to her demand for marriage. Moments before the climax, Roberta touches the surface of the lake, which further disturbs the already agitated Clyde. Right from the beginning of the film, ripples and water are used expressively.

Eventually, confused and nervous, Roberta stands up, the canoe is tipped and they both fall to the water. Not knowing how to swim, she drowns, while Clyde swims to the shore without making any attempt to save her. Clyde doesn't inform anyone about what took place and leaves the scene; eventually, he joins Sondra on a lakeside camping trip. Clyde reads the sensational news story about the suspicious drowning

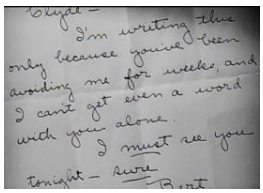


Arrest. From the get-go, the police regard the case with suspicion and a man hunt ensues for Roberta's companion. Clyde's suitcase is found and a pile of Roberta's letters lets the investigators identify him. They also find letters from Sondra, which immediately suggest a love triangle and point to a suspect with a motive. Clyde and Sondra happily canoe—until he gets arrested.



The Trial. His uncle arranges a good defense team for Clyde, while Sondra's father ensures that she is kept out of the spotlight. The zealous District Attorney Mason attacks Clyde from all angles, questioning and dissecting his past, character, motives, and statements. On the other hand, his own attorneys portray him as someone with questionable integrity, who might have conceived of murder, but ultimately did not actually go ahead and kill Roberta. There is incredible media attention and Clyde's mother joins the sessions—as a reporter employed by a newspaper.

Defeat. During the proceedings, the heated debate between the lawmen almost turns into a fist fight; a member of the audience demands that the defendant be lynched and he is fined for contempt of court. Even the actual rowboat is brought to the courtroom for a demonstration. The DA particularly focuses on Clyde obtaining travel brochures about the lakeside resort, well in advance of the trip—hence, quite successfully making a case for premeditated murder. Newspapers' headlines and Roberta's letters play a prominent role in the narrative as title cards. Soon, Clyde's calm composure gives way to panic and finally, the jury finally announces the guilty verdict. The judge sentences him to death by electrocution; at this moment, Clyde peculiarly—and arguably defiantly—smiles. His mother visits him in the death row and laments about her shortcomings as a parent. He assures her that he did not carry out his plan to murder Roberta.



CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Clyde Griffiths *Disagreeable* Clyde doesn't want to live as a poor and selfless missionary like his parents; he wants to climb the social ladder. To what extent is the society going to let him fulfill his ambitions? Also, to what extremes is he prepared to go, when his options for social mobility turn out to be extremely limited? During the trial, his defense team characterizes Clyde as "spineless" and a "coward", but the character is more complicated.

Illustrative moments

*Ambitious and Hankering***.** Clyde is not happy with his parents helping strangers in their street missionary work and is not interested in their selfless way of life. Leaving his family and jobs at luxury hotels brings him closer to the social circles he admires; but he wants to be with them, not serve them. An early scene shows him trying to ditch a chambermaid for a weekend outing; this comes right after he is teased by a flirtatious hotel guest. That weekend, he unenthusiastically goes to a party with his co-workers; a night of drinking ends with the fateful car crash. When his mother reproaches him for his choice of friends, his reply is appalling but sincere—he says that he needed to befriend them because he had no other alternatives. When he meets Sondra, he feels that the tide has turned. She represents access to the upper class; boating and horse riding with her exalts him—"how I love this life, this music, this kind of life".

*Stony-faced***.** Newspaper coverage of *People v. Gillette* was extensive in 1906 and the defendant's actions, as well as demeanor were reported in detail. "Unruffled" was the word used in one front-page

article to describe Chester Gillette (Herman). Most of the time, it is difficult to understand what Clyde is thinking and what his pouted lips signify. Clyde is stolid during the initial phase of the trial when his life is at stake and at its conclusion—when all is lost; but that was pretty much how he had always been. When his rich relatives had invited him to their home, he was basically polite and appreciative, but more interestingly, he was unresponsive to their derogatory remarks. His "opacity" (Merck, 100) contrasts with Roberta's transparency. It is possible that he is just as clueless about his own character—as he puts it himself during the trial: "You see, I never had any real plans to do anything."

Smiling. When he didn't immediately get what he wanted from Roberta, Clyde was able to confuse her with his cold and expressionless face; when she finally relented, there was an indication of triumph and a half-smile on his still impassive face. Later, he smiles once again, at a most unlikely moment, in the denouement, when his death sentence is announced. Fascinating scene and great acting by Phillips Holmes—Clyde is an unsympathetic yet complex character.

*Overwhelmed***.** The peculiar smile at the denouement raises the question—is Clyde defiant? When confronted with authority (or even the likelihood of such encounters), he is known to choose to flee. He escapes from the car crash even though he was innocent and does the same when the police raid the pool saloon. When things get more serious, Clyde is dumbified by the social forces closing in on him. The sheriff's posse so easily locates and apprehends him, without even the need for the anticipated manhunt; subsequently, he is swiftly convicted by the jurors in the trial. The farcical trial—with its physical altercation between the lawmen, display of the canoe, and, not least, a dozen grim-looking male jurors, all older than him—is obviously too much for him. Clyde seems to say anything that would make the prosecutors give him a break. He is disconcerted and his statements are inconsistent.

*"Hamlet-like" and Untruthful***.** Clyde is often hesitant and indecisive; then, at times he acts impulsively (e.g. the murder plan, courting Sondra, protesting his innocence during the trial). He is also a liar—the first instance of him lying is during the job interview for his hotel bellhop application. At the court, his lawyers decide to build their case on his flaws, mainly his tendency to lie. This leads to the argument of the defense that Clyde was actually untruthful in occasions when his statements incriminated him. As Susan Herman points out in her comparative analysis of the novel and the actual court case, this trial took place decades before the Miranda warning would be given to suspects in order to protect them from self-incrimination. Scared of authority and irresolute, Clyde incriminates himself by speaking.

Roberta Alden *Agreeable* Roberta was raised in a farm and has moved to New York to work in the textile plant. Her affair with Clyde hits a dead end once the latter hooks up with the wealthy Sondra. Roberta is pregnant and demands that Clyde marry her. She is meek and naïve, but her persistent calls for action increasingly annoy Clyde.

Illustrative moments

*Sympathetic and Unsuspecting***.** Shelley Winters (the gullible widow in *The Night of the Hunter* [1955] and the pathetically lovesick Charlotte Haze in *Lolita* [1962]) portrayed Alice in the other *An American Tragedy* adaptation, *A Place in the Sun*, as an annoying and pestering character. There is hardly anything negative about Roberta, she is exquisite and delicate. She resists Clyde's attempts to spend the night at her place, but caves in after he tactically ignores her for a while and pretends to be determined to end their relationship. She finally sends him a note to signal her capitulation; then, his reaction is a controlled smirk. At this moment, her heartfelt and happy smile sharply contrasts with his cold and triumphant stare.

*Desperate and Sincere***.** Roberta's pregnancy could not have been so openly stated in a post-1934 film. Abortion is also implicitly referred to, but its more explicit discussion would (and did) bother the MPPDA. Once it is clear that Roberta has no option left but to give birth to the baby, she becomes more resolute. It is clear that Roberta's anxiety is turning to desperation and she is firmly demanding a response from Clyde. At this moment, Clyde is seeing Sondra, so her attempts at communication are mostly via phone calls and letters. During the trial, Brown's letters were read out aloud as evidence

(Herman). Accordingly, in the novel, Dreiser uses Brown's original letters. This impactful device conveys her sense of urgency; as if she "almost shrieked or screamed," comments the novel's narrator at one point (Dreiser, 1953: 490). Following several lengthy letters, the narrator reveals Clyde's calculating mindset: "He must not write her any long and self-incriminating letters. That would be foolish in the face of his determination to marry her." (491). In the film, title cards and the Roberta's handwritten notes frequently appear, to persuasively convey her sincere desperation.

Sondra Finchley *Closed* Sondra is prepossessing and privileged; it is not difficult to see why Holmes is attracted to her. The character is portrayed by Frances Dee, a fine actress (*I Walked with a Zombie*, 1943), but interestingly, as opposed to her counterpart in *A Place in the Sun*, Elizabeth Taylor's Angela, Sondra is not presented as a complex character. With limited screen time and dialogue, Sondra is denied the chance to engage the spectators. An alternative approach might have encouraged them to root for her and Clyde as a couple—as in *A Place in the Sun*—whose romance might somehow persevere. The narrative carefully limits the Sondra character, in order to place the spotlight on Holmes: she may be beautiful and rich, but it is ultimately his call and there will not be any additional justification for them to become a couple. Accordingly, Sondra is removed from the picture right after the climactic death of Roberta. In her last scene, she is upset with Clyde's predicament and is reprimanded by her father for fraternizing with someone outside of her class. She is not seen or heard of again, not even her name is mentioned in the trial.

THEMES

Society (Class, Modern Media and Crime)

Fatalism (Free Will, Environment)

Justice (Justice System)

Class. The shirt-collar factory in Dreiser's novel has been preserved in the film; Clyde finds out that he is the nephew of a textile manufacturer. His uncle employs him as a foreman in the collar stamping department, mainly because he didn't like the idea of having a relative "working in the shrinking department." The uncle's approach is to keep his relative at a distance, while providing him a decent income and position, so that he doesn't end up embarrassing them. The uncle also invites his underprivileged nephew to dinner to introduce him to his family. As they wait for his arrival, Clyde's relatives briefly discuss potential undesirable outcomes of this family get-together. Their unanimous sentiment is that Clyde shouldn't get the impression that they would "take him up socially"; accordingly, his cousin Gilbert is outright rude to him. When asked about his parents, Clyde explains that "they run a kind of a mission"; his aunt arrogantly repeats Clyde's statement to underscore her disdain for their distant relatives.

"With *An American Tragedy* and *Blonde Venus*, Sternberg was moving increasingly towards portraying the individual experience of economic class in American life" (Baxter, 1993: 188). Couple of scenes shows Clyde supervising the female workers, who continuously stamp detachable collars. Their task is obviously repetitive and tedious—anticipating Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times* and René Clair's *À nous la liberté* (also from 1931, to be released just a couple of months after *An American Tragedy*). The particular item is itself associated with income and affordability—detachable collars reduced the need for laundry and helped men to struggle less to maintain a middle class appearance. These textile factory scenes are very realistic and actually Paramount Pictures was proud of them—real sewers were employed as the extras, as announced by the studio as part of the film's publicity (186).

Fatalism, Free Will, Environment. "Sternberg saw the major idea of the matter in the drowning, how lamentable!" (Baxter, 1993: 188) wrote contemporary critic Harry Alan Potamkin. Visually, frequent dissolves in the film bind the events and give a sense of inevitability, but do they point to a specific underlying cause of the events—a "major idea"? With the novel, Dreiser wanted to highlight the impact of environment and conditions on an individual's fate. The impression that the reader gets is that environmental determinism is a more important determinant compared to free will. Dreiser disliked the film

adaptation, because he thought it downplayed the social factors—this was concurred by von Sternberg's aforementioned assessment ("Overview"), that he "eliminated the sociological elements." Clyde may be weak and confused, but it is his decisions that shape the events. As opposed to Dreiser's environmental determinism, von Sternberg is interested in a "relaxed excursion into the diluted forces for deception and sexual self-destruction that can exist even among the unintelligent and unimaginative (Baxter, 1971: 88)" Almost a century later, it is up to the reader and viewer to continue pondering the question—is it environment or free will that primarily shaped the destiny of Chester/Clyde (and in general, individuals)?

Modern Media and Crime. Clyde's tripod-mounted bellows camera plays a part during the climax (he is holding it during the deadly hassle on the rowboat), but the modern communications technology that plays a key role in the denouement is the print media. Multiple times, newspaper front pages enter the frame; von Sternberg uses them as he did title cards in his late 1920s silent films. In the 1908 trial, newspapers and reporters were indeed important players of the legal process (Merck, 101)—so much so that Gillette's mother was employed by a newspaper as a reporter. Von Sternberg follows Dreiser in placing emphasis on the trial phase, and particularly, the role of the media.

The 1931 film comes just a year before the kidnapping of the baby of aviator Charles Lindberg, which would lead to the 'trial of the Century' in 1935 and the media frenzy surrounding it. The courtroom scenes and their press coverage anticipate the media's interest in the trial of Richard Hauptman; as well as other high-profile and well-publicized murder cases to come, all the way to the Ted Bundy, O.J. Simpson, and Casey Anthony trials.

Justice System. The absurdly hilarious scene in the courtroom, with lawmen of opposing sides almost engaging into a fist fight, scares Clyde and he begins to lose his composure. Then, he is rattled when someone calls for a lynching. Yet neither of these is the most scandalous moment of the trial. That happens when one juror disagrees with the guilty verdict and another one mildly supports his right to voice his dissent—the others are furious and directly threaten both jurors by saying that they would "run them both out of town." Consequently, the two are subdued. The problem is not that Clyde has subpar lawyers, but rather the jurors judge his intentions and character; yet, their own moral integrity and competency are questionable.

Discussion questions

In the novel *An American Tragedy*, Dreiser leaves it to the readers to decide whether the protagonist is guilty. How about von Sternberg and his *An American Tragedy*, Is Clyde guilty? Contemporary critic Harry Alan Potamkin stated that "Sternberg saw the major idea of the matter in the drowning, how lamentable!" (Baxter, 1993: 112) Do you agree with that?

Is Clyde also a victim? If so, is he a victim of conditions and environment or his own actions and will? How do you interpret Clyde's smile at the end?

How would you compare the corresponding characters in the two adaptations of Dreiser's novel—and the two actresses who were in their prime—Sondra (Francis Dee) in *An American Tragedy* and *A Place in the Sun*'s Angela (Elizabeth Taylor)?

Which adaptation of the Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* is more pertinent today? Von Sternberg's or Stevens' 1951 film *A Place in the Sun*? Dreiser was frustrated with von Sternberg's adaptation (outlined in the Overview section); would he have preferred the 1951 film?

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