

American Literature & Culture
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Mod 02 Lecture Number 12
Theodore Dreiser An American Tragedy (Lecture 10a)

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Professor: Today in *A Place in the Sun* is Elizabeth Taylor and Montgomery Clift starring movie. It was also, like most movies of course, you know, you have a great novel and you have to compress it within two hours so, what do you think could have been left out in the film, what parts? Loud, Ashwin

Student: The childhood

Professor: Yeah his childhood, his childhood is completely skipped over. Ok we are, the director is not interested in the childhood at all, the director is not interested in projecting Esta's plight and mother, parent's missionary zeal at all, Ok so he doesn't even refer to the car accident and the incident that happens back home, Ok and the reason that forces almost Clyde Griffiths out of that small town and into Lycurgus. But he is the, there is absolutely no mention whatsoever of all these very crucial incidents which are so important here. Ok, what we are, how the movie opens and I think Youtube must be having the opening shot also of the film somewhere which is very striking.

The opening shot has the great Montgomery Clift hitch-hiking his way to New York, to the big town. Ok, so he is at the crossroads, he is leaving his small town. We are not given the backdrop or background, we are just shown and it's the opening credit title sequence, there he

is hitch-hiking and he starts, he just hops into one of those wagons and drives towards the big town, towards the big city. Now, what happens when we skip all these parts? Why are these, these initial parts at all, important at all to us?

Student: Character

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Professor: Character? Ok give me something more.

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Professor: Because what happens, once he arrives in town, immediately he is thrown in the company of this very wealthy family of his, the wealthy cousins, the wealthy uncle and the high society as shown by the lives of his cousins and also the new girl he meets. Sondra Finchley in this novel, she is now Angela as played by Elizabeth Taylor in the film. Ok, so even the names are changed. But Roberta's character is played by this method actress of those

times Shelley Winters. Now, Shelley Winters one of those factory girls, Ok. Now my question again, what impact do you think would it leave on the movie when the initial parts are skipped?

Student: We don't see the transition happening.

Professor: We don't see the transition.

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Professor: We don't see the transition.

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Professor: We also skip a very crucial aspect of the hero's character. And what is his character?

Student: Thirst for ambition

Professor: Ambition, his ambition is there nevertheless

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Student: His upbringing

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Professor: His upbringing, Ok, so his very rigid upbringing as contrasted to his burning ambitions and desire. So we have been talking about desire and ambition, the novel The American Dream. The fact that we keep on referring to The American Dream so frequently, Ok what else is lost? In his interactions with Hortense, and his experiences as a bellboy, what are the crucial details of his character that we miss out?

Student: His passion

Professor: His passion?

Student: With Hortense

Professor: Ok

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Student: He came from a very rigid background and then he was thrown in.

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Student: He had a lot of freedom all of a sudden and how he couldn't cope with that and that

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Student: the car accident, everything changed him a lot and

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Student: he became a very guarded person. I think we don't see that, why he becomes a guarded, he is not so sure of what kind of friendships to make.

Professor: Ok, so in the movie, all these things are missed and perhaps we are shown that he is already a guarded person. We never understand his repressions, his insecurities, his complexes, his feelings of inferiorities. All those things are not highlighted or projected at all. Ok, also the fact, well you see this is a 51 movie, so although there were winds of changes in cinema also, we started having the concept of anti hero, negative kind of hero, so which was Ok in novel, Ok but not so Ok in films.

Now when we have a character in the novel who has been so indifferent to the plight of everybody around him, so his parents he doesn't care. He thinks over and then he ignores. He thinks of Esta and he ignores her. Ok he thinks he, he is passionately involved with Hortense. Not in love, that never comes. Love will never be a part of a naturalistic novel, Ok. It is all basic instincts, Ok, so his instincts towards, for Hortense. The accident, Ok all these things are. So you see hero on a very clean slate here. Much as a, one of, see it's very well made film. Its very well crafted film. It's a very, it is a brilliantly acted film.

But then it is only a portion, a slice of novel. The highlight of the film is the love triangle. Ok, the highlight of the novel is social conditions. So social conditions are referred to in the film also but not the way the love story is projected. After all, the director must have felt that you have Elizabeth Taylor, so why waste her? Ok therefore let's have the focus on her. So Sondra is, as I have been telling you all about, she is a very flighty kind of a young girl, barely out of teenage. Now she has been snubbed by Gilbert Griffiths. Therefore she picks this guy up because she thinks that this is one way of getting her own back at Gilbert and also she is, her family generally regarded as the nouveau riche kind, Ok, they are looked down by Mrs. Griffiths, the rich, the wealthy Mrs. Griffiths.

Yes, this is one way for Sondra to come up in at least social hierarchy. They have wealth, perhaps more wealth than the Griffiths but the prestige that they are lacking in, Ok that can be, so everyone is using someone else to come up the ladder. This angle is completely glossed over in the movie. So now I am taking you to this particular scene where the boy is already taken and he is shown his place where he should be working, so men's shirts, here the focus is on collars but here in the film they are in the process, in the business of making men's garments. So that's a minor change. Again I am interested in the title. An American Tragedy, it was a very successful, popular novel. Why change good things? I mean after all we have The English Patient adapted as The English Patient, right, on screen. We have all great works of literature. East of Eden the novel and East of Eden the film, why change An American Tragedy to A Place in the Sun?

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Student: very somber title for a movie.

Professor: It puts off people?

Student: Yes

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Student: A Place in the Sun on the other hand is very pleasant.

Professor: It is pleasant, yeah

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Professor: it evokes certain pleasantness; it evokes certain kind of poetic imagery.

Student: I think the shift is

Professor: Romance

Student: The focus is shifted to romance

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Student: rather than...

Professor: The social aspect, yeah.

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Professor: It's no longer an abysmal, hopeless, naturalistic social tragedy. The novel is no holds barred. Ok, there are certain points where you feel, for a 1925 novel, it is very revolutionary. Not from today's point of view, nothing shocks anyone anymore but for 1920s yes, so the title, it, it is evocative, it is romantic, it is not so cut and dried as calling it a tragedy.

Student: Also the movie is what the audience will expect, that's (()) ending as well

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Professor: That is going to happen here as well.

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Professor: That happens here as well but again, well let me show you

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Professor: and if you focus on the cover title, the poster of *The Place in the Sun* with Montgomery Clift, do you see, is it clear and Elizabeth Taylor, Ok, this is the way that film was advertised. The focus is completely on them. So this was perhaps a great departure that who you should be focusing on? The focus of the novel is definitely not Sondra. But here even renaming her, rechristening her as Angela, that itself is quite romantic in my opinion. She becomes his angel.

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Professor: Coming to chapter now, 2; that we have been talking about the head of the Lycurgus branch of the Griffiths, as contrasted with the father of the Kansas City family was most arresting.

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Professor: Now you have to look at again the binaries throughout, Ok, binaries as well as the so-called doppelganger and the double. So this father is contrasted with that father, this mother with that mother, this sister with that sister, this boy, this young man with Clyde Griffiths, throughout and then, this girlfriend, the poor girlfriend with the Hortenses of the world, and then you have Angela or Sondra in the novel who is absolutely unattainable, therefore she is all the more attractive to him, Ok.

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Professor: now would you like to comment on chapter 2? For me it is page 157, I think you will have to scroll down a bit if you are looking at the e-copies of it. Where he says Griffiths senior suddenly observed: "I had a curious experience in Chicago this time, something I think the rest of you will be interested in." He was thinking of an accidental encounter two days

before in Chicago between himself and the eldest son, as it proved to be, of his younger brother Asa. Also of a conclusion he had come to in regard to him.

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Professor: Now this boy is mentioned as an afterthought. The family is already into something. They are already having a discussion, very pleasant things of life and then suddenly he reminds, he remembers and mentions this boy to his family. How important could this boy be to this family, even to his own uncle who is his own blood? Nothing much, it's like a chance encounter with a stranger who is in, who has fallen on bad days and he requires certain, some kind of help.

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Professor: Now I will skip a page and then "A cousin? How old is he?" asked Gilbert instantly, curious as his to his character and situation and ability. "Well, he's a very

interesting young man, I think," continued Griffiths tentatively and somewhat dubiously, since up to this hour he had not truly made up his mind about Clyde. "He's quite good-looking and well-mannered, too--about your own age, I should say, Gil, and looks a lot like you--very much so--same eyes and mouth and chin. He's a little bit taller, if anything, and looks a little thinner, though I don't believe he really is."

At the thought of a cousin who looked like him--possibly as attractive in every way as himself--and bearing his own name, Gilbert chilled and bristled slightly. For here in Lycurgus, up to this time, he was well and favorably known as the only son and heir presumptive to the managerial control of his father's business, and to at least a third of the estate, if not more. And now, if by any chance it should come to light that there was a relative, a cousin of his own years and one who looked and acted like him, even--he bridled at the thought. Forthwith, a psychic reaction which he did not understand and could not very well control, he decided that he did not like him--could not like him.

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Professor: Without meeting Clyde, there is a judgment and an opinion formed about him. And what does it tell you about family relationships? It is all controlled by money and status and prestige. He is the one, he is the chosen one, now someone has come and he is a threat although he is no threat at all. Ok, just by virtue of being somewhat physical resemblance to him, by virtue of sharing a common family name, this man, this unseen unknown boy has become a very serious major threat and this is. So what, I was asking you to theorize it a little bit; naturalism thrives on Darwinian Theory, Darwinism.

Can you tell me, what is Darwin's Theory, the most famous conclusion of Darwin's theories? It is all about the survival of the fittest, right? Survival of the fittest, are you aware of that? So who survives, the strongest, the fittest. Nature has made everyone unequal. That is the idea. So we are not into an idealistic realm. Now contrast it if you, if you can with Henry James; full of idealistic characters, especially your heroine. So the leading character in Henry James is always an idealistic character.

Student: The reaction of Ralph towards his cousin and, like, it's the same thing. They didn't know that such a cousin existed but it is so different

Professor: Yes

Student: how Gilbert reacts

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Professor: and she is a poor cousin too,

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Student: Yeah

Professor: Yeah. So it is never at the forefront, in any part of his mind, that she will come and take control of one third, one half, two fourth and what not. But here, suddenly the idea of share, property, wealth, money, class everything comes into, yeah and this is perhaps what Dreiser tells us, this is what, so we have seen a realistic novel, we are seeing a naturalistic novel.

Student: The major point is we are told how both Mr. Griffiths and Gilbert, they both believe the caste is necessary

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Student: and it is important that these social distinctions prevail in the society.

Professor: Yes

Student: Yeah

Professor: Yeah

Student: Class is necessary

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Professor: Class is necessary, so again we have been talking about Dreiser and his Marxist leanings. So classes exist because of people like Mr. Griffiths who claim to be liberal capitalists but are they, are these people really so what they claim to be? There can be never any, any such thing as liberal capitalism. All sorts of capitalism, they exist to keep people in their places.

Student: So he says something should be there for the lower classes too, the upper class still is necessary

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Professor: Yeah

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Professor: that is a good point; that is also you are making an Althusserian point. So keep everyone that is what Gramsci says, yeah, hegemony of the ruling class, of the bourgeois. The people have to know their places and there are certain institutes that are, so you have all those institutions coming into play in this novel. What did, what does Gramsci tell you? What are those great institutions, man-made institutions?

Student: Church and school

Professor: Church, school, law, order, court, justice, family all these things are, all these things exist to keep people in their particular class. Ok you have aspirations; you can come up whatever way that is different. The higher you come, the less controlled you will be. The lower, at the lower rung of the society, all these institutions that exist, that exist at the top of the hierarchy, they give you a triangle, you know, all these ideological state apparatus, Althusser, Ok that's what he tells. He gives you something at the top, and at the top these things exist. Hegemony, Gramsci's concept of hegemony also feeds on althusserian concept of ideological apparatus of state, Ok. All those things were there when the novel was written but how it anticipates all those theories. And Darwinism

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. Professor: Now for me

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Professor: this is page 160

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Professor: you will have to skip a bit, skip a bit

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Professor: when Gilbert has already very openly displayed his contempt for this unknown and unseen cousin and Bella, the sister, yeah she is interested in meeting, there could be any amusing company, she thinks. Gilbert is too stuck up, too coiled a character, not amusing enough, not fun enough but perhaps if a cousin comes in her life, things will be more lively and generally, you know opposite sex cousins, so there isn't that kind of rivalry as it exists between same sex cousins.

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Professor: So now, look at Dad's opinion, or Dad's observation here, "All I know is that his father was never very practical and I doubt if Clyde has ever had a real chance." "All I know is that his father was never very practical and I doubt if Clyde has ever had a real chance." His son winced at this friendly and familiar use of his cousin's first name. "My only idea in bringing him on here was to give him a start. I haven't the faintest idea whether he would make good or not. He might and again he might not. If he didn't--" He threw up one hand as much as to say, "If he doesn't, we will have to toss him aside, of course."

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Professor: Ok, everyone, this is the benevolent capitalism, liberal capitalism, Ok. Everyone deserves a chance. I have brought him here. I will give him a start. I will give him a chance. If he makes it, fine. If he doesn't, who cares? Again this is very Darwinian, survival of the

fittest. Now you are calling a boy, again look at the, uncle is portrayed very objectively. Ok, he is generally seen as a regular guy, a rich man who has come up with his hard work and determination, he is very practical, therefore he could make it.

His brother couldn't make it. He is very practical therefore he gave all the chances to his children, the other brother has never been practical, and therefore his children never got a start in life, therefore their miseries, therefore their sufferings. Now this is all about survival of the fittest. And Dreiser has no sympathies for people who can't survive. Because that's the way life exists. Do you agree? Do we look out for those people who are unable to fend for themselves? How many of us do? Ok, and it is also, some critics have also questioned that under the garb of bringing this poor relation, you know, uprooting him from one city to another, isn't Gilbert's,

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Professor: isn't Griffiths senior doing a great justice to his nephew? Because his nephew is just not cut out to survive in a big city, he has no skills and that's proved the moment he walks in. Ok, he has always been the bellboy but he gives an impression that he is on some managerial kind of position in that hotel, not a simple bell boy. So once he arrives on the scene here, he is absolutely exposed and there is nothing he can be given and therefore in the movie clipping that you just watched, the iron gate, did you see the imagery of the iron gate, iron gate that closes in his face and what does it show symbolically? On the screen, what are we being told?

Student: He has been shut out.

Professor: He is shut out. You are not, and there is an iron gate which exists between you and the world outside; between the world there and you. And there is this divide, there is this wall which you can never aspire, and then suddenly he sees Elizabeth Taylor and her rich friends whisking away in a car, and this is the set he wants to join. So car again and again and again, Ok All these sports cars, fancy cars, they symbolize wealth, upwards social mobility for him, throughout the novel, throughout the film those symbols are thrown all over the place, any comments? Anything you want to talk about from the movie, clipping that you just watched?

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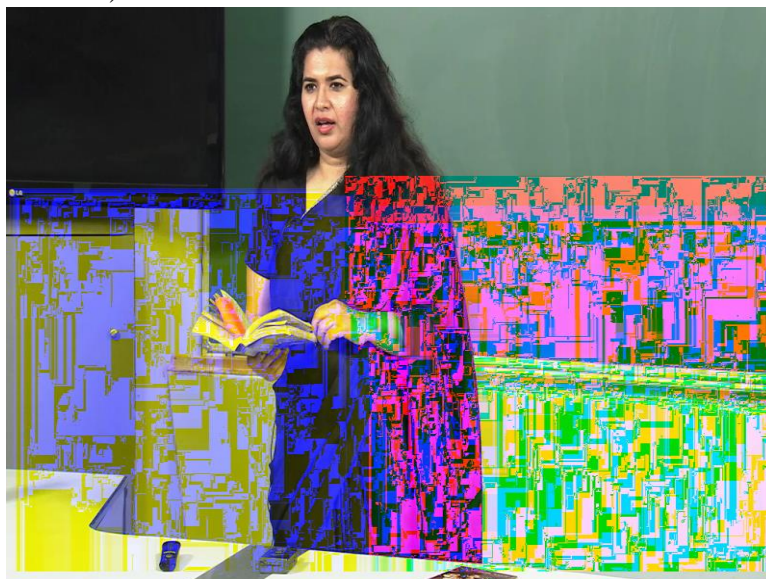
Professor: Girls from the lower class have too many restrictions, Ok. It is very important and especially in Uncle Griffiths' factory that they don't socialize with men they work with. But then what about girls that come from Angela's or Sondra's social class, Ok? Why are those

restrictions not applied to them? And if they get into trouble, first of all, no one would dare to get them into trouble; this is also, so Angela is always treated with lots of respect, with lots of distance. Even when they start going around, Angela is always, like to be pure angelic creature that has to be cherished and protected. Does he have those same feelings towards this girl? Yeah, he just accidently bumps into her in this movie theater, and what does he do? He puts his arm around her very casually as if girls like of her class are there, are available even though they have, she has her defenses, Ok. He knows that these defenses won't last long. Because that's their class, and that's because he has already seen this class of girls being treated this way back home. So girl available, girls in other worlds, Ok. That's a very, you know, cruel kind of a social distinction that Dreiser makes.

Did you also notice a very faint hint of his missionary background? Yeah, Ok, that's the only time when this thing is highlighted in the film and at the end when there is a Father confessor sent to him in the prison where he is forced to confess that he actually wanted the pregnant girlfriend to drown and die and all that. So you have the second instance of religion on screen at that point. At the first instant, he sees a little boy, he sees himself. He relates him and he just shirks. He shudders, that is not what he, so he, so in one way it is a good escape for him that he manages to come away from his town and his family. Ok, this is total distantiation from his past.

Let me take to chapter 22, there is a letter Roberta

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Professor: signed Roberta, do you get that? This is the point where he has been making advances at Roberta. She has been declining the suggestion of actually having sex with her. But now, he says that, but now that it is now or never. You give in or I go out of your life. It's like a threat. You have to do it, otherwise you won't, I won't be paying you any attention any more. And then look what she writes to him.

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Professor: "Please, Clyde, don't be mad at me, will you? Please don't. Please look at me and speak to me, won't you? I'm so sorry about last night, really I am--terribly. And I must see you to-night at the end of Elm Street at 8:30 if you can, will you? I have something to tell you. Please do come. And please do look at me and tell me you will, even though you are angry. You won't be sorry. I love you so. You know I do."Your sorrowful, "ROBERTA."

Now what does it tell you, in the naturalistic, against the naturalistic backdrop of the novel.

Student: Desperation

Professor: Desperation, desperation and it is not just mere love; it is also lust that exists on both sides.

You come to chapter 22 when we are told the relationship has already started.

The wonder and, delight of a new and more intimate form of contact, of protest gainsaid, of scruples overcome! So all the morals, all the scruples there existed, they have been overcome now. Days, when both, having struggled in vain against the greater intimacy which each knew that the other was desirous of yielding to, and eventually so yielding, looked forward to

the approaching night with an eagerness which was as a fever embodying a fear; for which, for with, with what qualms--what protests on the part of Roberta; what determination, yet not without a sense of evil--seduction--betrayal, on the part of Clyde.

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Professor: So you are already told everything. Ok, nowhere will you see the word love. Ok, seduction and a betrayal that is already there, the moment I get a better chick, she is the first to be dropped. Ok, that is something that exists in his mind from the very beginning. So it is not like he, Sondra paid him attentions, so therefore he dropped. He knows that the moment he gets any chance to go up the social ladder, she is, she is going to go out of the window and there is no such thing as love and that's what Dreiser tells us.