

# **An American Tragedy Study Guide**

## **An American Tragedy by Theodore Dreiser**

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# Plot Summary

A driven but immature young man by the name of Clyde Griffiths hopes to escape from the world of poverty and devout religion established by his parents, who are street missionaries in Kansas City, Missouri. One of four children, Clyde's entire family has moved from place to place promoting the Gospel for years. At the age of sixteen, Clyde makes a move toward improving his financial situation by obtaining employment as an assistant soda-water clerk at a drugstore that pays him twelve dollars a week.

When his sister Esta runs off with an actor and the prospect of moving to Denver arises from his parents, Clyde decides to remain in Kansas City and find a better job so he can support himself. He begins working at the classy Green-Davidson Hotel as a bellhop making close to four times the salary he made as a clerk. He soon finds himself in more sophisticated company and starts to indulge in a partying lifestyle. One of his main pursuits becomes trying to gain the attention of the flirtatious Hortense Briggs, a girl who is more than willing to accept his gifts and adoration with little desire toward reciprocity.

Things take a turn for the worse when Clyde and his friends decide to take joyride in a stolen car and end up killing a child. Clyde flees the city and eventually, after taking menial jobs in other cities, makes his way to Lyncurg, New York, where he tries to reestablish himself at the factory of his wealthy, long-lost uncle Samuel Griffiths. Clyde achieves a measure of success in the company, but for the most part, he stands outside of the social circle. Clyde becomes involved with an innocent girl who works for him at the factory named Roberta Alden. The penniless girl remains, however, a side-conquest to his true desire of obtaining Sondra Finchley, the elegant daughter of one of his uncle's wealthy associates. But just as things begin to work in Clyde's favor with Sondra, Roberta reveals she is pregnant with his child.

Although Roberta initially agrees to have an abortion, the two are unsuccessful in their attempts, first through pills and then by being denied an abortion due to the reluctance of a physician. Roberta eventually welcomes the idea of having the baby and insists Clyde marry her. Clyde continues to court Sondra and seems to be on the verge of obtaining her hand when Roberta threatens to expose their relationship.

Inspired by a newspaper headline about a couple killed during a canoeing mishap, Clyde contemplates murdering Roberta and making it look like an accident. At first, he is horrified by the thought but soon comes to the conclusion he has no other options. He takes Roberta on a canoe ride in upstate New York. His indecision about going through with his plan begins to manifest physically. Roberta, concerned, reaches over to touch Clyde. Reacting to her advancement, Clyde lifts the camera that he is carrying and hits her in the face. The blow leads to Roberta being thrown back. The boat capsizes and both are cast into the water. Unable to swim, Roberta is left by Clyde to drown.

An investigation into the incident points towards Clyde's involvement, and he is charged with first-degree murder. The news spreads quickly around the country because of the involvement of the Griffiths name and the clout it holds in New York. The trial, with many

reputations on the line, stirs up competitive social and political factions. Clyde is convicted and sentenced by the judge to be executed by electric chair. After the verdict, he is removed to prison to await his sentence.

Having heard the news of her son's conviction through her daughter Esta and a local news article, Clyde's mother Elvira heads to New York to plead for the life of her son and a commuted sentence, but her request is denied. Clyde is executed. The New York Griffiths are then forced to relocate in order to avoid the lingering scandal. Clyde's parents, now in San Francisco, continue to minister on the streets with nearly four-year-old Russell, the illegitimate son of Esta, taking Clyde's place.

# Chapter 1-6 Book One

## Summary

The novel opens during the 1920s with the Griffiths family, headed by father, Asa, and mother, Elvira, leading a street sermon with their four children, Esta, Clyde, Julia, and Frank, on a summer evening in Kansas City, Missouri. While his elder sister Esta sings a hymn, Clyde Griffiths is noticeably uncomfortable with the practices of his family. His family's chosen religious lifestyle, along with its lack of financial reward and the public ridicule that comes along with such a station, fills Clyde with contempt. After the family finishes its address, they make their way back to the mission house that serves as their home. The level of spiritual fulfillment earned by the evening's work is not nearly as perceptible in the children as it is in the parents.

In the following chapter, Clyde is shown to be very aware of his parents' less-than-desirable reputation as street missionaries. As a result of their extensive travels, the children have not received much in terms of proper schooling. Clyde dreams of a life similar to that of his wealthy uncle, Samuel Griffiths, who lives in New York. By the age of fifteen, Clyde realized his meandering life has not prepared him with the education or training to achieve anything great as far as a career is concerned. Although he lacks definitive plans for the future, he knows he wants wealth and his parents are unlikely to be able to help him reach that goal.

Chapter 3 sees Clyde arriving home one day to discover his sister Esta is missing. Clyde finds a letter she has left behind and gives it to his parents. The older Griffiths are at first reluctant to reveal the contents of the letter to the children, but eventually they tell them Esta has chosen to leave them. In fact, the girl has run away from home with a masher/actor who has promised her a life of adventure, love, and fidelity. Clyde more than identifies with his sister's desire for freedom. Her resolve to leave inspires similar sentiments in Clyde and reaffirms his belief in the unappealing quality and ineffectiveness of their upbringing.

In Chapter 4, Clyde is even more occupied with his plans to experience life beyond his family and takes several odd jobs to be able to afford entertainment, such as going to the theatre. When Clyde starts working at a cheap drug store as an assistant soda water clerk, he experiences his first true interaction with girls. When he takes notice of the male competition and their fancy dress, he knows he will never be able to look the way they look with the insufficient amount of money he makes at his job. After being confronted with his parents' desire to relocate the family to Denver and also a change in personnel at the drug store, Clyde looks for other employment opportunities. When he is unable to find a comparable position to his soda water duties, Clyde inquires about a job as a bellhop for the classy Green-Davidson hotel.

In the next chapter, Clyde is hired on at the hotel for a trial period. Oscar Heggland, another bellhop at the hotel, helps him learn the ins and outs of the job. The busy world



of the hotel, with its nice uniforms and higher salary, makes a favorable impression of Clyde.

Clyde is excited about the prospects of his new position in Chapter 6 and expects to see a drastic improvement in his enjoyment of life. Capitalizing on his parents' lack of experience with upscale hotels, Clyde keeps them in the dark regarding his earning potential as a bellhop. On his first official night, he is tipped to go on an errand to obtain silk garters from the haberdasher and bring them to a certain hotel room. While running many similar errands, he catches a glimpse of a party going on with people his own age who are having a good time drinking and dancing. Such sights, along with the luxurious atmosphere of the hotel, give Clyde a hint of the promised freedom that comes with being rich.

## Analysis

The first several chapters are intended to get the reader acclimated to the influences which are working on Clyde and his family from social, economic, and religious perspectives. Clyde is shown first to be a young man who is, above all, restless and discontent. He craves things beyond his imposed station and this hunger nurtures his ambition. He assumes the role of the outsider looking in, as is seen from his job as a soda clerk and his early days as a bellhop when he is able to talk to people about certain activities without actually being included in those activities himself.

The early idea of providing contrast between Clyde and his environment is a device which appears often throughout the work and comes to define his character not only externally but also psychologically. Clyde always seems to have some sort of dual obligation and rarely appears completely at ease in assuming any given role. Physically, he will be in one place and mentally he will be in another. His entire existence represents the struggle to maintain some sort of balance.

Although he is said to possess little formal education, he is shown to be very lively, intelligent, and observant. This idea of inherent capability seems to give credibility to Clyde's belief that he can achieve success without much external training or education. This quality often manifests in an inflated view of his own self-worth despite whatever material luxuries he may be lacking in reality. He is capable of living in his mind.

## Vocabulary

philanthropic, vagrom, throng, amiable, unprepossessing, anomalies, cursorily, proselytizers, adjurations, melancholia, dandies, dogmas, creeds, self-abnegating, self-immolating, enmesh, surreptitiously, malign, munificent, transfiguration, imminence, quintessence, splendiferous, dubious, dapper, geniality, haberdasher

# Chapter 7-12 Book One

## Summary

Chapter 7 finds Clyde enjoying the fruits of his labors and the company of new friends, one of which is named Thomas Ratterer, a young man from Wichita who is working to help support his mother. He and the other bellhops are more than eager to share their stories and experiences with Clyde. They warn him about predatory customers and also clue him in on a certain girl who is known for frequenting the hotel with numerous men. Clyde is making good money now and is happy to have extra to spend on himself.

In the next chapter, Clyde conceals from his mother the true amount of income he is receiving from the job. Although he contributes the bulk of his earning toward family expenses, he is also using an increasing amount to have a good time and also to buy new clothes, purchases he claims are required by his job. Clyde is also untruthful about his working hours, exaggerating the number so he can spend more time away from home. After declining several previous invitations, Clyde soon agrees to go on one of his coworkers' payday adventures to the all-night restaurant called Frissell's and also to a brothel.

In Chapter 9, Clyde goes to the restaurant with his group of friends and, following the example of Ratterer, learns how to order alcohol, having never been exposed to the drink before. When they leave the restaurant, they head over to the brothel called Bettina's. The group gets cozy as several scantily clad girls enter the room at the request of the madam.

The next chapter sees all of the young men, except Clyde, dancing with the girls. Clyde pairs off with a blonde and simply talks with her after refusing an invitation to dance. After a bit of alcohol, conversation, and flattery from the girl, Clyde abandons most of his shyness and goes upstairs to a room with her. Clyde is wary of catching something from her and also of being overcharged for her services. Clyde watches her disrobe.

In Chapter 11, Clyde is experiencing mixed feelings of self-loathing and excitement about his experience at the brothel. Clyde has become much closer to Ratterer and stops by his home one particular evening. There he meets the pretty shop girl named Hortense Briggs, a friend of Ratterer's sister. He is immediately taken by her and because of his newfound confidence is easily able to talk to her. Hortense, however, is only interested in using Clyde for whatever she can get out of him. Clyde is invited to go to a party and is taught how to dance in preparation. Ratterer warns Clyde about Hortense's reputation for leading men on. While at the party, Clyde tries to woo Hortense. She accepts his advances but is more interested in his willingness to spend money on her. At the end of the night, Hortense leaves the party with someone else but agrees to meet Clyde near the hotel on the following Tuesday for a date.



In the next chapter, Hortense is late for their scheduled outing and claims she broke off a previous engagement to be with Clyde. He buys her flowers. They go to Frissell's and she drowns him in details about herself and her busy social life. Clyde takes her to the theatre and then sees her home. Despite her impersonal attitude and lack of interest in him, Clyde is nonetheless smitten by the girl.

## **Analysis**

These chapters truly show Clyde's awakening to the ways of the world and just how deep his cravings for material prosperity run. For the first time, he feels as though he is truly living, and he has earned the finances to do so. Clyde's eagerness to break free of his restrictive upbringing, however, shows he is more than a little reckless. While at first he is hesitant to branch out, once he gets a taste of something, he submits to the sensations it evokes completely and willingly.

Clyde's lack of experience in the ways of the world proves to work against him in a number of ways. Because he is often swept up in the experience, he is frequently unable to see beyond the moment and does not fully consider the consequences of his actions. This leads to Clyde's inability to read people adequately, which often leaves him open to stronger, more experienced influences seeking to manipulate him. In no area is this more apparent than in his relationships with girls. His initial interaction with Hortense foreshadows his dangerous tendency to fall in love quickly and completely at the expense of losing himself to his emotions and impulses.

## **Vocabulary**

aggregated, libertinism, timorous, ostentatious, deprecatingly, innocuous, trenchant, roistering, antipathetic, ingratiatingly, contentiously, precepts, esthetic, palpitate, lackadaisical, contrive, ministrations, indiscriminately, dejection, gaucheness, emphatic, unctuous, tantalizing



# Chapter 13-19 Book One

## Summary

At the start of Chapter 13, Clyde is four months into his one-sided romance with Hortense and has not made worthwhile progress in winning any genuine signs of affection. In addition to this, his mother asks for an additional five dollars a week from him so she may raise one hundred dollars for some unknown purpose. The idea of shifting a chunk of his funds away from himself and Hortense does not appeal to him so he agrees with his mother's request to pawn off some family items, a move which results in his having to give his mother a higher weekly sum. His mother also begins looking for a room to rent, but she remains elusive on this point also. The mystery is soon reveal by a chance encounter on the street when Clyde discovers his runaway sister Esta is not only back in town but also pregnant with the child of the man who took her away and has since abandoned her. Esta has come to regret her actions and her mother has been trying to help her while keeping her condition a secret. Clyde shows sympathy for his sibling but is also embarrassed his family's lack of financial resources causes them to have such problems.

In Chapter 14, Hortense entertains the idea of further exploiting Clyde for the purposes of obtaining an expensive beaver fur coat the price of which she has managed to haggle down. The next chapter finds her doing some heavy flirting with Clyde, even to the point of lying about breaking off another date in order to be with him. The two pass by the window of the shop with the coat, and she mentions how much she would love to get it if only she had the money for a down payment. Clyde assumes the responsibility of paying for the coat. In Chapter 16, Clyde is approached by his mother for fifty dollars in order to help pay for Esta's necessary medical expenses. Unwilling to part with the money in his pocket he plans to use for Hortense's coat, he instead gives his mother five dollars with the promise of having more the following week.

In the next chapter, Clyde and friends take a joyride in an expensive Packard that has been "borrowed" by an associate of Heggland named Willard Sparser from his father's wealthy employer. They stop at an inn outside of the city and, much to the disapproval of Clyde, Hortense begins flirting with Sparser. When Clyde confronts her about it, she denies any such advances. Clyde backs off and affirms Hortense's influence over him. The evening continues in Chapter 18 with the group enjoying fun and games out on the ice and with Hortense continuing to flirt with Sparser. A frustrated Clyde begins to withdraw, but the young woman reels him back in with assurances of love and a small display of intimacy.

Book One closes with the group speeding back into the city in order to prevent Clyde and his bellhop brethren from being late to work. Sparser's reckless driving leads to his hitting a small girl and an attempt to flee from the police. The car soon crashes, injuring Sparser and his date, Laura Sipe. Those who are able to get out of the toppled car run away to avoid being arrested.

## Analysis

The arrival of Clyde's pregnant sister foreshadows the events in Book Two when Clyde has his affair with Roberta Alden. Pregnancy also shows the strange clash between the ideas of personal/internal worth and the value of material possessions. Characters often place the acquisition of external wealth above the cultivation of value on the inside. Pregnancy proves to be the physical manifestation of this concept. Even though she is with child, Esta still feels empty, alone, and abandoned without an external means of support and affirmation of value. This idea echoes Clyde's psychological dependence on the approval of others in order to feel worthwhile about himself.

Also present in these final chapters of Book One is Clyde's tendency to run away from his problems. This is a common recurrence and will be repeated in various forms throughout the other Books. When faced with a situation in which he is not quite sure how to respond, his first reaction is to flee, and most of the time, he follows that inclination. His lack of a true personal identity is the psychological root of this trait, as he often allows his circumstances to dictate his fate.

## Vocabulary

varietism, languorous, proprietress, unilluminated, pseudo, ingenuous, propitiatory, vainglorious, condescension, masochistic, instigate, contemptuous, hypothecated, transgressor, self-commiseration, picturesque, homesteads, victrola, Nickelodeon, fickleness, satyrs, nymphs, minced, chortle, indignantly, assuage, incumbent, admonition, martinetish, effrontery, thoroughfare

# Chapter 1-7 Book Two

## Summary

In Chapter 1 of Book Two the story picks up three years later and moves to the home of Clyde's rich uncle Samuel in Lycurgus, a small town in New York. The family is awaiting the return of Samuel, who has been away on business in Chicago. Samuel's seventeen-year-old daughter Bella tells her mother, Elizabeth, about the new lakeside bungalow the Finchley family is building and how she can't wait until she can go there with her friends. Enter twenty-three-year-old Gilbert Griffiths, the only son. He appears disinterested in his sister's gossip but secretly envies the excitement the Finchleys and Cranstons have introduced into their wealthy Lycurgus social circle.

In Chapter 2, soon after Samuel returns home, he is chatted up by Bella about the Finchleys. At dinner, he tells his family about his unexpected encounter with his nephew Clyde, the son of the brother he has not spoken to in thirty years. The two met at the Union League Club where Clyde works as a bellhop. Noting the remarkable resemblance between his nephew and son, Samuel goes on to say he has offered Clyde a chance to advance his career by coming to work in Samuel's factory in New York. Even with assurances from his father that he does not plan to show Clyde any special treatment, the prospect of welcoming his cousin into their lives annoys Gilbert.

Chapter 3 describes Clyde's life in exile since the accident. Sparsner had been charged on counts of homicide and larceny and had given up the names and contact information of everyone involved. All of this attention had caused Clyde to wander from town to town, taking on various jobs under the assumed name Harry Tenet. He did not contact his mother for the first eighteen months and when he finally wrote to her, he discovered the family had moved from Kansas City to Denver and now occupied a mission house of their own. While living in Chicago, Clyde runs across Ratterer, now an employee at the Union League club. The two catch up, and Clyde discovers that Hortense ran off to New York with a gentleman in the cigar business. Ratterer aids Clyde in first finding a hotel job and then later a position at the Club. At this point, Clyde once again starts using his birth name and enjoys the calm practicality of his new surroundings.

In the next chapter, Clyde discovers his uncle has come to the Union League Club. The young man steps up to introduce himself and lies about the economic status of his family back in Denver. Clyde asks Samuel if there are any positions open at his factory. Once he returns home and discusses the matter with Gilbert, Samuel writes to his nephew and offers the young man an opportunity to improve his situation by coming to work for him. Clyde jumps at the invitation and moves to Lycurgus. Upon arriving in Chapter 5, Clyde heads for the factory and meets his cousin Gilbert, who, as Secretary of the Company, is put off by Clyde and the fact that he has no experience. Clyde is resigned to duties in the shrinking room where shirt collars are prepped and is shown how the process works. Set to actually begin work the next morning, Clyde takes the

remainder of the afternoon to acquaint himself with the town and finds himself in awe of the home of his New York relatives.

In Chapter 6 Clyde locates a place to stay and takes in the town one again. Gilbert informs his family he is less than enthusiastic about Clyde and his lack of experience. At work, Clyde gains the respect of his coworkers by virtue of his name and within weeks, he grows accustomed to his place at the factory. His new reputation as a Griffiths makes him wish for the chance to get back at Hortense. In the next chapter, Clyde establishes a new but reluctant friendship with Walter Dillard, a department store worker who lives in the same boarding house as Clyde. Once again, the Griffiths name seems to be working to Clyde's advantage, and he is invited to socialize with Dillard and his circle.

## Analysis

Much like the initial chapters of Book One, the first several chapters of Book Two show how Clyde contrasts with his surroundings and is unable to establish a true sense of self. After the accident in Kansas City, he drifts from place to place, not being able to go back and not knowing truly how to move forward. He loses himself in the chase to avoid his past. Clyde also uses an assumed name to cover his tracks, which foreshadows his later use of aliases in his murder plot.

It is only after he returns to a familiar position, working as a bellhop in Chicago, that he tries to regain a piece of who he was in his former life. True to form, however, he eventually becomes restless, and when he sees an opportunity to "advance" he jumps in without knowing what he is getting himself into. For his efforts, he still finds himself in the position as the outsider, shown in Lycurgus by the indifference shown by his family and also the deference shown by those who do not know his true social status. His separation from both worlds, however, still allows him to maintain his illusion of superiority which, in the case of his ill-gotten reputation, actually yields physical results. There occurs a blurring of the real and fantasy. Whereas before, when he was back in Kansas City, he was able to afford some of his material possessions by a certain degree of his own effort, in Lycurgus, things are often handed to him by virtue of simply appearing to be what he is not. In this way, Clyde gains an even greater awareness of the value of appearances over substance in his new world.

## Vocabulary

cabareting, gayeties, bungalow, verandah, quarrel, acumen, prestige, forthwith, interject, delegation, mused, ostensibly, robustly, larceny, catastrophe, wayfarings, pegboard, menial, oleaginous, unobtrusive, assemblage, emporium, porte-cocheres, ingratiating, infiltrated, spinsters, circumspect, stodgy, subserviency, humdrum, supplicating, sychophant

# Chapter 8-14 Book Two

## Summary

In Chapter 8 Clyde and Dillard attend a social at the Digby Avenue Congregational Church. Dillard seizes every opportunity to flaunt Clyde's family ties. While there, Clyde meets Willard's associates, Zella Shuman and Rita Dickerman. Later at Zella's home, Rita and Clyde get closer, apparently feeling some mutual chemistry. In the next chapter, Clyde walks Rita home the next morning. Later, Clyde is pleased to finally receive a dinner invitation from his New York family and quickly loses interest in his former association with Dillard and Rita, even rejecting an invitation by the former to go away for the weekend with the girls. In speaking with the members of his family, Clyde strives to make a good impression.

In Chapter 10 stories of Clyde's poor upbringing make him very uneasy at the Griffiths' dinner table, especially when Bella arrives with her socialite friends. Clyde is immediately attracted to the one named Sondra Finchley, but her initial interest in him fades when she discovers he is not a person of wealth. Clyde is most comfortable with his friendly cousin Myra. Although he is fascinated by this world of high society, Clyde still feels like an outcast. His uncertainty is replaced with excitement, however, when Samuel suggests Clyde might be asked to dinner again in the coming weeks.

The next chapter sees Clyde obtain a promotion at work. At the request of his father, who is slightly embarrassed to see a Griffiths working in the shrinking department, Gilbert places his cousin in the position of assistant foreman of the all female-stamping room. Gilbert warns him that business professionalism forbids him from making advances on the girls. In his excitement over the promotion and consequent bump in salary, Clyde is more than happy to comply.

Chapter 12 shows Clyde is an outside observer of the social scene enjoyed by his family. His interest in Sondra Finchley grows, and he uses his higher wages to move into a new place. On the job, Clyde toys with the idea of taking advantage of his position as the only male in his department, but quickly abandons the thought out of respect for his promise to Gilbert. He is tempted again, however, to conduct a secret affair when a group of new employees are hired on and he meets the captivating Roberta Alden. Roberta's history is explored in the next chapter. Also from humble stock, she is the daughter of a farmer named Titus Alden. Her ambition to forge a better life for herself led her to leave home, and for two years she worked in a factory that produced hosiery. Lycurgus was the next step in her search for new opportunities and to eventually get the money to further her education. Despite her joy at having found a job at the factory, her lack of a social life leaves her with solitary evenings.

In Chapter 14 Clyde finds himself falling for the good humored Roberta and shares her distaste for being alone. He is also impressed by her ability to maintain a sense of grace amidst the lesser conversations of the other girls in the department. Roberta is taken by

Clyde also, but at the same time she is deceived by his name into believing he has more social clout than he actually does. With such thoughts in her mind, she is not sure how to act upon her growing attraction.

## Analysis

These chapters reveal a great deal about the interaction between wealth and power. With Clyde's reputation as a Griffiths, he develops a sense of entitlement that does not necessarily complement his humble station at the factory. His uncle believes hard work is essential to achieving wealth and status, but his nephew does not necessarily have to fully commit to the world of striving because Samuel has inadvertently placed him in a position where reputation by itself can yield a certain amount of clout. Once again Clyde is trapped in a limbo and is forced to live in a situation he believes is beneath him while being constantly exposed to the world he wants to occupy.

Clyde's first taste of power by being promoted to help run the stamping room is one of many opportunities handed to him ultimately because of another's desire to maintain appearances or to craft the world in accordance to one's will. Even though Clyde has not been truly accepted or proven worthy to have what he possesses, he obtains a title to reflect his position, and to most, that is all that is required. This is a concept that will come up again in Book Three during his murder trial, where social and political forces mold the landscape of the courtroom.

## Vocabulary

knickknacks, immaculate, stout, lupanar, anomalous, bantering, skimp, candelabras, tremulous, malleable, smitten, roguishly, decorum, exigencies, susceptible, titillate, placatingly, interloper, accredited, ermine, swathed, rotund, wistfulness, dilapidated, embellish, nebulous, toilsome, hosiery, taboo, demarcation, stratification, exuberance, eccentric

# Chapter 15-21 Book Two

## Summary

In Chapter 15, Clyde remains in a state of confusion regarding his feeling for Roberta. It is July, and Clyde takes a canoe out on the waters of Lake Crum to clear his mind. As he watches the other couples, he resents his own loneliness and wonders if he made a mistake by coming to Lycurgus. Coincidentally, he sees Roberta with her friend Grace Marr. When her friend heads off, Roberta joins Clyde in his canoe. The two row out together, enjoying each other's company and appreciating the attraction which is developing between them. In the next chapter, Clyde's feelings for Roberta grow, and even though he knows that they shouldn't be caught together, he finds himself going out of his way to see her "by accident", even venturing so far as to walk past her house at night and also bumping into her on the way to work. One day at the factory, she comes to him about an error she made in her work. Clyde excuses it and asks her to meet with him outside of work. She is at first hesitant, but eventually agrees on a time and place.

In Chapter 17, Clyde and Roberta meet up. Having come to the conclusion that Roberta is far more worthwhile pursuit than either Hortense or Rita, Clyde admits to her she constantly occupies his thoughts. When they kiss and he reveals he has indeed fallen in love with her, Roberta reluctantly acknowledges that she feels the same way. The two are deeply in love by the next chapter and are attempting to find ways to enjoy more of each other's company without being discovered. Roberta has been lying to the people at the boarding home, including Grace, about her whereabouts with stories ranging from studying stitching to visiting relatives. Her moral convictions contrast sharply with some of the things she is being asked to do by Clyde, but she still feels compelled to meet him. On one planned occasion, they rendezvous in the nearby town of Fonda and occupy the day by spending time in the Starlight pleasure park. Still believing Clyde is a man of means, Roberta agrees to meet with him the next day on her way back to Lycurgus from her sister's home in Homer.

In Chapter 19 Roberta is confronted by some of the girls at her boarding house when she is caught lying about her meeting with Clyde. The combination of embarrassment and annoyance at being interrogated by the boarders as well as Grace motivate her to locate a new place to live. She finds a room in the detached part of a house owned by a woman named Mrs. Gilpin. Her ability come and go as she pleases without disturbing anyone also opens new opportunities for visits from Clyde, a situation with its fair share of both excitement and danger. With the changing of the weather, the couple realizes in Chapter 20 that they will soon cease to have the luxury of meeting outside Lycurgus. When Clyde suggests that he visit Roberta's room, she declines the proposal. Despite Clyde's anger and subsequent departure, she remains firm in her convictions.

In Chapter 21, however, it is clear that Roberta is troubled by the stumbling block in her romance with Clyde. She wants her feelings for him to grow and believes his name makes him a prized marriage prospect. Although he is caught up in his desire for her,





Clyde has no intention of marrying Roberta, feeling as though his place as a Griffiths may yet yield more promising options. He maintains his distance at work until she eventually writes to him and begs him to come see her. He agrees to meet up with her in the evening.

## Analysis

These chapters explore the developing relationship between Roberta and Clyde. Their first true encounter on the boat is a calm foreshadowing of the more sinister events to come. Here, Clyde's intention is to get to know her and to build upon their attraction. Later his intention will be to destroy their relationship.

Roberta is shown as an instrument by which Clyde can achieve some sort of balance. Although he seems to prefer living in extremes, his attraction to Roberta does not reflect that desire. She is closer to representing his previous life than Sondra, but she still has an air of sophistication and charm that transcends the ordinary. This idea of centering and balance is particularly potent during their first meeting in the canoe. The later physical and emotional imbalance between the two will be the thing that literally tips the scales against the both of them.

Clyde is also exercising his developing powers of persuasion in these chapters. Whereas before he was the one being acted upon for the fulfillment of someone else's needs, namely those of Hortense, now he is using someone else to satisfy his own desires. His early days with Roberta allow Clyde to experience what it means to be mostly in control because he is not surrounded by the immediate influence of an extreme in the absence of the elite.

## Vocabulary

diverting, presumptuous, radiant, lithe, sentient, paradoxical, badinage, pavilion, obviate, impediments, circuitous, sidereal, untenanted, coaxing, babbling, clandestine, clap-trap, idyllic, meticulous, catechize, contrive, espionage, dictatorial, interurban, ineradicable, audaciously, overmastering, conjecture, incandescent, decrepit, hitherto, rivulets



# Chapter 22-28 Book Two

## Summary

The increased degree of sexual intimacy between Clyde and Roberta begins to disturb Roberta in Chapter 22, and she grows increasingly suspicious of his long-term intentions for their relationship. With his newfound confidence, Clyde also has his doubts. Although his time with Roberta had been a welcome distraction during their absence, the return of the Griffiths and their wealthy socialite friends from their vacations again filled Clyde's thoughts with dreams of his former ambitions, and he begins to doubt a lowly factory girl has a proper place in his future. In Chapter 23, Clyde encounters Sondra on the street when she mistakes him for Gilbert. She welcomes him into her chauffeured car and agrees to transport him wherever he wants to go. Although she dislikes his cousin, Sondra seems to be interested in Clyde and upon dropping him off, tells him that she wouldn't mind meeting him again sometime. Clyde, in awe of her, concurs with the sentiment.

Chapter 24 finds Clyde occupied with thoughts of Sondra and diminishing affections for Roberta. There is a heated exchange of criticism within the upper circles regarding Gilbert's treatment of Clyde and in retaliation Sondra's interaction with Clyde. Realizing her attraction to Clyde is based largely on her disliking his doppelganger cousin, Sondra decides to irritate Gilbert by welcoming Clyde into their circle of friends. She gets her friend Jill Trumbell to send Clyde an invitation to a dinner dance, where the plan is for several girls to come on to him and impress the other members of the group. Knowing the object of his affection will be there, Clyde readily accepts and puts aside any thoughts of wanting to visit Roberta.

Clyde joins the party in the next chapter and is introduced to the young members of the elite families. Clyde observes their confidence and education and admires the ease at which they engage in conversation. Sondra invites Clyde to sit with her during dinner. In Chapter 26 the question of Clyde's family is brought up at the table. Clyde lies by saying his father is a wealthy hotel owner in Denver, much to the satisfaction and relief of Sondra, who begins to take more of an interest in Clyde. When he feigns interest in some of her favorite recreational activities, she invites him to join her sometime.

Sondra realizes in Chapter 27 she may be developing feelings for Clyde based on his adulation of her. He receives another invitation to join the socialites at a pre-Christmas party. Claiming he has an engagement with his uncle he can't cancel, Clyde abandons Roberta for the function. Once again he meets Sondra and gains an invitation to a New Year's Eve event in Schenectady. She encourages him even further by insisting he try to act more indifferently toward her in public so that he doesn't draw criticism and they can spend more time together. The prospect of attending all of these planned events, along with the abundant attention from Sondra, gives Clyde an incredible feeling.



In the next chapter, Clyde continues to lie and breaks off another date with Roberta. She has noticed the change in his behavior toward her, and he himself begins to question whether his feelings have indeed almost vanished. He maintains his lies about his whereabouts as they exchange gifts. Clyde is unimpressed by her humble offering but tries in vain to conceal it. They make plans to meet on Christmas, but after Clyde leaves, Roberta experiences doubts about the future of their relationship.

## **Analysis**

With the return of Sondra and her social circle, Clyde is once again confronted with an opportunity to increase his standing. Now he is shown to be not so much concerned about what he can accomplish on his own but rather about what others can do for him. Much of the allure of Sondra comes from what an association or even a relationship with her can do for his reputation. Ironically, even though he is at this point mainly an observer, he has adopted this manipulative trait which is characteristic to the upper class, thus showing once again his seemingly innate ability to absorb without actual experience.

This situation ultimately proves to be different, however, because it involves Clyde's ever-so-fatal weakness and inability to overcome the charms of women. While he seems to be instinctually aware of the practice of using someone for what they can provide, he somehow remains oblivious to the practice when it is being performed on him by his love interest.

Sondra shows she is not completely like the other members of her group. Although she has a genuine need for Clyde to depend on her, she also finds joy in doing things for Clyde. The gradual development of her feelings for him shows just how potent Clyde's influence is becoming. A common trait of her circle involves making assumptions and prejudging the worth of something based on appearances. Initially Sondra is taken in by how much Clyde resembles his cousin Gilbert physically. In that assumption, however, she overlooked Clyde's ability to mimic the ways of her world, thereby leaving herself open to the developing power of Clyde to go after and achieve his goals.

## **Vocabulary**

gainsaid, scruples, ecstatic, tributaries, traverse, winnowing, gamboling, imperious, vanity, trump, peeved, illusory, eligible, invidious, interim, actinic, ravishing, gangling, chiffon, clatter, coquettishly, interpolations, sonorous, amorousness, decipher, ardent, concoct, anemic, epitomizing

# Chapter 29-35 Book Two

## Summary

In Chapter 29, the story follows Roberta back to her family's farm in Biltz. Upon her arrival, she absorbs the poor state of her family's living conditions and laments the impact they may have on Clyde's perception of her. She and her mother discuss her move from the boarding house, and Roberta blames her relocation on the stifling presence of Grace in her life. She also tells her mother about her love affair with Clyde and asks her not to reveal the secret to anyone. Further discourse is interrupted by the arrival of Roberta's brother. When family friends visit the next day, Roberta reads, via a newspaper that they bring, the details of the function Clyde had attended the previous Friday and discovers the guest list is different from the one told to her by Clyde. This casts a shadow of lingering doubt over Clyde's truthfulness and sincerity.

Chapter 30 sees Gilbert more than annoyed at Clyde's recent popularity and acceptance into the elite social circle with the help of Sondra. This sentiment, however, is not shared by Samuel, who believes Clyde should be invited over again. The invitation is set for the early afternoon on Christmas Day. This does not sit well with Gilbert, and the young man announces he will not be attending the early dinner. Being that the recent development does not conflict with his previous engagement with Roberta, Clyde accepts the opportune invitation to socialize.

Clyde's dinner engagement with the Griffiths lasts longer than he anticipates, and an invitation for further revelry at the Anthony's threatens to make him late for his eight o' clock date with Roberta. It is close to midnight before he eventually arrives at her doorstep and he offers a host of excuses for his tardiness. Recognizing how important Clyde's interaction with his family is, Roberta is only mildly upset. She does use this opportunity, however, to breach the subject about the newspaper reporting and how its details differed from what he told her. Clyde is defensive, and when Roberta questions him about whether he has feelings for Sondra, his elusive response sends the girl into tears. He manages to quiet her suspicions by assuring Roberta his love for her remains constant and faithful.

By Chapter 32 Clyde has become a regular guest at the upper class social events, but is still looked down on by many of the families for not being rich. Sondra enjoys Clyde's dependence on her. Despite the disapproval of her parents, she even gives Clyde a ride to the New Year's Eve party. Weeks later when an invitation to her home for hot chocolate results in the young man declaring his love and kissing her, Sondra believes their relationship has crossed the line and asks him to leave. He leaves upset and saddened.

Clyde and Roberta's relationship has taken a turn for the worse by Chapter 33. Clyde's obvious attraction to Sondra and his refusal to commit to Roberta threaten to put a stop to their secret affair. Things become even more complicated when Roberta suspects

she may be pregnant. Without any other options, she turns to Clyde for help with the situation, but he has no clue on how to proceed. One of his first thoughts is to try to obtain pills, hoping the child could still be aborted. A less than desirable option would involve going to see a doctor and risk exposing the affair. In the next chapter, Clyde follows up on his idea to purchase abortive drugs and heads to a pharmacy in Schenectady, posing as a destitute husband in need of a solution for his pregnant wife. After being refused service by the first pharmacist, who is strong in his religious beliefs, Clyde tries another shop and this time successfully obtains pills that the pharmacy employee claims will give him the desired effect. He immediately takes them back to Roberta absent any type of proper instructions. She thanks Clyde for helping her but is put off by his distant approach to her.

In Chapter 35, Roberta becomes anxious when the first round of pills seems to have no effect, and she proceeds to make herself sick by taking an excessive dosage. The girl's condition haunts Clyde, and he is unable to enjoy his usual social activities or the company of Sondra. The following day, Clyde pays another visit to the druggist and asks for a more potent remedy. The man can only suggest that Roberta couple the medication with hot baths and exercise and give the drugs a month to work. Clyde inquires about a doctor, but the suspicious druggist resists further cooperation. Meeting up with Roberta, Clyde informs her he plans to locate a doctor but she would be expected to go see him on her own since his position would not allow him to accompany her. Eventually, Roberta agrees to go along with the plan.

## Analysis

Once again Clyde shows his inability to deal adequately with a situation having limited options for resolution. The problem here is he is dealing not with a static scenario but with a person who is just as naïve as he is when it comes to the problem at hand, namely an unplanned pregnancy. The situation has the potential to follow him, and Clyde cannot necessarily run away, even though he does suggest taking a hands-off approach to the whole thing by offering to provide financial support only. He is dealing with both his emotions and the emotions of someone else.

The pregnancy is only an added concern. Clyde is also dealing with the prospect of loss. Another recurring pattern in the novel comes from Clyde's inability to let go once he does find the resolve to do something. His strange sense of fickleness does contrast with this habit on occasion. Clyde only seems committed to the thing which could leave him at anytime and not the thing which he has the power to control. Like his pursuit of wealth and status, he has a zeal for chasing the seemingly unattainable. He prefers to chase after the unknown and seemingly unending. Sondra represents endless possibilities of financial reward and happiness. With Roberta's pregnancy, Clyde has a clear view of his fate and he does not like the prospect.

In a way, because he is not really sure who he is, Clyde is most comfortable when confronted with the abstract and situations where the terms are malleable. His attention

seems to shift in the face of concrete things in preference of territory where possibilities exist.

## Vocabulary

conveyance, emissary, bleak, mackinaw, phonograph, sedate, accosted, acquiesced, asseverating, alibi, muffler, poignantly, culinary, plethora, paragon, supercilious, vehemently, infatuation, substantiation, amelioration, lacerated, infernal, celestial, contraceptive, libertinism, predicament, commercialism, preventatives, bespectacled, eventualities, allurement, pergola, extricated, indemnifying

# Chapter 36-42 Book Two

## Summary

In Chapter 36, Clyde asks the manager of a local men's store to recommend a doctor who might be able to help an anonymous couple at the factory deal with an unwanted pregnancy. Even though he suspects Clyde is in fact explaining his own predicament, the man provides him with the name of a physician who might be able to offer his assistance.

In Chapter 37, Clyde returns to deliver Roberta the news about the doctor he may have discovered and is bombarded with a host of questions about the doctor that he neglected to inquire about. The following evening, they rendezvous in Fonda and then proceed together to meet the physician named Dr. Glenn in Gloversville to have the abortion performed. Clyde remains outside while she goes in and explains her situation to the doctor. He has been known to perform abortions occasionally but does not practice the procedure regularly. Roberta lies and says that she is a poor married woman who cannot afford to have the child. In general, the doctor disapproves of the dangerous process and maintains that it goes against his moral beliefs. When he encourages her to go through with the pregnancy, the distraught Roberta breaks down and explains a scenario closer to her true situation. She pleads with him and insists she cannot possibly go through with having the baby. The doctor is moved but still unwilling to help her. Instead, he suggests she accept responsibility and inform her parents about the pregnancy. Roberta leaves, unable to concentrate on the next move.

Chapter 38 finds Clyde and Roberta depressed and at a loss for what to do next, especially after another failed attempt to convince Dr. Glenn to perform the abortion. When Roberta suggests a secret marriage and eventual getaway, Clyde is horrified by the proposition and what it would mean for his future in terms of success and the possibility of a life with Sondra. Even though she senses his love for her may indeed be gone, Roberta still insists they get married, if only to later divorce once she has given birth. Clyde suggests it would probably be best for her to leave and have the baby elsewhere with his financial support. Roberta dismisses the idea and accuses Clyde of having grown cold. Clyde feels the pangs of desperation, and after more discussion, the two agree if Clyde cannot come up with a reasonable solution soon, then they will get married.

In Chapter 39 Clyde continues to live it up with his friends and cultivate his relationship with Sondra. Roberta meanwhile sticks to the plan to have the baby. Clyde stalls any rash actions on her part with hints of a marriage he has no intention of entering into for fear of destroying his plans for social advancement and eventual partnership with Sondra. He refuses to let Roberta's condition stand in his way, but he still risks exposure with each passing month and the fact that the pregnancy will eventually start to show on her. On top of this situation, Clyde is also confronted with the possibility Sondra's parents may try to separate them by insisting she accompany them on a two-year



European tour. Her assurances she will remain with him after coming of age later in the year serves to raise Clyde's spirits and cement his desire to break things off with Roberta.

In the next chapter, Roberta becomes increasingly insecure with her ability to compete for Clyde's affections when she sees him talking one day with a high society girl. Later, while on a spring road trip with friends to a remote lake, Clyde coincidentally finds himself at the home of Roberta's family asking for directions. The poor condition of the house further enhances his anxiety at the prospect of being stuck with Roberta, and he contemplates just fleeing the city as he had done in the past after the accident in Kansas City. The idea of losing Sondra redirects his thoughts to other courses of action.

When June arrives in Chapter 41, Sondra leaves on vacation with the plan to meet up with Clyde at Twelfth Lake after a few weeks. Clyde's dilemma with Roberta has now reached the point where leaving with her seems unbearably inevitable now that she has started to show. Claiming he needs to gather his financial resources, he convinces Roberta to return to Biltz for a couple of weeks. He plans to use the time to think.

In the next chapter, Clyde receives a letter from Sondra at the lake and another one from Roberta expecting him to join her. Clyde only writes back to Sondra. That evening, an unlikely solution to his problems presents itself when he reads in the paper about a couple that drowns in a canoeing accident in Massachusetts. Since Roberta cannot swim, a recreation of the scenario could easily remedy his concerns if he manages to escape after the incident. Though he dismisses it at first, the thought continues to creep into Clyde's mind.

## Analysis

The situation with Roberta brings into the forefront Clyde's previously untested moral obligations. His indoctrination into the elite circles has instilled in him a growing sense of detachment when it comes to acknowledging the needs of others. His change in lifestyle now offers a distraction from himself and from the problems of the outside world. Although he is no longer a true outsider to his group, Clyde still feels the need to guard certain parts of himself, and the affair with Roberta threatens to expose him in a way with which he is not willing to go along. Because his first reaction is usually to withdraw, Clyde sinks deeper into himself and starts to entertain the darker sides of his personality.

His thoughts of murdering Roberta are the psychological equivalent of the physical flight he believes may be impossible. At first, it is simply fantasy, but as Clyde has shown in previous chapters, his mental exercises have a way of influencing his reality. His encounter with Roberta's father is the confirmation of his mental fears and shows he can no longer dwell in the confines of his head. Fate is shown to be a thing he must confront head-on.



Roberta also begins to undergo a transformation. She seems to gain a new sense of empowerment she exercises with potent effect on Clyde. Whereas she was once a force of balance, she is slowing using her power to tip the scales in her favor by forcing Clyde's hand on marrying her. For the first time she is truly making demands of Clyde.

## Vocabulary

clamorous, harried, forlorn, proclivities, jovial, broach, exculpate, nominal, abrasive, redolent, dereliction, illegitimacy, lethargy, free-masonry, ne'er-do-well, elucidated, wiseacre, dilemma, exigencies, subterfuge, shrewd, languishing, epitome, acceded, unkempt, harrowing, divertissement, trousseau, layette, taffeta, sacrament, twinges, rickety, insoluble, dredging



# Chapter 43-47 Book Two

## Summary

In Chapter 43, Clyde decides to call Roberta and expresses his concern about not being able to go through with his plans to join her because of the money issue. He then meets up with his friends for a weekend at Twelfth Lake. Clyde enjoys all sorts of leisurely activities, but most of all he is happy to be with Sondra. While horseback riding, the girl expresses her love for Clyde and her willingness to fight for him against the wishes of her mother. Sondra refuses his suggestion to elope, insisting they wait until she reaches proper age. The thought of being with her allows his boating scheme to creep back into his mind.

In the next chapter, Clyde returns home to find two more pieces of correspondence from Roberta, both pleading with him to join her and the second also expressing she is prepared to return in the alternative. He calls her to set a date for his arrival and vows to either call or write to her every other day. After pacifying her, he continues to go over his murder plot, having found a suitable location for the act while on his previous trip to the lake.

In Chapter 45, Clyde actually begins to detail his scheme to murder Roberta and engages in a battle of conscience with his “dark genie.” He devises he will make a false wedding proposal in order to lure her to Big Bittern Lake. There he would rent a boat under a false name, have it tip over, and then leave her to drown while he escaped, leaving authorities with the idea one body was missing. Meanwhile, Clyde receives a letter from Roberta threatening to expose him to everyone if he does not respond to her immediately. He calls and convinces her to come meet him so that they can go on an outing before the marriage. After the call, he contemplates the smallest details of the plan—from the amount of luggage to pack to the weight of the boat he plans to rent—in hopes of maximizing the probability of success.

In Chapter 46, the two travel in separate cars on the train to Utica. Roberta thinks about her future with Clyde and believes the next several months will give her the chance to regain his affection. Clyde, on the other hand, is going over the final details of his murder plan, internally mapping out the items he will need and the methods by which certain events need to occur.

In the final chapter of Book Two, Roberta and Clyde arrive at Grass Lake and witness a religious group is present at a retreat. After pretending to ask about Roberta's request for an impromptu marriage ceremony, Clyde tells her the group is unable to perform the rites. They eventually arrive at Big Bittern and Clyde signs in under the name Clifford Golden. He takes Roberta out onto the lake, stopping at one point to have lunch on the shore. While out, Clyde snaps some pictures of her. He takes her to a deserted region of the lake but is unable to act on his plan. When Roberta notices the disturbed look on his face, she reaches over to take his hand. Clyde reacts by hitting her in the head with

the camera. He rises to help after she falls back and the boat flips over, tossing them both in the water. The drowning girl calls for Clyde to help her, but he ignores her cries and heads to shore. He escapes through the woods.

## Analysis

It is in the final chapters of Book Two that the author's earlier use of foreshadowing pays off. By this time both Clyde and Roberta have effectively moved toward extremes. Clyde seems determined to go through with his plans to eliminate Roberta if she does not set him free, and Roberta is prepared to make good on her threat to expose Clyde if he does not marry her. In the earliest part of their relationship, they were both content to accept what the other had to offer. In these final chapters, the balance between them has disappeared, and they have begun to make demands and ultimatums.

The shifting of balance takes on physical form when they are in the boat. It is Roberta's act of reaching for Clyde that causes him to react and hit her with the camera. This physical encroachment literally leads to the boat being flipped over and both becoming equal in the water. Because Roberta is both literally and figuratively not adept at swimming in the waters Clyde is accustomed to, she succumbs and drowns. This allows Clyde to return to a version of his previous self and do what he knows best. He runs away.

## Vocabulary

missives, prestidigitation, tergiversation, dour, greensward, imperative, rutted, festooned, viperous, ouphe, barghest, psychogenetically, primordial, suavity, perturbation, Efrit, frivolous, erraticism, hamlet, tabernacle, pestilential, vacillating, dismayed, peradventure, delectable, iridescent

# Chapter 1-7 Book Three

## Summary

Chapter 1 opens in the office of the coroner in New York's Cataraqui County. The coroner's name is Fred Heit and he receives the call that a husband and wife have apparently been the victims of a drowning at Big Bittern Lake. Officials had so far only been able to locate the body of the woman. The woman's coat, which had been recovered from the inn, had a letter intended for the wife of Titus Alden in one of the pockets. Heit leaves for the lake with his assistant, Earl Newcomb.

In Chapter 2, the disappearance of a boat and the couple who rented it has led to the formation of a search party by the locals to investigate what may have happened. The body of Roberta is soon discovered. An investigation commences. The mysterious bruises on Roberta's face, the discrepancy between the names given by her male companion at Big Bittern and Grass Lake, and the letter revealing Roberta's intent to get married arouse the suspicions of authorities that the incident may be more than an accident. The suggestion of foul play makes the coroner believe this may be potentially be the case to put his friend, Republican district attorney Orville W. Mason, in the judge's chair after the fall election. In response, Heit holds on to the letter to prevent the case from being solved too quickly once released to the public. They soon discover there was a young man spotted leaving the woods several miles from the lake on the night in question who matched the description of Roberta's companion given at the inn. When apparently the same person is observed on a steamboat headed to Sharon, the case becomes even more appealing.

Heit disclosed his findings about the case to Mason in Chapter 3 and all signs point to murder. Mason agrees the compelling case may indeed assist him with achieving his legal ambitions, and on Heit's suggestion, he decides to help with the investigation personally. Mason follows up in Chapter 4 by delivering the sad news of their daughter's passing to the Aldens in Biltz. The distraught parents help Mason obtain a name for his murder investigation by pointing out that Roberta had been dating Clyde Griffiths, a name with initials to match those given by the dead girl's companion at the two inns. After Mason confirms the existence of Roberta's correspondence with Clyde through the mail carrier, Titus requests Mason take on the case and deliver justice to his daughter. Mason is more than happy to comply.

The investigation into the alleged murder continues in Chapter 5 with the discovery of Clyde's name on a card with the Christmas gift found in Roberta's bag. When Mason reveals Clyde's name to Heit, he is immediately connected to the wealthy New York Griffiths of Lycurgus. Suspecting Roberta may have been with child, Mason requests an autopsy. A warrant is issued to search Clyde's room and from the letters discovered in his trunk, Mason pieces together the story of the love triangle and the possible motivation for Roberta's murder. Mason and company set off to track down Clyde, who is found to be out on a camping trip with friends.

Chapter 6 flashes back to describe the events in Clyde's life since Roberta's drowning. In distress following the murder, he heads toward the Cranston lodge near the lake. Terrified, but still believing he is not a murderer, Clyde makes his way up past Three Mile Bay and eventually to Sharon, where, acting as though he had just arrived from Albany by train, he then phones the Cranstons to come pick him up. He now fears people are already looking for him in connection with the murder.

Clyde is spending time with his unsuspecting friends in Chapter 7 and tries to hide his anxiety. He heads off with Sondra to play golf, but in the evening, word reaches the group that a body has been discovered at Big Bittern Lake. He begins to doubt whether he was careful enough in covering his tracks. Faking sickness, Clyde returns to the lodge, where he proceeds to toss his grey suit into the lake.

## Analysis

Book Three serves to unify the rest of the work. In this part, the plot comes full circle and elements from the past emerge to influence how characters behave in their present circumstances.

With the introduction of Mason, Dreiser shows the true manifestation of focused ambition. Unlike Clyde, Mason knows what he wants and is not hesitant to act. He is just as zealous as Clyde and his powers of deduction are keen. In a way, the two complement each other in a form similar to the way in which Clyde and Roberta complemented each other. Her exit from the novel prompts the emergence of Mason, a representation of law and justice. The concept of justice is often represented by the picture of a blindfolded woman holding balanced scales. Mason is charged with the task of achieving a sense of equilibrium, but he is not blind to the ways of the manipulation of justice.

The problem with Mason, however, is even in seeking justice, he himself has become unbalanced in pursuit of his own ambitions to get elected to public office. He is the personification of disjunction within the justice system, someone who is capable of standing for one thing while truly representing another. In this way, the theme of appearances versus reality emerges once again. Previously this theme had only been explored in social and economic terms. In Book Three, the author explores deception through law and politics. Mason is identified by both his profession concerning the law and also as a Republican. One distinction tries to remain unbiased while the other clearly leans toward achieving a subjective end. The coming murder trial will become the ultimate demonstration of how these various powers play off of each other.

Also, Mason's affiliation with one side of the political spectrum foreshadows the appearance of the other side in Clyde's defense.

## Vocabulary

cupola, surmounting, omnivorous, capacious, subpoenas, queer, circumambient, waywardness, quadrennial, rebound, serge, vivacity, deplorable, writs, contumelies, tatterdemalion, demented, maundering, pathos, heinous, inquest, stalwart, futility, memorandum, skulking, serried, brambly, pretense, exhilarated, enthralled, laundered, marquee

# Chapter 8-14 Book Three

## Summary

At the beginning of Chapter 8 Clyde reads that the reported drowning is being investigated as a murder, and officials are looking for a man by the name of Golden or Graham, the aliases that Clyde had used when registering at the inns. He abandons the idea of turning himself in. Clyde and his companions make an early afternoon excursion to Bear Lake. Meanwhile, Mason and his team are closing in on Clyde. The next day while camping, Clyde has an unsettling feeling. He is apprehended in the woods by the deputy sheriff from Mason's search party. When questioned, Clyde denies having any knowledge of the murder and wishes he had tried to escape when the thought first occurred to him.

In Chapter 9, Mason speaks with the group of young people at their campsite and upon meeting Sondra gets a better understanding of Clyde's motives for murder. Clyde is eventually brought face to face with Mason and decides he will continue to deny everything. Mason has his doubts about being able to convict the young man due to his powerful connections. He tries to obtain a confession by taunting Clyde with the proposed testimony of several alleged witnesses and also the letters he has acquired from Clyde's room. Clyde remains calm and continues to deny any knowledge of or involvement with Roberta. When Mason threatens to expose Clyde to his friends back at the campsite, he breaks from the story and admits although he did in fact know Roberta, he did not murder her. The whole situation was the result of an accident that occurred when he tried to convince her to leave him in peace. Mason jumps on the changes in Clyde's story.

In Chapter 10, Mason informs the camping group their friend Clyde is being charged with murder. Sondra is in disbelief as the friends depart for home. When Mason questions Clyde about whereabouts of the suit he wore during his outing with Roberta, Clyde constructs a lie about having it cleaned. Clyde continues to try to lie his way out of the situation but is soon carried off to jail.

Roberta's autopsy report comes into play in Chapter 11 and confirms she was alive at the time she fell into the water, just as Clyde had stated. Clyde is made to retrace his steps at the lake and authorities soon discover his camera equipment, despite Clyde's insistence he had not carried any. The D.A.'s assistant Burton Burleigh tampers with the evidence by taking hairs from Roberta's head and planting them on the camera as proof that Clyde had hit her with it. Mason thus believes he has enough to move forward with the case against Clyde.

The media runs away with the story in Chapter 12 and Samuel Griffiths scrambles to keep the family name out of the headlines. Sondra's parents chastise her for her involvement with Clyde and relocates the family to Maine in order to avoid any negative press. Smillie, an executive at Griffiths, speaks with Clyde in jail, and after listening to



the young man's story, he is convinced Clyde is guilty. Smillie delivers his opinion to Samuel in the next chapter, and Samuel states he will only help his nephew if he believes he is innocent. The man sends a lawyer to assess the situation, thinking this will allow him to better decide on his choice of legal counsel for Clyde: either an expensive defense attorney or a low level local attorney to provide fair representation and prevent unnecessary media exposure of the Griffiths name.

In Chapter 14, the new attorney is unable to get any additional information out of Clyde, as he is still in full denial mode. For this reason, a local attorney is hired for Clyde named Alvin Belknap, who happens to be Mason's Democratic rival for the judgeship. The attorney visits Clyde and is sympathetic to his cause. Clyde maintains his story that Roberta's death was an accident but admits to hatching a plot to kill her and also claims ownership of the camera equipment. Faced with the likelihood that no jury would ever believe Clyde's story, Belknap contemplates altering the details of what happened.

## Analysis

In these chapters, Clyde's worlds of lies and reality become mixed. Now, even though he is within his desired social element with his friends, he has again become the observer as uncontrollable events unfold around him. Keeping with the idea of balance, Clyde's thoughts are now no longer occupied solely with visions of happiness and pleasure. In fact, even when surrounded by the things he used to enjoy, like the company of Sondra, he can no longer fully concentrate. His experiences have given him a more universal view of things, and he is literally unable to go back to the way things were before. Even with the prospect of being apprehended by the authorities, his previous inclination to run is no longer an option, and he appears content just to accept his fate.

In an example of foreshadowing, Clyde's story about his knowledge of Roberta is ripped apart by Mason in much the same way that his testimony will later be picked apart by the man on cross-examination at trial. Here, also, Clyde is shown to be completely inept when confronted with a much stronger and complete force. Up until this point Clyde has shown himself to be pretty good at concealing things, but when the authorities make him retrace his steps, the artifacts he has tried to cover up are unearthed with relative ease. Like the story of Book Three as a whole, the idea of an inevitable reckoning and revisiting of the past is strong during these scenes.

With the appearance of the defense attorney Belknap, the author presents the legal and political counterbalance to the dominating influence of Mason. The power dynamic has drastically shifted, and the figures who were once the main characters are either silent or completely absent.

## Vocabulary

dastardly, portaged, exquisite, ribald, adjournments, austere, sardonic, effrontery, harangue, catechizing, pallet, lanky, superlative, haemorrhage, incarceration,

decipherable, irrefragable, impanel, macerating, affianced, hegira, recessive,  
ineradicable, atrocious, protuberant, tribune, indict, aperture, escapades



# Chapter 15-21 Book Three

## Summary

In Chapter 15, Belknap discusses the case with his colleague, Reuben Jephson, and they come to the conclusion Clyde's story, if told as is, would likely lead to his conviction. After considering Clyde's life and circumstances, the pair concur that an insanity defense is the best way to go. When asked if his family has a history of insanity, Clyde answers in the negative. They ask Clyde many questions regarding his relationship with Roberta, hoping to find something there that will earn him sympathy. They discuss finding Clyde's discarded suit and having it cleaned to conform to his story and also arguing the marks on Roberta's face were the result of mishandling the body during the retrieval effort.

In Chapter 16 the legal team adopts the position that Roberta's death resulted from the fact Clyde was simply a "moral coward." A reworking of the events shows Clyde's attempt to call off his relationship with Roberta in favor of Sondra. A sudden change of heart, however, along with a proposal of marriage out on the boat, inspires such elation in Roberta she accidentally rocks the boat. When Clyde responds by jumping up, the boat tips over and he accidentally hits Roberta with the camera as they fall into the water. Clyde had been too dazed to save Roberta, and because of the suspicious nature of the situation and his nature as a "moral coward," he fled into the woods. Counsel agrees to take this version of events to court.

In Chapter 17 Clyde's lawyers are thwarted by Mason at every turn in trying to shift the court situation in their favor and are denied both a delay of trial and a change of venue. While Mason heads to Lycurgus to gather more information and witnesses, Clyde's attorneys drive the new story details into the less-than-stellar defendant. No one from his family has even come forward to help Clyde. Ignorant of the situation with their son, Clyde's parents only discover the details of his trial when their daughter Esta reads about it in the paper. Clyde's mother is in disbelief and decides to raise enough money to go to him. She sends notice to his attorneys and offers up prayers for her son.

Clyde is encouraged in Chapter 18 to turn down his mother's proposal to get involved. The woman is soon hounded by the press, and she reveals many of the painful details of Clyde's past he has tried desperately to keep secret. On his end, Clyde becomes depressed about his situation and the lies his lawyers want him to tell. He also thinks about Sondra and why she has not tried to get in contact with him. In his mind he thinks about the electric chair and dreams about getting out of jail.

In Chapter 19, with the trial close to starting, Clyde tries to concentrate on his innocence and establish a presence to match his positive mindset. During jury selection, Clyde is distressed by the crowd of people, which includes Roberta's family and a number of other familiar faces. Sondra is noticeably absent, and it is revealed her name will not be mentioned at trial.



The jury selection concludes in Chapter 20, and the trial is set to begin, with the judge already doubting Clyde's innocence. Mason's opening statement is powerful in its praise of Roberta and condemnation of Clyde and his heinous actions. He paints a portrait of a one-sided love that ended in Clyde battering the girl to death and then disposing of her body in the water. Mason's case is presented in the next chapter with a host of witnesses testifying favorably of Roberta and describing their knowledge of events that transpired during the time she was seeing Clyde. Belknap makes note of the political forces at work during the trial.

## Analysis

Clyde's influence is now almost completely absent when it comes to determining his fate, and although their intent is to help him, his attorneys have effectively taken away Clyde's ability to tell his own story. Clyde's helplessness reflects a major change in attitude and approach that resounds across the main cast of characters. Up until Book Three the primary task for characters like Clyde and his uncle Samuel involved placing emphasis on the acquisition of wealth and power. A great deal of importance was placed on names and exploiting one's exalted status publicly through flashy clothes, parties, and parades. Newspaper headlines were testaments to obtaining elevated social status.

Since the beginning of the trial, however, everyone who once thrived on excess has now gone underground to avoid exposure and scandal. The ability to disappear is shown to be equally if not more important than being seen and known. The grand displays of wealth and power that once stood proud for everyone to see now operate from the shadows. The result of Clyde's actions causes him to switch places with the elite he so admired, many of whom have decided to run away or have taken on new identities as he used to do.

Ironically, in the end, Clyde's defense is chosen to be one that emphasizes traits labeling him as a moral coward. In their effort to protect him, Clyde's attorneys replace many of his truths with lies in order to make his story more believable. Even though he has proven himself adept at the art in the past, Clyde has trouble passing off the lies of others as his own. His evolving sense of self is eroding his ability to place appearances over reality.

## Vocabulary

tensile, cataleptic, statically, ferrety, interpolated, preliminary, malignant, militate, venue, deluded, dispatched, averse, basalt, disheveled, yokel, bumpkin, cornices, antechamber, penny-dreadful, gimlet, jaunty, peripatetic, imperturbably, aforethought, substantiations, dictum, assailed, immaterial, puritanical, impeccable, miscarriage

# Chapter 22-28 Book Three

## Summary

The prosecution continues its case in Chapter 22 with Clyde's lies about the camera equipment being exposed to the jury. Photographs are shown of Roberta's face injuries and Burleigh offers his fabricated testimony about the hairs supposedly found on Clyde's camera. Emotions reach their peak when Mason reads each of Roberta's letters aloud to the court. As the prosecution rests, Clyde feels there is little hope for his case.

With Mason's performance thus far being praised by the press, Belknap opens for the defense in Chapter 23, pointing out Clyde and Roberta were never officially engaged and the defendant was the victim of circumstances instigated by his moral cowardice and inability to face reality. Following opening statements, Clyde takes the stand. In the following chapter, Clyde proceeds to tell his life's story, with the incidents about Roberta being clumsily replaced with his newly constructed set of facts. The defense's accusations of cowardice irritate Clyde, but he continues with his story. He admits to being in love with Miss X, aka Sondra, and wanting to end his relationship with Roberta, but he denies plotting to kill her. Clyde explains the reason for going on the trip and how he used false names to avoid scandal. When he tells the new story about how Roberta's death occurred, he realizes how truly horrible his case must seem.

When Mason cross-examines Clyde in Chapter 25, he uses every opportunity to assert his own brand of aggressive sarcasm in his attempt to make Clyde out to be a liar. Mason even brings in the boat from the accident and has the scene played out over the objections of the defense. The next day, Mason hounds Clyde for making no effort to rescue Roberta even though he was a good swimmer. He maintains Clyde wished for her to drown. Clyde is unsure of how to respond most of the time to the aggressive attorney. Mason tries to trip Clyde up with minor details, like how much money he was carrying at the time. He points out further inconsistencies in Clyde's story and questions how much of a change of heart he could have possibly had about Roberta if he was seen partying days later with his friends, proof of which Mason presents in the form of photographs. The conclusion of the cross leaves Clyde battered.

The defense wraps up in Chapter 26 with several more witnesses and a day-long closing which reiterates Clyde's moral shortcomings and the circumstantial nature of the prosecution's case. The next day, Mason offers his own day-length closing argument. When the jury retires to consider the verdict, there is only one holdout, and he quickly changes his position when faced with the prospect of confronting the rage of the public. A unanimous guilty verdict is issued, and Mason is hailed as a hero for having gained justice.

The news reaches Clyde's mother in Denver at the start of Chapter 27, and she still maintains although her son is guilty of seducing the young woman, he is not a murderer. She believes Mason used Roberta's letters to inflame the passions of the court. Faced



with the scandalous results of the case, the New York Griffiths refuse to contribute money for an appeal and leave the city for Boston. Clyde's attorneys welcome the idea of Clyde's mother coming to see him.

Chapter 28 sees Clyde's mother arriving to see her incarcerated son at Bridgeburg. Clyde insists he is innocent, and despite initial doubts, his mother comes to believe him. She tries to raise money for him by giving lectures. Clyde is given the death sentence and is transferred to state prison in Auburn to await the inevitable. Surrounded by the condemned, Clyde contemplates the electric chair.

## Analysis

The conclusion of the prosecution's case up through the delivering of the verdict highlights the potent effect of popular sentiment on the way people live and make decisions. In the case of Mason, he appeals to the common emotions of sadness and betrayal when he reads Roberta's letters out loud to the court. In the press, headlines in praise of Mason in essence paint him as the victor even before the defense can present its evidence. With the jury, most members are convinced Clyde is guilty even before they deliberate. When one person has the audacity to go against the group, it is only through the threat of public condemnation that he is convinced to change his mind and rule against Clyde.

In the end, ultimate truth is shown to be elusive due to its malleability. Just as much is gained from what is said as from what is not said. Clyde is judged for his actions and not his heart or intentions. More emphasis is placed on what the person appears to be rather than who the person truly is. Even when confined, Clyde still insists he is innocent because he has convinced himself, for the most part, of that truth from a place he has denied his entire life.

## Vocabulary

vehemently, chambermaid, meditative, sarcasm, placid, deluge, architectonic, lecherous, overtures, bugbear, paroled, levity, antagonistic, purloined, innuendo, fervor, blanched, rebuke, rostrum, resuscitated, contradicted, ruts, buttressed, pliable, Jesuitical, consternation, brood, calloused, sparse, recompense, depot, rumination, vouchsafed, exhorter, ludicrous

# Chapter 29-Souvenir Book Three

## Summary

In Chapter 29, the scene shifts to the new Death House at Auburn. There, the condemned occupy themselves with games and are allowed to receive visitors. Knowing death is inevitable there is a general atmosphere of gloom hanging over the prisoners as their spirits deteriorate. Clyde's mother breaks down when she comes to visit, but assures her son he will likely see his verdict overturned and an order passed down for a new trial.

In Chapter 30, Clyde's mother launches a campaign among Christian congregations to collect funds for Clyde's defense. The response is mostly cold, except for the help she receives after being allowed to speak at the theater of a Jewish man. When her husband gets sick, Clyde's mother departs for Denver. Because he realizes the duration of the legal process may take a couple of years, Clyde uses his time to learn about the other men imprisoned with him. He meets a Buffalo attorney named Miller Nicholson convicted of poisoning a rich man in order to collect his money. Nicholson offers many words of encouragement to Clyde. When an Italian prisoner is sent off to die, the inmates observe his passing by foregoing their evening meal. Clyde is depressed by the thought he will likely share the same fate.

Chapter 31 sees the passage of five months and a diminishing number of inmates, one of whom is Nicholson, who handles his execution with peace of mind and leaves Clyde with some advice for an appeal as well as two books: Robinson Crusoe and The Arabian Nights. Clyde's mother arranges for Clyde to receive a visit from the Syracuse evangelist named Rev. Duncan McMillan. Rev. McMillan encourages Clyde to turn to God in prayer and says he will visit again. In the next chapter, Clyde struggles to find assurances through religion in spite of all of the evidence from his past and current circumstances which seem to point to either the nonexistence or unsympathetic nature of God. In his ruminations, Clyde contemplates the nature of insanity, guilt, and responsibility regarding his relationships with Roberta and Sondra. On one occasion he receives an unaddressed, typed note from Sondra telling him she still remembers him.

Chapter 33 finds Clyde depressed for weeks after receiving Sondra's letter. In his attempt to find peace Clyde reveals the true version of his story to Rev. McMillan and asks if his actions have been those of a murderer. There is no direct answer, only discussion about thoughts and a need for prayer. The Rev. McMillan comes back in a week and tells Clyde he does not believe his guilt could probably ever be absolved. Clyde stays true to his beliefs that he is not the guilty man people make him out to be. Months later, Clyde's conviction is affirmed and he is sentenced to die. McMillan's assurances he will make another appeal on Clyde's behalf to the new governor fall on deaf ears.



In Chapter 34, the Reverend and Clyde's mother pay a visit to New York governor David Waltham. After speaking with them, the governor decides not to act against the court's ruling. In his cell, Clyde reflects on the events which have led him to this end. He affirms his faith in God but is not entirely convinced of his sincerity and ability to repent truthfully. His mother and the minister are with him until the end. He bids farewell to everyone as he heads to his execution.

In the closing section of the novel called "Souvenir," the scene shifts back to the lives of the poor Griffith evangelist, now ministering on the streets of San Francisco. The newest member of their group is Esta's son Russell, having effectively taken his uncle Clyde's place. After they are finished on the street, the boy asks his grandmother for money to buy ice cream. Elvira allows him to have it, hoping the small indulgence may prevent him from walking the path of her son.

## Analysis

The novel truly comes full circle in the last several chapters. Having once experienced the epitome of freedom and luxury, Clyde now finds himself confined in the worst position imaginable.

Even though his mother once represented everything that Clyde thought was keeping him from living life to the fullest, in prison she has become his greatest hope for escape and salvation. She becomes his link to the outside world.

Reverend McMillan represents a link of a different kind. Although both the Reverend and Clyde's mother want to help him become free, the minister is much more concerned with the salvation of Clyde's mind and soul. MacMillan takes the things Clyde has been trying to bury and forces the young man to finally be able to view them in a positive light as something that has brought him closer to achieving absolute truth and peace of mind. The minister's final indecision about the helpfulness of his actions concerning Clyde's fate is a direct reference to Dreiser's own views about the ultimate relevance of religion in curing the sicknesses of the world. The final contrasting images and approaches taken by Elvira Griffiths and the Reverend illustrate the author's doubts.

The final scene with young Russell is perhaps the most telling exchange as to how Clyde's actions in life and the manner of his death continue to influence those left behind. When he requests ice cream after the street sermon, Elvira gives him the money and allows him to buy the treat himself. Although Clyde's mother still values the teaching of the Gospel, she has now found her own sort of balance and realizes by allowing her grandchild to experience both the religious and secular world without stigma, he will be better equipped to handle his own challenges in life.

## Vocabulary

wardens, nook, cranny, bravado, veriest, sectarian, unsavory, theological, seminaries, immured, congealing, gargoyle, contrition, transgressions, involute, surcease, emissary,

dicker, chaplain, preachments, chasten, extenuating, fornication, bolstered, clemency, impenetrable, adultery, automatons, exhortations, cadaverous, hymnals, askance



# Characters

## Clyde Griffiths

Clyde is the protagonist of the novel. He is an adamant chaser of the American Dream of wealth and success. Clyde seeks to rise from his simple beginnings and gets swept up in the promise of luxury and fast living. Behind his charm and respectful manners, Clyde suffers from a weakness of mind and morality that eventually leads to his undoing.

## Elvira Griffiths

Elvira is Clyde's mother. She is so preoccupied with suffering for the word of God she cannot fully understand the depth of Clyde's ambitions and his need to escape into the secular world. Her maternal instincts make her very caring when it comes to her children, and she tries to support them through earnest prayer.

## Asa Griffiths

Asa is Clyde's father. He is a poor street evangelist. Although praised by his wife as a visionary in religious matters, he is not nearly as effective in his domestic role as a father.

## Esta Griffiths

Esta is Clyde's older sister. She escapes the life her parents have made for her by leaving with an actor. She soon returns, however, pregnant and abandoned. Her parents eventually adopt her illegitimate son named Russell.

## Oscar Heggland

Oscar is one of the bellhops at Green-Davidson. He befriends Clyde and helps introduce him to the pleasures of the high life.

## Thomas Ratterer

Thomas is another bellhop at Green-Davidson. A friendly individual, he later assists Clyde in finding employment in Chicago at the Union League Club.





## **Willard Sparser**

Willard is an associate of Oscar Heggland. He enjoys being flashy and is the reckless driver of the stolen car that Clyde and the others are riding in on the night of the incident in which they accidentally kill a child.

## **Laura Sipe**

Laura is one of the friends who went on the joyride in the borrowed Packard obtained by Sparser. Along with the driver, she is injured in the car crash and is later taken into custody by the police in connection with the killing of the little girl that Sparser hits with the car.

## **Hortense Briggs**

Hortense is an attractive shop girl in Kansas City. For a while she is the object of Clyde's deepest affections. She flirts with Clyde for gifts and attention even though she has no desire to pursue a serious relationship with him.

## **Samuel Griffiths**

Samuel is the long-lost, rich uncle of Clyde. He meets Clyde by accident and gives him a position working in his New York factory that manufactures shirts and collars. He is the personification of the American Dream and believes wealth comes from hard work. He values his name, wealth, and family.

## **Elizabeth Griffiths**

Elizabeth is the wife of Samuel.

## **Myra Griffiths**

Myra is the more reserved of the two daughters of Samuel Griffiths. Although she is kind and friendly, her mother doubts her marriage prospects.

## **Bella Griffiths**

Bella is the more active socialite of the two daughters of Samuel Griffiths. She is all about having a good time and indulging in the various perks of being in her elite social circle.



## **Gilbert Griffiths**

Gilbert is the son of Samuel and helps to manage his father's factory. He is noted to bear a striking resemblance to Clyde, but he is very resentful towards his cousin. His business-like approach to most things makes him seem cold and disagreeable company to many people.

## **Roberta Alden**

Roberta is a poor factory girl under the supervision of Clyde. She believes in love and has a secret relationship with Clyde, eventually becoming pregnant with his child. Seeing Roberta as a threat to his budding relationship with Sondra, Clyde plots to murder her.

## **Grace Marr**

Grace is Roberta's close friend and companion while they are staying at the boarding house. They are nearly inseparable until Clyde comes into the picture and Roberta's lies drive a wedge between them.

## **Sondra Finchley**

Sondra is the daughter of a wealthy friend of Clyde's uncle Samuel. She is the epitome of everything Clyde desires in a woman. She is a true socialite and indulges in the perks afforded by her station, but for the most part, she chooses to remain free of romantic encumbrances. Although she is attracted to Clyde, she maintains a practical perspective that allows her enough detachment to abandon any lingering sentiments if needed.

## **Jill Trumbell**

Jill is one of Sondra's socialite friends.

## **Titus Alden**

Titus is the impoverished father of Roberta. His anger over the death of his daughter motivates him to seek revenge.

## **Fred Heit**

Heit is the coroner who first suggests that Roberta may have been murdered.



## **Earl Newcomb**

Newcomb is the assistant of coroner Heit.

## **Orville W. Mason**

Mason is the Cataraqui County district attorney who succeeds in the prosecution of Clyde for the murder of Roberta. Having come from humble beginnings himself, he is strongly motivated to be successful and employs all the strength in his possession to achieve that end.

## **Burton Burleigh**

Burleigh is an assistant to Mason. Convinced of Clyde's guilt in the murder of Roberta, he aids the prosecution by tampering with the evidence.

## **Alvin Belknap**

Belknap is the lawyer who defends Clyde.

## **Miller Nicholson**

Nicholson is another condemned prisoner who gives Clyde advice and leaves him books.

## **David Waltham**

Waltham is the New York governor who refuses to commute Clyde's sentence.

## **Reverend Duncan McMillan**

McMillan is the young minister who in the end aids Clyde in trying to bring himself to some sort of spiritual peace before his execution. He is kind and sincere in his duties and feels remorse for Clyde's fate.

## **Russell Griffiths**

Russell is the illegitimate son of Clyde's sister Esta. He is adopted by Clyde's parents and effectively takes the place of his uncle as a helper in their missionary endeavors.



## **Walter Dillard**

Clyde meets Walter at the boarding house in Lurgus and is friends with him for a while before abandoning him for more affluent company.

## **Rita Dickerman**

Rita is the first girl Clyde becomes involved with in Lurgus. Like everyone else she is impressed by his family name. Their relationship is short-lived.

## **Mrs. Gilpin**

Mrs. Gilpin owns the house Roberta moves into after she leaves the boarding house.

## **Dr. Glenn**

Dr. Glenn is the physician who refuses to give Roberta an abortion.

## **The Newtons**

The Newtons are the strict landlords of the boarding house where Roberta originally stays.

## **Smillie**

Smillie works for the Griffiths and visits Clyde after his arrest in order to help Samuel assess Clyde's guilt. He offers guidance on how Samuel should approach lending his nephew aid.

## **Reuben Jephson**

Jephson is the younger colleague of Belknap and helps with Clyde's defense at trial.



# Objects/Places

## Kansas City

Kansas City is the first setting of the novel. The Griffiths have moved here to carry out their missionary work. Clyde has to leave when he is involved in the accidental death of a child during a joyride with his friends.

## The Packard

The Packard is an expensive car borrowed by Sparser from the wealthy employer of his father. Sparser crashes it while trying to evade the police after he accidentally hits a little girl.

## Chicago

Chicago is one of the cities where Clyde works during his exile from Kansas City. He meets his uncle Samuel here.

## Denver

Clyde's family moves to Denver after they leave Kansas City and open up their own mission house.

## Lycurgus

Lycurgus is a small New York town where Clyde's extended family lives. It serves as the primary setting of the novel after Book One.

## Green-Davidson Hotel

The Green-Davidson is the luxury hotel in Kansas City where Clyde first works as a bellhop. It is where he is first introduced to the lifestyles of wealthy people.

## The Griffiths Shirt and Collar Factory

The Griffiths Shirt and Collar Factory is owned by Clyde's uncle Samuel in Lycurgus. Clyde works here after he is invited to New York by Samuel.



## **Frissell's**

Frissell's is a popular upscale restaurant in Kansas City and primary hangout spot for Clyde and his friends.

## **Bettina's**

Bertina's is the brothel Clyde visits with his friends in Kansas City.

## **The beaver fur coat**

Hortense convinces Clyde to buy a beaver fur coat for her after she manages to haggle down the price.

## **Union League Club**

The Union League Club is an establishment in Chicago where Clyde works for a time. He meets Samuel here.

## **Biltz**

Biltz is Roberta's hometown. Her family still lives there.

## **Homer**

Homer is where Roberta's sister lives.

## **Fonda**

Fonda is the main rendezvous point for Clyde and Roberta. It is located just outside of Lycurgus.

## **Starlight Pleasure Park**

Starlight Pleasure Park is the amusement park where Clyde and Roberta go on one of their first dates.

## **Gloversville**

Gloversville is the town where Dr. Glenn's office is located.



## **Twelfth Lake**

Twelfth Lake is a popular vacation spot for the Lycurgus elite.

## **Big Bittern**

Big Bittern is the name of the lake where Clyde plans to murder Roberta.

## **Grass Lake**

Grass Lake is one of the stopover spots on the way to Big Bittern.

## **Roberta's bag**

Roberta's bag contains a great deal of the evidence later used in the trial against Clyde.

## **The grey suit**

The grey suit was worn by Clyde on the day he planned to murder Roberta. He tosses it into the lake.

## **Clyde's camera and tripod**

Clyde's camera and tripod are key pieces of evidence used in Clyde's murder trial. Clyde hits Roberta in the face with the camera during their boat trip.

## **Auburn Prison**

Auburn Prison is the location where Clyde is sent after he is convicted of murder.

## **Death House**

Death House is a section of the Auburn prison where those who are sentenced to death are held.

## **Robinson Crusoe and The Arabian Nights**

Robinson Crusoe and The Arabian Nights are the two books left to Clyde by Nicholson after he is executed.

## Bridgeburg

Bridgeburg is the city where Clyde is taken to after he is apprehended for suspected involvement in Roberta's murder.



# Themes

## The Influences of Society on the Will of the Individual

This is one of the major themes of the novel and is a favorite topic for Dreiser. His belief that life is mostly determined by forces outside of an individual's control appears in many forms throughout the work. As far as the influences of society and society's way of thinking, Clyde is shown to be especially susceptible. He always reacts to the forces which are beyond him, whether it be the beliefs of his parents or the lures of material wealth. Such influences appear to be neither entirely positive nor entirely negative. The devout religious beliefs of Clyde's parents, which probably should be considered positive, are the main source of oppression in Clyde's early life. In trying to escape, they cause him to seek out secular pleasures enthusiastically, which although satisfying, ultimately prove to be his undoing when Clyde becomes so concerned about what people think of him he starts lying about himself in order to fit in with more affluent crowds of people.

Also during Clyde's trial there are constant reminders of how much social and political influences come into play as far as determining the outcome of someone's fate. In the end, Mason is more concerned about his goal to win an election and become a judge than he is about pursuing justice. In the same way, the holdout juror who may have saved Clyde's case is convinced to turn against his own convictions at the thought of being the object of negative public sentiment.

## The Pursuit of the American Dream

The pursuit of the so-called American Dream is shown to be a divisive force within the novel. Clyde fully believes he is capable of rising above his station and becoming a person of wealth and influence like his rich uncle Samuel. Unfortunately, he never quite arrives. In fact, his unyielding desire often proves to be the very thing that hinders his progress. He becomes so focused on the objective of succeeding he doesn't bother to cultivate the mind which is capable of obtaining success or for that matter maintaining it. Clyde's pursuit illustrates the flaws inherent in not acknowledging one's limits. His constant obsession with obtaining more leaves him unable to appreciate what he currently has, and he recklessly abandons his current position in pursuit of something better. The result is often destructive, as proves to be the case when he thinks that eliminating the problem with Roberta will give him a better chance at being with the wealthier Sondra.

## Appearance vs. Reality

This is a very important theme that often comes up in the context of the relationships in the novel. The concept emerges in the form of duality and the difference between truth and lies. Clyde's life is a constant struggle to reconcile these forces. Ashamed of his

humble origins, Clyde fabricates an existence for himself that conforms to what he believes people want to see.

The prime example of this comes from his indulgence in the reputation of the Griffiths name while he is in Lurgus. Even though he knows he is not a member of their class, he uses his family relations in order to gain favor with the locals. Those outside of the elite circles seem to value appearances more than the upper class, however, and while they look at Clyde in awe of his assumed position, those who know better keep him as an outcast in one form or another. True acceptance always seems to be out of Clyde's grasp because they never let him truly forget he is not one of them. The parents hide their daughters from Clyde and Sondra constantly rubs his lack of finances in his face by giving him money. Clyde is always aware of this, but in his mind, the illusion of inclusion is better than the reality of exclusion.

# Style

## Point of View

The story is presented from the third-person omniscient point of view. This means the reader is able to see every aspect of the character's intentions and thoughts as they develop. It also helps to unify the themes across the individual characters' experiences and helps drive home the author's point given in the title; that there is a tragedy occurring in parallel with the American dream that is universally experienced.

## Setting

The story takes place during the nineteen twenties and moves to various cities. The main locations are Kansas City, Chicago, Denver, Lycurgus, and various other places throughout New York State. The descriptions of the settings, especially in regard to their physical characteristics, are often colored by Clyde's sentiments regarding luxury and poverty. This transition of settings is not difficult to follow, and helps reinforce the universal nature of the themes - they are manifesting across the nation, not just in one state or town.

## Language and Meaning

The novel is written in standard prose with occasional variances based on speech patterns and character traits. At times very wordy, Dreiser likes to employ variances on descriptions, using situations unique to his characters' names or surroundings to create original words and phrases such as the Hortense inspired word "Hortensian" or using the honorific "Mr." to create the verb "mistering" as a way of describing the action of calling someone mister. The author also uses a fair amount of clichés and common imagery as a way of showing the ways in which some characters tend to think, speak, or act alike.

## Structure

An American Tragedy is an enormous work divided into one hundred chapters spread out over three "Books." Each book marks a certain phase in the life of Clyde Griffiths. Book One describes his early life in Kansas City and goes until the car accident which kills a little girl. Book Two chronicles Clyde's time in Lycurgus and ends with the death of Roberta. Book Three describes the aftermath of Roberta's death and concludes with Clyde's death and a return to street sermons with his parents in the closing section called "Souvenir."

## Quotes

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. (2, Book 1)

The imaginative flights of Clyde in connection with all this—his dreams of what it might mean for him to be connected with so glorious an institution—can only be suggested. For his ideas of luxury were in the main so extreme and mistaken and gauche—mere wanderings of a repressed and unsatisfied fancy, which as yet had had nothing but imaginings to feed it. (5, Book 1)

Rather, as he saw it now, the difficulty lay, not in the deed itself, but in the consequences which followed upon not thinking or not knowing. (14, Book 1)

For to say the truth, Clyde had a soul that was not destined to grow up. He lacked decidedly that mental clarity and inner directing application that in so many permits them to sort out from the facts and avenues of life the particular thing or things that make for their direct advancement. (3, Book 2)

Titus Alden was one of that vast company of individuals who are born, pass through and die out of the world without ever quite getting any one thing straight. They appear, blunder, and end in a fog. (13, Book 2)

In constant touch with all phases of ignorance and dereliction as well as sobriety, energy, conservatism, success and the like, he was more inclined, where fact appeared to nullify his early conclusion in regard to many things, to suspend judgment between the alleged claims of heaven and hell and leave it there suspended and undisturbed. (37, Book 2)

Should he lose all this for such a world as he and Roberta could provide for themselves—a small home—a baby, such a routine work-a-day life as taking care of her and a baby on such a salary as he could earn, and from which most likely he would never again be freed! God! A sense of nausea seized him. (38, Book 2)

There are moments when in connection with the sensitively imaginative or morbidly anachronistic . . . the mind [is] befuddled to the extent that for the time being, at least, unreason or disorder and mistaken or erroneous counsel would appear to hold against all else. In such instances the will and the courage confronted by some great difficulty which it can neither master nor endure, appears in some to recede in precipitate flight, leaving only panic and temporary unreason in its wake. (45, Book 2)

She herself is unable to save herself and by her erratic terror, if you draw near her now, may bring about your own death also. But you desire to live! And her living will make you life not worth while from now on. Rest but a moment—a fraction of a minute! Wait—wait—ignore the pity of that appeal. (47, Book 2)



Clyde, if I could only die. That would solve all this. And I have prayed and prayed that I would lately, yes I have. For life does not mean as much to me now as when I first met you and you loved me. Oh, those happy days! If only things were different. (22, Book 3)

What followed then was what invariably follows in the wake of every tortured consciousness. From what it dreads or hates, yet knows or feels to be unescapable, it takes refuge in that which may be hoped for—or at least imagined. (32 Book Three)



# Topics for Discussion

## Topic 1

Is Clyde a victim of fate or the circumstance that he creates?

## Topic 2

In what way is Gilbert the foil of Clyde?

## Topic 3

How does the concept of Clyde's "dark genie" reflect his place within the elite circle?

## Topic 4

In what ways does the freedom of having money enslave Clyde?

## Topic 5

How does the grey suit that Clyde wears on the day that Roberta drowns reflect his change in attitude going into Book Three?

## Topic 6

In what ways does Mason's scarred face reflect his approach to his job?

## Topic 7

In what ways does Esta's pregnancy mirror Roberta's pregnancy?

## Topic 8

In what ways does the car accident at the end of Book One resemble the death of Roberta at the end of Book Two?