The Magnificent Ambersons Short Guide

The Magnificent Ambersons by Booth Tarkington

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Characters

Though only one family is named in the tide of The Magnificent Ambersons, the relationships between members of the Amberson, Minafer, and Morgan families really drive the action of the novel, provoke its dramatic interest, and provide the thematic insights which lift the work well above the typical sentimental bestseller of the early 1900s.

Major Amberson establishes great wealth through land holdings and rental houses. This fortune allows his family to live in leisured luxury. His daughter Isabel marries Wilbur Minafer, though she really loves Eugene Morgan, another suitor who loses her through a cheerful drunken escapade uncharacteristic of his true good nature. Wilbur is business-minded, dull, and ever-so-steady as a husband. A chastened Eugene leaves town to forget disappointment and seek new horizons.

Isabel and Wilbur settle into a placid marriage, crowned by the birth of the cherished Amberson heir, George Amberson Minafer, upon whom she unstintingly lavishes her whole soul. No prodigality of care, attention, or caressing is too much. He cannot err and the best is barely good enough for him. Not surprisingly, George at the age of nine is a "princely terror." Despite "his silk sash, and silk stockings, and a broad lace collar, with his little black velvet suit," George brooks no opposition from anyone, enforcing his superiority with insolent manners, precocious japes, street badinage, and flying fists. Serving as a leitmotif for George's career, both adolescent and adult, of domineering all he surveys is his signature term of ultimate abuse, let loose in moments of angry scorn, the single word "riffraff." George is so surpassingly arrogant that many of the townsfolk yearn for the comeuppance of this "lord among boys." At each stage of his early life—private school, prep school, fancy Eastern college—they vainly pray for his humbling; he remains unbending and unrepentant.

Thus George as a young adult has never thought of anyone but himself and the heavenly Amberson name. He has especially taken his unconditionally-loving mother for granted. Only once, at a Christmas ball given in his honor when home from college, does George have a fleeting insight that he has never noticed Isabel as anything but a "mother," the cherisher of her heart's pride who is merely "an adjunct to himself," that he has never considered her as a woman who could fall in love, walk with a friend, read a book, or do any of a world of things that a free woman could do. The moment passes and he continues on his heedless way, a path both ridiculous and tragi-comic.

George falls in love with the beautiful Lucy Morgan, then baffles her love by a refusal to even consider any profession but rich gentleman of ease. After his father's death, he thwarts any possibility of marriage between Isabel and Eugene by dismissing him as unworthy of his mother's love, even refusing to let revelations about their past mutual tenderness unharden his heart and hurt pride. In doing so, he loses any chance of reconciling with Lucy, and he forces his mother into the crudest of choices: who does she love the most? As always, she chooses George. They go to Paris where George

can forget the profanation of the Amberson name. After five years Isabel dies and George is bereft of his truest supporter; shortly after, Isabel's father dies as well.

By this time the Amberson fortune is completely gone, a blighted victim of the pollution smirching the city's center that drove already depressed property values to almost nothing. George and his Aunt Fanny must go to live in a boarding house. The Ambersons are magnificent no more. George, who has always scorned work as ungentlemanly, finds the highest paying job he can, a very dangerous one hauling nitroglycerine to blast sites. With the wages from this job he can at least keep a roof over their heads. At the close of the book, by a series of contrivances involving a medium and some improbably shared thoughts, Lucy and Eugene are brought to think better of George, who is in hospital with two broken legs caused by a car running him over. The three have a bedside reconciliation promising future happiness for all.

Eugene Morgan, who has become a wealthy automobile manufacturer and investor by the book's end, is in many ways the most admirable character in the novel. He is a hard-working visionary who apprehends that great social and economic changes inevitably accompany technological advances, and that clearsighted recognition of these trends is crucial to meeting the future with grace.

He is in sharp contrast to the Ambersons who are totally out of touch, not only with the future, but with the very present as well. Morgan also remains tender and response to his feelings; he adores Lucy, has always loved and will love Isabel, and at the last allows this love to lead him back to George, to embrace him as a future son-in-law.

Social Concerns

Booth Tarkington's The Magnificient Ambersons describes the decline of the Amberson family from wealthy social prominence to impoverished social inconsequence. The fall of this family's fortune is mirrored in reverse by the explosive growth of the Midwest town in which they live. The relations and intimacies of the Amberson clan with the Minafer and Morgan families over the thirty years from about 1880 dramatize how quickly a compact society in which all know their hierarchical place changes to one in which the old orders, the old values, and the old certainties are subsumed in a ravening new social organism.

The local change from tiny town to modest city reflects the national shift during this period from a largely agrarian and rural society to a country dominated by industrial cities.

A related social concern is how seemingly impractical inventions can completely alter every aspect of a region: the physical surroundings, the social landscape, the economic order, and the psychology and worldview of the inhabitants.

The most remarkable agent of change in the novel, one dismissed as having no long-range utility, is the automobile. The first horseless carriage in the Ambersondominated town is regarded as an interesting novelty, a dirty, noisy, unreliable, inelegant, and generally classless vehicle, a machine which if even improved would never be more than a fad for the occasional recreational use by a few frivolous rich people. The Ambersons' casual contempt and pitying condescension towards the future of the automobile seems to them eminently logical and grounded in common sense. They little suspect that perhaps the most radical transformation in American society is just beginning.

Everything will be utterly changed by the automobile in an astoundingly short time.

The Amberson wealth resides in its property. Major Amberson, the founder of the family fortune, owns two hundred acres of prime land. On four of the acres he has built the town's greatest mansion.

Elsewhere on the property he has built large, stylish, finely-built, commodious, and well-spaced brick houses that he rents. These properties provide great income, making him the wealthiest man in town. However, with the advent and budding success of the automobile, in conjunction with increased manufacturing, his income prospects quickly change.

As more people make money, houses are built first closer together then farther out.

As the town greatly expands, suburbs spring up with smaller houses clustered side-by-side, and the black smoke of burnt soft coal hangs heavily over the center of the ever-growing city. The Amberson Addition, once comprising the most elegant and valuable

houses in the entire community, now becomes desolately marooned under the heart of the black cloud. Property values in the city center plummet while those in the suburbs skyrocket. Rents from the Amberson houses constantly dwindle. Properties have to be sold for what they will bring, and by the time of the old Major's death all the properties are gone. The Amberson Addition is now only a name no one remembers. Even the Amberson street names have been changed. What seemed a fortune sure to last is completely lost through heedless free-spending accompanied by great economic changes.

Techniques

The primary technique used by Tarkington in The Magnificent Ambersons is a literary realism in which the closely observed details of the surfaces of events, manners, and families (even if some of his rendered observations are superficial) reveal the forces at work changing society from within. This technique is used extensively in Chapter 1 when the omniscient narrator quickly sets the social habits and fashions of the period just after Major Amberson has made his great fortune. Not only does this ease the reader into the milieu of the 1870s Midwest, but it creates a tone of quiet but pervasive nostalgia for quieter times forever lost which remains throughout. This realism and the tone of nostalgia combine in later sections of the book to show how the "horseless carriage" rapidly moves from an expensive entertainment for the rich to a supremely potent engine of social and economic transformation.

Towards the end of the book realism and the nostalgic timbre are tinctured with symbolism to show some of the evils caused by thoughtless industrialization.

The black cloud of smoke created by burning soft coal suffocates the town and ruins health, homes, and property values shrouded under it. The smoke also has a symbolic dimension which just touches on what Charles Dickens noted so powerfully in Bleak House: the heartlessness, corrupt rapacity, and moral presumption of profit-crazed industrialism. Tarkington's brief glimpse of this dark tyranny cannot be compared to the huge orchestration of moral outrage mustered by Dickens in Dombey and Son (1846-1848), Bleak House (1852-1853), Little Dorrit (1855-1857), or Our Mutual Friend (18641865) but it does deepen the social significance of the work.

Themes

Underneath the broad arc of the largest social concerns addressed in The Magnificent Ambersons are a group of related themes such as the transience of social position, the nature of gracious living, and how trends in social fashions and manners help set the stage for larger cultural shifts. To see how these themes relate in the novel a brief verbal "snapshot" is needed of Midwestern life as it was just before and just after the Civil War.

The residents of the Midwest around the time of the Civil War were the sons and daughters of true pioneers, those early settlers who came almost penniless and had almost nothing save what they could make. To the pioneers thrift was a religion while spending money on art and entertainment was considered practically a sin. Their children came gradually to have a more relaxed view; for the few people like Major Amberson who made substantial fortunes, lavish spending became the norm. Even families of average means were less averse to spending money than before. This trend is reflected in the kinds of entertainment so popular in the 1870s and early 1880s: allday picnics in the woods; the "open houses" with constantly replenished punch bowls and endless conviviality; and the band serenades under pretty girls' windows of flute, harp, fiddle, cello, and bass viol sweetly blending with tenor and baritone voices. To illustrate the gracious felicity of this life Tarkington has a character say, ". . . life here then was just one long midsummer serenade. . . . there always seemed to be gold-dust in the air."

This modest slackening of rigidity and constriction in both life and spending money is also reflected in apparel; as Tarkington says, "shifting fashions of shape replaced aristocracy of texture."

Simply put, new styles became as important as lush materials. The primacy of silk was challenged by more varied designs in lesser fabric. This greater openness to new design ideas helped kindle enthusiasm for the somewhat later aesthetic movement during which chinoiserie was all the rage and girls gilded everything in sight.

Accompanying these alterations in spending habits, taste, fashion, and art appreciation is a new agitating sound in the air, the sputtering bark and unmuffled clamor of the nascent automobile. Faulty and frail at first, autos confound skeptics who say they will never supplant horsepower, never become more than an expensive novelty, by the speed with which they change everything. Horse, stable, and hired man, fixtures in people's lives as far back as anyone can recall, vanish almost overnight. The tidy town of the book has grown so fast "Its boundary was mere shapelessness on the run. . ."

and ". . . it grew dirty with an incredible completeness."

By now the pioneer influence has become attenuated, only modest memories of their courage and austere hardihood remain, and the grandchildren of this resolute band are now the prime movers of frenetic "modern" life. Those who live by the old codes, who

live with past values, who cannot adapt to different manners of business, and who lack the vision to grasp how new technologies will continue to alter life (for better or worse), are a threatened species, as the Ambersons are in this novel.

Another set of themes arises from the action of the plot and how the characters interact. These themes include the baleful effects of overwhelming family pride, the problems mat can arise in a marriage of unequal and incongruous partners, and the warping consequences of uncritical maternal love. The "Characters" section below specifically details the relations and actions of the major characters which most clearly illustrate these themes, so only a summary is offered here.

The Amberson family pride, especially the colossal pride in the family name held by George Amberson Minafer, is a vital force in propelling the plot and shaping the destinies of the characters. Unfortunately the effects are mostly odious: ruinous emotional trauma for the "hero" George, his mother, and family friends; perplexed pain for those who love George most, because of his refusal to think of anyone but himself; and George's own isolation from and obliviousness to the rapidly evolving society around him. George, in the guise of upholding the family honor and maintaining his lofty position of gentlemanly leisure, is an agent of unwitting destruction for both himself and those about him. He has to be thrown into the dust before he can see his faults and begin to work for a measure of redemption.

Isabel Amberson Minafer marries a man who is not up to her stature. She is high-spirited, sensitive, insightful, clever, and has a deeply-loving nature. She does not love her husband but respects his quiet goodness. He is a man of narrow interests, only concerned with a calm life in the family circle and his business investments. It is clear, though only implied, that Isabel has to stifle much of the full range of her nature to make the marriage work. The fact that she secretly loves another man whom she didn't marry also must affect her attitude towards being both a wife and a mother.

Isabel loves her son George so passionately that more than normal maternal love and pride in bearing the family heir must be at work. Some measure of this obsessive love must be due to her being mated with a man who is too limited to fulfill her needs, and some due to her buried love that can find no other expression. Whatever emotions conspire to make Isabel such an uncritically loving mother, the result is disastrous for George's character. His natural selfishness and conceit are elevated to a nearly sublime arrogance. Untempered love almost destroys any native sense George may have. Though George is the direct catalyst for the injurious consequences in the novel, Isabel has had, at one remove, a hand in creating them as well. Softness of heart can engender hardness of heart, and grief can follow from each.

Adaptations

Portions of The Magnificent Ambersons, especially the first chapter, were frequently anthologized. Tarkington's mildly satirical style makes both interesting and amusing reading. The best known adaptation is Orson Welles's film version.

Welles both wrote the screenplay and directed the film on location in Indianapolis. The movie, made in 1942, features Tim Holt as George, Anne Baxter as Lucy, Dolores Costello as Isabel, Richard Bennet as Major Amberson, and Joseph Cotton as Eugene Morgan. An earlier movie entitled Pampered Youth was produced in 1925.

Key Questions

In some ways, The Magnificent Ambersons is an old-style novel whose themes of familial and societal obligations, the influence of wealth and property, and transformations due to technological advances seem trivial in a world that has changed so dramatically. And yet, in spite of the characters' provincial attitudes and their stupidity about the automobile, there are many parallels between their society and modern life. One area for discussion is the influence of technology on closed societies, especially in farming communities where change is slower to occur.

The Magnificent Ambersons is a classic story of the rise and fall of a family, which is the heart of many popular novels that are not considered great literature (In 1998 The Magnificient Ambersons was selected as one of the one hundred best books of the twentieth century.) What, if anything, distinguishes Tarkington's novel from those of Judith Krantz, Danielle Steele, and other popular novelists whose stories of family misfortunes have much in common with the Ambersons?

1. Which aspects of Tarkington's writing reflect his post-Civil War upbringing?

To what degree does he regret the changes that have occurred since his youth?

2. Is there a difference in attitude towards money between Major Amberson and his son? If so, what are the differences?

3. Why did Major Amberson lose his wealth, and what could he have done to prevent it?

4. From your reading of the novel, what is Tarkington's ideal of the true value of work for the individual? Which characters meet that ideal and which do not?

5. What political values and economic views might Tarkington have held based on his opinions of industrialization and capitalism?

6. List other technological advances that were responsible for changing the social structure in America at this time.

Try to decide on the relative importance of each one.

7. To what degree was the Amberson haughtiness responsible for their economic demise? What factors were beyond their control?

8. Discuss the relative merits of marrying for love or for security in view of what happens to Isabel in her marriage and as a mother.

9. Who do you think behaves more admirably, Lucy or Isabel? Why could neither of them get "through" to George? Could they have done anything differently?

10. What combination of traits make Eugene Morgan so successful as both a businessman and a person? Contrast him with George. What advantages over Eugene does George squander?

11. How well-prepared and believable is George's repentance at the end of the book?

12. How have the struggles between duty and self-fulfillment now changed from the time of Isabel and George?

13. What parallels can be drawn between our late twentieth century and the time of the end of The Magnificent Ambersons?

Literary Precedents

When he named George Minafer's horse "Pendennis," Tarkington suggested a model for some of the characters in his novel. George himself is similar to Arthur Pendennis in William Thackeray's novel, The History of Pendennis (1848-1850). What Thackeray called "psychological incest" is portrayed in the relationship of mother and son. Helen Pendennis makes a minor deity of her son and worships him. Isabel Amberson Minafer treats her son similarly. Like Thackeray, Tarkington analyzed closely the power mothers have over their sons.

William Shakespeare, in Coriolanus (1608), also produced a character very similar to George Minafer. Caius Marcius Coriolanus is a superior man, but as the noted Shakespearean critic Alfred Harbage says of him, his weakness is an inability "to accommodate himself to reality." Insufferable in his pride, he cannot be flexible enough even to try pleasing the Roman populace and its tribunes. He is expelled from Rome. The most influential person in his life is his mother, Volumnia.

Tarkington also shares some broad affinities with Victorian novelists other than Thackeray and Charles Dickens.

Charlotte Bronte in Shirley (1849; see separate entry) wrote about a fictional world thirty-five years earlier than her own, just as Tarkington does at the beginning of The Magnificent Ambersons. Both novels are filled with many telling details and close observations that establish the social setting of the earlier period, and both novels comment "on the warped system of things," as Bronte wrote in the preface of the second edition of Jane Eyre (1847; see separate entry). The difference, is, of course, that Tarkington glances at the "warped system" and uses it to give pathos to the main story of George's humbled pride and his steps towards redemption, and that Bronte looks at it with an unwavering eye everywhere and continually in Shirley. George Eliot in Felix Holt (1866) and Middlemarch (1872) also sets novels in a period thirty to forty years before her time in a plot context with much social criticism. Eliot's social tapestries are monumental though, while Tarkington's are quite modest.

Related Titles

The Growth trilogy, of which The Magnificent Ambersons is the second volume, is an extended investigation of what obsession for material gain has done to individuals, families, and the communities in which they live. James Sheridan, the hero of The Turmoil (1915) is a highly successful businessman and president of the Sheridan Pump Works. For him the smoke pouring from his company's stacks is proof positive of his prosperity.

He runs his family like a business corporation. Two sons are destroyed when forced by their father into the business.

The third son Bibbs, an aspiring poet, becomes a successful businessman when he sacrifices his poetry and rescues his father's company, making it more profitable than ever. Materialism triumphs over the impulse to create art.

The third volume of the trilogy, The Midlander (l923), features a reformer, Dan Oliphant, who fights to have decent housing built for working people. His Ornsby Addition is opposed by merchants, city officials, older residents—all the entrenched interests. The struggle destroys him, but he lives long enough to see his dream realized.

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