

## CHAPTER FIVE

## CLYDE GRIFFITHS CONFLICTS IN ACHIEVING HIS DREAMS

The main conflict happened in "An American Tragedy" are social and psychological conflict. These conflicts do not appear in separate elements, but in an inseparable relationship to each other.

As explained in details by the writer how the elements of the novel --- character, setting and plot --- are related to each other to convey the conflict, therefore, in this chapter, the writer will only highlighted some of the most essential elements of the conflict of the story.

In 'An American Tragedy', poverty and ironically the religious dogmas and sterile moralism have become the underlying motives for any conflicts that happen to Clyde Griffiths.

Born as an ambitious, selfish and pagan son of a poor and unimportant street preacher, Clyde Griffiths has let himself enveloped in a turbulent chain of events eventually brings him to his doom. Clyde's earliest environment -- a devastating combination between a dreary and poor home and a useless religious works and mission -- has become a double cutting edge knife for Clyde's later conduct.

Clyde can not bring himself interested in these kinds of jobs -- for he 'felt himself above the type of work which was purely manual' (p.18).

Furthermore, as explained above, the society he lives in is a society deifies material and worldly success on one hand and the strict moralism and religious conventions on the other hand.

This dualism - from the beginning - has brought about a painful collision between a character so lack in everything and so ill-formed by a family so impoverished mentally and materially with the surrounding society.

Being brought up in this kind of environment so opposite to his aspirations and ambitions, Clyde tends to be rebellious and lethargic at times. Discontents and despises this condition, he becomes the prey of misguided values he finds in his wandering in the world of sanctioned America; very much contradictive with his own family background -- the works in America's luxurious and prominent hotels and in the streets. The hotel life is in fact his college, the miniature of the Lycurgus' social elite he will later break into.

From these values, he learns much about being a 'pleasure pursuer'. There is much for one can have and be in this world if only he has enough money to be the one. Being a materially succesful person means '..to have somebody waits on you, to do anything..'. Contrasted to the impoverished condition of his religious family, the material world seems to be more

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Instead of giving him the 'pleasure pursuit' principle, the hotel life, especially in Chicago is also giving him the reason to make a false breakaway from it.

In this stage, Clyde works in a hotel mostly attended by the most successful persons in America. During this time, he is able to develop a new and more beneficial traits in his personality, also the determination to eliminate all the elements of misguided sex which has brought his downfall in Kansas City.

As previously explained, these new traits are just on the surface. Clyde deludes himself to abandon his former 'cheap desire and false gratification' only to create a new one in a different manner. He deludes himself that he has already changed to be a better man.

As a social climber in a society so long ignores and neglects him, Clyde tries his best to be aspired to the world of the 'rich and powerful'. He suffers a lot trying to make a firm foothold in slippery social world, and working his way to success -- nevertheless, the 'pleasure principle' or id of his soul and unconsciousness can not go in harmony with the 'reality principle' of his actual condition, being poor and lack in everything.

This has given him an 'illogical' reason to unconsciously rebel to the norms long established within the structure of the society. This rebellion actually is nothing new if his basic traits and characteristic are considered carefully.

When eventually Clyde comes to work in his uncle's company in Lycurgus, the proud Clyde is dissatisfied because he is sent to the company's lowest position -- remember his former attitude towards minor job -- and once more he must suffer from the indifference and negligence of his rich relatives. The condition in a way is similar with his condition in Kansas City. Therefore, with his traits unchanged, once again Clyde is back to his former attitude in Kansas City, rebellious and lethargic at times.(p.18)

The rebellion visualized as a clandestine rebel in the form of an illicit relationship with Roberta Alden, a working girl coming from a religious family as poor as his own. It is rebellion not only toward the indifference of his rich relatives, but also toward the neglect and suppression of the society in general.

It is important to be noted that in this novel, characters are moved by religious ethos, moral restriction and social abstractions in their life and based themselves on them, either in judgment or conduct. Nevertheless, the fatality lies in the fact that none of these conventions and abstractions are taken for a pure faith.

The sterile moralism and rigid religious teaching of his parents can not provide him with enough strength to resist this desire problem or how to overcome it. The condition is similar with that of Roberta. The

strict training of her upbringing can not make her say 'no' to Clyde's indecent proposal. She can not go against Clyde's seduction because although she based herself on these moral, religious and social abstractions, still, these motives are never taken as a pure faith.

The seduction scene itself is very powerful in conveying the conflict of the story. From the beginning, both Clyde and Roberta have unconsciously played the painful game of sexual politics and economics. It is true that he realizes the danger and difficulty the relationship will lead, but his ego and ambitions will never permit him to pull back his demand to Roberta.

In Roberta's part, Clyde is much more than a superior and a lover, he is also a Griffiths, which means a lot. A Griffiths means a representative of a much higher social class, the higher world very much different from her own 'basement world' (p.190). Roberta yields to Clyde's blandishment as a result of her pathetic effort to escape from this world. Ironically, her position is similar to Clyde's position to Sondra. Besides that, her surrender is also caused by the natural 'overmastering urge of repressed and feared desire knocking loudly for recognition' (p.289).

For Clyde, the cause should be traced back to his years of experiences and hardships in life. Roberta is just a surface to bounce off his sexual timidity with two women so unlike her -- the sly Hortense and the

sensual Rita, the surface where he can project his rebellious feeling, anger, resentment and repressed desire.

The force of fate is one elemental force in the life of human being that can not be avoided. By the twist of this fate, Clyde meets Sondra Finchley, the emblem and embodiment of worldly success whom the grasping Clyde always dreams of.

Clyde finds sex as the embodiment of his dreams of delight. He finds it as the symbol of his extravagant love that always goes with show, pleasure, wealth, position and desires (p.806). Clyde adores the beauty and the appeal of sex just like he admires the luxurious lobby of the Green Davidson. All of these fantasies are projected in Sondra Finchley, the rich, beautiful and alluring Sondra. He will never grow tired of Sondra as long as he still admires and preserves his American dream and flaming desires for pleasure.

This condition is different with that of Roberta. As previously explained, from the beginning, this poor and religious, country girl is just the surface where Clyde can project his entire resentment to the society and his lack in everything, his sexual timidity and his suppressed personal affirmation. He betrays Roberta as the symbol for his fear towards poverty and the rigid religious and moral dogmas of the society, a revolt towards the hard and restricted life.

In this case, sex functioned as once again the double edged knife. On one side, sex is the mean for Clyde to projected his rebellious feelings (Roberta), and on the other side as the device to aspire to and identify himself with the upper social world (Sondra) . Despite his view about sex, for him sex will always surrender to the force of social will, fear, calculation and snobbism.

As previously explained, Clyde only knows money, worldly success and the desire for sexual gratification as the source his happiness . In turn these give him the psychic energy needed to retain these dreams.

This energy enables him to make an effort to retain Sondra and gets rid of the pregnant Roberta. The pregnancy, as explained in the previous chapter, is the result of Clyde's fatal sympathetic sensitivity. He pities Roberta because of the emotional similarity between his experience and hers. But, as previously explained, the nature of his own self will never allow him to pity her more than he pities himself. Ironically, the sequence of this pregnancy scene is the same with the sequence of accident that kills Roberta -- he feels sorry and for a moment tries to help the drowning Roberta, but this brief moment does not last long to enable him to help Roberta. Why should he pity Roberta if she has not even pitied him a little to let him go his way ?

The pregnancy which supposed to link him permanently to Roberta, on the contrary, has even brought him to the farthest possible distance of emotion from her.

Clyde and Roberta do not know how to retain the feelings and emotions that has brought them together at at the beginning. Both lack in character and emotion for these. Clyde can not and will never abandon his attitude and dreams toward material success, while Roberta keeps on seeing him with adoration, as the symbol of the higher social class than her own.

Employing this attitude, Clyde is not exaggerating when saying that the pregnancy will never bring them together. It will always be a mere physical occurrence for a normal girl instead of a more emotional one.

This pregnancy, socially is a slap for Clyde's ambitions and egoism. It is an anticlimax to his brief, spontaneous rebellion, because on the other side of his conscience, Clyde is very much terrified to the force of society in general. He understands that he has broke one of the most sensitive norms of the society at that time. As a result of this extreme deviancy, one thing for sure, the destruction of his ambitions and dreams to have a luxurious life..

Psychologically, Roberta's pregnancy is the barrier to his happiness. As an active and intense

pursuer of pleasure, it blocks his most basic and essential desire, the id and libido for pleasure.

This eventually leads to the event when Clyde contemplates in killing Roberta.

Clyde's feeling about pleasure, particularly his libido is in conflict with the superego after the reality principle or the ego can not find any acceptable way out for the problem. He can not find any way to help her and his inept efforts has failed in finding a way for abortion. His ego says that he can not let him own self marry the poor Roberta, and surely he can not make this concealed blandishment forever unrevealed.

The superego, or the morality principle, eventually can not block the pleasure principle or id demands, -- so enormous the predicament to Clyde's interest and ambitions. The society will never accept any of this kind of predicament, and it will severely reject to it. Eventually, although he has based himself in the moral and social abstractions to find the most acceptable way out, Clyde has made the decision to kill Roberta, the barrier to his happiness. It is a fulfilment to the id's demand, which from the beginning has the nature of seeking pleasure and self destruction, and the decision to kill Roberta, becomes a way is his self destruction.

Socially, Clyde is trapped inside a society which structurally gives a great emphasis on individual

success but on the other hand, excludes some of the member the possibility to achieve the success. (American System of Criminal Justice, 1983 : 38) Those who are trapped inside this society's mousetrap like him will choose a criminal means as a way out.

There is an irony of the conflict happening within and outside Clyde. The sterile moralism and religious teachings of a highly conventional society has evidently failed in giving him a strong foothold in the slippery structure of the social circle and to overcome the difficulties of his puny life.

Clyde tries to resort to materialism but in this context he also fails. At the end, the conflict resolves with a dead end. The society wins again, Clyde is trapped in a heavy mechanical social convention and is destroyed.

