

American Literature & Culture
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Mod 02 Lecture Number 13
Theodore Dreiser An American Tragedy (Lecture 10b)

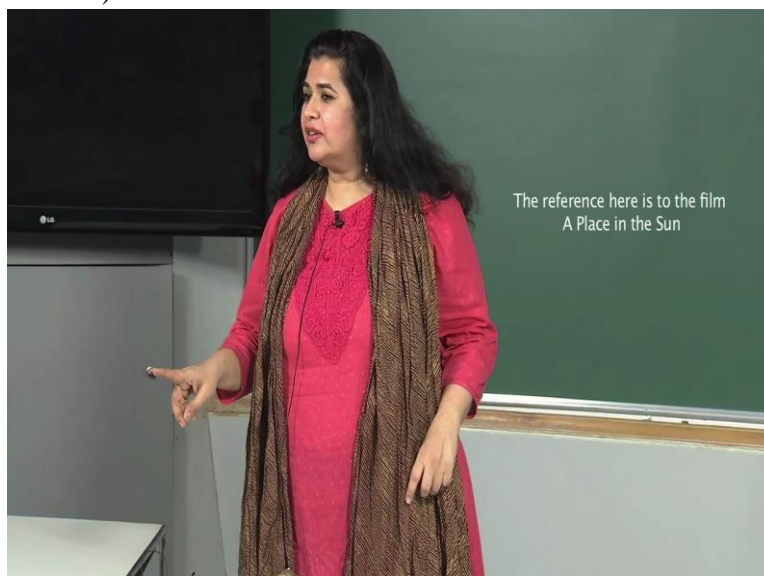
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(Professor – student conversation starts)

Professor: As I was telling you the other day, the film is more a love story and more the love triangle becomes more prominent than the social issue. Dreiser's novel is all about social issue.

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Professor: Dreiser's is a naturalistic setting, Ok. The novel, the movie is more of a romantic tale. Ok, therefore the way, now I was just wondering if you could get, if you had the time to go through the rest of the book 2, because book 2 is heavily dominated for half, for the 50% of its volume by how he adjusts himself to this family, to his newfound cousins and the rich cousins and the Griffiths family and he starts making his, creating his own space in the factory and his little fling with Roberta. Ok, half of the book 2 is all about that. The second half is more about his interaction with Sondra, ok. Now, in the light of this scene, Ok tell me something about the relationship, the interest and relationship that Dreiser had?

The scene that you just watched, does the idea that this man, this young man is absolutely blown away by this setting, this kind of a setting, by these kinds of people and the beauty of Sondra or Angela in the movie, do you think that comes across effectively? Ok, the way his body language, the way he starts becoming very self-conscious when she is around, Ok. So all that, now in the movie it is just a poor boy meets rich girl. In the novel, its how the poor girl, poor boy uses this rich girl to go up the social ladder, Ok. In the movie, I don't think that idea is so well articulated because after all it's a love story, remember that. So when we, generally we talk about adaptations, these are the issues that should be looked into. It's an adaptation, but it's an adaptation of a different kind.

Therefore perhaps that may the reason why the director chose to change the names of the characters. That, look I am just taking the brief outline from the, of the novel but I am not actually, I am giving it my own spin to it. I think that's the idea. Also pay attention to Elizabeth Taylor's movements, the fluid movements, the gown, Ok. Her gowns were much talked about. They became a fashion symbols at that point in a cinematic history because the focus was on her loveliness, Ok and his beauty also, his masculine beauty, her feminine grace. So it is a coming together of two major stars here, Ok, not about the social propaganda that Dreiser was interested in.

Now coming to the social part of it, let's go to chapter 37. Book 2 chapter 37... Roberta is pregnant. Yes, Roberta is now pregnant. We have already seen the physical intimacy between Clyde and Roberta. Ok, socially now what he is trying to tell us, what the writer, what Dreiser is trying to tell us is that these were, these occurrences were nothing uncommon in that society. Ok, these were a matter, you know, these things, these kinds of pregnancies

happen with alarming regularity. Now what was the reason? One reason was the extreme puritanical nature of American society at that period which prohibited men and women mixing, freely mixing together.

Ok and the idea is whatever, whenever the society gets too repressive, too controlling especially about mingling of opposite sexes there is always trouble. But here is talking, yeah and then there is also that ridiculous rule in his Uncle's factory that men and women shouldn't socialize. I mean, why not? This is a rule, I think at many other, many workplaces even today. Many cities in many countries that there shouldn't be mixing, people shouldn't interact socially outside the working places. Now how, what is the appropriacy of that and how sensible that rule is, we wouldn't know. Ok but then the question is always why not? Ok, but then, anyway. Now coming to page, chapter 37 I am on page 414, four hundred and fourteen.

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Professor: Now we were talking about naturalism and how naturalism is interested in looking at human beings as they are and not portraying them in an idealized way. Now there is one school of thought that looks at man as an ideal creation, ideal as with capital I. Ok. Naturalism looked at the *bête humaine*, the human beast. And here we had a glimpse of that when Clyde even refuses to accompany Roberta for this, very serious appointment and she has an appointment with a, a doctor who sort of specializes, supposedly specializes in terminating pregnancies, unwanted pregnancies. Clyde has somehow got information about this particular doctor from a friend of his. What are we looking at? What kind of social condition are we looking at?

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Professor: She is sad but she has no other choice. She has to come to terms with that?

Student: There are lots of consequences of breaking social

Professor: Taboos,

Student: Yeah.

Professor: Yeah so there are lots of social taboos now. rather than getting into the morality and see, all religions, let's not get into the religious part of it but all religions prohibit abortion. Do you agree to that? There is not a single religion that says, Ok goes ahead, if you don't want this pregnancy, go and get the fetus aborted. He; now think of those, these ideas at this point in American History or in any history. This is very serious issue. Right, a woman's right to abortion. Now in America, all this came into being only in the late 60s, the Counter

Culture period. Then there was actually a law. A law had to be enacted, Right to Abortion. Are you aware of that? Right to Abortion and this particular law came into existence, which is very surprising, as late as 1960s.

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Professor: So what was happening before that; black marketing of abortions. Ok, so doctors charging

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Professor: exorbitantly for these kinds of abortions and when this particular doctor feels that she has come all by herself, all by herself, she has no other companion, she doesn't have enough money, Ok and it may be a risky proposition, what does he do? He turns her down, Ok, and where does that leave her? So I am not going into the details of, I am more interested in the, ideological approach, that Dreiser takes. Now Dreiser has no moral compunctions

here. He is looking at the whole thing in a very objective way, Ok. The doctors take, the doctor takes a moral position. Look at it, where do you get that?

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Student: (())

Professor: Yes,

Student: She goes to meet the doctor by herself. There is line where

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Student: he says he is more or less irritated by these young scamps of boys and girls, who were so free to exercise the normal functions of their nature

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Professor: Great, now for me, I am on page 427. 415, yes, but let me go to page 421; it is a very lengthy chapter where they just discuss the moral issues and the ethics of abortion. Page 421

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Professor: where he advises, this may not be very serious as you think. I know you are probably very much frightened, but it is not unusual for a woman to miss a period at any rate, without an examination, it would not be possible to be sure et cetera, et cetera and then on page 422.

As I told you before Miss Howard, if that is your name, I am seriously opposed to operations of this kind, just as I am to the folly that brings girls and young men to the point where they seem to think they are necessary. A physician may not interfere in a case of this kind unless he is willing to spend ten years in prison, and I think that law is fair enough. Not that I don't realize how painful your present situation appears to you. But there are always those who are willing to help a girl in your state, providing she doesn't wish to do something which is morally and legally wrong. And to the very best advice I can give you now is that you do nothing at all now or at any time. Better go home and see your parents and confess. It will be much better--much better, I assure you. Don't forget there is a life there--a human--if it is really as you think. A human life which you are seeking to end and that I cannot help you to do.

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Professor: Now he takes a very religious and a very moral position and what is Dreiser's opinion on this? What is Dreiser's opinion of this? Now I am no longer interested in what's the doctor's opinion. We have already seen he is a morally righteous person. What does Dreiser think of such people?

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Professor: Entire episode, now this is a very important chapter in the book. The entire episode is treated with extreme detachment and objectivity. Nowhere does Dreiser comes forward and starts moralizing or sermonizing or taking sides with Roberta or going against the doctor, whatever. He just presents you the way things are.

Student: Does he find the righteousness very farcical?

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Professor: Exactly, Ok because it is so pro men

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Professor: and so so against women.

Student: And this point in the story is actually, really a important

Professor: A turning point

Student: Yeah, it could have prevented the ultimate tragedy

Professor: Ultimate tragedy

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Professor: yes, yeah

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Professor: so please note these things, this turning down of this girl's request proves to be the turning point. So who is her real killer? We have been talking about the social pyramid, that people like Gramsci and Althusser talk about. Ok, so at the top, you have all these moral custodians of society. You have parents. The young people have made a mistake, Ok, so called mistake, or the folly as doctor rightly or wrongly points out but then is it only her fault? Ok and also the point that society was such and we have such puritanical standards of moral behavior that there was nothing like called sex education. Ok and that's what Dreiser finds extremely disturbing, that when men and women are thrown together so often and so much to this degree then why not, why aren't they educated about having safe sex

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Professor: and this is revolutionary point to make

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Professor: at that period in history.

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Student: I didn't understand one thing. Didn't Clyde hear from someone that this doctor performs these?

Professor: Exactly, yeah

Student: So why does refuse to that?

Student: Isn't he refusing or only

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Student: after realizing that she doesn't have money to pay?

Professor: She doesn't have a husband

Student: Yeah

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Student: That is what I told you

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Professor: She doesn't have, and the way she talks, it slowly gives away the fact that she is not married. So she is not married. Her boyfriend or husband whoever is supposed to be around her; he is not there. Later on in the same novel, when in book 3, when the murder has been committed or whether it is a murder in the first place or not, that is also very ambiguous. If you haven't read the novel so far, please go through it. By the end of the second book, book 2 you will feel whether he actually he committed the murder or was it an accident?

And if he committed, he actually committed the murder, because that's what he had in mind, that if she dies, this pregnant girlfriend of mine dies, then I am free to marry Sondra. Ok but

then in book 3, now any normal, or not a normal, normal is not a right word, any regular conventional novel would have ended with Roberta's death and a quick resolution for the other characters, whether he ends up with her or whether he ends up getting electrocuted. It doesn't happen. Book 3 is all there, I mean, any regular novel would have ended ideally at that point that Roberta is drowned and Clyde gets caught and gets punished. It's not that simple here.

Ok, that's, book 3 is what takes this novel to another level, therefore it became a document of social justice or social, you know, debate in American history .That's the relevance, because it is book 3 that brings into all these, brings all these discussions and debates about ethical, moral and legal aspects of sex and the nature of murder that was conducted, the nature of murder or the murder that didn't happen, Ok and the nature of capital punishment. Whether it should be there or not because he, he maintains he didn't kill her. It was an accident. Ok, so now book 3 is all about, now coming back to the same thing, at the top of the pyramid, the hierarchy of social institutions. Who are the people at the top?

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Professor: Do you think this doctor is a part of that, yeah part of that pyramid at the top? In what capacity;

Student: Specialist

Professor: As an educated, as an expert, as some kind of a moral torchbearers, so doctor a respectable position, so these are the bourgeois, she is the working class, it's that kind of, yeah. Now there's a distance between, he refuses to see her point of view. At the end of the chapter, she is literally in tears and begging, please do this; otherwise I won't be able to show my face around. Ok and he increasingly hardens his stand. Note that. So these are the things you should pay attention to, that how, so it's not, perhaps the writing style is a bit meandering, if you are reading Dreiser, but it is the, it is what he is trying to say is more important.

Ok, so how the people, the so-called moral torch bearers and beacons of hope and all these things, how increasingly they, they, they take this very hard-line kind of a position which makes it very difficult for women to escape from the clutches of people, because see what's her fault in it? And is why that fellow allowed to let go so, so scot-free, absolutely blameless. Nobody even talks about it. It's your fault. You got yourself into. Now go to your parents and confess. So you have the idea, the parental authority at the top, you have the, you have your society, you have the educated people and in book 3, the entire social system is in place, the entire machinery is in place.

And what is that machinery; the law, the judiciary, Ok the law, the legal system, the rich versus poor, so law is different for the rich and for the poor. So Clyde gets electrocuted by the end of the story because he is poor. That is also there. So it is not just like open and shut case. And it's not a morally very black space that Clyde occupies. He is in a very gray area. Therefore if you have read the novel and if you have paid attention to the language, there is emphasis on his grey suit, constantly we are told, at the time of the murder, he was wearing a grey suit. When he attends his trial, he is wearing a grey suit.

And I was just wondering why Dreiser is talking so much about, so then, the color comes into the picture. It's the grey suit that he is; it is a morally very ambivalent character. Ok, he is what, what the society turned him into. Roberta behaves in a way; now again Roberta absolutely, by the, right now she is a sympathetic character but later on in the same book, in book 2, she starts suffocating Clyde. Ok she keeps on writing him these whining and whinging kinds of letters, that if you don't marry me, I will come and I will destroy you. If you don't marry me, I will come and expose you. I will tell it to your uncle. I will tell it to the people you work with. Ok, this sort of alienates us from her.

Now we are no longer looking at her as a, this suffering sympathetic figure. Ok, she turns into this annoying kind of a creature, Ok who is just not willing to see his point of view. Now what is he trying to do here? He is just trying to, he may be a cad, Ok and Dreiser has no sympathy for his hero, absolutely. So therefore my repeated references to the film; the film maker has all his sympathies for the leading characters, Elizabeth Taylor and Montgomery Clift. He is more interested in their beauty, Ok. So therefore it completely shifts the ideological position that Dreiser takes. But Dreiser here is very clear that man, that hero here is a scamp. Ok, young (()) or whatever he calls him.

But the woman is not entirely blameless. Again he takes yet another approach to Roberta's character also. Now what Clyde with his half baked, and we are told very often, very frequently he is a semi-educated person. From this kind of a person, now suddenly an opportunity is presented to him in the form of the beautiful Sondra and what does she tell him? By this time when Roberta is pregnant, 3 months, 4 months into her pregnancy, what is his equation with Sondra?

Student: (())

Professor: Not just closer, not just closer

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Professor: he is getting invited to all her country parties and

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Professor: she is away picnicking in the country house along with the group of other highly placed friends. And Clyde is actually invited to join Sondra and her friends in the country side

Student: She is starting to realize that may be it is possible for him to now be a part of this circle.

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Professor: Not just he starts realizing

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Professor: but what happens is that, this increasing closeness between Sondra and Clyde, Sondra's mother starts getting concerned about this, this relationship and she sort of warns her daughter that he is not really one of the Griffiths, although he is related by blood, he has no money. He is not one of us. Stay away from him. That is also there. Now what is her reaction to this? She goes and tells, and this is important. This is extremely important. While Roberta is pregnant, at the same time Sondra, unobvious, oblivious to Sondra, Roberta's presence in Clyde's life, she approaches Clyde and says, look right now I am only 17 years and a few months.

After a couple of months, I will be 18; I will come of age, Ok. If mother does not allow us we will elope. It doesn't really matter to me. I don't want my parent's consent or blessings, and I am, she has a brother I think. In the novel, there is a brother, Stuart? Stuart I think yeah. So she says that, once I; Stuart likes you. He will help us. All my friends, within this friend circle, you are accepted. They will also help us. Now the only thing that is left to us is, wait for me to come of age. I will be legally 18 and then we will escape, we will elope, we will get married, we will come back to my family.

What will they do? And what can, they are not going to throw me out or disinherit me. They love me too much for that. Ok, now what, this semi educated almost small town boy, rustic boy who has had only bad experiences throughout his life, suddenly an opportunity like this appears. It's not just like he is imagining things. An opportunity of a lifetime is actually being presented to him on a platter, you see that? Do you think Sondra is also in way, complicit in whatever happens, her complicity in his situation?

Student: (())

Professor: But doesn't she see the enormous social chasm and gap between them? She is doing this to, for her it's a game.

Student: I think she would be doing to annoy

Professor: She is doing this to, for her this is a game

Student: She is just using him.

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Student: Initially it was....

Professor: Initially yeah,
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Professor: but she actually believed that she is in love. So notion of love, the idealize, so this is also something that Dreiser is interested in, that most of us fall not in love with people but with this notion, with this idealized kind of love. I can give up everything for you but can you? See, she has tested right after making this suggestion when Roberta's murder, when the news comes in what is the first thing that she does? She has written all these love letters to, now again there is a juxtaposition of these two things happening.

On one hand you have Roberta writing heart-rending letters to Clyde that, you know that grow increasingly threatening in tenor. After a while, first she pleads then she says I am so alone, she is sent off to her parents' house. She has no other way. So Clyde says, for a couple of months, because now your pregnancy may start showing, why don't go home and start living, start staying with your parents on their farm? Ok and she does that, because she feels she needs some rest. In the factory conditions, working conditions she cannot rest. So she leaves and she stays with her family for a month or so and she is happy but from there, sometimes she writes, three letters a day, or four letters a day and keeps on posting.

So Clyde is, clever enough never to write to her, because in his mind, he thinks if I don't write to her, there is no way that anyone can ever connect me to her. But he does not realize that law does not think that way. Law is not that so simple or so foolish, because the moment she gets killed, what does the police, what do the detectives do? First thing, they go to her house, Ok. They can track her. That is very easily, that can be easily done. They go, track her

down, track her family down, they go to the farm and the mother says yes, she used to send letters every day.

They go to the post office, and there the post office, the postmaster has all the details of the address she was sending the letter to and there was only one address, Clyde Griffiths, in Lycurgus. Lycurgus, by the way is a fictional part. Actually it is meant to be New York. So we are given references to New York throughout, but Lycurgus is a part of New York which really historically, geographically doesn't exist but we are just, because may be, you know Clyde Griffiths; sorry Dreiser may not want to give a, present a novel like a documentary.

Student: Like there are

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Student: Greek references throughout the?

Professor: So are you trying to read a Greek

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Professor: tragedy kind of reference here?

Student: There are other Grecian characters

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Professor: Yes, give me some example,

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Professor: while you are at it. Chapter 38, please, the first effect of the doctor's decision was to shock and terrify them both, Roberta and Clyde beyond measure for apparently now here was illegitimacy and disgrace for Roberta, exposure and destruction for Clyde. Ok

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Professor: so both of them Ok so it's not that now they are no longer functioning as one unit. It's disgrace for her and its social destruction for him. Yeah, therefore this child had to be, or this pregnancy had to be aborted.

Now coming back to the letter writing, now while she is sending those letters to her, to Clyde Griffiths, at the same time you have Sondra's letters to Clyde where she professes undying love and did you notice, she uses that baby talk.

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Professor: MY DEAR CLYDE:

I am writing to tell you that I am coming back to Lycurgus. I simply can't stay here any longer. Mamma worries and wonders why I cry so much, and I am just about sick. I know I promised to stay until the 25th or 26th, but then you said you would write me, but you never have--only an occasional telephone message when I am almost crazy. I woke up this morning and couldn't help crying right away and this afternoon my headache is dreadful.

Ok and the last few lines.

You have said you would come, and sometimes I just know you will. But at other times I get to thinking about other things and I'm just as certain you won't, especially when you don't write or telephone. I wish you would write and say that you will come just so I can stand to stay here. Just as soon as you get this, I wish you would write me and tell me the exact day you can come--not later than the first, really, because I know I cannot stand to stay here any longer than then.

This letter, coupled as it was with a threat to come to Lycurgus, was sufficient to induce in Clyde a state not unlike Roberta's; to think that he had no additional, let alone plausible, excuse to offer Roberta whereby she could be induced to delay her final and imperative demand. He racked his brains. He must not write her any long and self-incriminating letters.

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Professor: Now there is another, now all, how would person like Clyde, who is not a criminal, basically he is not crime, but *la bête humaine* inside and he comes across the news item in the papers that there is a reported incident where a man in thirties and woman in her early twenties, they went for a boat ride. The boat capsized, the body of the young woman has been found and the man's body has never been found. Now he starts thinking about it. And then only conclusion he can draw from this episode is that, perhaps the man was in a similar situation, perhaps a married man because of his age, a younger girl, he got her in trouble and the best way to get rid of her was to get rid of her was to drown her. The man escaped and he escaped, and he, you know, he never got caught. So, don't you think that I can also get away with blue murder like that?

At the same time, you also have example of his sister Esta. Once upon a time, she got into a similar trouble. Now she is happily married to a nice enough guy. Why can't Roberta end up like that? Why can't she go somewhere, give birth to this baby, Ok, I will pay for it but I can pay for it only if she allows me to marry Roberta, why is she creating so much, sorry Sondra, why is she creating so much of trouble out of nothing? So this is the state of mind, this is the frame of mind, a society which is so much prejudiced against women, Ok and also these are questions, these basic human rights that why can't abortion be legalized? If it was only legalized, all this, this major tragedy might not have occurred, any comments? I wanted to read out Sondra's letters also because it is so interesting against the backdrop of this other girl's letters. How did I lose that? Anyone can help me here?

Student: The part where she talks

Professor: Can you tell me that part?

Student: 446

Professor: 446. Let's go to page 446, although she writes also in this vein

Student: (())

Professor: Yes,

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Professor: it's end of chapter 40

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Professor: and 446, so the last. So you know when, she has all, Clyde is going through all these problems there is Sondra who sat next to him, and who previously had been whispering

at intervals of the plans for the summer, now instead of resuming the patter, whispered: "What come over de sweet phing?" now whatever that means.

When Clyde appeared to be the least reduced in mind she most affected this patter with him, since it had an almost electric, if sweetly tormenting effect on him. "His baby-talking girl," he sometimes called her. "Facey all dark now. Little while ago facey all smiles. Come make facey all nice again. Smile at Sondra. Squeeze Sondra's arm like good boy, Clyde."

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Professor: Now what kind of a talk is this? Some faceys are very smiley now.

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Professor: Now Ashwin

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Professor: if you had a girl friend like this, how would you respond?

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Professor: No idea? Well you know

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Professor: it is all; to me it looked quite silly. Yes, it is extremely silly that, but you know, perhaps Sondra is too young and too inexperienced. That's the only explanation because she often resorts to this kind of; this is not a stray incident. She even sends letters in this way. There are several. May be when they catch those letters, the detectives come across those two women; and they automatically sympathize with Roberta. Because when they see all the letters written in this style, they can understand the difference between the two women. Ok, so the binaries are very well established.

One is always so serious, so pathetic. All the time she is clinging on, and this one, she is so happy, almost like an airhead, as we call such girls; dumb, blonde perhaps but empty headed girl, yeah. And this is particularly important because when she starts making all these, makes Clyde dream about this kind of a golden future together, and coming from a person like this, yeah, I think Dreiser is trying to tell us that, you know, Clyde had no sense, and where was getting himself into? He actually took this girl very seriously, her words very seriously because what happens, the first thing, when the news of Clyde murdering Roberta comes out, what is the first thing, I am coming back to my previous question, what is the first thing that Sondra does?

She goes running to her dad and says I have written letters to this guy, what do I do about it? And she weeps and weeps and weeps and then the father, who is a very, described in great detail as a imposing man and a well-connected man and this and that, then he says Ok, the first thing you should do is that, get out of this city and this country, there is a country house,

farmhouse, a mansion of some kind on an island, Ok and we have a house there. So all of you should disappear and go there and be absolutely non-committal to the press and to the detectives et cetera, and idea is, your name shouldn't come. This is, throughout the investigation, I mean, such a big case, it's such a serious issue.

Her name is never divulged either to the papers and it doesn't come out in the legal case also, in legal debate also, in the court also. That is what Dreiser also trying to tell us that how could one girl go absolutely unscathed, Ok, although she is also responsible for his condition, Ok. She took love as a game. Ok, he took the entire thing extremely seriously because of the way he was. Ok. It's a great psychological reading into a certain kind of a mind. I would like to finish the novel tomorrow. Ok, so what I will do, I want you to finish book 2 absolutely and come having read, we will quickly about second book and finish with the third book, alright.

(Professor – student conversation ends)