



Paramount's "A Place In The Sun" starring Montgomery Clift, Shelley Winters, right, and Elizabeth Taylor was based on the real-life events of the Gillette murder case.

1951 film invites comparisons

By **DAVE DELLECESE**
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The 1951 film, "A Place in the Sun," was based on Theodore Dreiser's novel "An American Tragedy" — a work of fiction based on the real-life events of the Grace Brown/Chester Gillette case.

The film starring Montgomery Clift, Shelley Winters and Elizabeth Taylor was nominated for nine Academy Awards, and won six, including best directing, best editing, and best screenplay.

It told the story of George Eastman, a poor man toiling in his wealthy uncle's factory where he meets fellow worker, Alice Tripp, with whom he begins a secret relationship that could become scandalous when she becomes pregnant.

Eastman finds himself torn when he meets the beautiful, well-to-do Angela Vickers. Though the movie differs from the real-life case, the many similarities make for some good conversation. It was with that in mind that the Observer-Dispatch screened the film for viewers. They came away with some different takes.



"He planned everything so perfectly and definitely had the motive. Marrying Alice would have ruined the life he had planned for himself. The fact that he tried to run also increases his guilt in my mind."

HARRISON LANDRY
— New Hartford High School advanced placement English student.



"I sympathize with George, because he seemed like your archetypical everyman. What happened to him could happen to any of us. He seems to be just a normal person who has made a series of unwise decisions. He's a difficult character to dislike, despite his actions."

DAVID J. PLESCIA
— Proctor High School English teacher



"I have seen people become so involved with class situations that they will take advantage of the disadvantaged in order to meet the expectations of others, especially those they hold in high esteem."

KAY LANAUX
— community service volunteer

Former Utica reporter revisits case

By **DAVE DELLECESE**
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Craig Brandon's 1986 non-fiction book "Murder in the Adirondacks, An American Tragedy Revisited" brings to life Chester Gillette, Grace Brown and his trial for killing her.

As a reporter for the Utica newspapers, Brandon wrote a lengthy article on the 75th anniversary of the murder. Now living in New Hampshire, Brandon will attend several local events this year marking the murder's centennial.

He took time last week to answer a few questions about the case, its impact and what it's meant to him.

Observer-Dispatch: Why do you think people are still fascinated with this case 100 years later?

Brandon: Unlike the Scott Peterson case, which it superficially resembles, the Gillette case was more than just a sensational murder trial.

For one thing you had those remarkable letters from Grace Brown that had such an impact on everyone in the courtroom and readers around the world.

Spectators at the trial said it was as

if the voice of the victim had returned from the grave to bring her murderer to justice. Her words have since then been immortalized in (Theodore) Dreiser's novel and last year's opera.

There is also an unsolvable puzzle. While most people agree that Gillette was guilty, the evidence has always been contradictory and no one has ever been able to figure out a theory of what happened that ties up all the loose ends.

And then, of course, there is the fact the story was turned into a classic American novel, two famous movies and even an opera. What other murder case can claim that level of attention?

O-D: Some people and accounts believe that Grace's letters displayed a sense of depression and possible suicidal tendencies. Do you think there is any merit to this?

Brandon: Absolutely. I counted 14 separate sections in the letters in which Grace said she wanted to die or welcomed death and even at one point threatened to throw herself into the river.

While the letters were very influential in stirring up sympathy for the victim, they were also the best evidence for the defense's case that Grace committed suicide.

But I think it's difficult for readers to separate true depression and sui-

dal tendencies from a late Victorian tendency towards melodrama.

After all, the purpose of her letters was not to honestly describe her emotional state, but to convince Chester to keep his promise to take her away.

O-D: What do you see as the biggest questions left unanswered 100 years later?

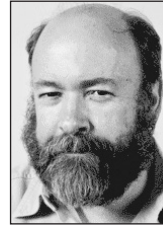
Brandon: There are a lot of them. For me, the biggest mystery is what on Earth Grace and Chester were planning for their trip to the Adirondacks. Her letters are frustratingly silent on this point.

My guess is that the plan was to find a place for her to stay until the baby was born and she could give it up for adoption.

That would explain why Chester brought only a small suitcase and she brought an entire trunk. He was just there to find a place for her to stay. There is absolutely no evidence for this theory, however.

And then there is the question of whether Gillette actually confessed just before his execution.

His mother said he did, but the written statement Gillette distributed is not a confession but a statement to the youth of America. If his mother knew what happened why didn't she tell anyone?



BRANDON

Read more Q&A with Craig Brandon online at uticaOD.com

Author's style remains influential today

By **CASSAUNDR A BABER**
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Theodore Dreiser, author of "An American Tragedy," may have been a man before his time.

"Dreiser seemed to open up a kind of territory in writing that other people were avoiding," said Austin Briggs, Hamilton College English professor. "He was much more realistic."

Dreiser opens the door to the dark side of the American dream. He explores what can happen when desire for wealth overwhelms moral sensitivities, Briggs said.

Briggs said to read Dreiser's novel based on the Chester Gillette/Grace Brown case, is to read into a statement about materialism in American society. The novel, published in 1925, remains relevant today.

"There's a great deal of power to these novels," he said. "Shortly after it was published it was made into a successful play in 1931, it was made into a film and then again 'A Place in the Sun' was an extremely successful and popular story, so there's something about this story."

"There's something true in it that there's some problem with the materialism

in American life."

Dreiser's style and thinking is still evident today in modern film, Briggs said. He alluded to Woody Allen's recent film "Match Point" as purely Dreiser.

Brian Ure, a retired Holland Patent teacher, said the novel is an important piece of American naturalism — a writing style that depicted social problems and viewed people as helpless victims of larger social and economic forces.

"At the time the story of (Gillette and Brown) was so taboo, he couldn't cover it factually, so he used fiction to expose an ill of society," Ure said.

Opera highlights 'Tragedy'

The Metropolitan Opera in New York City was the scene in December of "An American Tragedy," the opera based on the 1920s book of the same name by Theodore Dreiser, which is based on the Chester Gillette/Grace Brown affair. A revival with some of the same cast is scheduled for sometime in 2008, although dates have not been confirmed.

For a full story on the opera, see Jessica Ryan's story on www.uticaOD.com

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