

MOBIL MASTERPIECE THEATRE'S AMERICAN COLLECTION

Education Site — Funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting

[THE SONG OF THE LARK](#) [CORA UNASHAMED](#) [THE AMERICAN](#) [THE PONDER HEART](#)

WHAT KILLED JESSIE STUDEVANT? By Dan Sanders

*“They called in old Dr. Brown,
but within a month (as quick
as that) Jessie died.”*

In the stark narrative of *Cora Unashamed*, Langston Hughes laments the death of a young girl in a lone, terse paragraph. As all great artists do, Hughes leaves us wanting more: what were the elements of history, law and morality that converged to kill Jessie Studevant in 1934 rural America? A remarkable book by Leslie J. Reagan, *When Abortion Was a Crime* (University of California Press, 1997) provides some answers.

“The disaster of the Great Depression touched all aspects of women’s lives, including the most intimate ones,” writes Reagan. “Women had abortions on a massive scale.” In the United States of the 1930s, the practice was against the law, but extremely common because children were

unaffordable to many Americans. The tactics used to suppress abortion today — organized protest, politicization, and terrorism — did not widely occur until it was legal, forty years after the time of *Cora*. For women of the era, however, reproductive risks were numerous. One sword, AIDS, was not yet pointed at our species, but another, inferior birth control, was. Contraceptive devices were unreliable, difficult to obtain, and embarrassing to ask for. For many in that troubled decade, abortion was their sole method of birth control. And it was dangerous.

In truth, a middle-class white girl like Jessie Studevant had better odds than most. Poorer women, unable to afford an abortionist, resorted to physical trauma, folk medicine, or self-induced horrors to terminate their pregnancies. Yet Jessie was set on a course towards death from the beginning. Today a rural teenager can go to Wal-Mart, shoplift a home-



*For decades,
abortion has been
one of America’s
most volatile
social issues.*



Langston
Hughes,
1925.
(National
Portrait
Gallery)

pregnancy test, and know she is pregnant a few weeks after conception. A girl such as Jessie, however, naive and with no information available to her whatsoever, would not know until, perhaps, well into her second trimester - - increasing the risks given the abortion procedures of the day. Her options were vexing and few.

Have the child? While unwed motherhood was far from uncommon, the social stigma of it was great. Today a child born to a teenage girl is distressingly common, but it would have been the talk of Cora's hometown of Melton for weeks: the words "Jessie Studevant" would have evoked only ridicule. Mrs. Studevant's *raison d'être*, her precious world of clubs and library boards, would have been greatly compromised. Adoption? Jessie would have been shipped to a "home for girls in trouble," something a woman of color such as Cora had had no access to in her day. However, many such homes were virtual prisons. Jessie probably would have been forced to adopt the religious tenets of the home's sponsors, perform endless unpaid work there, and have no say in the choice of the adoptive parents. Marry the Matsoulos boy? Even if she had, the birth of a child less than nine months later would have led to a shunning by much of the community. As Thornton Wilder wrote about early-20th-century rural America, "In our town we like to know the facts about everybody," and the whisperings would have

been corrosive to Jessie's status in it. For both girl and family, one option remained.

The local doctor in Melton would have been forced to cooperate, whatever his personal objections to abortion. A person like Jessie's mother, Mrs. Studevant, was vital to his economic well-being. As Reagan puts it, "If necessary, a well-to-do woman could threaten to end the doctor's relationship with the entire family," causing him to lose "years of fees for child deliveries, children's illnesses, and injuries." Thus, abortion it would be.

Once decided upon, the procedure was both expensive and perilous. With travel and post-operative care, the cost to the Studevants would have been perhaps \$200 — two months' pay to a working class woman even less fortunate than Jessie. There was seldom credit, because wary practitioners wanted cash in advance that left no paper trail. Since abortion was illegal, often it was only doctors with checkered pasts and uncertain skills who were willing to risk their livelihoods by doing such work. The training of physicians varied much more widely in the 1930s than today, and doctors were subject to far less monitoring by governmental entities. Officially, the medical profession opposed abortion, though even those who didn't perform them often profited by getting kickbacks for referrals by those who did. Jessie's doctor — if he or she were a true doctor at all — would have performed the procedure alone, without the supportive advice of other physicians; not in a hospital, but a non-sterile

environment such as an office. Unlike most abortions today, pregnancy would be terminated either by the introduction of a toxic substance or a sharp surgical instrument into the woman — both carrying mammoth risks of infections such as peritonitis. As Bernice Sandler, a nationally noted expert on women's issues, speaks of the era, "You really took your life in your hands, because you didn't know what kind of medical care you were getting."

Once Jessie took ill from the procedure, her options shrank dramatically. Other doctors would have been reluctant to help, leery about being implicated in the illegal abortion. Her lover, poor and from an immigrant family, might well have been jailed, ostensibly for being a party to it. Police, also, commonly questioned the families of women known to be dying this way, prying into private lives in an era that still valued them; Mrs. Studevant would have never stood for such scrutiny. "Old Dr. Brown" was plainly the last resort, a final token measure to save her least favorite child.

And so Jessie died, as did many others. In 1934, the very year Hughes wrote *Cora Unashamed*, Leslie J. Reagan writes that Chicago's "County Hospital . . . reported twenty-two abortion-related deaths that year." Doubtless, there were many more that went unreported and hushed, as was Jessie's by her mother who, unlike Cora, was "humble in the face of death."

Today, what killed Jessie Studevant is one of our great Achilles' Heels, an issue that wildly divides America. This conflict is not a new one. Abortion is not a custom limited to our century, or even our millennium, and the practice has a history much more complex than most fighting over it care to remember. Even today, either side's arch extremists would point at Jessie's grave and hiss, "See?" The time of Cora was a critical chapter in a tale yet to be fully told. "The structural transformation that occurred during the 1930s . . . was crucial for the history of abortion," claims Reagan. "The changes wrought by the Depression accelerated the change of pace in the coming decades, particularly in the methods of enforcing the criminal abortion laws." Jessie Studevant was killed by a tragic triumvirate of her society, its laws, and its medicine.



Cora (Regina Taylor) and Joe (Kohl Sudduth).

Dan Sanders is a writer in Santa Monica, California.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- 1.) What fears drive Mrs. Studevant's determination to resolve Jessie's pregnancy the way she does?
- 2.) In the 1930s, what were some of the circumstances that limited women's choices in dealing with pregnancy? What particular circumstances limited Jessie's even more than most?
- 3.) Why did the Great Depression have an effect on the abortion rate in the United States?
- 4.) How is Jessie's predicament different from what a teenage girl would face today? How is it the same?
- 5.) What factors in the law, medicine, and social mores made abortion so dangerous sixty years ago? What effect did these dangers have on later policy and attitudes towards it?

OTHER ACTIVITIES

IMPROVISATION — Assign students the following roles of Jessie, Cora, the Matsoulos boy, Mrs. Studevant, and Mr. Studevant. Ask them to improvise a discussion of Jessie's situation. Each character has the following "superobjective" in the improvisation: Jessie, to calm her parent's anger; Cora, to help Jessie; the Matsoulos boy, to get permission from Jessie's parents to marry her; Mrs. Studevant, to take Jessie to the doctor in Kansas City; and Mr. Studevant, to appease his wife, whom he is afraid of.

LETTER COMPOSITION — Direct students to assume the character of Cora. They should write a letter to the Studevants, articulating Cora's feelings and anything she was not allowed to say at Jessie's funeral.

ESSAY — In essay form, direct students to speculate on what became of Cora in the years following her firing by the Studevants. Students should bear in mind that Cora's life expectancy would have spanned into the 1960's.

