

I. BONNIE AND CLYDE

PRE-READING TASKS

- 1) *Everyone knows the famous gangster couple Bonnie and Clyde. Collect ideas from the class to see what the students know about them.*
- 2) *Bonnie and Clyde committed their crimes during an era referred to as "The Great Depression". Find out more about this specific time period to get an idea of the historical background.*
- 3) *Why did many Americans see gangsters as outlaw heroes in those days?*
- 4) *Find out more about J. Edgar Hoover and the G-Men.*
- 5) *Find out more about the iconic Thompson submachine gun and its nicknames.*

THE UNTOLD TRUTH OF BONNIE AND CLYDE

(by Kathy Benjamin)

Source: <https://www.grunge.com/153063/the-untold-truth-of-bonnie-and-clyde/>



Bonnie and Clyde are perhaps the most romanticized outlaws of all time. At a time when gangsters and bad guys were celebrities, they stood out. No one knows who Al Capone's or John Dillinger's lady friends were off the top of their heads; the fact that Bonnie and Clyde committed crimes as a couple made them special. Clyde Barrow and Bonnie Parker met in 1930, and later went on a 21-month spree. Once they got started, they tore across various Southern states, leaving death and destruction in their wake. Yet the public was obsessed with them, this sexy young couple taking on the police and the banks, two of the most hated institutions in Prohibition- and Great Depression-era America.

But of course, there's more to the story. Bonnie and Clyde were real people, with complicated and tragic pasts. Their love affair was more than a little twisted. And their crime spree wasn't as impressive as it's gone down in legend. Here's the things the movies don't tell you.

They could have been famous by more traditional means

While Bonnie and Clyde ended up becoming famous by killing people and robbing banks, they probably could have taken the legal route. Both were talented in more traditional ways.

According to *Bonnie and Clyde's Hideout*, Clyde had a "natural music ability." His brother-in-law taught him to play the saxophone, and he also played guitar. It's said he "brought a little happiness into the lives of others sentenced to poverty" when he'd strum the guitar around the fire at camps the couple stayed at while on the run. When one of their safehouses was raided, Clyde's guitar was left behind, and he asked his mother to try and get it back to him. She failed, but he did manage to hold onto his sax. It was actually in the car, along with sheet music, when he and Bonnie were killed.

Bonnie was the one who actively wanted to be famous, though. The producers and writer of two different movies about Bonnie and Clyde all said she wanted to be a celebrity by any means necessary, whether it was as a Broadway star, a singer, a Hollywood actress, or even a poet. And she did have talent; growing up she starred in school plays and pageants, including one where *Texas Monthly* reports that a boy upstaged her, so she punched him. When the audience broke into applause, she cartwheeled across the stage. Once she became famous for her life of crime, she referred to their fans as "her public" and signed autographs.

Bonnie was married, but not to Clyde

Bonnie and Clyde are up there with Romeo and Juliet when it comes to famous (and extremely dysfunctional) romantic relationships, but Bonnie had found love long before meeting Clyde. She met and married Roy Thornton in 1926, and they never divorced.

According to *Texas History Notebook*, Roy was "blessed with naturally good looks." Bonnie certainly had a type; while he's sometimes referred to as a welder, Roy was a hardened criminal. They met when Bonnie was just 15, and a year later she dropped out of school to marry him. Even back then people made stupid tattoo decisions, and Bonnie got her and Roy's names inked in hearts above her knee.

Roy would disappear for long stretches, committing crimes and seeing other women. Bonnie probably knew about the cheating, writing in her diary that she had a "roaming husband with a roaming mind." After he left for the third time in less than a year, she was pretty over it. She wrote that while she loved him "very much" and "[missed] him terribly," this time she was not going to take him back. Bonnie said she was swearing off guys, adding, "Let all men go to hell!"

Almost two years to the day after she wrote that, she met Clyde and it was love at first sight. But she wore Roy's wedding ring until the day she died. Her first husband only outlived her by four years, shot to death in a prison break.

Prison completely changed Clyde



Clyde's initial brushes with the law were very minor. His first arrest was for failing to return a rental car on time, and his second was for stealing a turkey. But his crimes started escalating. Finally, at 21 years old he was sent to prison for burglary, according to the FBI.

Eastham Prison Farm was no joke. Even at a time when all prisons were horrific for the people inside, *Texas Monthly* says Eastham was "the worst of the worst." Prisoners were regularly beaten by guards or had their hands cuffed to a pipe over their heads for a whole day, and there was even a guard who would execute prisoners point-blank and then say they died trying to escape.

Clyde's experience at Eastham was so bad that he never talked to anyone about it, not even the love of his life. But we do know some of the things that happened to him there. An inmate known as Big Ed Crowder beat him and sexually assaulted him repeatedly. Clyde finally couldn't take the abuse anymore, and one night he got Big

Ed alone in the bathroom and beat him to death with a pipe. An inmate already serving life took the rap, and Clyde was eventually paroled. His good friend said prison changed Clyde "from a schoolboy to a rattlesnake." Even before he got out, Clyde started formulating a plan. He was going to start a gang, steal money and guns, then return to Eastham and kill all the guards.

Both had trouble walking

Oddly, by the time they died, both Bonnie and Clyde would suffer injuries that made it difficult for them to walk. Clyde's issue was a result of his time in prison. The torture he went through at Eastham also included hard labor, according to New World Encyclopedia. Desperate to avoid the backbreaking work and hoping for a transfer to a less terrifying environment, Clyde asked another prisoner to chop off some of his toes with an ax. It wasn't his tiny, less important toes, either; Vintage News says Clyde lost the big toe and most of the second toe on his left foot. This had a "lasting impact" on his ability to walk, and he had to drive in his stockinged feet from then on. It was also pointless; by the time he lost his little piggies, the parole board had already agreed to release him. Clyde left Eastham six days after mutilating himself.

Bonnie had less choice when it came to her injury. In June 1933, the two were on the run when Clyde badly crashed their car. Clyde was fine, but Bonnie got battery acid all over her right leg. It ate away down to the bone in some areas. Despite the seriousness, the outlaw obviously couldn't just show up at a hospital, and Thought Co. reports that Bonnie was nursed by Clyde and other members of the gang. They must not have done a great job because she never walked properly again.

They became famous because of misleading pictures

It wouldn't be wrong to call Bonnie and Clyde the first American reality stars. The public followed their exploits for two years, and History says everyone romanticized what were actually pretty horrific crimes because they were committed by a young, beautiful couple in love. The fact they weren't married made it even more risqué. It was perfect tabloid fodder, except it was also front-page news of legitimate newspapers.



According to Smithsonian Magazine, the biggest reason Bonnie and Clyde became so famous was the discovery of some cute photos they took. It was actually just some rolls of undeveloped film that the police discovered at a safe house they raided. But the cops processed the pictures, a local newspaper ran them, and then they sent them over the wires. It was this technology, the ability for the ends of the earth to get images of Bonnie and Clyde adorably playing around, that made them major celebrities.

The public loved the pictures. They showed the couple larking about with each other. There Bonnie pretended to shoot Clyde, there she was on his shoulders, and, most famous of all, there she was with a cigar between her teeth ("Freudian implications and all") and a pistol in her hand, looking like the perfect gun moll. This would be how the public imagined Bonnie, although she didn't normally handle guns and she smoked cigarettes, not cigars. Thanks to those photos, they went from local Texas outlaws to "criminal superstars." Bonnie had the fame she always wanted.



They didn't kill a lot of people

Various members of the Barrow Gang killed plenty of people. Clyde is thought to have murdered 10 personally, according to New World Encyclopedia. If anyone blocked their escape, they would die, even if they were innocent bystanders. But they had a lot of chances to kill people, people it might have made more sense for them to kill, and they didn't take them.

Instead, Bonnie and Clyde seemed to enjoy kidnapping people and traveling around with them for a bit. It didn't matter if they were civilians or police officers. The podcast *Stuff You Missed in History Class* recalls one time when a cop tried to pull the outlaws over for speeding, so they just took him. Another kidnapped officer asked Bonnie if there was anything she wanted him to tell the press when he got released. She said to tell them she didn't really smoke cigars. On some occasions, the couple would give their kidnapping victims money to get back home.

The fact that they didn't kill everyone might have been one of the reasons the public loved Bonnie and Clyde. But a single mistake turned the tide. Two policemen came up to their car one morning. For one of the cops, it was his first day on the job and he was about to get married. Clyde wanted to kidnap them like usual, but his cry of "Let's take them" was misunderstood by a gang member who started shooting. After those murders, public opinion turned against the couple.

Their infamous robberies were unimpressive

The duo and their gang became famous for robbing banks. They stole nice cars, and the pictures that circulated showed them wearing fancy clothes, so as former speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives Jim Wright recalled from his childhood (via 405 Magazine), you had to "envy them a little," being so "rich and happy."

In reality, their infamous robberies were unimpressive. The gang lived "hand-to-mouth" and one of the reasons they kept holding places up was they never got much money out of it. The Encyclopedia Britannica says they never took more than \$1,500, and once got as little as \$80. They were so desperate for cash, sometimes they would break into vending machines for food money.

They robbed fewer than 15 banks during their 21-month crime spree, and since it was the Great Depression, things didn't always go as planned. Bonnie and Clyde's Hideout records that one of the gang attempted to rob the Ponder State Bank in Texas, only to be told it had failed a week earlier and there was no money to steal. Clyde apparently thought this was hilarious when he was told. But the fact it was the Depression and everyone was barely getting by made Bonnie and Clyde's usual choice of victim extremely disappointing. They knew there was less chance of being

caught if they robbed small-town restaurants, grocery stores, and gas stations, so those were the places they normally hit, meaning they weren't hurting The Man so much as the little guy.

Clyde's mom was a classic enabler

Bonnie might be the famous woman in Clyde's life, but there was another equally important one. Cumie Barrow, Clyde's mom, was fundamental in enabling his life of crime. According to History, after Bonnie and Clyde were killed, the U.S. government put a bunch of their family members on trial for aiding the outlaws. In his closing arguments, the prosecutor roared that Cumie was the real mastermind of the conspiracy.

Cumie certainly was more than just a mother who loved her son even though he went bad. When Clyde first went to prison, authorities tried to pin a murder on him. But his mommy gave a newspaper interview where she swore Clyde was with her in a different city when the murder occurred. In order to make her son look like a mere boy, she said he only just turned 18. (He was really 21.) She tried to get him out of jail by claiming to be a widow (her husband was very much alive) who needed her son to support her. The parole board eventually made their decision to release Clyde early specifically because of these lies.

Once Bonnie and Clyde started their crime spree, Cumie let them visit her dozens of times. She bought them nice clothes and probably bribed cops. And she kept giving weepy interviews, denying she knew Bonnie and claiming Clyde was completely innocent. When it came time for her own sentencing, she managed to cry her way into just a month behind bars.

"Bonnie and Clyde syndrome" explains women attracted to evil men

Bonnie and Clyde's names might go together, but they were not equally violent. Not by a long shot. Eyewitness reports say Bonnie never wielded a gun, always waited in the car when they were holding up banks, encouraged kidnapping over murder, and almost certainly never killed anyone herself. *Texas Monthly* says before turning to a life of crime, Bonnie was bright, popular, and "famously tenderhearted," doing sweet things like breaking her pencil in half to share with students who couldn't afford one.

So what the heck was she doing with a psychopath like Clyde? (Or for that matter, her chronically criminal husband?)

Bonnie was probably attracted to violent men because she suffered from hybristophilia. According to Psychology Today, hybristophiliacs (usually women) find it ... umm ... pleasurable when their partner commits "an outrage or crime, such as rape, murder, or armed robbery." Roy Thornton fit the bill, but if worse crimes mean a bigger turn-on, then Clyde was the one who really must have done it for her. The couple were definitely passionate. And Bonnie is such the perfect archetype of someone with hybristophilia that it's often called Bonnie and Clyde syndrome.

You still see people (again, usually women for some reason) who have this today. It's the reason serial killers, even the ugly ones, find themselves with lots of female admirers and fan mail. Part of the attraction may be the more violent their mate becomes, the more special they are, since he would "never" hurt them.

Their afterlife was just as crazy

Dying didn't tone down the craziness around Bonnie and Clyde. Within 24 hours, the population of the nearest town swelled from 2,000 to 12,000 people. As the death car with their bodies inside was hauled to the morgue, trophy hunters reached in to grab things, either off the car or off Bonnie and Clyde themselves. According to Vintage News, these included locks of hair and pieces of bloody clothing. There was even a man who tried to cut off Clyde's finger, and another who took a knife to his ear. But one guy wanted Clyde's whole body; Texas Escapes reports a huckster offered his parents \$50,000 (yes, during the Great Depression) to mummify Clyde's body and make it part of a traveling show. They refused, but when the stolen death car was returned, its owner put it on tour. You can still take selfies with it today.

The outlaws' bodies returned to Dallas, where Texas History Notebook says they were put on public display at two mortuaries. Around 10,000 people came to look at Clyde, while 20,000 wanted to see Bonnie. Their funerals were much smaller, a couple hundred people each, but only because there were lots of armed guards.

Bonnie and Clyde had asked to be buried next to each other, but Bonnie's mother wouldn't hear of it. They were laid to rest in Dallas cemeteries a couple miles apart. D Magazine reports that as of 2019, the families are considering changing their minds and the couple might be reunited at last.

COMPREHENSION

- 1) *Why did Bonnie and Clyde stand out as gangsters?*
- 2) *Briefly summarise what lives they could have led without becoming criminals.*
- 3) *How would you characterise the young Bonnie before she met Clyde?*
- 4) *They say that "prison changes a man". To what extent is this true for Clyde?*
- 5) *Briefly summarise the reasons why both of them had trouble walking.*
- 6) *Which event shifted public opinion against the couple?*
- 7) *Which factors helped to create the romantic myth of Bonnie and Clyde?*
- 8) *Which facts prove that Bonnie and Clyde were not such notorious gangsters?*
- 9) *What do you make of Clyde's mother?*
- 10) *Explain the concept of hybristophilia.*
- 11) *Why is it fair to say that Bonnie and Clyde were the first American "reality stars"?*

II. BONNIE PARKER'S POEM

ACTIVITIES

The poem below was written by Bonnie Parker.

Read it and answer the following questions:

- 1) *How does this poem make you feel about Bonnie and Clyde?*
- 2) *What are they supposedly victims of?*
- 3) *What do you make of the poem and its authorial intentions?*
- 4) *Find out how the couple died and if they were buried next to each other.*

The Story of Bonnie and Clyde

You've read the story of Jesse James
Of how he lived and died;
If you're still in need
Of something to read,
Here's the story of Bonnie and Clyde.

Now Bonnie and Clyde are the Barrow gang,
I'm sure you all have read
How they rob and steal
And those who squeal
Are usually found dying or dead.

There's lots of untruths to these write-ups;
They're not so ruthless as that;
Their nature is raw;
They hate all the law
The stool pigeons, spotters, and rats.

They call them cold-blooded killers;
They say they are heartless and mean;
But I say this with pride,
That I once knew Clyde
When he was honest and upright and clean.

But the laws fooled around,
Kept taking him down
And locking him up in a cell,
Till he said to me,
"I'll never be free,
So I'll meet a few of them in hell."

The road was so dimly lighted;
There were no highway signs to guide;
But they made up their minds
If all roads were blind,
They wouldn't give up till they died.

The road gets dimmer and dimmer;
Sometimes you can hardly see;
But it's fight, man to man,
And do all you can,
For they know they can never be free.

From heart-break some people have suffered;
From weariness some people have died;
But take it all in all,
Our troubles are small
Till we get like Bonnie and Clyde.

If a policeman is killed in Dallas,
And they have no clue or guide;
If they can't find a fiend,
They just wipe their slate clean
And hand it on Bonnie and Clyde.

There's two crimes committed in America
Not accredited to the Barrow mob;
They had no hand
In the kidnap demand,
Nor the Kansas City depot job.

A newsboy once said to his buddy;

"I wish old Clyde would get jumped;
In these awful hard times
We'd make a few dimes
If five or six cops would get bumped."

The police haven't got the report yet,
But Clyde called me up today;
He said, "Don't start any fights
We aren't working nights
We're joining the NRA."

From Irving to West Dallas viaduct
Is known as the Great Divide,
Where the women are kin,
And the men are men,
And they won't "stool" on Bonnie and Clyde.

If they try to act like citizens
And rent them a nice little flat,
About the third night
They're invited to fight
By a sub-gun's rat-tat-tat.

They don't think they're too tough or desperate,
They know that the law always wins;
They've been shot at before,
But they do not ignore
That death is the wages of sin.

Some day they'll go down together;
And they'll bury them side by side;
To few it'll be grief
To the law a relief
But it's death for Bonnie and Clyde.
— Bonnie Parker 1934

III. BONNIE AND CLYDE: SOCIAL OUTLAWS / SOCIAL BANDITS

Source: <https://www.thoughtco.com/bonnie-parker-poem-bonnie-and-clyde-1779293>

Parker's poem is part of a long-established outlaw-folk hero tradition, what British historian Eric Hobsbawm called "social bandits." The social bandit/outlaw-hero is a people's champion who adheres to a higher law and defies the established authority of his time. The idea of a social bandit is a nearly universal social phenomenon found throughout history, and ballads and legends of them share a long set of characteristics.

The main feature shared by ballads and legends around such historical figures as Jesse James, Sam Bass, Billy the Kid, and Pretty Boy Floyd is the enormous amount of distortion of the known facts. That distortion enables the transition of a violent criminal into a folk hero. In all cases, the "people's champion" story the people need to hear is more important than the facts—during the Great Depression, the public needed reassurance that there were people working against a government perceived as callous to their predicament. The voice of the Depression, American balladeer Woody Guthrie, wrote just such a ballad about Pretty Boy Floyd after Floyd was killed six months after Bonnie and Clyde died.

Curiously, many of the ballads, like Bonnie's, also use the metaphor of "the pen is mightier than the sword," stating that what newspapers have written about the bandit hero is false, but that the truth can be found written in their legends and ballads.

ACTIVITIES

- 1) *Make sure you are able to define the term "social bandit" or "social outlaw".*
- 2) *Compare Guthrie's ballad about Pretty Boy Floyd to Parker's poem.*

IV. 12 CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SOCIAL OUTLAW

Source: <https://www.thoughtco.com/bonnie-parker-poem-bonnie-and-clyde-1779293>

American historian Richard Meyer identified 12 characteristics that are common to social outlaw stories. Not all of them appear in every story, but many of them come from older ancient legends—tricksters, champions of the oppressed, and ancient betrayals.

1. The social bandit hero is a "man of the people" who stands in opposition to certain established, oppressive economic, civil, and legal systems. He is a "champion" who wouldn't harm the "little man."
2. His first crime is brought about through extreme provocation by agents of the oppressive system.
3. He steals from the rich and gives to the poor, serving as one who "rights wrongs." (Robin Hood, Zorro)
4. Despite his reputation, he is good-natured, kind-hearted, and frequently pious.
5. His criminal exploits are audacious and daring.
6. He frequently outwits and confounds his opponents by trickery, often expressed humorously. ([Trickster](#))
7. He is helped, supported, and admired by his own people.
8. The authorities can't catch him through conventional means.
9. His death is only brought about by the betrayal by a former friend. ([Judas](#))
10. His death provokes great mourning on the part of his people.
11. After he dies, the hero manages to "live on" in a number of ways: stories say that he is not really dead, or that his ghost or spirit continues to help and inspire people.
12. His actions and deeds may not always gain approval or admiration, but rather are sometimes decried in the ballads as mildly stated criticism to outright condemnation and refutation of all the other 11 elements.

ACTIVITIES

- 1) Go through the 12 characteristics of the social outlaw by Richard Meyer again. This time, decide for each characteristic, if it applies to Bonnie and Clyde.
- 2) Do the same again, this time with Robin Hood in mind.
- 3) Can you think of any other social bandits that have made it into folklore?

V. ORAL PRESENTATIONS

Prepare a well-structured oral presentation for one of the following famous gangsters or notorious bank robbers. Respect the following rules:

- *Time limit : 4-7 minutes*
- *Notes : one piece of paper with a maximum of 7 key words*

- a) *Myra Maybelle Starr (Belle Starr)*
- b) *John Dillinger*
- c) *Baby Face Nelson*
- d) *John Nevison*
- e) *The Newton Gang*
- f) *Ronnie Biggs*
- g) *D.B. Cooper*
- h) *John MacLean*
- i) *Robert Mang*
- j) *Jesse James*
- k) *Billy The Kid*
- l) *Pretty Boy Floyd*
- m) *Machine Gun Kelly*
- n) *Al Capone*