

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Broken Blossoms (1919)

D.W. Griffith (1875–1948)

OVERVIEW

Director D.W. Griffith (1875-1948) earned his place in film history as a Hollywood pioneer. Including all of his shorts and projects, Griffith produced nearly 500 films, many of which have been lost. His 1914 *Judith of Bethulia* was one of the first feature films produced in the United States, and many know him from his controversial 1915 film *The Birth of a Nation*. Only three of his films include recorded sound. Many film and editing techniques that are now commonplace were first used by Griffith in the early 1900s. Despite his many accolades and firsts, D.W. Griffith remains widely criticized; *The Birth of a Nation*, for example, is often said to be one of the key factors in the Ku Klux Klan's revival in the interwar period.

Film Continuing a trend started with *Intolerance* in 1916, *Broken Blossoms* took massive liberties with the source material. Based on a short story by Thomas Burke called "The Chink and the Child" (1917), Griffith used the names and places, but changed the story and circumstances to promote a message of tolerance. In the original story, Cheng Huan is an opium-abusing drifter quite literally 'Shanghaied' into naval service, while in Griffith's story, he is a pious Buddhist man who seeks to spread his religion in the West only to be burnt out by poverty and racism. *Broken Blossoms* represents a massive shift in Griffith's filmmaking: the entire film was done in a sound stage. In 1996, the film was selected for preservation in the United States National Film Registry by the Library of Congress as being "culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant".

Background *Broken Blossoms* was a popular film, described by reviewers in 1919 as "nine days' wonder" (slang for a popular fad) and earning 12 times its initial investment at the box office. While the film's more racist elements, such as Richard Barthelmess' yellowface makeup and forcibly squinted eyes, are clear to modern audiences, this film was practically socially sensitive when compared to the widespread anti-Chinese sentiment of the early 1900s America. Likewise, the honest portrayals of child abuse were incredibly shocking at the time. Despite Lillian Gish's insistence to Griffith that she was becoming too old at twenty-three to play children, her outstanding performance of trauma responses and terror literally sickened the investors Griffith invited to previews. Gish said in an interview that a film reporter invited to one of the shootings had to leave the room to vomit after seeing one such scene. Originally shot for Famous Players—Lasky, the distribution rights for *Broken Blossoms* were sold to newly founded United Artists, becoming the fledgling company's first distribution and hit.

CHARACTERS

Lucy Burrows – The illegitimate daughter of prizefighter, Battling Burrows

Cheng Huan – A formerly pious young man from China turned opium-using shopkeeper

Battling Burrows – A violent, hard-drinking prizefighter, father of Lucy

Burrows' manager – Battling Burrows' boxing manager

Evil Eye – A Chinese man who enjoys causing trouble for Cheng Huan

SYNOPSIS

Cheng Huan is a young man living in coastal China who decides to try to preach Buddha's "gentle message" to the Westerners who flood into his homeland. Traveling to London, he faces the brutal reality of the inner-city and eventually loses his religious fervor, turning to opium. At the same time, a young girl, Lucy Burrows, lives with her father, a boxer called Battling Burrows, who takes out his rage on her and treats her as a servant. One day, Lucy is very badly beaten by her father and stumbles into Cheng Huan's

shop in a daze. Returning home from a visit to a local opium den, Cheng Huan is surprised to see Lucy laying on the floor of his shop; he carries Lucy to a bed upstairs, caring for her by dressing her in elaborate silks and feeding her well. Lucy can scarcely believe the treatment she's getting and revels in it, feeling loved for the first time in her life.

Sometime later, Battling Burrows hears about his daughter's whereabouts from a friend and goes to retrieve his daughter. Out of jealousy and racism, he also trashes Cheng Huan's upstairs room before dragging Lucy back home. In their little hovel, Lucy begs for mercy, but Battling is convinced she was sleeping with Cheng Huan, although his care is quite innocent. While Battling beats Lucy within an inch of her life, Cheng Huan returns home to find his home in disarray and Lucy missing. A neighbor called Evil Eye is all too pleased to tell Cheng Huan what happened in his absence, and the Chinese shop-owner leaves for the Burrows' home with a pistol in his pocket. He enters the hovel through a window and is distraught to find Lucy dying in her bed. Battling emerges from his room to find the intruder, and Cheng Huan draws his pistol, killing the boxer. He carries Lucy's body back to his home, placing her on the bed she used during her stay. He then puts together a makeshift Buddhist shrine before killing himself with a knife in his sorrow.

SCENES

Port-side- The film opens on a busy early morning in the port of Shanghai. A title card reads: "At the turn-stiles of the East – The bund of a great Chinese treaty port." In the bustling roads near the port, a rich man is carried in a palanquin, while nearby women smile and chat about the books they read. The rich man speaks with a group of children, giving each a coin to buy a treat in the market. A title card introduces a group of "Sky-larking American sailors." The men eat and drink boisterously, comically fumbling with their noodles and chopsticks. The women from before approach a fortune-teller, who reads the sticks they choose from the jar on his table.



Buddhist temple- "The Yellow Man in the Temple of Buddha, before his contemplated journey to a foreign land," a title card says. A monk sways and chants before a richly-dressed man, Cheng Huan. Then, the monk sits and contemplates his prayer beads, thumbing each as he murmurs prayers. A title card explains that the monk is giving Cheng Huan "advice for a young man's conduct in the world" as they continue to talk to each other. The monk reads from the sutras while Cheng Huan listens, smiling. Nearby, a monk rings a bell while several others conduct prayers in front of an altar to the Buddha. Another title card appears, explaining Cheng Huan's desire to spread "the glorious message of peace to the barbarous Anglo-Saxons, sons of turmoil and strife." Cheng Huan bows in thanks to the monk before turning and leaving the temple.



Proselytizing- Back near the docks, the American sailors pay for their meal and drinks before wandering away in a small drunken mob. Cheng Huan passes by and overhears the sailors begin fighting. Cheng Huan puts himself between the yelling men and says, "Do not give blows for blows. The Buddha says: 'What thou dost not want others to do to thee, do thou not to others'." The sailors ignore Cheng Huan and begin a brawl, knocking him to the ground as fists fly. A title card calls Cheng Huan "sensitive" for his reaction to the "sociable free fight" before some Chinese guardsmen usher the soldiers away toward the docks. Cheng Huan sits, nursing his face where he was struck, before a title card reads: "The Yellow Man more than ever convinced that the great nations across the sea need the lessons of the gentle Buddha." Sometime later, Cheng Huan returns to the port to leave for the West. He and his luggage travel by rickshaw down the dock before a shot of the bay in dusk's dim light takes the screen.



London, some years later- A title card begins the scene: “Early morning in the Limehouse district of London, some years later.” Some people walk the streets in Limehouse, several dressed in the dark-colored shirts and skull caps typical of Chinese immigrants to the West. Another title card reads: “Now—Limehouse knows him only as a Chink store-keeper.” Cheng Huan’s name hangs above a store. Bent over and walking slowly, Cheng Huan approaches his store, where he leans against the wall and faces the camera. He looks distraught. A title card tells us: “The Yellow Man’s youthful drams come to wreck against the sordid realities of life.”



The Opium Den- The screen fades to black, then an opium den filled with patrons smoking takes the screen. Two Asian men play traditional instruments while people of many races and ethnicity—some dressed in traditional garb—listen, reclining by their pipes. “In this scarlet house of sin,” a title card asks: “Does he ever hear the temple bells?” Puffing on his own opium pipe, Cheng Huan remembers the bells of the temple back home. A short sequence after shows Cheng Huan playing Fan-tan with two quarrelsome gamblers.



Battling Burrows- A sailboat drifts up the canal somewhere in the Limehouse district. A title card introduces the home of Lucy and her father, Battling Burrows. “Fifteen years before,” the next title card reads after a short shot of the spartan hovel, “one of the Battler’s girls thrust into his arms a bundle of white rags—So Lucy came to Limehouse.” Inside the tiny home, Battling Burrows sits at a table, toying with a bottle of liquor, while his boxing promoter gives him disapproving looks. Another title card explains that Battling is celebrating a boxing victory by drinking. He downs several glasses before we’re shown the boxing match as if he is remembering it. Soon, a woman enters Battling’s home and speaks with him flirtatiously. After she leaves, a title card tells us: “The manger’s complaint about drink and women puts Battling in a rage—he cannot take his temper out on him—he saves it for a weaker object.”



The Girl- Walking down the path by the canal, Lucy enters the scene. A title card describes her: “The Girl. When not serving as a punching bag to relieve the Battler’s feelings, the bruised little body may be seen creeping around the docks of Limehouse.” She sits on a large coil of rope to rest, thinking about what a friend has told her: Never get married. While wandering the street, Lucy bumps into two well-dressed sex workers who repeat a similar warning. Another title card reads: “In every group there is one, weaker than the rest—the butt of the uncouth wit or ill-temper. Poor Lucy is one of these.” Timidly, Lucy rises and enters her home, finding her father drinking heavily.



Pent up brutishness- Battling scowls and snaps at Lucy, beckoning her to come closer with a jerk of his head. Battling stands when she stops at the edge of the table, looking at her with murderous eyes as she reacts physically to his gaze, as if struck by something. “Don’t whip me—” Lucy begs, trying to keep the table between herself and her father, “don’t!” Battling shouts something accusatory, pointing his finger at her, while Lucy cries. “Put a smile on yer face, can’t’ yer?” Battling demands, and Lucy goes through a macabre process of forcing the corners of her mouth up into a grimace acceptable to her father.



Lucy's smile- Battling then demands that Lucy make dinner, sitting back at the table and pelting her with spoons while she works at the stove. Soon, he eats the meal she's prepared, rising from the table with a satisfied look when he finishes. Before leaving for the pub, he makes an order for his tea at five in the evening. Lucy nods, a frightened look on her face. "Come on—" Battling says, "give us a smile." Again, the girl pushes the corners of her mouth up with her fingers, and Battling leaves. Lucy sits on the small cot in the room, eating the scraps that remain of her father's lunch.



Men of the cloth- Two priests chat with Cheng Huan outside his shop. "My brother leaves for China tomorrow," says one priest, "to convert the heathen." Cheng Huan stifles a disappointed look and says, "I—I wish him luck." The first priest says something and hands Cheng Huan a pamphlet simply titled "Hell" before bidding the shopkeeper farewell and leaving with the other priest. With a disappointed sigh, Cheng Huan crosses his arms—perhaps remembering his own desire to spread the word of the Buddha—and walks into his shop.



Thrifty Lucy- In her little hovel, Lucy is hard at work mending her father's socks. A title card reads: "The shopping trip." Lucy then puts on her hat and moves to open the door, but stops for a moment before kneeling down to remove a small package from a hiding place beneath the rough brick floor. She unwraps the package, finding a crumpled wad of tin foil and black ribbon inside. Beneath them is a letter that reads: "Dearie, This aint much but all I got to leave you. You might find them some use for your weddin. The piece of silk and the ribbon." Lucy holds the piece of silk beneath the letter to her cheek for a moment, staring past the camera in some sort of trance-like state, before she exchanges one of her ribbons for the black one and stows the silk and letter in their hidey-hole. A title card explains that someone might trade for the tin foil. Adding the tin foil to her paltry handful of coins, she leaves for the market. While Lucy shops, her father carouses at his favorite pub.



Spirit of beauty blossoms- In his shop, Cheng Huan lights a pipe and begins smoking, idling the time between customers. Outside, Lucy stoops to pick up a candy wrapper. She deftly separates the foil from the paper and adds it to her little wad of foil while Cheng Huan watches through the window. A title card reads: "The Yellow Man watched Lucy often. The beauty of which all Limehouse missed smote him to the heart." The Chinese shopkeeper smiles softly at the girl when she looks through the window at a small display of dolls. Another Chinese shopkeeper known as Evil Eye watches from across the street. Lucy soon crosses to his shop, where she tries to barter for a single flower after buying a fish for dinner. Cheng Huan crosses the street, watching her, and Evil Eye takes notice.



Battling at it again- At Battling's favorite pub, his boxing promoter enters. A title card reads: "The manager horrified to find Battling at it again." The promoter says something and Battling rises, glaring at him, saying, "Wot yer expect me to do—pick violets?" The promoter says a few more words before leading Battling out of the bar. Meanwhile, Lucy continues trying to trade her lump of tin foil for a single flower "—but not quite enough foil," a title card reads. Dejected, the girl turns and walks away, passing in front of Evil Eye, who reaches out to grab her. Cheng Huan sees this and rushes to bump into Evil Eye, causing him to walk away. A title card explains that being sent home from the bar has put Battling Burrows in a foul mood. The boxer marches angrily toward his home, barreling through the door and breathing heavily in the small kitchen space.



Home early- Lucy quickly makes her way back home with the supplies to cook her father's teatime meal, and is surprised to find him sitting inside. He says something with a sneer, pointing up at the little alarm clock on the mantle. Lucy cowers, saying, "'Tain't five! 'Tain't five!" Battling says something else, angrily punching the table for emphasis. Lucy holds up the groceries as if to explain her absence, and this seems to calm Battling long enough to allow her to start cooking. A title card explains that this teatime meal is Battling's last before moving to his training quarters in preparation for a big fight. Before serving her father, Lucy pushes up the corners of her mouth again.



Violence- As she ladles out a serving of the stew she's prepared, Battling reaches out and bumps her, causing some hot stew to spill on his hand. Lucy cowers as Battling threatens her with a whip. "Don't do it, Daddy!" Lucy cries. "You'll hit me once too often—and then they'll—they'll hang yer!" Trying to defuse the situation, Lucy drops to her hands and knees, trying to polish the dust from her father's boots. This does nothing, as Battling pushes Lucy against a wall and savagely beats her before leaving.



Leaving the house of suffering- A title card reads: "After dim aeons—dumbly, blindly, she struggles away from her house of suffering." Inside the house, Lucy rises in a daze, crawling to the table and propping herself up on two feet before stumbling out onto the streets of Limehouse. At the same time, Cheng Huan makes his way home after dinner. As he reaches his door and enters, a title card appears: "With perhaps a whiff of the lilled pipe still in his brain." On the street outside, Lucy sways on her feet outside Cheng Huan's shop and tumbles into the unlocked door, ending up in a heap on the carpet in front of his store counter. She lies there, unconscious, as Cheng Huan returns from the back room. He closes the door, thinking he'd left it open, and turns to see Lucy. He thinks she's just an opium induced vision for a moment before she stirs. She sees Cheng Huan and begins to panic, but the shopkeeper comforts her, finding a small basin and dabbing her wounds with a clean cloth. A title card reads: "The first gentleness she has ever known."



Kind treatment- Cheng Huan carries Lucy upstairs and places her in a bed before lighting a lamp. He then pours her some medicinal wine and helps her to drink it. "The room prepared as for a princess," a title card reads. Sometime later, the room is redecorated with ornate silk drapery. Lucy is dressed in what a title card describes as "a magical robe treasured from an olden day." Another title card says Lucy has been "transformed" by Cheng Huan's kind treatment.



Foreign luxuries- Lucy sits on the bed, and Cheng Huan helps her to put new ornaments in her hair. "Blue and yellow silk caressing white skin—" a title card says, "her beauty so long hidden shines out like a poem." Cheng Huan averts his eyes, seemingly out of reverence, as he hands Lucy a hand mirror. She marvels at her appearance. After some time smelling incense and flowers, Lucy asks, "What makes you so good to me, Chinky?" Cheng Huan doesn't answer. A title card reads: "There he brings rays stolen from the lyric moon, and places them on her hair; and all night long he crouches, holding one grubby little hand," and Cheng Huan acts this out before the scene fades.



White blossom- A title card explains that Cheng Huan has given Lucy a pet name, "White Blossom." The upstairs room fades into view, where Cheng Huan plays a flute for Lucy while she eats. Sometime later, a man enters Cheng Huan's shop. A title card explains that he is a friend of Battling Burrows. The man buys a bolt of cloth, giving Cheng Huan a large coin. When Cheng Huan wanders outside to the neighboring store to make change, the man hears Lucy break a teacup upstairs. He walks upstairs and recognizes the girl. The man laughs to himself before walking back downstairs and waiting for his change. When Cheng Huan returns, the man treats him strangely before leaving.



Across the river- "Across the river, where battling is training for his fight before the munition workers, comes the Spying One," a title card reads. Taking a break from his training matches, Battling Burrows is excited to see his friend, but his expression changes when the man tells him about Lucy's whereabouts. After Battling threatens the man, a title card appears: "Battling discovers parental rights—A Chink after his kid! He'll learn him!" After some further conversation, Battling moves out of the boxing ring and a title card appears: "Above all, Battling hates those not born in the same great country as himself."



Gin stokes anger- Now dressed in street clothes, Battling walks toward his friend. He says something angrily. The pair, along with Battling's manager and another man, leave. Back in Cheng Huan's home, Lucy motions her desire to leave, but she soon changes her mind and lies back in the bed. At his favorite bar, Battling orders a drink. He speaks angrily to his entourage, saying, "Wait till I'm through with this fight tonight—I'll get 'em!" Meanwhile, Cheng Huan offers Lucy the doll she was looking at earlier in the film.



The big fight- Later that night, Battling Burrow's big fight begins. A large crowd sits where there was a collection of chairs before, and the men hoot and holler as Battling enters the ring. Battling grins and waves his gloved hand to the crowd before sitting down and talking to his trainers. Battling and his opponent trade blows until the bell rings, marking the end of the round. In between rounds, we're shown quick shots of activity in Cheng Huan's shop. At first, he's portrayed as sinister, lusting after the young girl, but the mood changes suddenly after he turns away from her and a title card reads: "His love remains a pure and holy thing—even his worst foe says this." Eventually, Battling is victorious over his foe and leaves the boxing ring after pumping his fists in victory. "He goes to right his Honor—?" says a title card. Dressed in his street clothes again, Battling confers with his entourage before leaving the building with a few men.



The lowering storm- Over an image of stormy clouds, a title card reads: "The lowering storm." As if to confirm what his friend told him, Battling returns to his hovel and looks around for Lucy. At the same time, Cheng Huan wanders away from his shop on his daily pilgrimage to the market. The flames of his anger fanned by Lucy's absence, Battling leaves with his entourage and makes his way to Cheng Huan's shop. Lucy sleeps soundly in the upstairs room, and Cheng Huan takes notice of some flowers, speaking to the florist about them. As Burrows and his little gang descend on the shop, the old man who sometimes keeps Cheng Huan company tries to stop them, but he's brutishly shoved aside. Battling makes his way upstairs and his rage explodes when he sees Lucy. "You!" he shouts, clenching his fists so tight the veins bulge. "With a dirty Chink!" The camera faces battling head on as he advances toward Lucy. The girl begs for her father to calm down, but he refuses to listen and makes threats.

Evil Eye investigates- A title card reads: "The Evil Eye investigates." One of Battling's friends stands in the downstairs of Cheng Huan's shop when Evil Eye enters and quickly walks upstairs. There, Battling demands Lucy take off the silk robes while she cowers. Evil Eye leaves as quickly with he came, this time a sick grin on his face. Unable to contain his rage any longer, Battling begins ripping the ornaments from Lucy's hair before swinging around and smashing everything in the room.



Bad news- In the market, Evil Eye finds Cheng Huan and a title card appears: "Evil Eye gladly bears the news." Cheng Huan walks away quickly, hoping to stop the confrontation and protect Lucy. Back in the upstairs room, Battling shouts at Lucy, "Where is he?" He pounds his fist and brandishes a candlestick, while Lucy cowers. Seizing a chance to run, Lucy suddenly bolts down the stairs, but Battling's friends grab her arms and stop her. She begs for them to let her go, but they hand her over to Battling.



Dragged home- Battling pulls Lucy away from the shop while Cheng Huan draws closer, a strained look on his face. While he enters his shop while by the canal, Battling drags Lucy through the pea-soup fog, growling and shouting things at her while she struggles. Inside the house, he throws her onto the bed and begins shouting again. Upstairs in Cheng Huan's shop, the shopkeeper is beside himself when he finds Lucy missing and his furniture destroyed. Cheng Huan clutches the robes Lucy wore and throws himself to the floor while Battling threatens Lucy with a whip back at their home. "Don't! Daddy!" Lucy pleads. "It wasn't nothin' wrong!" Battling crosses the room to close the door, and Lucy takes advantage of his distraction, locking herself in the closet. "Open the door, I tell yer!" Battling shouts before he begins trying to break the door down. Lucy screams inside, writing like an animal in a trap.



Pistol- With a sudden shift in his mood, Cheng Huan stands up and crosses his upstairs room to a chest where he retrieves a pistol, tucking the weapon in his shirt before leaving. As he wanders the mist-soaked streets, Battling takes up a hatchet and begins chopping through the door as Lucy screams and spins in a circle.

Gone too far- Lucy is dragged from between the splintered remains of the closet door and thrown onto the bed, where Battling holds her while brandishing the whip. Lucy begs for mercy, but her father doesn't yield. The scene fades to black as he raises the whip above his head. After a quick shot of Cheng Huan running along Limehouse's alleys, the camera returns to the hovel where Battling stands over Lucy's unconscious body. Looking suddenly worried, Battling moves into his bedroom where he lights a candle and uncorks a bottle of whiskey, drinking liberally.



Last little smile- Outside, Cheng Huan reaches the hovel and, unable to open the door, he begins to try the window. A title card reads: "Dying, she gives her last little smile to the world that has been so unkind." Lucy stirs on the bed and raises her hand to her mouth, forcing the corners of her lips upward one last time. She takes a final breath and her eyes roll upward as she falls limp against the bed.



Confrontation- Cheng Huan climbs into the room through the window and finds Lucy's body. He approaches her corpse, leaning over the girl as he checks her breathing. In his room, Battling throws the empty bottle of whiskey away, startling Cheng Huan, who jumps toward the wall. Battling then grabs his hat and marches into the other room, turning to see Cheng Huan. The two men scowl at each other for a moment, seemingly sizing each other up. Battling moves to pick up the hatchet on the floor when



Cheng Huan draws the pistol from his chest pocket and shoots the boxer dead. After looking at Battling on the floor for a moment, Cheng Huan lifts Lucy's body and takes her to his shop. Battling's friends return to his hovel and find him dead on the floor. They rush off to inform the police. Meanwhile, Chang Huan places Lucy's body back in the bed in his upstairs room. He gently poses her body as if she is sleeping before placing the blanket on her.

Police report- In a police station, a uniformed officer and a plainclothes detective read a newspaper. Battling's friends push past them to talk to the clerk. He dismisses them while he finishes writing something, but eventually gives them his attention. Back at the shop, Cheng Huan begins building a shrine for the dead girl. The police leave with Battling's friends and make their way to the house. The officers look over Battling's body and take the men's statement. Back at the shop, Cheng Huan performs last rites for Lucy, ringing his little replica temple bell.



Sad end- The police and Battling's friends leave the hovel, making their way to Cheng Huan's shop. The Chinese shopkeeper kneels before his makeshift shrine, holding a knife in the air. A title card reads: "As he smiles goodbye to White Blossom, all the tears of the ages rush over his heart." Cheng Huan looks at Lucy one last time before plunging the knife into his chest and falling to the floor. Outside the shop, the police and Battling's friends arrive and enter, quickly moving up the stairs. After a quick shot of Lucy's body in the bed, a vision of the Buddhist monk ringing the temple bell fades into view. The film ends with one last shot of the harbor in Shanghai at dusk.



THEMES

Society

Class- *Broken Blossoms* is a story shrouded in poverty. It takes place in one of the more down-trodden areas of London and focuses on the squalor Lucy lives in. Despite her father's relative fame and seemingly steady work, Lucy is forced to eat her father's scraps and lives in a home that—even for the time—was unsuitable for human habitation. Battling's drinking seems to empty their coffers as quickly as they are filled, forcing Lucy to live like a pauper, barely having enough money for a single fish or a sachet of tea for her father's teatime meal. Cheng Huan is in a more stable economic situation, appearing to be a somewhat successful shop owner, but being Chinese in a foreign country relegates him to the lower-class districts and lifestyle. Anti-Asian sentiments were high during the early 1900s, and many western countries used social and economic redlining to make sure immigrants were segregated from "polite" society. Often, class in American films focuses on the divide between rich and poor, but Griffith breaks from that trend, examining the role of race in the stratification of class.

Illustrative moment- Class is clearly on display in Battling Burrows' home. It appears to be an old office or storage building, roughly modified into a home. The main room serves as Lucy's bedroom, and a second small room with more amenities serves as Battling's room. There is a very rough hearth in the corner of the room where Lucy works to prepare her father's meal. The room is lit by a dangerously rudimentary gas lamp that resembles a modern-day Bunsen burner. There is no basin, no running water, nothing for Lucy to wash herself in, and it shows in her appearance. Battling seems to use the facilities at his boxing job and immediately go spend his earnings on liquor at the bar, never spending a cent on her health or well-being.



Gender- This film displays a very traditional view of gender. Besides Lucy, there are no named women in the film, making it difficult to find another example of the female gender. The only time we see a woman who isn't one of Battling's conquests is early in the film, when Lucy speaks to an overworked wife and two sex workers. All three women tell Lucy never to get married, as men are brutes. We do see many men.

The British men all take part in drinking and revel in fighting. Battling shows himself to be a brute of a man early on. Title cards explain that he sleeps with many women, and one of these sexual escapades left him with Lucy when her mother abandoned her at Battling's home. He is the definition of toxic masculinity: he genuinely believes that brute force and anger can overcome any obstacle. Cheng Huan represents a more gentle masculinity, both in being partially degendered by his Chinese garb and cultural expressions and in his desire to see gentility spread across the world. In his admiration and care of Lucy, we see what a father should be, whereas Battling represents the most repulsive kind of abusive father.

Illustrative moment- We see masculinity displayed clearly at the film's beginning, when Cheng Huan attempts to break up a fight between American sailors. Griffith tries to use this moment to highlight Cheng Huan's lack of understanding for American culture, as a title card tells us the sailors are just fighting for fun. This moment also shows us the difference in gender norms between the two cultures, as Cheng Huan isn't the only Chinese man who shows displeasure at the sailor's brawl. While this was likely an attempt to show the "backward" nature of Chinese culture to an American audience, in this exchange we see clearly that Chinese masculinity wasn't connected with physical prowess and aggression in the same way as European or American culture of the time, which upheld soldiers, boxers, and other fighters as the ideal man.



Religion- While a frequent backdrop to the story, religion only plays a small role in *Broken Blossoms*. Preaching Buddha's teachings is what drives Cheng Huan to leave his home. He also interacts with a pair of priests who are supporting Christian missionary work overseas. In private moments, Cheng Huan often thinks of the temple back in Shanghai, dreaming of the monk's prayers and temple bells. One of his final acts is to build a small shrine and pray for Lucy after Battling beats her to death.

Illustrative moment- The film begins with Cheng Huan talking to a monk in a temple in Shanghai. Here we see a very Westernized version of a Buddhist temple where aesthetics of many cultures and Buddhist traditions overlap. The monks pray and enact ceremonies in front of an altar. Cheng Huan has great faith and pledges his life to spread the Buddha's teachings. When he attempts to do this in the harbor, he gets caught in a fight between rowdy American sailors.



Sports- Boxing is a major part of this film. Battling is employed as a boxer and spends all the time he's not drinking or mistreating his daughter training for his next big fight. In these moments, we're given glimpses into the sports culture of the time, where fame substitutes for decency: many of Battling's followers know that he is a violent abuser, but many overlook this obvious flaw and a few even help him, despite knowing the danger Lucy is in. Sports always has its scandals and scandal-makers, and Battling represents this issue quite clearly.

Illustrative moment- The most prolonged display of sport comes toward the film's end when Battling fights with an opponent whom the title cards name only as "The Tiger". Surrounded by men in suits and watched by a professional-looking referee, Battling and The Tiger swing punch after punch, going for several rounds before Battling is declared the victor. Griffith likely included this sequence in order to draw in boxing fans who would often go to cinemas to catch sports highlights in the week's newsreel; otherwise, this sequence feels almost out of place when juxtaposed with the rest of the film's dramatic and tragic elements.



Justice

Injustice- In many ways, *Broken Blossoms* is a story of injustice. Lucy is at the mercy of her abusive father, and no one stops to help her, not even those she calls her friends. The poor girl resembles a small old woman because of the constant stress and abuse she faces. Only Cheng Huan sees past this, seeing

the child behind the “tear-stained face.” When he cares for her after she stumbles into his shop, the title cards say this is the first tenderness Lucy has ever known. The injustice compounds when Battling’s friends keep a lookout for him while he trashes Cheng Huan’s upstairs room and terrorizes Lucy. Cheng Huan returns home and, fearing the worst, goes to where he knows Lucy and Battling live. There he finds Lucy’s corpse. Angry and disgusted by Battling’s callous violence and abuse of Lucy’s trusting innocence, Cheng Huan shoots him. Knowing that no one will care for the girl’s corpse, Cheng Huan takes Lucy’s body back to his store and prepares a simple shrine to give her last rites before taking his own life.

Illustrative moment- When Battling finds Lucy at Cheng Huan’s shop, he is accompanied by his boxing promoter and a couple other men. When Lucy sees a chance to run away from her father, these men stop her, the boxing promoter grabbing her arm. She pleads with him, but he hands her over to Battling, who angrily drags her back home and beats her to death. Not only could these men have protected Lucy, they willingly oversee Battling breaking and entering into Cheng Huan’s shop and destroying his possessions. In many ways, Lucy’s blood is on their hands as much as on Battling’s.



Violence- There’s a shocking level of violence on display in this film, even by today’s standards. Viewers in 1919 were disgusted by the portrayal of child abuse, and these feelings persist even as the film ages. Battling is portrayed as a self-serving brute with obvious anger issues in an incredibly unsympathetic way. He has no positive qualities: he just hits people and drinks. We see this violence contained in the ring during his fight, but unfortunately for Lucy, Battling’s rage doesn’t stop after his fights. The film’s final acts of violence come from Cheng Huan, who first shoots Battling to avenge Lucy and then ends his life to avoid further despair—and perhaps the death sentence.

Illustrative moment- The clearest moment of violence comes when Battling drags Lucy home from Cheng Huan’s shop. He eventually beats her to death, leaving her body in the main room while retreating to his bedroom to drink a bottle of whiskey. The infamous “closet scene” that precedes this beating gives us the violence of the impending act without actually showing it. Many modern critics note the strangely aural quality of this scene, saying they can almost hear her screams. Part of that might be the fact that the actress *was* screaming as if she were about to be murdered. After the first take, Griffith was quoted as asking Lillian Gish, “Why didn’t you warn me you were going to do that!?” While the violence in *Broken Blossoms* may seem minimal in terms of special effects, but Gish and Griffith use the emotional overacting typical of the time period to multiply the emotional impact of what we are shown. This moment is a perfect example of how violence in film is not always gruesome shots of blood and brutality.



Relationship

Attraction- There is a small but interesting exploration of attraction in this film. Part of it has to do with the expectations of the audience, while the other part has to do with people’s biases. We see Cheng Huan admiring Lucy from afar, being defensive of her when no one else is. He sees the innocence in Lucy and does what he can to protect it. As the film draws on, Griffith begins to use angles and lighting that make Cheng Huan appear more sinister while he looks after Lucy, but then he suddenly breaks this trend after a title card explains that his intentions are pure. Those who had read the short story the film is based on were likely expecting the more racist plot, and rampant anti-Chinese sentiment in America would have lent to a distrust of the main character in many viewers. Lucy experiences the inverse attraction, showing appreciation to this kind man who treats her more like a daughter than the man who has raised her.

Illustrative moment- In between shots from Battling’s big boxing match, we’re shown a short drama between Cheng Huan and Lucy in which he slowly approaches her. Griffith uses shadow and creative lighting to make Cheng Huan appear sinister, as if he has ill intent. When Cheng Huan moves his face toward Lucy’s, however, the lighting suddenly changes, and he turns



away from her after gently caressing the soft silks that adorn her hair. A title card explains that he only cares for the girl as a guardian. Lucy returns a similar attraction, thanking Cheng Huan for his kindness and gentle treatment she'd never experienced before.

Kindness- While sometimes overshadowed by the tragic elements of the film, kindness plays a big role in *Broken Blossoms*. Almost every tragic thing that happens comes out of misunderstanding or intolerance for Cheng Huan's attempts at kindness when he cares for Lucy. The story begins with Cheng Huan wishing to spread the kind word of Buddha to the rough-and-tumble cities of the West. But the economic and social realities of life in London quickly change his plans and push him to pick up the opium pipe. Even with his senses dulled, Cheng Huan still wishes to make the world a kinder place. He gets the opportunity when Lucy collapses in his store. Not only does he make sure she's safe and give her a place to stay while she recovers, he tries to make up for her life of mistreatment by treating her like a princess.

Illustrative moment- When Lucy collapses in Cheng Huan's shop, he acts quickly, carrying the girl upstairs and placing her in a soft bed before feeding her and giving her medicine to help her recover from her beating. A title card says: "The room prepared as for a princess". Cheng Huan goes out of his way to show kindness to someone he knows doesn't experience it often. He lines the room with silk tapestries and burns incense as well as bringing fresh flowers into the room, something she desires but cannot afford. He even gives her a doll she was looking at in the window just days before.



CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Cheng Huan- Cheng Huan is a young man who moves from Shanghai to the West in the hope of spreading Buddha's teachings. It doesn't take long for the mean streets of London to grind away his resolve, however, driving him to opium dens to pass the time and alleviate his frustrations. One day, a young girl, whom he's admired for her innocence and survival despite her father's abuse, passes out in his store, and he cares for her as if she was his own child.

Brave Cheng Huan shows a subtle bravery throughout the film. To travel across the world is never a coward's choice. His revulsion at violence shows the depth of his character: While those who are portrayed as brave are often fighters, Cheng Huan highlights how bravery can emerge in those who lack a penchant for violence. Simply to stand by your values is an act of bravery, especially in the face of ignorance and brutality, and that is exactly what Cheng Huan ends up doing. At the film's end, when Battling drags Lucy back home, Cheng Huan returns home to find his upstairs room destroyed and Lucy missing. Knowing no one else will try to stop Battling from beating her, Cheng Huan finds a gun and goes to the Burrows' hovel to confront Battling, a hulking brute prone to anger who openly hates foreigners. Attempting to protect the weak in the face of frightening odds is Cheng Huan's greatest display of bravery.

Generous This character trait mostly shows after Cheng Huan finds Lucy in his shop. His first reaction is to care for the girl, which is something we all might do in similar circumstances, but he goes beyond simple aid. Cheng Huan shows Lucy no end of kind treatment, dressing her in rich silks and burning incense for her, while feeding her richly. Here, Griffith twists the source material: in the short story, Cheng Huan wished to sleep with Lucy whereas in the film, he only wants to care for someone so obviously downtrodden, someone who needs the most care but receives the least. This is another sign of his generosity. Cheng Huan wants nothing but to see Lucy acting like a child instead of an abused woman.

Dissatisfied Cheng Huan's dissatisfaction with life in the West is clear from the first shots of London. While in Shanghai Cheng Huan is smiling and richly dressed; but in London, he dresses in black and often frowns. He also picks up an opium habit as a way to cope with the disappointment life has brought. Working as a shopkeeper in an overcrowded, poor neighborhood quickly stifles Cheng Huan's desire to preach Buddha's teachings. In his drug-addled dreams, he often thinks of home, of the temple and the monks. Much of his dissatisfaction comes from the treatment of the poor and the foreign in London, and this feeling leads him to care for Lucy.

Lucy Burrows- Lucy is the daughter of Battling Burrows, a rising star in the boxing world. She faces her father's pent-up rage, often being whipped for the most minor offenses like not having meals prepared whenever he decides to come home. Despite the physical and mental toll of her father's abuse, Lucy remains hopeful and tries to see the best in everyone.

Submissive Lucy responds to her father's abuse with close to complete submission. She hopes that doing whatever her father says will make him happy and keep him from hurting her, but we see that even this is a gamble for her. She stoops and bows anytime her father is near, trying to appear as nonthreatening as possible, almost like a stray dog being domesticated for the first time. Likewise, she knows that she is small and weak compared to almost anyone, and it consistently shows in Lucy's body language such as when she's cornered by Evil Eye. She could simply step away and likely outrun him, but having been conditioned by her father, she freezes and tries to do what Evil Eye wants. Lucy's submissive nature plays into her relationship with Cheng Huan, too, as when she wants to leave at first, she stays in bed to make Cheng Huan happy.

Serious Lucy often has a serious look on her face. She also acts like a girl twice her age, having been forced into a servile role in her father's home from an early age. She dotes on him like a mother or housewife might, and never outside of Cheng Huan's shop does she act in a truly childish manner. This upbringing and the constant threat of violence from the man who is supposed to care and provide for her has robbed Lucy of her childhood, forcing her to adopt a serious demeanor to survive.

Hopeful Despite everything, Lucy can't help but hope for better. The way she begs with her father not to hurt her shows that is not yet so broken that she cannot imagine Battling acting like a real father. Similarly, she collects tinfoil and garbage from the street in the hope of trading it for some small treat for herself, such as a flower. Lucy also looks at the dolls in Cheng Huan's shop window, wishing she could have such possessions and live a normal child's life.

Battling Burrows- Battling is a skilled boxer who is quickly rising in the ranks of London's boxing halls. He is prone to anger and often takes his rage out on his illegitimate daughter, Lucy. Despite his cruelty and irritability, he has many friends and followers, and they often accompany him to the bar and elsewhere.

Cruel Battling shows his cruelty frequently. He often beats Lucy for little more than not smiling. Likewise, he forces the young girl to serve him while leaving only scraps for her to eat. Battling also controls his daughter's movements, demanding that she be home when he gets there, even if he's unexpectedly early. Even knowing that he's mistreated Lucy, he continues to beat her. Lucy screams that he'll kill her if he beats her again, he continues his abuse. When he realizes that he's killed his daughter, Battling goes into his bedroom and drinks a bottle of whiskey, more upset that he'll be in trouble if the police find out than he is for having killed his daughter.

Angry This is Battling's most obvious character trait. He is only not angry when there's a drink in his hand and a woman on his arm. Channeling his anger at his opponent makes Battling a talented boxer, but he is unable to contain his rage outside the ring. He takes out his anger on anyone around him, including his friends, his boss, and especially his daughter, Lucy. Toward the film's end, we see Battling's anger give way to outright intolerance as he is shown to be bigoted against foreigners. While many people would be thankful that a stranger cared for their child when they were hurt, Battling's anger multiplies when his friends inform him that Cheng Huan is taking care of Lucy. In his rage, he smashes everything in Cheng Huan's upstairs room before dragging Lucy back to his hovel and killing her. In his final moments, Battling is angry to see Cheng Huan in his home and attempts to kill him, both out of hatred and an attempt to keep him from going to the police.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How does Griffith hide the fact that the Limehouse district is just a set? How do these techniques compare to more modern films?
2. How does the racism on display in *Broken Blossoms* compare to the racism in *Birth of a Nation*?
3. What did you feel while watching Lucy's abuse? Do you think modern viewers would feel similar revulsion to those watching in 1919?
4. What did you think of the closeups used in *Broken Blossoms*? How did they impact the storytelling?
5. What is the significance of the title, 'Broken Blossoms'?