

## **Birth of a Nation** Viewing Guide

Overall:

What is Griffith's perspective on slavery? on the Civil War? on Reconstruction? What is Griffith's perspective on the preferred status of black people in the twentieth century U.S.?

How are the constructions of various womanhoods central to Griffith's vision? Pay attention to his depictions of Northern women, Southern women, black women, white women, mixed-race women.

What are the varying constructions of manhood in the film? How are physical characteristics and even physical movement used by Griffith to help signal ideas about the manhood of various characters?

Can you categorize the African American characters – what “types” of African American are represented in the film? Here you might draw on your viewing of *Ethnic Notions* but also what other additional “type(s)” might you see? (Note: while Griffith did use black men and women as extras in the filming, he cast white actors and actresses to play all the African American characters who would come into close contact with white actresses during the filming.)

### **First 33 minutes:**

How does Griffith present slavery and the slaves themselves?

Who are the Camerons? What is the relationship between the Camerons and the Stonemans? What does this relationship suggest about pre-Civil War North/South relations in the U.S.?

What is the “seed” that would grow into disunion of the North and South?

What does the film suggest about the condition and attitudes of the slaves pre-Civil War?

One title card indicates location of the scene with these words “The Stoneman library where his daughter never visits.” Why does Elsie Stoneman never go to her father's Washington, D.C. apartment? Who else lives in that apartment?

In presenting Stoneman, what is it that Griffith presents as the “great leader's weakness”?

How do the Camerons and their fellow townspeople—white and black—react to the raising of a Confederate Army?

### **33:00 – 1:27 – the Civil War**

How does the war affect those left at home in the South? and in the North?

How do those left at home in the South and in the North contribute to the war effort?

How are the soldiers themselves, Union and Confederate, depicted?

How does Griffith present war?

What are the consequences of war?

How does Griffith depict Abraham Lincoln?

How does Lydia Brown react to Lincoln's assassination?

How does Austin Stoneman react?

How do the Camerons react to the assassination of Lincoln?

## **Part II Reconstruction begins at 1:27:47**

In Part II, what does Griffith do to lend legitimacy or a sense of historical accuracy to his characterization of Reconstruction?

How does Griffith depict Reconstruction?

Who is Silas Lynch? Who is Gus? How are they similar? different?

What is the depiction of freed slaves? of black soldiers? of black legislators?

How are mulattoes – female and male – depicted in the film?

If black and mulatto men and women have a primary goal for what they hope to achieve in Reconstruction, what is it, i.e. what seems to be the number one priority?

Why/how is the Ku Klux Klan organized?

What decision do the Camerons and Stoneman jointly make about the fate of the Cameron/Stoneman women should the Klan fail to rescue them?

## **Ending**

What's going on with that ending?