



Clift, Montgomery (1920-1966)

by Tina Gianoulis

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Montgomery Clift.
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Brooding and intense, Montgomery Clift was one of a group of young actors in the 1950s who personified the emotionally repressed loss of innocence of the post-World War II generation. A dedicated actor who exhausted himself both emotionally and physically with the depth of his characterizations, Clift was also an isolated and tortured, closeted gay man who used drugs and alcohol to escape his pain.

Although he was both friend and inspiration to the likes of Marlon Brando and James Dean, Clift felt his own acting achievements were undervalued, and he died as bitter and broken as the characters he played in many of his films.

Clift was born into privilege in Omaha, Nebraska on October 17, 1920, the son of a wealthy stockbroker. His father spent most of his time working in New York, leaving Clift, his twin sister Roberta, and his older brother Brooks in the care of their high-strung mother.

An upper-class childhood filled with lengthy trips to Europe and the Bahamas ended suddenly with the stock market crash of 1929, and the family moved to a small house in Sarasota, Florida. There Clift discovered the theater in a local teen acting club.

Clift's mother encouraged her son's acting ambitions, and when the family moved back to New York in 1935, he auditioned and was cast in a Broadway production, *Fly Away Home*. His 1938 performance in the lead in *Dame Nature* established Clift's acting career. He was seventeen years old.

Clift's success on Broadway continued, and he soon found himself courted by Hollywood film executives. He rejected a number of scripts before finally making a memorable film debut in Howard Hawks' 1948 film *Red River*. He followed that with a critical success in Fred Zinneman's *The Search* (1948), which earned him the first of four academy award nominations.

Clift continued to make successful films and developed friendships in Hollywood, the closest of which was with actress Elizabeth Taylor. Taylor and Clift were both passionate and vulnerable people who felt a bond immediately. They worked together on several films, beginning with George Stevens' *A Place in the Sun* in 1951, and remained friends until the end of his life.

Clift had always had relationships with men, but he dated Taylor and other women to conceal his homosexuality. In the early 1950s, he turned down a role in Alfred Hitchcock's *Rope*, based on the infamous Leopold and Loeb gay murder case, probably because it might have led to speculation about Clift's own life.

Though at the beginning of his career, he drank only moderately and conducted his private life discreetly, by the mid 1950s he was using alcohol and drugs excessively and spending wild nights cruising.

In 1954, Clift rented a house in the gay resort of Ogunquit, Maine, and spent the summer picking up men on

the beach for S&M parties. The studios did their best to keep Clift's exploits out of the press, but rumors about his lifestyle abounded.

On May 12, 1956, after leaving a party at Taylor's, Clift drove his car into a telephone pole. The crash caused scarring and partial paralysis of his face, which would affect his appearance for the rest of his life. Although he continued to act, and gave some of his most memorable performances after the accident (in, for example, Stanley Kramer's *Judgment at Nuremberg* and John Huston's *The Misfits* in 1961), both his expressive acting and his personal life were never the same.

In his final years, Clift plunged more deeply into drug and alcohol abuse and wild sexual behavior. He began to be considered unreliable by studio bosses. Sadly, by the time his companion Lorenzo James found him dead of a heart attack at their home, on July 23, 1966, he was virtually unemployable.

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Tina Gianoulis is an essayist and free-lance writer who has contributed to a number of encyclopedias and anthologies, as well as to journals such as *Sinister Wisdom*.