

"TILLIE"

Screenplay by David Chester & Blake Pinter

Based on the 1904 American novel

"TILLIE, A MENNONITE MAID; A STORY OF THE PENNSYLVANIA DUTCH"

by

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EXT. GETZ FAMILY HOME - NIGHT

A hint of light seeps through the shuttered windows of a white, severely plain two-story frame house.

SUPER: "LANCASTER COUNTY, PENNSYLVANIA, 1894"

INT. GETZ FAMILY HOME - KITCHEN - NIGHT

A hanging kerosene lamp illuminates every aspect of the austere world of (YOUNG) TILLIE GETZ, 12. Her eyes shine with intelligence, maybe even wisdom, as she sits at the kitchen table, absorbed in the Bible.

Her father JACOB GETZ, 35, weatherbeaten and humorless, crouches at the stove and banks the fire for the night.

JACOB

Tillie, I a'ready told you once,
it's time to turn in.

TILLIE

Pop, please! Just a little longer!

JACOB

You got chores in the mornin' and
after school I need you and Sammy
in the celery beds. Get goin'.

TILLIE

But I still don't understand...
(reading)

"Except a man be born of water and
of the Spirit, he cannot enter into
the kingdom of God." Is that what
happened the day I was baptized?

Jacob stomps over, shuts the Bible. Unhooks the lamp. Waits. Tillie reluctantly returns the Bible to a shelf. They head up the stairs, the light disappearing as they go.

EXT. GETZ FAMILY HOME - BACK OF THE HOUSE - DAY

An axe cleanly splits a log on a chopping block. Another log is quickly set on the block.

With a strength belying her slight build, Tillie slams the axe down again.

In the distance... Jacob gathers vegetables.

INT. GETZ FAMILY HOME - KITCHEN - DAY

The cries of a BABY grow louder as Tillie, her arms full of firewood, enters through the back door.

Tillie's anemic stepmother, MRS. GETZ, 30, looking older than her years, flips pancakes on a griddle.

MRS. GETZ
Mind your sister.

Tillie drops the firewood in a woodbox near the stove, then rushes to calm her baby sister, fussing in a cradle.

SAMMY, 8, and SALLY, 6, Tillie's siblings, finish their breakfast at the table. All the children are dressed in clothes that have been mended one too many times.

The back door opens again. Jacob enters with a wicker basket full of turnips, carrots and greens. He removes his felt hat, hangs it on a wall peg, sits at the head of the table.

Mrs. Getz quickly places a plate of pancakes in front of him.

JACOB
(to Tillie)
Ate your breakfast a'ready?

TILLIE
Yes, Pop.

JACOB
Well, get goin', then.

Tillie lays the baby, now soothed, back in the cradle, collects the wicker basket and her lunch pail. She heads for the front door. Stops.

TILLIE
But Pop... how did Pastor know I had the Spirit?

Jacob stares at her.

TILLIE (CONT'D)
When I was baptized, how did Pastor know I had the Spirit?

JACOB
There was water, Pastor and you. It was a baptism. That's what happens! Now come home straight after school so we can get to those celery beds.

TILLIE

Yes, Pop.

EXT. COUNTRY ROAD - MORNING

Tillie walks briskly, passing by fields that flank the road. Soon the fields give way to woods. She makes a sudden turn...

EXT. SAFE HAVEN - MORNING

... and disappears into a grove of oaks, quiet but for the flute-like song of the wood thrush. One oak, clearly struck by lightning, has a huge HOLLOW in it.

Tillie steps over a fallen log, heads to the hollow and removes a book wrapped in an old rag. It's a worn copy of *McGuffey's Sixth Eclectic Reader*.

With the pail over one arm, the basket over the other, she reads the book as she returns to the road. This is her secret pleasure.

EXT. NEW CANAAN HOTEL - DAY

Large, sturdy, two stories. Distinguished by its wrap-around porch. A sign hangs above the porch steps: "NEW CANAAN HOTEL"

ABE WACKERNAGEL, 40s, lanky and amiable, sweeps the porch, humming to himself. Footsteps interrupt his routine.

Tillie, engrossed in her book, approaches the hotel.

ABE

Maybe it's good your pop don't let
you read those books at home, cuz
you'd know more than President
Cleveland, ain't?

Tillie smiles.

TILLIE

Mornin', Uncle Abe.

Tillie rushes up the hotel's steps. Abe holds open the door for her. Tillie happily enters as if she, too, lives here.

INT. NEW CANAAN HOTEL - ENTRANCE HALL - DAY

As Tillie steps in, cousins REBECCA, 16, plain, and AMANDA, 15, pretty, both with laundry baskets, bound down the stairs. Their work clothes put Tillie's mended school dress to shame.

AMANDA

Tillie! Doc just ran out of here!
Mary Hertzog done slip doin' the
wash and broke one of her legs!

REBECCA

(to Amanda)
Mind your step or you'll break one
of yours!
(shouting out)
Mom! Tillie's here!

KITCHEN - CONTINUOUS

EMILY ("EM") WACKERNAGEL, 40s, stands at a table, vigorously kneading dough. Her matronly figure is clad in Mennonite garb: a black dress covered in a black three-point cape. Her hair is neatly tucked under a white bonnet, known as a "cap."

Rebecca, Amanda and Tillie enter. Rebecca and Amanda continue out the back door. Em watches them leave.

EM

I sure wish they were as talented
in the kitchen as they are with the
laundry. But, oh well.
(to Tillie)
Hope you got plenty of turnips.

TILLIE

Yes, ma'am. Two bunches.

EM

Good. The *schneke* are still warm.
Help yourself.

Tillie sets down her things and heads to a counter where a large tray of cinnamon rolls beckons. She takes one and divides it into three pieces.

Em notices, heads for the tray, tears off two more rolls and places them in Tillie's lunch pail.

EM (CONT'D)

Them's for Sammy and Sally. You can
have a whole one of your own.

EM (CONT'D)
 How many times I got to tell you,
 there's always plenty?

Tillie looks down shyly. Em lifts her chin, kisses her cheek,
 then returns to her kneading. Tillie observes her.

TILLIE
 Aunt Em. When you went plain,
 weren't you baptized again?

EM
 I sure was.

TILLIE
 But it wonders me, wasn't your
 first baptism enough?

EM
 No. Because a body has to feel the
 Spirit of its own will.

TILLIE
 Don't you ever get tired of wearin'
 the garb every day?

EM
 Never. It brings me closer to the
 Lord, 'stead of wastin' my time
 thinkin' 'bout fancy things.

TILLIE
 I sometimes think about fancy
 things, but I know I'll never have
 'em. So I just think about
 somethin' else.

Tillie takes a bite of the *schneke*. Smiles.

EXT. WILLIAM PENN SCHOOLHOUSE - DAY - ESTABLISHING

A plain little one-story schoolhouse on an otherwise empty
 road.

INT. WILLIAM PENN SCHOOLHOUSE - DAY

On the walls are portraits of Washington, Lincoln, Grant and
 Garfield. Below them are framed mottos:

"GOD IS OUR HOPE" "KNOWLEDGE IS POWER" "DARE TO SAY NO"

(MISS) MARGARET, 25, Tillie's greatest inspiration,
 circulates among SCHOOLCHILDREN of various ages. She has an
 air of grace and speaks with a genteel Southern accent.

MARGARET

Children, when writing your compositions, do not force your words. Write simply of what you see or feel.

Some students tentatively press pens to paper; others seem to be waiting for inspiration to strike.

Tillie is already writing with zeal.

ABSALOM, 13, farm boy handsome and bright as a brick, stares at his blank page, then glances at Tillie, several rows ahead. He finally picks up his pen.

LATER

Margaret walks about as STUDENTS stand and struggle to read their compositions, only snippets of which are heard.

MALE STUDENT

"... but on Jordan's bank the Baptist stands, silver buckles on his knee..."

FEMALE STUDENT

"... and when thoughts of the last bitter hour come like a blight over thy spirit..."

ABSALOM

"... the only thing I took particular notice to about girls is that they are always pickin' lint off each other, still."

He sits. Stifled laughter comes from the other students.

MARGARET

Go on.

ABSALOM

That's all the further I got.

Margaret takes a moment; composes herself.

MARGARET

Well. That's... a promising start.

Tillie shoots her hand up.

MARGARET (CONT'D)

Tillie, honey, go ahead.

Tillie stands, glances at Sammy and Sally, who smile proudly.

TILLIE
 "Evening."
 (reading aloud,
 enunciating carefully)
 "I love to take my sister and
 brother and go out, still, on a
 hill-top..."

BEGIN TILLIE'S IMAGINATION

EXT. HILLSIDE - DUSK

Tillie, hand in hand with her siblings, reaches the top of that very hill, watching the day end...

TILLIE (V.O.)
 ... when the sun sets so red in the
 West...

The children run from her and frolic down toward their world: farms, cows, corn fields.

TILLIE (V.O.) (CONT'D)
 ... and the birds sing around us as
 the men return from their work.

Tillie gathers a bunch of wildflowers, their colors still vivid even as the sun sets.

TILLIE (V.O.) (CONT'D)
 I would love to play in the
 evening, if I had the dare, when
 the children are gay and everything
 around me is happy.

She admires the bouquet she now holds.

TILLIE (V.O.) (CONT'D)
 I love to see the flowers close
 their buds when the shades of
 evening are come. I hope the
 closing of my life may come as
 quiet and peaceful as the closing
 of the flowers in the evening."

END TILLIE'S IMAGINATION

INT. WILLIAM PENN SCHOOLHOUSE - DAY (REALITY)

Tillie finishes, sits. Pin-drop silence. Margaret leans against her desk, closes her eyes for a moment, smiles.

MARGARET
Children. That is what we call a
composition.

Tillie beams. Absalom does, too; he's in love with her.

LATER

Students gather their things. Tillie retrieves her *McGuffey Reader* as Absalom, smiling, purposely brushes by her. She looks at him with disdain, then joins the others as they file out.

MARGARET
Tillie. Could I see you a moment?

Sammy and Sally stand at the door. Tillie motions to them to leave without her. They do. She approaches Margaret's desk.

Margaret gently takes the *McGuffey Reader* from Tillie...

MARGARET (CONT'D)
I think you're ready for something
new.

... and hands her the novel *Ivanhoe*.

MARGARET (CONT'D)
Have you ever read a novel?

TILLIE
Oh, no, ma'am. Us, we're
Evangelicals. Pop don't uphold to
novel-readin'. Only the Bible and
books from the church li'bries.

MARGARET
Well, this won't harm you any.
Borrow it as long as you'd like.
I'm quite sure you're going to
enjoy it.

Tillie hesitantly takes the book from Margaret.

TILLIE
Thank you, ma'am.

She turns to leave, stops. Looks back.

TILLIE (CONT'D)
Did you really like my composition?

MARGARET
Yes, honey. It was truly moving.

Tillie smiles... and floats out of the room with confidence.

EXT. COUNTRY ROAD - DAY

Balancing her pail and basket, Tillie reads *Ivanhoe* as she passes a wooded area. She struggles with unfamiliar words.

TILLIE (V.O.)
"In that pleasant district of merry
England..."

The road before her shimmers and changes before her eyes...

BEGIN TILLIE'S IMAGINATION

EXT. FOREST - DAY

Tillie, still reading, now walks in a forest near a river.

TILLIE (V.O.)
... which is watered by the river
Don, there extended in ancient
times a large forest. Here, haunted
of yore, the fabulous Dragon of
Wantley...

AN OMINOUS DRAGON-SHAPED SHADOW races across the ground.

Tillie, engrossed, rapidly turns pages.

Somewhere in the distance is the thundering of hoofbeats.

TILLIE (V.O.) (CONT'D)
... and the cavalcade, setting
spurs to their horses, rode on as
men do who wish to reach their inn
before the bursting of a night-
storm."

The hoofbeats swell...

END TILLIE'S IMAGINATION

Tillie, startled, looks up to see a horse and buggy, driven by a FARMER. He tips his hat to her as he passes by.

EXT. SAFE HAVEN - DAY

Tillie now stands at the oak. She reluctantly places *Ivanhoe* in the oak's hollow, then returns to the

COUNTRY ROAD

She walks a few feet. Stops. Races back to the

SAFE HAVEN

She retrieves *Ivanhoe* and reads as she returns to the road.

INT. GETZ FAMILY HOME - KITCHEN - DAY

Mrs. Getz peels potatoes at the sink. Sally rocks the baby in her cradle.

Tillie enters excitedly.

TILLIE

Mom! Today we wrote compositions.
Miss Margaret thought mine was --

MRS. GETZ

Hurry up and get changed. Pop's
expectin' you!

Tillie walks off, disappointed. She stops for a moment by the cradle and kisses the baby.

SALLY

(whispered, to Tillie)
She thought it was wonderful good.

They share a smile. Tillie heads to the stairs.

TILLIE AND SALLY'S BEDROOM - DAY

Spotless, spartan. A bed and a wooden dresser.

Tillie enters, lifts her skirt, removes *Ivanhoe*, carefully pinned in her petticoat, and slips the book under her pillow.

She takes off her school dress, removes an even more worn frock off a hook and dons it.