TREATMENT OF THE AMERICAN BUSINESSMAN IN THE

NOVELS OF THEODORE DREISER

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TREATMENT OF THE AMERICAN BUSINESSMAN IN THE
NOVELS OF THEODORE DREISER

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The novels of Theodore Dreiser are notably rich in their picture of the operations of American business. The lives of all of the protagonists of these novels are shown to be influenced if not determined by the practices or conventions of our business system. Most of Dreiser's characters are shown as directly involved in the workings of this system, some as heads of large enterprises, others in managerial positions, some as skilled labor, and still others as barely subsisting wage slaves. The range of his picture of the American business world is broad, not only in the variety of occupations of his characters but in the years covered, for his novels treat a period of more than half a century, from 1865 to the 1920's. They show the changes in attitudes which characterized the development of big business. They show the growth of the American city and the extremes of wealth and poverty which came to characterize our urban life. They reveal the attraction which the city had for the young people of the small towns and rural communities. They reveal the beauty of the city and its indifference to the fate of the hundreds of thousands who were lured into its savage competitions.
In commenting upon Dreiser's attitude toward the panorama of our business life, critics have either praised him for his objectivity or have singled out his portrayal of Cowperwood, the tycoon, saying that Dreiser's attitude toward American business was favorable, if not worshipful, or they have concentrated upon his treatment of Clyde Griffiths of An American Tragedy, saying that Dreiser condemned American capitalistic society.

There is truth in all of these views but only a partial truth. Dreiser was comparatively objective in his portrayal of American business and those who were participants in it. But his sympathies may be felt beneath the surface of apparent objectivity. They were broad as was his understanding of the desires and urges of his characters. These sympathies shifted as he moved from one protagonist to another, entering into their desires and feelings. Above all there was his constant sympathy for man--man caught in the web of fate, urged on by desire, hindered and thwarted by convention, law, and circumstance.

It is easy to concentrate upon one or two novels and to misinterpret Dreiser's treatment of American business and the American businessman. For not only did Dreiser's sympathies change with a change of protagonist, but his own philosophy underwent change. It is only through a chronological study of all the eight novels that Dreiser's full comment emerges.
If one is to understand Dreiser's viewpoint and his merits as an interpreter of the American business scene, he had best begin with an examination of Dreiser's life and background, for in Dreiser's antecedents, his struggle against poverty, and his life-long brooding over the human condition lies the explanation for that which was peculiarly Dreiser.

Dreiser was one of eleven children. Both his parents were German immigrants, his father a fiercely puritanical Catholic and his mother a Mennonite who tended toward pagan mysticism. His father, John Paul, a weaver with some business and mechanical abilities, was left partially incapacitated and penniless through a series of accidents prior to Dreiser's birth.¹ His temperament and increasingly fanatical adherence to the church incapacitated him for success in the world of commerce, and the family lived in chronic poverty. To his son, the elder Dreiser always appeared to be "concerned much more with the hereafter than with the now...",² and his authoritarian manner and stern insistency on observance of strict moral codes alienated the father from his children. The mother, Sarah Schanab, did not share her husband's moral outlook. Dreiser describes her as being strange, dreamy, sweet, and mystic. She was amoral, beyond good and evil--


intellectually, emotionally and temperamentally. "She appealed to me as thoughtful, solicitous, wise, and above all, tender and helpful . . .," Dreiser wrote. ³ When she died in 1890, it was the end of the home unit for the Dreiser family. They had all turned to her who had been the central sustaining force to the entire brood, and when that force was gone, the family dispersed, disappearing into the cities as they attempted to build their own lives.

One trait which was alike in both Dreiser's mother and father—their natures were very different—was that of being superstitious, a peculiarity which they passed on to their children. In family stories, Dreiser's own birth in 1871 was enveloped in a supernatural mist. ⁴ Their home in Terre Haute, Indiana, where he was born, was associated with spirits, supernatural visitations, and other unexplainable episodes. These occurrences led Dreiser's father at one time to call in the priest to sprinkle the place with holy water. ⁵

Because the elder Dreiser was unable to support his family properly, it was necessary for them to separate and move frequently. At various times, Mrs. Dreiser and the children lived in Vincennes, Sullivan, Evansville and Warsaw, Indiana, and in Chicago while her husband went to other towns to seek work. While the younger ones stole

³Ibid., p. 4. ⁴Elias, pp. 3-4. ⁵Ibid.
coal from the railroad yards, the older sisters took up with the men in
the town who could offer them a measure of the financial security and
some of the pretty things they craved.\textsuperscript{6} Dreiser describes his family
as one with a "peculiarly nebulous, emotional, unorganized and
traditionless character."\textsuperscript{7} The early impression made on Dreiser by
his family's circumstances was one of chronic poverty, quarrels, shame,
broken illusions, rootlessness, and a generally chaotic environment.

"One does not make one's relatives or oneself or the world," says
Dreiser in the opening page to his account of his childhood.\textsuperscript{8} Indeed,
having ten brothers and sisters who were reared in such a chaotic
environment would call for such an outlook in regard to one's family.

His sister Ruth, says Dreiser, had "the artistic impulses of a Marie
Antoinette, also her weaknesses;"\textsuperscript{9} his brother Rome drank and gambled
and wandered all over the hemisphere, returning home only to shame
his family; his oldest brother, Paul (Paul Dresser), was the only one
who succeeded other than Dreiser, becoming an actor and famous song
writer after a troublesome youth. His sister Eleanor, when she was
sixteen, was offered money by a prominent lawyer which she accepted
after some persuasion and which her mother, very poor and in no
position to question the moral implications, allowed her to keep.

\textsuperscript{6}Ibid., pp. 8, 13. \hspace{1cm} \textsuperscript{7}Dawn, p. 9.
\textsuperscript{8}Ibid., p. 3. \hspace{1cm} \textsuperscript{9}Ibid., p. 11.
The incident eventually led to a seduction. Two of his sisters, mainly concerned with clothes and men, soon fulfilled their father's prophecy of disaster. One of them, who went to Chicago, was soon being supported by an architect; later she fell in love with the married manager of a bar called Hannah and Hogg's. He tricked her into running away with him to Canada and then to New York after stealing money from his employer. Dreiser later used this episode for *Sister Carrie*. Dreiser's other sister, who got pregnant by a young aristocrat of Warsaw, was sent to her sister in New York to have her baby.¹⁰

Dreiser the boy was curious and sentimental as was the man.

"My sisters, . . . always described me to myself as a most curious-minded child, hanging about and listening even when I was not wanted . . . ," recalls Dreiser.¹¹ He played alone often, thinking and listening, making up games, often finding himself an unintentional eavesdropper. He was serious-minded, always asking questions and wanting to know; furthermore, he was also emotional and sensitive and capable of great sympathy. One day while playing on the floor he discovered his mother's shabby shoes, began to caress her toes, and as his mother showed him the hole, he was "so full of a kind of pity . . . until he felt swollen inside and his pity all welled up into tears."¹²

¹⁰Ibid., pp. 11-12.  
¹¹Ibid., p. 81.  
¹²Elias, p. 5.
From the age of seven until he was fourteen, Dreiser was sent to parochial schools, a step his father felt necessary to insure a proper religious education. The harsh religious training to which he was subjected frightened and repelled him. When he was fourteen, he attended public school in Warsaw, for the first time with Protestants. In 1889-1890, Dreiser spent one year at Indiana University at the expense of his former high school teacher, Mildred Fielding, who felt that he had potential and so was willing to finance a year of college. From an academic point of view, Dreiser says he learned nothing. It was through his associations at school, however, that he came in contact with social and intellectual matters which whetted his appetite for life and knowledge.

The family's conditions were hard and dreary, but nonetheless, he found himself "vibrating with an emotional ecstasy in regard to life itself." He discovered the charms of the country--creeks, trees, birds, flowers--a perfect setting for a "dreamy and all too meditative temperament." His free hours away from school and church were spent reading such romantic stories as those of Horatio Alger and poring over Goldsmith's "Deserted Village." If the real world of family, church and school became unbearable, he could always escape into his

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{13}Ibid., pp. 15-16. \hspace{2cm} \textsuperscript{14}Ibid., pp. 35-36. \\
\textsuperscript{15}Dawn, p. 57. \hspace{2cm} \textsuperscript{16}Ibid., p. 121.
\end{flushleft}
dream world. The family spent one year in Chicago, a year which made an immense impression on Dreiser. It was the same Chicago that was going to amaze, frighten, and fascinate the young Carrie and Dreiser's other characters as they entered the booming city. "Life was glorious and sensate, avid and gay, shimmering and tingling . . . I fell asleep from sheer weariness of wonder," he writes of his first day there. The Americans who crowded into this wonder of the new West were ignorant, naive, hopeful creatures, Dreiser recalls, "but how ambitious and courageous!"

The constant moving, poverty, and unstable family life were bound to create an impression on a sensitive boy such as Dreiser. The contrast he noted between his family and those who were more financially secure aroused in him a sense of dissatisfaction and shame. It developed through the years into a feeling "of social and personal inferiority." But also these contrasts stirred his desire for money, power, and excitement. He must conquer the city.

When Dreiser was sixteen, he went to Chicago on his own where he drifted through a variety of frustrating jobs for a few years--laundry truck driver, bill collector, stove cleaner--and then into reporting in 1892. On the Chicago Daily Globe he learned the fundamentals of

17Elias, p. 16.  
18Ibid., p. 159.  
19Ibid.  
20Ibid., p. 8.  
21Ibid.
reporting and the value of using details, and was exposed to the cynicism of the trade. One of Dreiser's first editors told him that "life is a god-damned stinking, treacherous game, and nine hundred and ninety-nine men out of every thousand are bastards." Although Dreiser's experience did not lead him to so cynical a generalization, he became increasingly aware of the glaring contrasts between the precepts and practices of American life. Already he had observed that spiritual integrity and material well-being were not necessarily related. His mother, who did the best she could to keep the family together and loved and encouraged them was not notably concerned with morals, while his father, usually penniless, hungry and unable to provide for the family, was overly concerned with virtue.

Now as he moved around to different newspaper jobs in St. Louis, Toledo, Cleveland, Buffalo, Pittsburgh, and New York, the contrasts became more glaringly apparent. He questioned what he saw and "observation became the form of understanding." He saw strong and weak instead of the conventional good and bad. The strong achieved success, but not through virtue as was prescribed by convention; furthermore, their reward was not the hellfire that reformers screamed about on street corners. He felt that it could not be said that one was


23 Elia, p. 52.

24 Ibid., p. 48.
bad and another good. Some won, if temporarily, and most failed, and it was a pity that the world was made up that way. He saw the misery and struggle of a rapidly expanding America, the vice and corruption practiced by those engaged in law, politics, and big business. He saw the powerful pay off their weaker contemporaries to do their bidding, while in the slums the poverty, social unrest, and labor strikes aroused his pity. All the while, the newspapers reflected an America of sweetness and light, and Dreiser knew that this reflection was not a true one.

In 1895, he left reporting for good, for he was barely making a living and he was tired of being a reporter. For a while he struggled to support himself through free lancing, and he was almost despondent. His brother Paul came to his rescue and got him a job with Every Month, a periodical devoted to literature and popular music which was published by Paul's publishing house. In it Dreiser wrote editorial material which he signed The Prophet. As the Prophet Dreiser expounded his views that man operated within a system of laws to which all were subject, whether rich or poor. He hoped to arouse in the fortunate "a sympathy for the unfortunate which would purge selfishness and ruthlessness." From 1897 until 1899, Dreiser was associated with Success Magazine.

25 Ibid., pp. 69-70.  
26 Ibid., p. 87.  
27 Ibid., pp. 88-89.  
28 Ibid., p. 93.
for which he wrote stories telling of how great men had achieved success and power through hard work. Dreiser was a frequent contributor, and his stories included such things as "Determination Not to Remain Poor Made a Farmer Boy Merchant Prince--Marshall Field, " and "A Great Vocalist Shows that Only Years of Labor Can Win the Heights of Song--Lillian Nordica." In telling of these successful individuals, he betrayed admiration, envy, and fascination. Years later he could recall these successful individuals sympathetically, and he could write understandably of the businessmen in his novels. He looked up to them as being better able to manage their destiny, and envied "the active and impersonal efficiency that characterized their lives."

About this time--1897--Dreiser decided to marry Sallie White, a school teacher whom he had met in 1892 when the paper in St. Louis sent him to cover the Chicago World's Fair. The marriage proved to be a mistake. Sallie was a conventional girl who adhered to the precepts set up by society--the ideas which Dreiser so violently rejected--and their personalities conflicted from the start. They were separated from 1912 until her death in 1942.

By this time, Dreiser had reached the conclusion that it was not the writer's obligation to judge but rather to record and interpret.
But interpretation became difficult when one was confronted with miseries that had no answers. He groped for formulas and could find none, except that life and the world were extremely complex. Once when he preached to a prostitute about the evil of using narcotics, she answered, "What do you know about life anyhow?" He wondered what he did know.

He found a partial answer in the writings of Tyndall, Huxley, and Spencer. Their writings confirmed his belief that man was subject to nature's forces and that he was engaged in a struggle for survival in which the fittest survived and the weak perished. There was no discernible purpose to the constantly changing world in which man found himself. Although Huxley and Spencer viewed the evolutionary process with optimism, Dreiser did not. Now that he could view the turmoil around him as an Unknown Cause, he need not concern himself with ethics, for the evolutionary process did not allow room for any. He could only observe the Unknown Cause in action. This discovery, although it explained to him how the world he knew and the world pictured by Balzac (his literary model) had come to be, did not bring him peace of mind. It did not take away the sadness that he experienced in viewing the miseries of shattered lives, for life appeared to have no point.

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34 Ibid., p. 72.
35 Ibid., pp. 81-82.
36 Ibid.
This was Dreiser's life prior to writing his first novel. When he sat down to write *Sister Carrie* in 1899, he was ready to describe the America he had experienced, to tell of what he had seen and how he felt about the conflicts he had encountered between reality and the untruths to which the majority still paid homage. The novel is about a small-town girl who comes to Chicago to earn her living, finds it difficult to do so, and lives first with a salesman and then with a married man who leaves his family and position for her. In the end, Carrie has achieved success as an actress, but she is not happy with her success. The publisher's wife, shocked because Carrie was not punished for breaking the moral code, was instrumental in persuading her husband not to publish the book. Dreiser demanded that Doubleday stand by its contract, and the book was published, but it was not promoted. The genteel tradition was entrenched firmly enough in American letters that it could force Dreiser's publisher to leave the novel in his cellar for many years. The few copies which Frank Norris, then a reader for Doubleday, mailed to reviewers attracted little notice, but reviews were not altogether bad.

Following the suppression of *Sister Carrie*, Dreiser turned once more to magazine editing, and by 1909 he was a ten-thousand-dollar a year editor: confident, well-dressed, well-fed—a successful man

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of business. He had been connected with Smith's Magazine and Broadway Magazine and was director of Butterick publications when he resigned in 1910. 

Complications in his job and in his personal life came to a head with a scandal involving the daughter of a woman in the Butterick organization, and Dreiser was forced to resign. His position, however, had brought him in contact with the actual commercial world, an experience which would prove useful in his novel-writing.

No longer preoccupied with editorial worries, Dreiser returned to Jennie Gerhardt, which he had started in 1909, and which he completed in 1911, ten years after his first novel. In this novel, he again turned to a woman for his main character. Jennie, too, had illicit love affairs and even had a child out of wedlock, but the American public was now more receptive to a novel in which the "transgressor" is not judged. Most reviewers praised Jennie Gerhardt, and H. L. Mencken called it the greatest American novel since Huckleberry Finn.

For his next three novels, Dreiser turned to the type of individual who has the talent and the power to achieve success. In The Financier, published in 1912, Dreiser began a trilogy on the life of Charles Tyson Yerkes who made a fortune in Philadelphia, was sent to prison for embezzlement of city funds, and returned to recover his fortune in the

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39 Ibid., p. 150.  
40 Ibid., p. 152.  
41 Ibid., p. 158.
1873 stock market panic. The novel was not received so well as Jennie Gerhardt, and its sales were not outstanding. In The Titan, which followed in 1914, Dreiser showed Frank Cowperwood getting control of the gas and railway systems of Chicago. Unexpectedly, as Dreiser was completing the book, Harper's stopped its plans to publish The Titan, and rumors circulated that this move was due to fear that the big businessmen upon whom the firm depended might be offended. The problem was quickly solved when a British firm took over its publication. The Titan was considered a better book than The Financier, but its sales were less in the first few months than its predecessor's.

When The "Genius" was released in 1915, it got few good reviews, and it sold less well than either The Titan or Jennie Gerhardt. The book, an account of the artist-businessman undermined by sensuousness, was declared lewd by the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice in 1916. Threats by the society to keep the book from going through the mails set off the famous Dreiser protest which was signed by prominent writers from this country and abroad. Nevertheless, the obscenity charges caused the publisher to withdraw The "Genius" from circulation and it was not until 1923 that a different publisher reissued it. To add to Dreiser's problems, his books were bringing him only a meager income.

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However, it was ten years until he published his last novel, *An American Tragedy*, the book which made him famous and assured his financial success. This book, heavy with social implications, traces the life of Clyde Griffiths who is charged with drowning his pregnant girl friend for the love of a rich girl and sent to the electric chair. He now became not only a controversial literary figure but also one whose public pronouncements were listened to. For the conservatives, he was the *bête noire* of American literature, and for the young radicals he was a prophet. He visited Russia, criticized the capitalistic system, and became more and more involved in social problems. He became chairman of the Communist-agitated National Committee for the Defense of Political Prisoners, driven by "an intense idealistic indignation that such victimization could occur and was indeed occurring in American society ..." He became a spokesman for "oppressed persons of all degrees" and urged his fellow writers to join in the battle for the betterment of the masses.

After more than a decade of leadership in liberal and radical causes, Dreiser gradually withdrew from the limelight. He was tired of the struggle and disillusioned with the breaking out of war. Now he was content to observe the universe and humanity, and as his two

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posthumous works show, gave way to the mysticism which had lurked
beneath his materialism. In 1944, Dreiser received an Award of
Merit from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, but many of
its members shunned him. He joked about his disappearing talents,
but he returned to work on his last two novels, The Bulwark and The Stoic.
The Bulwark, which tells of the spiritual triumph of a Quaker-businessman,
rejects American materialistic society for the inner light. The Stoic,
the final book to the Cowperwood trilogy, shows Cowperwood in
London trying to gain control of the railway system. Cowperwood dies
and his fortune is scattered, but Dreiser is more concerned with the
conversion of Cowperwood's young mistress, Berenice, to Yoga and
spiritual triumph. Again Dreiser rejects materialism.

These two last novels are considered Dreiser's poorest works,
but they are vital if we are to observe the results of the change in his
philosophy--from materialism to mysticism. In this last creative period,
he had turned to a form of pantheism in which he found himself as one
with the creative force and with all of nature's creatures, much like the
aging Solon Barnes of The Bulwark. So concerned was Dreiser with
doing something that might "help promote equity and love even after his
death . . ." that he joined the Communist Party. His books would carry
to the people his advocacy of spiritual cause, but what about his

47 Elias, pp. 291-292.  
48 Ibid., pp. 293-294.
social cause? Dreiser was convinced that the Russian social program was motivated by a religious rather than a political belief. Dreiser died on December 28, 1945.
CHAPTER II

SISTER CARRIE AND JENNIE GERHARDT

If the American businessman of the nineteenth century had not been, Theodore Dreiser's story of Sister Carrie would have been radically different—if it had been at all. For although in his first two novels Dreiser does not deal directly with the powerful financier, his protagonists were indirectly caught up and influenced by the changes the businessman set in motion. The industrial revolution which he helped create lured many rural Americans to the city in search of their success. 1

One of these who came to the city to "make good" was the fictional Sister Carrie created by Dreiser for his first novel. Sister Carrie was only a name on a slip of paper when Dreiser began to write the book his friend Arthur Henry had persuaded him to attempt. From this beginning he reached back into memory and recalled what his sisters had been like. Then he drew the figure of Drouet after the various traveling salesmen who had fascinated his sisters, and for settings he used his knowledge and experience of what the city was like. In the period 1889-1900

Dreiser in his newspaper articles had dealt more and more with poorer and more unfortunate men rather than the rich and masterful ones whom he often interviewed in his newspaper and magazine work.\(^2\) Too, he had experienced poverty and disillusionment, hunger and cold, as he tried to make a place for himself in New York and other cities. From these experiences he was able to conceive the idea of Hurstwood. Carrie represents his dreams as a boy, his ambitions, illusions and disappointments, while Hurstwood represents his fears.\(^3\)

The publication of Sister Carrie was halted when the wife of publisher Frank Doubleday protested.\(^4\) She was horrified not only with its theme of illicit love, but outraged by the fact that the heroine was not punished for breaking the moral code. She persuaded her husband not to publish the book, but Dreiser held the firm to its contract and it was published. No effort was made to promote its sale, however. Frank Norris, who was reading manuscripts for the firm, had proclaimed it as the best book he had read. He pushed for its success and sent out copies to reviewers, but to no avail; the book was a failure.\(^5\) The catastrophe plunged Dreiser into deep gloom and thoughts of suicide. All reminders of indigence irritated him and made him sad. He underwent an ordeal much like the one he had described in the character


\(^3\)Ibid., p. 109.

\(^4\)Ibid., pp. 113-114.

\(^5\)Ibid.
of Hurstwood. After recuperating with his brother Paul's help, he was able to write: "All that is, now passes before me a rich, varied and beautiful procession . . . ."7 Years later in telling of the early fate of Sister Carrie, Dreiser was to say: "The American mass mind of that day . . . was highly suspicious of any truthful interpretation of life."8 Even in 1908 when Grosset & Dunlap republished it, the outraged critics outnumbered those who praised it.

In an interview in 1901, Dreiser made clear his interest in "the reasons for the individual failure, the individual success" which he encountered daily in American society.9 But these were not the things about which Americans wanted to hear. Dudley sees Americans' spurning of Sister Carrie as their refusal to face the revelation of their own crudities.10 Noble says that "Dreiser's destructive theme was a direct challenge to the idea of progress, which was the major value or myth of his culture."11 Both theories have some element of truth in them.

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6 Ibid., p. 128.
7 Ibid., p. 131.
What was this novel about that it caused such a stir? It was the story of Carrie Meeber who comes to Chicago from a small town to work, finds it almost impossible to make a living, and, when faced with having to return home with the loss of all her dreams, chooses to live with a traveling salesman without benefit of clergy. Later she falls in love with a married man, the manager of an elite saloon, who tricks her into running away with him to Quebec and then New York. After three years during which he disintegrates gradually into a failure, she leaves him and becomes a stage celebrity. In the end she has achieved success of a sort, but she is not happy. She is not even aware that her lover has committed suicide in a dirty charity room near the Bowery.

Carrie came to Chicago in an ambitious mood with dreams of success and pleasure. Like many who migrated to this city during this period--Carrie arrived in 1889--this eighteen-year-old was an unskilled worker. She was not alone in her search for employment. In Chicago, Dreiser tells us, the population was then prospering not so much from the commerce already established there, but from the new industries preparing for the hordes moving in from the country. \(^{12}\) The city's effect on the newcomer is tremendous, notes Gelfant in her book, *The American City Novel:*

As an atmosphere it stirs in him false hopes; as an economic structure it educates him to want money and success; and as a way

of life it engulfs him in its own disorder and leaves him helpless. . . the young and growing American city exerts a seductive attraction upon the hero. 13

Unfamiliar with the city, says Dreiser, the new city dweller drifted to the wholesale houses and shopping district in the center of town. With so many looking for work and a limited number of positions available, the situation was such that subsistence wages were the standard. Carrie, when she finds employment working long hours in poor working conditions, gets paid four dollars and a half per week, of which four go for room and board. Clothing and other necessities are out of the question. With an overabundant labor supply, foremen are indifferent to new applicants. Several times Carrie is rebuffed coldly and told she is not needed. Besides, they hire only experienced help.

One instance in particular gives an inkling of the feeling of helplessness which assailed Carrie as a job-seeker:

"Well," said the foreman, scratching his ear meditatively, "we do need a stitcher. We like experienced help though. We've hardly got time to break people in." He paused and looked away out of the window. "We might, though, put you at finishing," he concluded reflectively.

"How much do you pay a week?" ventured Carrie, emboldened by a certain softness in the man's manner and his simplicity of address.

"Three and a half," he answered.
"Oh," she was about to exclaim, but checked herself and allowed her thoughts to die without expression.
"We're not exactly in need of anybody," he went on vaguely, looking her over as one would a package. "You can come on

Monday morning, though, "he added, "and I'll put you to work."¹⁴

H. L. Mencken credits Dreiser's writing success to his ability in making Carrie and her surroundings understandable and significant.¹⁵ This ability, of course, is one of Dreiser's best points, and Carrie's situation is developed fully so that it is no surprise that she later succumbs to Drouet. On the one hand, she sees Hanson, her brother-in-law, as a hard-working, pleasure-denying common laborer trying to get ahead by practical planning and sober concentration. For him and his wife, Minnie, life is a daily routine of toil with little or no pleasure to fill in the greyness of their existence. They do the best they can and do not yearn for beauty and pleasure, which do not happen to be a part of their reward in their struggle for security. On the other hand, she sees the wealth and luxury the city offers to some and which she desires for herself. "Her craving for pleasure was so strong that it was the one stay of her nature," Dreiser tells us.¹⁶ The answer is "Money: something everybody else has and I must get," Carrie deduces.¹⁷ In this way, Carrie, being of a strong aesthetic nature hungry for beauty and pleasure, is subjected to the demands of a material world.¹⁸

¹⁴Sister Carrie, pp. 28-29.
¹⁶Sister Carrie, p. 34.
¹⁷Ibid., p. 63.
¹⁸"Without money . . . as we know it in our society, the story is meaningless." James T. Farrell, "A Literary Behemoth Against the Backdrop of His Era," New York Times, July 4, 1943, p. 3.
After weeks of privation and sickness, Carrie enters into a common law marriage with the traveling salesman Drouet, who can provide her comfort and some of the pleasures which she desires. However, she does not fall in love with him and in time comes to see that she is superior to him in many ways.

Drouet is not a bad fellow, merely a weak and shallow one. His weakness consists of an irresistible admiration for women and an equal inability to deny himself pleasure. Having little of what he considers the good things in life, he takes the next best thing by frequenting those places which cater to the successful. By rubbing elbows with the elite and partaking of a little of what they enjoy, he manages to lead what in his estimation is a gay life. This contact with the wealthy keeps alive his ambition to someday be able to succeed enough to participate fully in this pleasurable life. "In his good clothes and fine health, he was a merry, unthinking moth of the lamp," says Dreiser. Out of his position and assailed by some of the forces which plague other men, Dreiser continues, he would be as helpless and pitiable as Carrie, perhaps more. Being smiled upon by fortune, however, he has the opportunity to indulge in his "inborn" desire to possess women and to satisfy his vanity in good clothes. "Madame Sappho would have called him a pig; a

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19 *Sister Carrie*, pp. 9-10.

Shakespeare would have said 'my merry child'; old, drinking Caryoe [his boss] thought him a clever, successful businessman.  

Carrie, fighting a losing battle for subsistence, accepts clothing and food and eventually a common law marriage with this jovial salesman. Self-preservation and a chance to achieve a small part of her dream are stronger forces in her than is the morality in which she has been reared. She could have continued as a factory hand at subsistence wages, but what would that bring her? Garet Garrett in his article on "Business" says that American business has made many things available to its people through wealth, but it has caused great damage. Of the assembly system, he says, "It wastes the spirit by depriving the individual of that sense of personal achievement, that feeling of participation in the final result, which is the whole joy of craftsmanship so that the mind is bored and the heart is seared." It is work of this sort which Carrie performs at the shoe factory—work which dulls the mind and spirit.

As for Drouet's part in his relationship with Carrie, his drive to possess her and care for her in a good-natured, selfish way, is fulfilled with only the slightest twinges of conscience. When Carrie transfers her attentions to Hurstwood, Drouet is hurt because of what he feels is

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21 Ibid., p. 65.


23 Ibid., p. 413.
Carrie's ingratitude for all he has done for her, but the disappointment is brief as he continues on his merry way, fancy-free as he really wants to be. "He was too young, too successful," to spend too much time grieving, and, indicates Dreiser, this is how he would be forever. 24 Still, he is generous. One incident which reveals his generosity and at the same time reveals Carrie and Hurstwood's essential selfishness occurs outside a theater where the three have gone. A beggar begging alms comes up beside Hurstwood with the remark: "Honest to God, mister, I'm without a place to sleep." Hurstwood barely notices him; Drouet, the first to take note, feels a surge of pity and hands him a dime; Carrie forgets the incident quickly. 25

The environment in which Dreiser sets Carrie is one of shifting values kept unsteady by constant change. Carrie is unprepared to face the temptations of the city. In Veblen's terms, Carrie has support neither from lower class instincts nor from middle class mores. Her desire for the ideal leads her into the commonplace struggle for material success as she tries to capture some of her illusions. Her success depends on chance and luck, and it does not necessarily bring happiness. "Success in a world that is crumbling is necessarily solitary and momentary." 26

24 *Sister Carrie*, p. 120.
26 *Noble*, p. 327.
The most successful businessman in *Sister Carrie* is Hurstwood, the manager of a fashionable bar, who takes her from Drouet. Hurstwood had attained his position as manager of Fitzgerald and Moy's saloon through shrewdness, perseverance, and hard work. From bar-keeper in an ordinary saloon he had risen to the class which Dreiser describes as "the first grade below the luxuriously rich." Here in his role comparable to the public relations man of today, he creates a good impression with his imposing air, good clothes, and acquaintance with the successful men who frequent the place.

Lounging around in well-tailored, expensive clothes, Hurstwood leads a life which revolves completely around his work. He has learned how to greet men according to their financial rank from the most successful celebrity to the lowliest clerk, adjusting his manner accordingly. In his own social group, he is "a light among them, reflecting in his personality the ambitions of those who greeted him . . . . It was greatness in a way, small as it was." 27

However, his family life has stagnated and is held together by convention. He keeps his wife and family in the North side of Chicago in a "perfectly appointed house" according to current tastes, but one devoid of warmth and spirit. His wife, "a cold self-centered woman," aspires for social betterment and Hurstwood has long ago lost interest

27 *Sister Carrie*, p. 169.
Their son and daughter follow their own ambitions in the commercial and social circles and pay little attention to their parents. Hurstwood refuses to get involved with younger and more beautiful women than his wife not because he believes in the sacredness of the marriage bond, but because he fears home complications which may threaten his social position and his job. His opinion of men who let themselves be caught in such predicaments is one of condemnation for letting themselves be caught for such acts, not for committing them. Hurstwood's home and business personality is one in which superficiality is a necessity demanded by social pressures.

Hurstwood's understandable interest in Carrie is not based merely on physical desire, but in an appreciation of her youth and fresh beauty. "He picked her as he would the fresh fruit of a tree," and his thoughts in the beginning are not to upset his home life, but to enjoy Carrie's beauty as an added delight. 28 Hurstwood is far ahead of Drouet in his treatment of women. He is attentive, refined, and assured, and he makes Carrie feel important.

When his wife suspects that Hurstwood is seeing another woman, she asserts her position. "Hurstwood was a man of authority and some fine feeling, and it irritated him excessively to find himself surrounded more and more by a world upon which he had no hold, and of which he had

28 ibid., p. 120.
a lessening understanding. ²⁹ Therefore, when his wife poses a real threat, he becomes panicky and his first thought is that he will lose his job through the scandal. Locking up one night when he has been drinking, he finds the safe open with money inside, and he ponders on the advisability of taking it. He is left no choice when the safe locks on him accidentally while he is holding the money in his hand. His employers would know that he had tampered with the money, and, knowing that they would thereafter be suspicious of him, he takes it. He tricks Carrie into coming with him to Toronto, from which he returns all but a small amount of the stolen money when accosted by detectives. From there he takes the unsuspecting Carrie to New York, where he hopes to start anew.

Devoid of the burning desire and illusions of youth, Hurstwood finds himself in a city which has little room for the dispossessed. His age and temperament are of little help in the struggle for position. "In part it was an awesome place to him, for here gathered all that he most respected on this earth—wealth, place, and fame."³⁰ He finally invests the stolen money as a partner in a bar which looks like a place he might like, but he is sorely disappointed. The bar attracts few celebrities, and he finds it difficult to make friends. In New York, people are in too much of a hurry to care for friendship, and Hurstwood misses the

²⁹Ibid., p. 198. 
³⁰Ibid., p. 274.
intermingling and socializing among the customers he did at Fitzgerald and Moy's in Chicago. When the lease runs out on the place, he barely gets back his investment.

During the three years Hurstwood and Carrie stay together, a psychological change takes place in the middle-aged man. He is aware that he is not getting anywhere, that he is not advancing materially. 31 "The cloistered philosophers erred when they stated with due eloquence that solely in the spirit of man and not in his material well-being, manhood consists," said a reviewer of Hurstwood's case. 32 To Drouet money had come and gone easily; to Carrie it meant all of the answers to her unrealized dreams; to Hurstwood, at first it is not even a problem, but it comes to mean the instrument to get Carrie and later it is the basis for mere survival. 33 Dreiser suggests that any man who is forced by circumstances to change his pattern of living at an age such as Hurstwood's and to recognize that his abilities are not what they used to be will be faced with psychological problems. Hurstwood becomes moody and broods more and more on the past. The city becomes like a wall to him. "You could not get in. Those inside did not care to come

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31 Ibid., p. 305.


33 Dreiser, more than any of his age, understood the vital importance of money in the lives of individuals in their American society. He understood "that it is congealed labor power." Farrell, p. 3.
out to see who you were. They were so merry inside there that all those outside were forgotten, and he was on the outside. Hurstwood wastes time, looks for jobs for a while, then quits looking and sits in hotel lobbies all day, thinking of the past. When his clothes begin looking shabby and his money begins to dwindle, he sits in the apartment, endlessly reading newspapers and hoarding the little money he has left. The rest of the time he is making excuses to creditors at the door. When Carrie leaves him, he is forced to live on the streets, finding a bed and food wherever he can. He turns to begging and finally he commits suicide.

Hurstwood's tragedy begins with his weakness for beauty. Had he followed the rules of social conduct, he would not have had to step out from the protection of his middle-class group to be lost in the impersonality of the city. When he seeks beauty in the form of Carrie and loses his job and his place in society, he also loses his personality and character. Some critics blame Hurstwood's downfall on sexual weakness, but it is more a matter of a weakness for beauty and the ideal which leads him to violate the social code and lose his business and

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34 *Sister Carrie*, p. 306.

35 There is some evidence, however, that Hurstwood's inability to find a job is not confined to him alone. Toward the last, on one of his brief jobs, a man says: "It's hell these days, ain't it? . . . A poor man ain't nowhere. You could starve, by God, right in the streets, and there ain't most no one would kept you." *Sister Carrie*, p. 381.
social role. The implication is that if Hurstwood had gone along with the requirements of society even superficially he would have continued being a successful businessman. Blinded by his desire for Carrie and what she represents to him, he throws caution to the winds and makes the mistakes which lead him to his grave in Potter's Field. In addition, luck and chance desert him in his final bid to make his way in the business world even in the lowliest of jobs, while Carrie, with youth and luck on her side, becomes a success.

For his second novel, Dreiser again turned to a woman for his main character; however, her fate revolves first around a successful politician, and then around a wealthy businessman. When Dreiser finished writing Jennie Gerhardt in 1910, he had just given up his job as a successful editor and turned again to writing. He was a different Dreiser from the gangling, poor youth who had contemplated suicide.

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37 Horace Gregory points out that Dreiser wrote about all his women from a man's point of view and only in relation to a man's world. Some exceptions he cites are Aileen Butler and Clyde Griffiths' mother, who are strong characters in themselves, but by and large Dreiser's women are sorrowing mothers, beautiful mistresses, or out-grown wives. "In the Large Stream of American Tradition," New York Herald-Tribune, March 24, 1946, pp. 1, 2.
when *Sister Carrie* failed ten years before. Dreiser had started *Jennie Gerhardt* shortly after the failure of *Sister Carrie*, but he had been too troubled by the threat of poverty and accompanying psychological fears of it to finish the novel. 38 Now that he returned to it, money was no longer a problem. Furthermore, he had lost interest in Jennie and her theme of goodness and suffering and had become more interested in her businessman lover, Lester Kane. He had to contrive the death of Jennie's daughter to achieve the "poignancy" which the "original tone demanded but which he had not been able to maintain." 39 The fact that Dreiser's mind was being drawn more and more to the businessman hero was made evident between 1912 and 1915 when he published *The Financier*, *The Titan*, and *The Genius* in rapid-fire succession. By 1916, Dreiser thought *Sister Carrie* and *Jennie Gerhardt* were "really old-line conventional sentiment." 40

Jennie is a young, poor girl like Carrie, but she has better qualities as a person. She is kind, generous, unselfish and warm—a picture of Dreiser's mother. Jennie's seduction by an older successful man is not brought about by desire for money and clothes, but to get her brother out of jail. After her seducer dies suddenly without marrying her, she faces the situation admirably, taking joy in being a mother.

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38 *Elias*, pp. 122-123.  
Jennie's seduction takes place after she and her mother have gone to work in the town's hotel to help support the family while the father is ill and bedridden. Columbus, Ohio, is still a small enough town that the hotel clerk and housekeeper can be kindly and helpful and the grocer can allow them to take food on credit during their hard times.

Bass, Jennie's brother, has already adopted the philosophy that to succeed one has to associate or "at least seem to associate" with the successful in the social and commercial world, a philosophy much like Drouet's. Bass will succeed because he can ignore his family's circumstances as he goes on making his own success.

Senator Bender, the father of Jennie's child, is presented as a sympathetic, kind politician—ambitious and opportune when necessary, but not corrupted. He could have been a richer man, had he taken advantage of all his opportunities, but he is still a man of conscience and not unscrupulous in his dealings. His interest in Jennie springs from loneliness, for he is middle-aged and has never been married. He loves Jennie and plans to marry her and help her and her family, but his unexpected death ruins their plans. After the baby's birth, Jennie goes to Cleveland where she goes to work as a maid in a rich home. There she meets Lester Kane, a rich young man who is attracted to her and persuades her to go to Chicago with him where he sets up an apartment for her.

Lester is the youngest of two sons of Archibald Kane, who made his fortune by realizing a need for vehicles in a growing America and providing that need by honest effort. His carriages, wagons, and drays have been sold on their merits and not by unfair methods; a "shrewd but honest man" is what people say about Archibald Kane. 42 To this man, his son Lester is his favorite. He realizes that Robert is a more able businessman, but he credits Lester with being more human, having a bigger vision, and his sentiments (aside from business) favor Lester.

He urges Lester to marry, for the fact that he has not settled down to be a family man and a responsible man of affairs disturbs him. He feels that Lester's bachelor status is hurting him in every way—commercially, socially, and morally. His opinion about Lester's living with Jennie and not being married is that he should have married her or left her, although he would have preferred that he marry a girl of his own class. His feeling is that Jennie could not be a good woman because she allows his son to keep her, so she must be after his money. His objection to the entire affair is that he cannot see how he can entrust his fortune to a son who has little care for what the world thinks is proper. He has seen how vital is the right sort of marriage for a businessman. His only defense against his son is in seeing that his will indicates that Lester must leave Jennie or lose his fortune. "What a

42Ibid., p. 145.
foolhardy persistence in evil and error!" He shook his head. Robert was wiser. He was the one to control a business. He was cool and conservative. If Lester were only like that. " Yet his heart, if not his mind, is still with his wayward son.

Lester Kane is a forceful, determined individual. He is strong and handsome, "hairy, axiomatic, and witty." He knows what he wants and he goes after it. He gets the yielding, kind-hearted Jennie through tactics which are almost like a caveman's. His methods are what Stuart P. Sherman called animal-like behavior. "Mr. Dreiser's leonine men must circle once or twice about their prey, and spring, and pounce; and the struggle is over. " Education and background have merely served to smooth out his essential animalness and vigor, says Dreiser, and his mind is "Rabelaisian in its strength and tendencies." He is not afraid of anything, and "he felt that he knew how to live and to die. " He demands only the best in food and wine and eats and drinks with gusto and in large quantities. "His reply to any question was that he only had one life to live. " At first his plans with Jennie involve enjoyment of her, but he does not mean to marry outside his own plane.

43Ibid., p. 279. 44Ibid., p. 133.
45Stuart P. Sherman, "The Barbaric Naturalism of Mr. Dreiser," The Stature of Theodore Dreiser, edited by Alfred Kazin and Charles Shapiro (Bloomington, 1955), pp. 75-76.
46Jennie Gerhardt, p. 415.
Lester's philosophy of personal life consists of a desire to "be vigorous" and sustain his "personality intact." He complies with social conditions as inevitable and present, but he believes it necessary to weigh and temper those conditions with his own views as to what is best for him in the matter of personal conduct. His philosophy is practical—accept the inevitable and do not get overly sentimental or emotional. Although his relationship with Jennie is selfish and arises from the desire to possess, he is at the same time kind-hearted and generous to Jennie and her family. Eventually a bond of spiritual love develops between them. For him this affection is based on his appreciation of Jennie's womanliness and ability to yield. Jennie reminds him of a flower—"white, delicate, beautiful . . .," and to him she is "the essence of everything beautiful . . . ." In spite of his affection for Jennie, Lester needs nothing and no one totally. He can take Jennie and keep her, but if something more important comes up, he can put her aside.

Yet it is this affair with Jennie which threatens his fortune and leads him to make financial investments which are not profitable. Eventually he gives in to social and financial pressure by giving up Jennie, marrying a wealthy former sweetheart, and rejuvenating his business personality and activity. He recognizes that the breaking of

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47 Ibid., p. 135.  
48 Ibid., p. 151.
social conventions can break a man and even alienate him from his family. However, he is soured by the thought that he has been forced by convention to forsake Jennie and in so doing committing the first brutal act in his life. Lester cannot be brutal and hard to Jennie: "She needed him, and he was ashamed to think that his charity had not outweighed his sense of self-preservation and his desire for material advantage." In the end when he is dying and Jennie is beside him, he tells her that he would have been as well off with her as in his role of wealthy businessman.

It is this same lack of ruthlessness which keeps Lester from being a top businessman. His "tragic flaw" is that he cannot be hard, subtle, or cautious. He is straight, direct, and honest, and to succeed in his business world in a big way one had to be crafty. Dreiser explains Lester this way: "The trouble with Lester was that, while blessed with a fine imagination and considerable insight, he lacked the ruthless, narrow-minded insistence on his individual superiority which is a necessary element in almost every great business success." In addition to this ruthless force, says Dreiser, he must boast a marked enthusiasm for his product, and this Lester lacks. Dreiser seemed to be saying that individuals like Jennie and Lester are not able to succeed.

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49 Ibid., p. 398.

50 Ibid., p. 303.
greatly or to avoid suffering, for they lack the hardness which the
materialistic world requires. 51

Individuals like Lester's brother, Robert, however, are capable
of accumulating a sizeable fortune and scoring a great success in the
business world. Robert is his father's right-hand man in business
matters. He has the personality and ability "which fitted him for the
somewhat sordid details of business life." 52 A quiet man of few words,
he coldly weighs problems before making a decision, and it is to him
that his father turns when it is a question of financial intricacies.
Robert is cold and conventional in character, "irreproachable" in both
his public and private life; he never oversteps the strict boundaries of
righteousness as drawn by legal rules. In business deals he will use
evry trick necessary to succeed and is still capable of squaring the
matter with his conscience. This ability to follow the hard tactics
required by business and still justify them by moral rules is a matter
which always mystifies Lester. Lester describes Robert as having "a
Scotch Presbyterian conscience mixed with an Asiatic perception of the
main chance." 53

By following convention, Robert has the public conscience with
him in his practical dealings. 54 He never breaks the law in a criminal

51 Elias, p. 153. 52 Ibid., p. 146.
53 Ibid., p. 177. 54 Ibid.
way, but he believes in succeeding in business regardless of friendship or family ties. He believes in pulling things tight, cutting down production costs and using financial rewards to get rid of competition. Robert is shrewd in speculation and intent on amassing more and more money.

By looking forward to future problems of competition and reorganizing the business, he hopes to profit and this requires getting rid of Lester. When his father's will names him trustee of Lester's part of the fortune (dependent on Lester's abandoning Jennie), he is pleased to be rid of his brother who stands in his way of expansion.

"It gave him a righteous duty to perform. Lester must come to his senses or he must let Robert run the business to suit himself." He does not make any effort to help his brother although he could have easily done so. "He would never do a snaky thing--and Robert knew, in his own soul, that to succeed greatly one must. You have to be ruthless at times--you have to be subtle," Robert reasons with himself.

Years later after Lester has given up Jennie and he has once again become a successful and powerful businessman, Robert tries to make amends to him. He makes overtures to Lester because he sees no need for them to remain apart when they could work out deals together which would profit them both. Lester rebuffs him, for he has never forgotten

55Ibid.
56Ibid., p. 299.
that his brother deserted him when he was down and in need, and the thought still hurts him. Robert tells Lester that he has never felt right about the will business and everything else connected with it. "We're brothers after all," he tells Lester. Later, after Lester has rejected him, "there was a sense of unsatisfied obligation and some remorse in Robert's mind as he saw his brother walking briskly away,"\(^57\) Dreiser says. Robert cannot understand how Lester's mind works, and neither can Lester understand his businessman brother. Still Lester sympathizes with him and can keep from condemning him: "He could see now how it all came about--why he had been made the victim, why his brother had been made the keeper of the great fortune. 'It's the way the world runs,' he thought. 'What difference does it make?""\(^58\)

Dreiser does not seem very interested in Robert's personality although he is definitely the more successful of the two as a businessman. But Robert is too cold. He is like John D. Rockefeller, who Dreiser felt was "intellectually and artistically ... dull."\(^59\) Lester is more the Cowperwood type in the matter of intellect and art, but he is not ruthless enough. In Cowperwood, Dreiser would combine the talents of both Lester and Robert to create the superman financier.

\(^{57}\)Ibid., p. 412.

\(^{58}\)Ibid.

\(^{59}\)Ibid., p. 190.
CHAPTER III

THE FINANCIER AND THE TITAN

After the publication of Jennie Gerhardt in 1911, Dreiser dropped a theme which he would not treat again for ten years: he had had enough of neglected failures. Life was a struggle anyhow; he knew there were strong as well as weak individuals, and he was fascinated by those capable of great effort and hard-fought victory.

Not long before as a ten-thousand-dollar a year magazine executive he had been like the financiers he had admired in his less successful years—competent, efficient, and demanding. He had reached the top as director of Butterick Publications, and his well-fed, flashily-clad figure reflected it. To the young Sinclair Lewis he appeared "more like a wholesale hardware merchant than a hollow-cheeked realist." Writers and other employment-seekers were mercilessly scrutinized while they trembled and shifted uncomfortably under his piercing gaze. He warned his staff they could work for him so long as they had good ideas, and he meant what he said.

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2 Ibid., p. 144.
3 Ibid.
4 Ibid.
Now that he had disposed of the limited weaklings of the world as subject matter for his fiction—and was for once not poverty-stricken—, he turned to the figure of a robber baron who had known few limitations in his life—Charles Tyson Yerkes. He fashioned Frank Algernon Cowperwood, the hero of his financier trilogy, after this tycoon who had made a fortune in Philadelphia, served a prison term for embezzlement of city funds, recovered his fortune in the panic of 1873, and left for Chicago. From there, where he took control of the street railways, he went to London to compete against J. P. Morgan for control of the London subway system. Meanwhile, he had dropped wives and mistresses as his fancy dictated. At his moment of greatest victory, he collapsed and died. His fortune was dispersed, his art collection scattered. His success had come to this. The question of success—how it was accomplished and what it finally meant—had long attracted Dreiser. Now he planned to write a trilogy about this tycoon who had pursued power so relentlessly. For background information on Yerkes, Dreiser gathered material from old newspaper files, interviewed those who had known Yerkes (who died in 1905), and visited the places

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5Dreiser had been writing The "Genius" as he finished Jennie Gerhardt and had it completed a few months after the latter novel. His publishers, however, showed more interest in his plans for The Financier, and Dreiser left The "Genius" until 1913, when he began revising it with a new perspective. It was published in 1915.

which had been stomping grounds for the financier. He planned to write of Yerkes as he perceived him, "unidealized and uncursed." People could judge him as they pleased, according to their own prejudices.

Robert L. Duffus has said of Dreiser that "he did not need to invent his supermen and quasi-supermen, for he had lived their lives vicariously." This is true, for just as Dreiser identified, because of childhood memories, with those who failed, he felt a sympathy for the strong financier because he, too, craved riches and success. In New York when he was struggling to establish himself, he felt that financiers were "sharks and tricksters"; by 1905 when he was on Smith's Magazine he was doing well enough that he could say: "Success is what counts in the world, and it is little matter how the success is won . . . ." By the time he started writing The Financier, he was detached and financially secure enough that he could sympathize with the business tycoon and create a romantic and adventuresome role for him.

The Financier was published in 1912. Most reviewers did not find it so good as they had Jennie Gerhardt and its sales were not astounding, but H. L. Mencken wrote Dreiser that "no better picture

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7Ibid.  
8Ibid., p. 160.  
11Elías, p. 134.
of a political financial camorra has ever been done. It is wholly accurate and wholly American. " For the skeleton of his plot, Dreiser followed Yerkes' career closely. In creating Frank Algernon Cowperwood, however, he developed not only a prototype of worldly success but an artist of power, and most critics agree that Dreiser finds the "pirate of finance" a very romantic figure worthy of admiration. Dreiser admires the financial genius for his qualities of mind and will aside from his commercial achievement. He admires him for his virility, his subtle, artistic craft, his egotism, and his intellect. It is not necessarily the money, but the challenge of the game and the power victory brings with it which interest the financial genius in exercising his talent.

This talent makes itself evident in Cowperwood very early in life. He is a born leader and displays exceptional common sense, courage, incisiveness, and defiance. His brothers follow him as they would a master. As a boy he had observed a lobster slowly devour a squid and decided that life had to operate that way—the strong live on the weak, men live on men. A financier by instinct, he early has opportunities to

12Ibid., pp. 163-164.

13Dreiser generally admires Cowperwood not only for his faults—his sexual promiscuity—but for his good points—courage and good taste. Sinclair Lewis, "The Relation of the Novelist to the Present Social Unrest," Bookman, XXXX (November, 1914), 282. He celebrates "almost Homerically" the activities of the giant capitalists of his day. Clifton Fadiman, "Dreiser and the American Dream," Nation, CXV (October 19, 1932), 365.

develop his intelligence by watching his father at work as a teller in a bank. "All the knowledge that pertained to that great art [finance] was as natural to him as the emotions and subtleties of life are to a poet. This medium of exchange, gold, interested him intensely."15 Aside from his interest in money, stocks and bonds, and related financial intricacies, Cowperwood also shows a strong tendency toward the young girls in his neighborhood. He has little trouble winning their approval. Cowperwood's childhood in Philadelphia in mid-nineteenth century is a happy one, with no illnesses or shocks or rude awakenings to shake his confidence.

By the age of seventeen when he quits school and is ready to enter the business world, his ambitions are definitely set—he wants to be rich and powerful. Quickly he learns that his main interest is in the stock exchange. Here it is a case of dog eat dog and men are frankly out to make their fortune at the expense of others. They get down to their main business, and there is none of that talk of morality and kindness which plagues the outside world. Cowperwood likes this atmosphere. As an agent for a banking and brokerage firm, he makes up his mind that an agent is merely a tool for more powerful interests, for the men who scheme and develop great enterprises like the railroads, mines, and manufactures. "A real man—a financier—was never a tool."

He used tools. He created. He led, "he tells himself. In the meantime, since he is still young and is still an agent, he learns all he can that may help him later.

His judgment of women at this point "is temperamental rather than intellectual," and the passionate woman is the one he desires. The idea of a self-sacrificing woman is not appealing to him. "He preferred to think of people—even women—as honestly, frankly self-interested." All the talk he hears which praises virtue and decency and condemns inconstancy he takes lightly, and he has little use for the ten commandments. Surely he frequents houses of ill repute, as do all the others, but he craves more intimate, more beautiful personal contact with women. At the age of nineteen, he decides that Lillian Semple, a married woman five years older than himself, is the type of wife he would like, and he marries her after her husband's unexpected death. He senses in her an unawakened passionate nature which is obscured by her passivity. "It never occurred to him that he could not or should not like other women at the same time . . . . He wanted her physically. He felt a keen, primitive interest in the children they would have." That she is older and that people may talk is of no import to him. As far as he is concerned, "People think what you want them to think," and he could not care less

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16Ibid., p. 63.  
17Ibid., p. 56.  
18Ibid., pp. 56-57.  
19Ibid., p. 70.  
20Ibid.
about public opinion. Clearly he is a man of a strong acquisitive nature who recognizes no restraints and no limits in obtaining what he wants. He enjoys married life for a number of years, but the birth of two children and poor health mar Mrs. Cowperwood's beauty and make Cowperwood aware that he will have a sickly wife on his hands. To him, affection and sympathy between a man and his wife have their place in a marriage, but a woman must also be charming and desirable to hold her husband's interest. Besides, he has discovered a Puritan streak in his wife's character which is incompatible with his own nature; intellectually she does not understand him.

Cowperwood begins to wonder if a man should be confined to only one wife in a lifetime. The answer is Aileen Butler, the beautiful, lively eighteen-year-old daughter of Edward Butler, 21 a businessman-politician of great power. She becomes his mistress, and sex is no longer just an outlet for his physical needs, but fulfills an equal need for conquest and beauty. This search for beauty is also satisfied through art, and he begins an art collection. "He cared nothing for books, but life, pictures, trees, physical contact--these, in spite of his shrewd and already gripping financial calculations, held him. To live richly, joyously, fully--his whole nature craved that." 22

21 Dreiser had known a political boss in St. Louis by the same name while working as a newspaper reporter. Theodore Dreiser, A Book About Myself (New York, 1922), p. 44.

22 The Financier, p. 80.
In the business world, Cowperwood sets up his own brokerage house, and his genius in financial manipulation begins to amass him a fortune. Dreiser writes page after page of detailed information on Cowperwood's speculations, schemes, and connections which bring him increasing profits. By the time he is almost thirty-four, in 1871, he has a banking business whose worth is almost two million dollars, personal holdings valued at half a million, and prospects for much more.  

Cowperwood appears to be a tool of inscrutable forces and a product of society rather than its leader. He is endowed with an inexplicable personal magnetism which influences others and furthers his success. Dreiser speaks of a universal force which appears to be operating outside of Cowperwood, pushing him toward his goal. The society in which he thrives is extremely conducive to his ambitions: laws to regulate business are unclear and lack teeth, and large business can be transacted with phantom capital, better known as credit.  

In Philadelphia at that time, public officials and politicians swarmed around

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23 Ibid., p. 177.

24 "The effect of this revolution of methods upon the morals and manners of business was tremendous, " and it threw the field wide open to everyone, even those without capital. "Salesmanship became a specialized, conscienceless art." Because of low profits through this competition, the idea of mass production arose and big business was born. Garet Garrett, "Business," Civilization in the United States (New York, 1922), pp. 405-406. Business truths mirrored by Dreiser in his novels reflect the same ideas expressed by Garet Garrett's article, notes Burton Rascoe in Theodore Dreiser (New York, 1925), p. 7.
the city treasury (and the city treasurer) where fortunes could be made with the use of city funds, for the treasurer might use the city's money, without interest, so long as he returned the principal. Forward-looking men who were clever enough to manipulate these funds under cover—for the practice was not general but political—could make a nice-sized fortune from the public funds and none would be the wiser. One of these forward-looking men is Cowperwood:

Cowperwood was an opportunist. And by this time his financial morality had become special and local in its character. He did not think it was wise for any one to steal anything from anybody where the act of taking or profiting was directly and plainly considered stealing. That was unwise—dangerous—hence wrong. There were so many situations wherein what one might do in the way of taking or profiting was open to discussion and doubt. Morality varied, in his mind at least, with conditions, if not climates. 25

For six years, Cowperwood and the city treasurer have been working together secretly. Not only is the public unaware of these activities, but the powerful businessmen who have traditionally fattened their purses from all the opportunities to be had are also uninformed of Cowperwood's dealings.

In 1871 when the Chicago fire strikes, Cowperwood has been investing heavily in stocks and bonds of various kinds. As panic follows

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25 Ibid., p. 170. ("The will of business is anarchistic; its religion is fatalism. If let alone, it will seek its profit by any means that serve and then view the consequences as acts of providence. One cannot say that business is either honest or dishonest. It is both." Garrett, p. 409.)
the fire, insurance companies call in their loans, causing Eastern
investors to suffer heavy losses, and, in some cases, fail. Cowperwood's
fortune hangs in the balance, and his dealings with the city treasurer
could very well come in the open. But he still can recover his investments
intact if his business associates will continue to honor his credit. In the
meantime, Edward Butler has been tipped off that Cowperwood is having
an affair with his daughter, and he is enraged. Butler wants revenge
and Butler's associates want Cowperwood's railroad holdings. What
better reason to turn against him and cripple him financially? Not only
do they join forces to break him, but they railroad him into prison on a
technicality involving the city funds. Many have done it, yet Cowperwood
and the city treasurer become their scapegoats.

Morality has served its purpose as a weapon for the organized
group to rid itself of Cowperwood. In private, he has seduced Butler's
daughter; in the press (controlled by his enemies) he is a grafter and
conniver who has betrayed the people by misusing their funds. He must
be punished for breaking the sacred laws. And yet, he had been
following the usual custom. Edward Butler had been a poor Irish
garbage contractor who rose to contractor for the city (in the construction

26Ibid., p. 514. (Garrett explains that "Business morality is a
term without meaning. There is no such thing. Business is neither
moral or immoral. It represents man's acquisitive instinct acting
outside of humanistic motives. Morals are personal and social. Business
is impersonal and unsocial," p. 409.)
of sewers, water-mains, street paving, and other things) with the help of political maneuvering and bribery. George W. Stener, the city treasurer, had been elevated to that office by his political party as a puppet useful to their purposes, a cog in their giant machinery. Mark Simpson, a U. S. senator, along with Butler and Henry A. Mollenhauer, a prosperous coal dealer and investor, are the powers which control the political life of the city, using such stooges as Stener to accomplish their purposes. So it is that every state official up to the State Supreme Court is bribed and pressured into convicting Cowperwood through political machinations. After serving thirteen months in the state penitentiary—long enough for the powerful to no longer consider him a threat and for Butler to die, thus taking off the pressure—Cowperwood is freed.

During this troublesome period, Cowperwood never loses his equilibrium. "Embezzlement is embezzlement if the politicians want to have it so," he tells his lawyer. Repentence never enters his mind, for he never for an instant feels that he has done wrong:

Good and evil? Those were toys of clerics, by which they made money... Morality and immorality? He never considered them. But strength and weakness—oh, yes! If you had strength you could protect yourself always and be something. If you were weak—pass quickly to the rear and get out of the range of guns. He was strong and he knew it, and somehow he always believed in his star... 27

27 The Financier, p. 296.
Cowperwood believes in himself and he loses control only once when Aileen comes to see him in prison. He breaks into tears at the thought of facing her in such a degrading position.

Following his imprisonment, Cowperwood returns to Philadelphia to regain his place in the financial world, where most have assumed that he is finished. His chance comes only six months later. In 1873, the banking house of Jay Cooke & Co., a leading American financial organization, and the Northern Pacific Railroad failed for a combined total of fifty-eight million dollars. "Now the crash had come. The grief and the rage of the public would be intense. For days and days and weeks and months, normal confidence and courage would be gone. This was his hour . . . ." He is perfectly calm and cool among the panic-stricken because he has little to lose. Many will fail, but he will gain at their expense. When he failed before, he had had to go long to protect himself. Now he can go short on everything, because he has only a paltry seventy-five thousand dollars to lose. He sells everything up to thirty points off when necessary in order to trap the unwary and scare them into selling; then he buys below these figures as much as possible to cover his sales and reap a profit. In a few days he is once more a millionaire. "I have had my lesson; . . . I am as rich as I was, and only a little older. They caught me once, but they will not catch me again," he says to himself.  

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28 Ibid., p. 532.  
29 Ibid., p. 537.
Three months later, Cowperwood departs for Chicago and success, minus his family. His wife refuses a divorce, but Aileen is to follow him when the time is right. But Dreiser closes the story ominously with an epilogue that predicts "Sorrow, sorrow, sorrow . . . a world of dreams whose reality was disillusion." Even the strong who reach success and glory will face disillusionment in this world much the same as those who do not.

Between the end of 1912 and the beginning of 1914 while Dreiser was working on The Titan (1914), he returned to Chicago for information on Yerkes' career in that booming city. The city evoked longings of his youth, and he was reminded of all the hopes and aspirations he had known there. He "could sense the significance of Yerkes' accomplishments and amours." In an interview there he told a reporter that the strong individual must be left alone to fight in the struggle with the weak to assert his genius. All was going well with Dreiser, and he was happy as he worked steadily toward finishing the second book of his trilogy.

He was not prepared, therefore, for what followed. Harper's unexpectedly stopped the publication of The Titan. Many rumors as to the reason passed around, including one that the treatment of the

30 Ibid., pp. 541-542.
31 Elias, p. 170.
32 Ibid., p. 173.
financier might draw criticism from big businessmen upon whom the firm depended. "The Titan . . . was being limited by the very codes . . . [it] challenged."33 The outcome was not so bad as it had first appeared, however, as the John Lane Co., a British publishing firm, took over the book three weeks after the Harper's decision. Even so, Dreiser was disgusted by the incident, and complained: "The tendency here is . . . to discard the opinions of those at the highest point of the intellectual scale for the prejudices and stupidity of the multitude."34 He also remarked that "The idea that all men are created equal is one of the fundamental errors of our system of government."35

Although it was generally considered a better book than The Financier, The Titan in its first few months failed to sell as many copies as its predecessor had in a similar period. 36 Moreover, adverse criticism appeared in articles by such critics as Stuart P. Sherman, a critic in the Genteel Tradition. He remarked in 1915 that "He [Dreiser] has just two things to tell us about Cowperwood: that he has a rapacious appetite for money, and that he has a rapacious appetite

33Ibid., p. 174.
34Ibid., p. 175.
35Ibid.
36Ibid., p. 176.
for women."³⁷ On the other hand, although Mencken felt that Dreiser had created an excellent picture of the businessman in The Financier, "little more than an extra-pertinacious money-grubber, and not unrelated to the average stock broker or corner grocer,"³⁸ he was of the opinion that in The Titan Cowperwood began to take on heroic proportions. The artistry of Cowperwood is no longer obscured by the drive for the dollar once Dreiser gets to The Titan, said Mencken.³⁹

In closing The Financier with a gloomy prediction, Dreiser was not arguing against effort; he was simply upholding his belief that illusion should be detected for what it is.⁴⁰ Indeed, he was convinced that struggling merit deserved attention more than poverty, that "Art should show, . . . not only the concentrated filth at the bottom but the wonder and mystery of the ideals at the top."⁴¹ These "ideals at the top"

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³⁷ Stuart P. Sherman, "The Barbaric Naturalism of Mr. Dreiser," The Stature of Theodore Dreiser, edited by Alfred Kazin and Charles Shapiro (Bloomington, 1955), p. 78. (Criticism along this line continued to appear even after An American Tragedy (1925), which established Dreiser's reputation. Milton Waldman calls The Titan inferior to all of Dreiser's books "because it is merely a detailed account of vulgar brutality, chicanery, and disgusting looseness." "A German-American Insurgent," Living Age, CCCXXXI (October 1, 1926), 99. Thomas K. Whipple, criticizing Dreiser's method of characterization, wrote that Cowperwood, by his actions, indicates that he "is dull, coarse, and mean, with the mentality . . . of a card-sharper or a tricky horse-trader, animated only by avarice and lust." "Aspects of a Pathfinder," The Stature of Theodore Dreiser, p. 99.)


³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Elias, p. 165.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 171.
in the figure of Cowperwood change from an all-enveloping preoccupation with finance to the fame and the power it will bring to resist social pressures and to do what he wants. Telling Aileen good-by before departing for Chicago, he tells her: "I'll get a divorce, and well marry, and things will come right with a bang. Money will do that." Once he is sufficiently wealthy and powerful, he feels, he can express and satisfy himself as he pleases and can violate the social codes and conventions which serve to repress his nature.

Once in Chicago, a city which excites Cowperwood's artistic nature ("This raw, dirty town seemed naturally to compose itself into stirring artistic pictures."), the ex-Philadelphian decides definitely what his financial specialization is to be. The street-car business, he realizes, will be a lucrative field if Chicago continues to grow and expand. Furthermore, this business of street-railways suggests a tremendous manipulative life to Cowperwood, who thrives on this type of existence. Dreiser suggests that if Cowperwood had not been a great financier and an extremely talented organizer he might have been a


43 Gratifying the passion for power through business is a new way, a kind of kingship which allows satisfaction of desires for conquest, personal vengeance, and control over others, says Garrett. Business derives from three passions: the passion for things, the passion for personal grandeur, and the passion for power. Garrett, p. 397.

44 The Titan, p. 23.
highly individualistic philosopher, for he has a speculative mind which
ponders over the drama of life. Given the circumstances of his nature
and of the society in which he lives, however, he is wholly concerned
with material things; he is determined to seize wealth and power, to
rise to fame and authority, and to rule alone. His fixed policy since
the disastrous incident in Philadelphia is that no one should ever have
the least claim on him:

He wanted no more dangerous combinations such as he had
had with Stener, the man through whom he had lost so much in
Philadelphia, and others. By right of financial intellect and courage
he was first and would so prove it. Men must swing around him as
planets around the sun. 45

With this plan in mind, he begins to draw the talented men of
Chicago to him who will be his tools and accomplish his ends. "I satisfy
myself was his private law, but so to do he must assuage and control the
prejudices of other men. " 46 There is Addison, president of the largest
financial organization in Chicago. He is very much like Cowperwood,
but less subtle:

Addison was ostensibly a church-member, and model citizen;
he represented a point of view to which Cowperwood would never
have stooped. Both men were ruthless after their fashion, avid of
a physical life; but Addison was the weaker in that he was still
afraid—very much afraid—of what life might do to him. The man
before him had no sense of fear. Addison contributed judiciously
to charity, subscribed outwardly to a dull social routine, pretended
to love his wife, of whom he was weary, and took his human
pleasure secretly. The man before him subscribed to nothing,

refused to talk save to intimates, whom he controlled spiritually, and did as he pleased. 47

Because of their likenesses, they remain mutual associates throughout Cowperwood's stay in Chicago. Then there is Peter Laughlin, a quaint-looking speculator who knows all there is to know about Chicago business, financial conditions, deals, individuals, and opportunities. 48

A trader by instinct, he cannot make constructive use of what he knows, for he lacks the organizational ability which Cowperwood possesses.

When Cowperwood realizes that the street-car field is not a good investment at the time, he turns to the gas business. He knows nothing about gas, but he finds a man who does. Henry De Soto Sippens, who has full knowledge of the manufacturing and distributing of gas, had sensed the possibilities of immense profit in that area. "He had tried to 'get in on it,' but had been sued, waylaid, enjoined, financially blockaded, and finally blown up," giving the whole thing up and with no means of retaliation. Cowperwood finds his implement, and Sippens gets even with those who pushed him out. 49 There are also Gen. Judson P. Van Sickle, a crooked lawyer with powerful political connections, 50 and John J. McKenty, an influential politician who rose to power and got his training through robbery, ballot-box stuffing, graft, and vice exploitation. 51

48 Ibid., pp. 39-43.
49 Ibid., p. 62.
50 Ibid., p. 64.
51 Ibid., pp. 99-100.
All these characters help Cowperwood fight the big powers of Chicago and take control first of the gas business and then later of the street railways.

On the other side of the fence fighting Cowperwood, there are many highly respected businessmen some of whose beginnings in the financial world would not be found spotless. They are now powerful, run Chicago as they please, sometimes take part in society, and control all the lucrative businesses where money is to be had. In describing this varied company of men, Dreiser depends on animal imagery to get his point across:

There were short and long men, lean and stout, dark and blond men, with eyes and jaws which varied from those of the tiger, lynx, and bear to those of the fox, the tolerant mastiff, and the surly bulldog. There were no weaklings in this selected company. 52

There is Norman Shryhart, a powerful man who is used to being the dominant force in every venture, and who wonders why he didn't think of Cowperwood's scheme to capture the gas business. When Cowperwood outsmarts him, he runs to the newspapers, which he controls, with complaints that Cowperwood's ventures are robbery. He calls for fair-play. 53 Anson Merrill, who really admires Cowperwood, goes along with Shryhart and his followers so long as there is something in it

52 Ibid., p. 30.

53 Ibid., pp. 92-93.
for himself. 54 Truman Leslie MacDonald of the Inquirer, a man much like Cowperwood in that he views life from a strictly selfish point of view, asks his price as compensation for favoring one of Cowperwood’s propositions. Because he does not get the reward, in later dealings he helps turn the public against his foe through his newspaper. 55

Cowperwood, by seducing the wife of Hosmer Hand, makes an enemy who, like Butler in The Financier, seeks to avenge himself by turning all his business associates against Cowperwood. 56 These and others are Cowperwood’s enemies. They may be losers in the gas scheme, or in the railway scheme, or husbands or fathers of seduced wives and daughters. Together they combine forces to wrest power from Cowperwood or seek revenge to soothe their ruffled feelings and righteous indignation. Toward the end, after Cowperwood has become so powerful that they are both jealous and frightened, they plan Cowperwood’s ouster on a great scale. They succeed in turning public opinion against Cowperwood and in blocking his bid for a fifty-year franchise for the city’s street railways. This franchise would have given him virtual control of Chicago’s public transportation system and would have made him as rich and powerful as he had planned.

54 Ibid., pp. 196-197.

55 Ibid., p. 205.

56 Ibid., p. 287.
Van R. Halsey describes Cowperwood as a "potentially" good man forced by the system to bribe politicians or allow someone else to do it and succeed.\(^57\) Unlike Lester Kane (the businessman in Jennie Gerhardt, who detests convention for forcing him to leave Jennie and do the first brutal thing in his life), Cowperwood thinks nothing of using every means to achieve his end. When a mayor proves to be unco-operative, he finds out that the man has a weakness for blondes, plots a love affair for him with a woman working for him, secures letters and other evidence, and later bribes him to favor his cause. When a citizen holds out for an exorbitant price on his property, Cowperwood, who needs it for one of his railway lines, finds a legal scheme to escape paying so much. He has the building removed on a week-end when the permit to demolish the building cannot be appealed. The case is tied up for years in the courts and the helpless owner ends up getting less than what he had been offered in the beginning. As Halsey says, Cowperwood is forced by the system to bribe politicians, but his insatiable drive for money and power recognizes no boundaries, and so he chooses to capitalize on the system to his best advantage, regardless of who gets stepped on. "He did not believe in either the strength of the masses or their ultimate rights, though he sympathized with the condition of individuals, and did believe that men like himself were sent into the world

to better perfect its mechanism and habitable order. "58 In his capacity, he decides, the only thing he can do for them is to pay them decent salaries—nothing more. The "public uprising" which his rivals bring about he recognizes for what it is—a trick whereby the public is made a pawn in the game of political maneuvering. Nonetheless, the game can be played by both sides, and he is defeated in his final bid for a franchise.

When Cowperwood left for Chicago, Mrs. Cowperwood had refused him a divorce and Aileen Butler had continued being his mistress. Eventually, however, Mrs. Cowperwood is pressured into agreeing to a divorce, and she is offered a nice sum for herself and her children in return for her co-operation. Aileen soon becomes Cowperwood's wife, and they plan for a grand social life, hoping that the fiasco in Philadelphia will not wreck their chances. Cowperwood's plans are not to make a bid for social standing among "the clannish, snobbish, elements of society," but among the beginners who had come up, or were on the way, to the top. "If through luck and effort he became sufficiently powerful financially he might then hope to dictate to society."59

Their dreams are short-lived for various reasons: Aileen is not polished and refined enough; rumors of Cowperwood's past prison record and Aileen's mistress role make the rounds; Cowperwood's business

dealings make him many enemies who doom their social aspirations; and the social group to which they aspire is rabidly opposed to anything new or different. "It was, as a matter of fact, customariness of thought and action and the quintessence of convention that was desired." Cowperwood, of course, had realized that the situation was such, but he had hoped that he and Aileen could brighten up the group and become its leaders. The failure does not matter to Cowperwood as much as it does to Aileen, for she has few friends with whom to pass her time.

By this time, Cowperwood has decided that Aileen is not suited to him intellectually and that he is no longer physically attracted to her. He is not mean or harsh, simply indifferent. He is the way he is and he cannot change. He has numerous affairs with women, married and single. His yearnings, however, are usually for the artistic and the artistic-minded. One girl in particular appeals to him, a married woman by the name of Rita Sohlberg, who is young, charming, and elusive. The affair comes to an end when Aileen finds out and physically attacks her; Cowperwood pays off her husband to keep him quiet and she walks out of his life. Cowperwood does not soon forget Rita, nor does he forget another girl by the name of Stephanie Platow, this one because she is the only woman who cares nothing for money and cannot be bought. An affair with Cowperwood she does have, and she does

60 Ibid., p. 76.
accept money from him, but she just cannot make up her mind if she loves Cowperwood or not and so she deceives him with her artist friends. When he finds out, he surprises her and her lover and lets her know that he is not unaware of her unfaithfulness. Nevertheless, his ego is hurt, and for the first time he feels his age. Eventually, Aileen gets used to Cowperwood's wanderings. She can do nothing to control him, even though she may remind herself that he is an ungrateful cur for treating her this way after she stood by him through his imprisonment. For her part, she always loves Cowperwood. In defense, she begins having affairs of her own, drinking, and generally going to pieces.

Cowperwood, in the meantime, has fallen in love with Berenice Fleming, daughter of a society woman who through necessity has been forced to become a high-class madam. Berenice is to Cowperwood the very essence of beauty and dignity, a beauty and dignity which has attracted him since she was fifteen. He helps her mother financially so that Berenice will have a chance to take advantage of the New York society to which her family background entitles her. Berenice is not only artistic and perceptive, but smart enough to realize that to handle a man like Cowperwood she must be elusive, non-committal, and selfish. As Berenice draws closer to Cowperwood (who for the first time is at the beck and call of a woman), Aileen makes one last try for his love by attempting to commit suicide. She fails, and brings Cowperwood no closer to her.
Just as Cowperwood is drawn to artistic women, he has been drawn more and more to art and he and Aileen make several trips to Europe where he picks up a number of masterpieces. He collects paintings and other objects of art for which he eventually builds a museum-home in New York. His plans are for an enduring palace or museum which will not only reflect his tastes, but which will serve as a memorial to him. "Until he could stand with these men [magnates of the East], until he could have a magnificent mansion, acknowledged as such by all, until he could have a world-famous gallery, Berenice, millions—what did it avail?" he wonders. 61

On the eve of his defeat, when Cowperwood is beaten in his attempt to obtain a franchise for the city's street railways, he sits defeated and alone. Yes, he can try again, tie the transit situation in suits, injunctions, and appeals for years and years, but he is tired of Chicago, tired of the interminable contest. Separated from Aileen, he has no one, except Berenice, and she is non-committal, gracious perhaps out of a sense of gratitude for what he has done for her and her mother. There he sits, almost sixty years old, "looking into the future, deciding heavily that he must fight on, whatever happens. . . ." 62

The doorbell rings; Berenice (twenty-two by now) has come to him. "And there aren't to be any other ladies, unless you want me to change

61 Ibid., p. 431. 62 Ibid., p. 538.
my mind," she warns, and he answers "Not another one, as I hope to keep you. You will share everything I have . . . ."63 Dreiser's closing line "How strange are realities as opposed to illusion!"64

In an epilogue he speaks of future events which will go into the final book of the trilogy, The Stoic (which did not appear until 1947 after Dreiser's death), and he forecasts doom.

This amoral financial wizard who has defied all rules and all laws, who has plundered the resources of a rapidly-growing country and left ruined lives in his wake, is not immune to nature and society's blind forces which plague all--the powerful as well as the weak.65 He is neither good nor bad. Through his genius, he organized Chicago's gas system and also provided efficient city transportation. The need was there, and he fulfilled it, in spite of the means he employed to achieve his ends and of his motives for doing so. Cowperwood's efforts to acquire money--the possession of which would open the doors to society--are the very actions which turn the business and social community against him. But this same business community, by arousing the public against monopoly of public utilities in the hands of their enemy, planted the seed of rebelliousness in the mind of the common man which would extend to demands for public ownership of these systems. They had let loose a monster which would turn against them, as it had turned

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63 Ibid., p. 540. 64 Ibid. 65 Ibid., pp. 540-541.
against Cowperwood. "In the end a balance is invariably struck wherein
the mass subdues the individual or the individual the mass—for the time
being. For, behold, the sea is ever dancing and raging. 66 A new
balance had been struck and the masses of Chicago had subdued the
strong individualist—in the form of Cowperwood—for a time.

Dreiser was to abandon Cowperwood for thirty-three years before
he again picked up the thread of this giant's life.

66 Ibid., p. 540.
CHAPTER IV

THE "GENIUS"

In The "Genius," Dreiser created in Eugene Witla a man who is fundamentally an artist. Artists, however, have to eat as everyone does, and Witla is forced to enter the business world in pursuit of money just as his Philistine brothers are wont to do.

Long before he ever thought of writing the Cowperwood trilogy, Dreiser had been toying with the idea of writing a novel about the artist's role in society.1 His own experiences had taught him that the very qualities which made him an artist and a spectator of American society had at the same time brought him failure and disillusionment in his personal life.2 Like Witla, Dreiser had turned to magazine work which led to an important managerial position and high pay; also like his painter counterpart, Dreiser had turned to sensuousness in his search for beauty. Also both married the wrong woman. Dreiser, in short, was writing of his own life, making Witla a painter instead of a writer.

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Because of the similarities between the lives of Witla and Dreiser, critics find The 'Genius' more of an autobiographical treatise than a work of art and generally evaluate it as one of his weakest novels. 3 Mencken was led to remark that "he [a novelist] may, if he will, go on a spiritual drunk now and then and empty the stale bilges of his soul." 4 Another frequent criticism of the novel is that Dreiser never convincingly develops his hero as a serious painter. 5 Carl Van Doren says that Dreiser tells the reader that Witla is a gifted painter, but somehow fails to give evidence of this fact. 6 Dreiser could understand the painter in what he was trying to interpret, but he really did not understand his craft as well as he did his temperament. 7

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3"Dealing with the most intimate and immediately personal material in any of his novels, he began putting pen to paper almost before the events he was describing had terminated," says Gerber, p. 112.


7For his model, Dreiser used the art of Everett Shinn, a member of the school known as the "Ash Can" School of Painters. These painters were attempting to do for American art essentially what Dreiser was trying to do for American literature. These New York Realists--Robert Henri, John Sloan, William Glackens, George Luks, and Shinn--appealed to Dreiser, but he was closest to Shinn, whom he had known while working in the magazine field. Joseph J. Kwiat, "Dreiser's The 'Genius' and Everett Shinn, the 'Ash Can' Painter," PMLA, LXVII (March, 1952), 15-31.
When The "Genius" was published in September 1915, few reviewers praised it whole-heartedly, and it sold less well than The Financier and Jennie Gerhardt. Sympathetic contemporaries of Dreiser such as Randolph Bourne, Edgar Lee Masters, and Mencken criticized it for its rhetoric or else simply digressed from the novel under review to praise his earlier works. Some criticism was voiced in reference to his philosophy and lack of patriotism, and predictions by the Little Review that the critics would set up a howl and scream that Dreiser was "striking at the bed rock of solidarity, of home, happiness, of everything decent and worth while . . . ." came true on July 25, 1916. The New York Society for the Suppression of Vice launched their attack upon The "Genius," declaring it lewd and unfit to go through the mails. They appealed to the U. S. postal authorities to ban the book, a threat to which Dreiser answered--in a letter to Mencken--that he was "perfectly willing to break the postal laws and go to jail myself. It will save me my living expenses."9

The upshot of this attack was that Dreiser's publisher refused to distribute the novel even though there was no legal bar to his doing so, and that it gave rise to the famous Dreiser protest. Dreiser complained loudly to the press, while Mencken distributed pamphlets and letters

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9Elias, p. 197.
which were signed by close to five hundred authors and critics, including such personages as Amy Lowell, Robert Frost, Jack London, Sinclair Lewis, Edwin Arlington Robinson, David Belasco, and others. Some like Hamlin Garland and William Dean Howells, however, refused to sign. In spite of all the uproar and involved legal proceedings against his publisher, *The Genius* remained on the publisher's shelves until 1923 when Liveright reissued it.

*The Genius* is the history of a midwestern young artist who gains fame in New York through his interpretations of the romance and beauty as well as the grimness and shabbiness of city life. After a long engagement, Witla marries Angela, a conventional, possessive country girl he no longer wishes to marry. She captures him by capitalizing on his sense of responsibility and his physical desire. This ill-fated marriage, the over-indulgence of sex to prove a love he does not feel, the denial of new romances which his temperament demands, the constant bickering and nerve-shattering scenes which follow these behind-the-scenes affairs—all take their toll on his personality until he can no longer paint, can no longer do anything. Witla suffers a nervous breakdown, and, seeing that painting guarantees nothing, not even his daily bread, he turns to magazine work. Eventually he earns up to twenty-five thousand dollars a year as magazine art director for a big firm.

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10 Ibid., p. 201.
An involvement with the eighteen-year-old daughter of a local society
woman leads him to throw over his already shaky position and leave
his wife, but Suzanne, the girl involved, abandons him in the end under
pressure from her family. Angela, his wife, dies giving birth to the
baby whom she hoped would tie Witla to her, and he is left with the child.
He turns to Christian Science and other metaphysical pursuits, but he
remains basically unchanged, and once more begins to do well as a
painter. He finally concludes: "What a sweet wretched life is—how rich,
how tender, how grim, how like a colorful symphony," and implies
that peace of mind does not come among men, but in contemplation of
unknown forces to which man is ultimately subjected.

Before Witla suffers his nervous breakdown, his views on morality
are already very much like Cowperwood's. He holds that strict
morality and an ordered life might be good for others but not for him:
"He was always thinking in his private conscience that life was somehow
bigger and subtler and darker than any given theory or order of living." After his failure, moreover, he, like Cowperwood, sees life as a struggle.
He knows that his former way of life is not going to bring him the security


12 In the unrevised version which he finished in 1911, Dreiser
had Suzanne return to Witla, who had repented and changed for the things
he had suffered, and ended the book with Witla contemplating the beauty
of metaphysics and a ruling power. Elias, pp. 155-156.

he needs, nor the luxury he craves, and that his artistic temperament is poorly adapted to business success. To be a part of the forceful element of society,

... one had to be strong, eager, determined and abstemious if wealth was to come, and then it had to be held by the same qualities. One could not relax. Otherwise one became much what he was now, a brooding sentimentalist--diseased in mind and body. \(^{14}\)

It is not a matter of conviction but of expediency: "It was grim but it was essential." \(^{15}\)

Later on, when he has managed to make himself financially secure, he might consider art for art's sake, but for the moment this problem of necessity is the most pressing. \(^{16}\) The price he has paid has been too great, and poverty has scared him too much so that now he is anxious to draw a regular salary and down the uncertainty of survival. From his boss, Summerfield, he learns soon enough that ruthlessness is necessary; moreover, he is eager to rise out of his poverty and do whatever is in his power to work things to his advantage. The problem is to hold himself in check henceforth. "The world demanded it." \(^{17}\)

Set loose in the commercial world, Witla is forced into using his superior cunning. Money is what he is after, and he is determined to stand what he has to from his boss, but he is also going to stand up for

\(^{14}\)Ibid., p. 394. \(^{15}\)Ibid. \(^{16}\)Ibid., p. 403. \(^{17}\)Ibid., p. 420.
his rights to save his own skin. He would not be again "the ambling,
cowardly, dreaming Witla he had been." This is what business
demands—hardness, bitterness, aggressiveness. Once, after a stormy
fracas with one of the staff members, his boss congratulates him:

"Good for you, Witla!" exclaimed Summerfield joyously. The idea of a fighting attitude on Eugene's part pleased him.
"You're coming to life. You'll get somewhere now. You've got
the ideas, but if you let these wolves run over you they'll do it,
and they'll eat you. I can't help it. They're all no good. I
wouldn't trust a single God-damned man in the place." 19

But every gain has its disadvantage. As in the case of Cowperwood,
Witla suffers failures as well as successes. At this job with Summerfield,
his superman assertion and self-confidence draw mistrust and ill-will
from his superior. Witla is too genial, too sure of himself, and what
Summerfield wants is a frightened and broken man whom he can
manipulate. 20 This change in attitude on the part of Summerfield does
not hurt Witla in the least, however, for there are others who are willing
to pay more for his services. Besides, Summerfield has done something
for him by teaching him to fight. "He had forced him to do his best
and utmost, which no one had ever done before," and from now on little
storms could never frighten him. 21 From Summerfield he goes to Kalvin,
where cut-throat tactics and stiff competition are not a part of his work,
but soon he is drawn to another firm which offers him much more money--

18 Ibid., p. 431.
19 Ibid.
20 Ibid., p. 433.
21 Ibid., p. 441.
twenty-five thousand dollars a year—and much more responsibility and
trouble. He is capable in performing his job, for he is able to draw
talented employees by his understanding and organizational ability.
This is what the job demands of him; but Witla lacks the art of political
maneuvering, and so falls prey to office jealousy which aligns the
weaker employees with his enemy. The result is much like Cowperwood's
when the weaker forces are marshalled against him in his bid for his
fifty-year franchise. His scandalous affair with Suzanne simply
completes the break.

In many ways, Witla resembles Cowperwood, but he is a much
weaker version of the financier because he never ceases being an artist
in spite of his business success. He never really accepts the ruthlessness
which is supposed to make for good business policy. His weakness is
that, unlike Cowperwood, he has an introspective nature which compels
him to analyze himself, to question his own ethics, and at the same time
to realize that life and its truths are shifting things.22 Between the two
he flounders in uncertainty. Even though he thinks himself hard and
ruthless, he cannot be really that way, and so he has little power for
commanding loyalty from the employees under him. He inspires them,
and they use him to their advantage, for they consider him too easy-
going and not at all someone whom they cannot overthrow.

22 Ibid., pp. 360-361.
He was no subtle schemer and planner, but rather an easy
natured soul, who drifted here and there with all the tides and
favorable or unfavorable winds of circumstance. He might have
been ruthless if he had been eager enough for any one particular
thing on this earth, money, fame, affection, but at bottom, he
really did not care as much as he thought he did . . . . there was
nothing really one could not do without, if one were obliged. 23

Cowperwood, on the other hand, found that he wanted "money, fame, and
affection" and directed all of his efforts to satisfy his desires.

Essentially, Witia's "tragic flaw" is that he cannot change his love
for beauty:

But two things were significant and real--two things to which
he was as true and unvarying as the needle to the pole--his love
of the beauty of life which was coupled with his desire to express
it in color, and his love of beauty in the form of the face of a
woman, or rather that of a girl of eighteen. 24

This weakness for women, this sensuous side of his character, disrupts
and disorganizes his personality so that it obscures everything else.

It drives him to marry the wrong woman because he is at first so blinded
by desire for her that he fails to see her true character. This desire
combined with his inability to be cruel to a wife he no longer loves,
leads to his first breakdown. Angela dominates his life, watches over
him like a watchdog so that he will not stray, and forces him to fulfill
his duties to her as a husband. When he is found out in his indiscretions,
she berates him and breaks down "that sense of pride in himself which
was the only sustaining power a man had before the gaze of the world." 25

23 Ibid., p. 602.  
24 Ibid., p. 295.  
Such abuses, however, are not enough to lead to his reformation. What she wants is for him to devote and sacrifice his entire life to her, and this he is unwilling to do. On the one hand, he wants freedom of action to do what he pleases. On the other, he fears his wife and fears society. Cowperwood would never have subjected himself to the denial of his pleasures, but Witla is a weaker specimen. Mencken sees Witla as "always a bit despicable in his pathos." When Witla finally revolts, it is a blind act which ends only in complete disaster for him.

In the art-business community to which Witla is subjected, there is little room for failures. Rival artists are glad in a way because a failure means one less competitor. Art dealers consider him unprofitable, yet when he turns to the business world for his sustenance they shake their heads and say that art has lost a talented man to crass materialism. To Daniel C. Summerfield, artists are starving men he can hire cheaply, drive to the breaking point, and then shed them when no longer useful. To Obadiah Kalvin, a good Christian who runs his firm in a fair way and treats his employees extremely well, an artist like Witla means both genius and weakness. He warns Witla not to let his love for luxury and women turn his head and to stay within the bounds of convention. He realizes that Witla is not a cold business man, and so is likely to be

26 Mencken, p. 124.  
27 The "Genius," p. 298.  
28 Ibid., p. 407.
led astray in his search for the ideal, be it beauty, women, or luxury. Florence White, the commercial manager for the last firm for which Witla works, believes that money comes first, then artistic and intellectual considerations. Money can always buy the necessary brains, he feels. When Witla becomes too strong, it is necessary to undermine him and drive him out. Others will come.

Throughout The "Genius," Dreiser interpolates superstitious incidents to which Witla attaches some significance. He sees a cross-eyed boy, and he interprets the incident as a sign that he is going to get the job he wants. He does. There are two sides to this matter of omens, however; Witla also finds a horseshoe and he takes it to mean that he will keep his job and Suzanne too. He loses both. These superstitious elements develop into a combination of mysticism and metaphysics at the end of the story. Witla dabbles in Christian Science and broods upon the mystery of the universe, but solves nothing.

This ending reveals in Dreiser a tendency toward mysticism which is to become a vital element in his two posthumous novels, The Bulwark and The Stoic. In the meantime, the very practical problem of crime and society was to interrupt this trend toward mysticism.

29 Ibid., p. 444.
30 Ibid., p. 469.
CHAPTER V

AN AMERICAN TRAGEDY

Now that Dreiser had sung praises in honor of individual anarchy for the financier and the artist in society, he did an about-face. What about those who did not have the superior abilities of a Cowperwood or even a Witla to rise socially and financially and fulfill the American Dream, yet daily were goaded by these riches which the fittest were privileged to enjoy? How did they go about satisfying their ambitions?

His answer was Clyde Griffiths of An American Tragedy, published in 1925. Dreiser had long been drawn by cases of ambitious lovers who murdered their poorly-placed pregnant girl friends in efforts to capture wealthier girls. One of these ambitious young men had been Chester Gillette, who had drowned Grace Brown for just such motives. The scene of the crime had been Moose Lake, New York, in 1906. Dreiser decided to write a novel based upon the life of Gillette. He pored over newspaper accounts of the case, talked with a doctor concerning the psychology of murder, visited the Sing Sing death cells, and interviewed a condemned murderer.  

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2 Ibid., p. 220.
After examining the evidence, Dreiser decided that Gillette had been unfairly judged and that he had been no killer in the ordinary sense of the word. He had aspired after money and social position, which in themselves were socially approved goals, then been faced with obstacles which he was not equipped to handle. As Dreiser saw Gillette, he was too undeveloped mentally, too young, and too inexperienced to plot against society. Had Gillette been a product of more advantageous circumstances and had had more money or influence, he could have found an abortionist to help him solve his problem, Dreiser felt. He could have been free and successful and Grace Brown would have lived. Instead, he became enmeshed in rules and customs which closed all doors to any solution other than marriage, which would ruin his chances for success, or murder, which if undiscovered might retain for him the appearance of respectability. "Thus he had become the victim of those whose values he had affirmed," says Elias.

\(^3\)Ibid.
\(^4\)In 1921, four years before the publication of the novel, he had told an interviewer that "I never can and never want to bring myself to the place where I can ignore the sensitive and seeking individual in his pitiful struggle with nature--with his enormous urges and his pathetic equipment." F. O. Matthiessen, *Theodore Dreiser* (New York, 1951), p. 189.
\(^5\)Elias, p. 221.
\(^6\)Ibid.
\(^7\)Ibid. (C. C. Walcutt calls this stage in Dreiser's philosophy his conversion to socialism, for he has come to believe that something can be accomplished toward the amelioration of social evil if men will unite in a concerted effort to alter these evils. "Theodore Dreiser and the Divided Stream," *The Stature of Theodore Dreiser*, edited by Alfred Kazin and Charles Shapiro (Bloomington, 1955), p. 261.)
When it was released, *An American Tragedy* was received with such enthusiasm by both the critics and the public, that it was enough to assure Dreiser of financial security for the first time in his life and to allow him to speak his views in public with authority. It outsold his other books by a large margin. By the end of 1925, it had sold more than thirteen thousand copies; five months later, the number had doubled. Joseph Wood Krutch called it "the greatest American novel of our generation,"\(^8\) Carl Van Doren hailed it as Dreiser's masterpiece,\(^9\) and even Stuart P. Sherman who had so heartily attacked his "barbaric naturalism" now praised this novel for its "moral effect."\(^{10}\) The book was made into a successful play and later into a motion picture, but Dreiser criticized the film for cheapening his intent, and, angry and disappointed, stalked out of the premiere performance.

Dreiser had achieved critical and financial success, but his victory was not without its bitter moments. The Pulitzer Prize for 1925 went to Sinclair Lewis, instead of Dreiser, in spite of the great reception accorded *An American Tragedy* here and abroad. Even though Lewis refused it, the fact remained that Dreiser had been snubbed. In 1930 when the Nobel Prize was also awarded to Lewis, disappointed critics

\(^8\) Elias, pp. 225-226.


\(^{10}\) Elias, pp. 225-226.
were quick to point out that if any American deserved the prize it was Dreiser. Lewis himself told his electors in his acceptance speech that Dreiser had been the pioneer who had opened the doors that made it possible for those like him to express their views. Nevertheless, Dreiser's great success had been ignored for Lewis' Babbitt. 11

In An American Tragedy, which follows the Gillette case closely, Dreiser traces the life of Clyde Griffiths from early boyhood, when he is forced by evangelical parents to sing hymns and preach the gospel on the sidewalks of Kansas City, to his death in the electric chair at the age of twenty-three for the murder of Roberta Alden. Clyde flees Kansas City after being involved in a hit-and-run killing of a little girl (another boy was driving) and eventually settles in Chicago, working as a bellboy in a plush hotel. From there he goes to Lycurgus, New York, to work for his rich uncle in his collar factory, hoping to realize his dreams of wealth and position. When it becomes apparent that his uncle's family does not intend to bring him into their circle, he drifts into an affair with Roberta, a factory girl who works in his department. Company rules forbid Clyde as department head to date the employees under his supervision, so it is necessarily a secretive affair.

Meanwhile, Clyde has attracted the attention of Sondra Finchley, a wealthy society girl who picks Clyde to amuse herself and spite Gilbert, 11Ibid.
Clyde's cousin. With all his dreams finally about to come true, Clyde has no more use for Roberta, but he is forced to delay the final break because she is pregnant. All attempts to terminate the pregnancy fail. She insists that he marry her, and, in desperation, he plots Roberta's drowning, only to change his mind at the last moment. The boat capsizes, accidently spilling them both into the water, and Clyde hesitates long enough to let her sink. He is caught, convicted, and electrocuted. According to law, he is innocent because he does not actually drown her, simply lets her sink; according to Christian ethics, he is guilty because he had murder in his heart. The jury decides that he willfully drowned her. Up to his death, Clyde is uncertain as to his guilt.

Clyde resembles Dreiser's other characters in that he also has a strong desire to get more out of life than he has, but Carrie, Witla, and Cowperwood all have talent which they put to use, while Clyde has no talent at all. He is the weakest of Dreiser's characters; he is not trained for anything, for his itinerant parents have neglected his education; but, "true to the standard of the American youth, or the general attitude toward life, he felt himself above the type of labor which

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12"Of all Dreiser's figures, Clyde Griffiths is the most colorless and annoying; a nasty little boy, really, trying above all to be respectable; so polite, good, incompetent, weak--a sad sack," says Maxwell Geismar, Rebels and Ancestors: The American Novel, 1890-1915 (Boston, 1953), p. 354.
was purely manual." On top of these deficiencies, he is "as vain and proud as he is poor." He is sensitive and observant and resents going on the streets to preach. While the family experiences poverty and deprivation, Clyde's parents always speak of "love and mercy and care of God for him and for all. Plainly there was something wrong somewhere," Clyde thinks. He is ashamed of his mother and father because they are different and "shabby and trivial." What his temperament demands—a temperament which is emotional and tinged with an exotic sense of romance—is pleasure, luxury, good clothes, pretty girls; in short, he wants everything that is considered desirable in American society. "Nobody tells him what to be. Everybody tells him what to have," says Van Doren. Yet, Dreiser warns us, "Clyde had a soul that was not destined to grow up," for he lacks the mental ability to evaluate his chances and so direct his efforts toward direct advancement.

In Lycurgus, where the social scheme is one of stratification, Dreiser belongs neither to the higher class represented by his uncle's family, nor to the lower class represented by his co-workers. His insecurity and rashness, then, are not due merely to his weakness, but to the social system in which he finds himself. On the one hand, an


14 Ibid., p. 21.

15 Van Doren, p. 256.

16 *An American Tragedy*, p. 188.
established family like the Griffiths, in a place like Lycurgus, have to be careful that any one related to them and carrying their name must have good manners, taste and judgment, and be extremely cautious.  

At the same time, opportunity is limited. His cousin Myra, "knowing Lycurgus and the nature of the mill life here and its opportunities for those who worked in factories such as her father owned, " is puzzled as to why Clyde bothered to come. On the other hand, the mill-workers who work with Clyde are inferior and nondescript, as far as he is concerned. They are of all nationalities and types--Poles, Hungarians, French, English, and American--and are all touched with a certain "ignorance or thickness of mind or body" which Clyde in his mind associates with the basement world of his uncle's factory. Clyde wants nothing to do with them, and they in turn consider him out of their range, since he is a Griffiths.

Whereas in Cowperwood's world success comes to those who use their abilities well and take advantage of opportunity, An American Tragedy suggests that there is little opportunity to be had in a town like Lycurgus, whether Clyde has the ability or not. Also, while in Cowperwood's world success is pursued for the independence and power it will bring to do as one pleases, in Clyde's world it is desired for the

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17 Ibid., p. 212.  
18 Ibid., p. 211.  
social standing and money it provides. Geismar describes the wealthy
class of Lycurgus as "a society of inherited wealth in the second or third
generation which in itself prizes social position more than personal
ability . . . ." Philip L. Gerber sums up Clyde's plight this way:

If a superman of Frank Cowperwood's caliber might smash
the economic barriers, light years of frigid space still separated
the classes socially. As for those born without Cowperwood's
financial acumen, they could beat themselves insensible like
storm-crazed sparrows fighting to get through the windows of
closed rooms.

This futile fighting is precisely what Dreiser condemns. He neither
blames Clyde nor accuses nature. His quarrel is with a materialistic
society which sets goals that lead people like Clyde who are incapable of
attaining them to hope they can. This hope, Dreiser maintains, leads
to irresponsible acts such as that committed by Clyde. By making
money the goal and invoking wrong standards, then imposing external
restraints and moral prohibitions, society must inevitably produce Clydes.
Cowperwood would have bought himself out of the situation, if he had
found it necessary to do so, and even if the situation had become known,
his financial success would not depend on it. For those like Clyde,
however, "not only were obstacles constructed that weaklings could not

20 Geismar, p. 356.
22 Elias, pp. 223-224.
surmount, but men and women were brought up in an ignorance that assured they would remain weaklings," said Dreiser. 23

In Lycurgus, a caste system closely allied to the social structure also dominates the business community. Samuel Griffiths, who has worked his way up to the top, thinks that Clyde should have a chance to show what he can do. He is conservative but tolerant. His son, Gilbert, on the other hand, represents the second-generation aristocracy and feels only contempt for those below him. He is self-centered, arrogant, vain, and intolerant. While Gilbert sees Clyde as an intruder in his circle and wants to keep him out, his father recognizes Clyde as a relative who should be helped to get ahead if he is capable. Samuel Griffiths, however, is not in accord with the "socialistic theory relative to capitalistic exploitation." 24 Both he and his son prefer to hire those who are by necessity compelled to take their lowest jobs, because then they will have higher goals to work up to. "One was foolishly interfering with and disrupting necessary and unavoidable social standards when one tried to unduly favor any one—even a relative." 25 The main reason the elder Griffiths insists on moving Clyde up from the lowest job is that he does not think it looks right for a Griffiths to be sweating in the basement of his factory. The philosophy of the Griffiths family consists of making their

employees aware of the value of money, and of teaching them all the intricacies involved in the

... only really important constructive work of the world—that of material manufacture... And so become inured to a narrow and abstemious life in so doing. It was good for their characters. It informed and strengthened the minds and spirits of those who were destined to rise. And those who were not should be kept right where they were.\textsuperscript{26}

Since all of Clyde's instincts rebel against the "narrow and abstemious life," his hopes for rising to any heights are extremely limited.

Involved in one way or another with Clyde and Roberta's tragedy or in the investigation and trial are a host of major and minor business and political figures who represent the various levels of society. Doctor Glenn, who has performed abortions for daughters of "good families" of the town, piously lectures Roberta on the evils of such an operation. He cannot possibly do it; it is against his morals and prejudices and those of his profession. Jephson and Belknap, Clyde's attorneys, do not plead insanity because of the reflection such a plea may cast on the sanity of the Griffiths family. After all, Samuel Griffiths is financing the defense. After Clyde's conviction when his uncle stops financial aid, the lawyers agree to go ahead with an appeal only after Clyde's mother shows up and a scheme is worked out so that she may raise some money. No money, no appeal. Coroner Fred Heit and District Attorney Orville W. Mason keep one eye on the case and the other one on the political

\textsuperscript{26}Ibid.
rewards which the conviction of the accused in such a sensational case might mean in the coming elections. The newspapers capitalize on the naiveté of Clyde's parents to get all the details of his childhood and other information which will help their circulation and fill up their columns. Established churches turn down Mrs. Griffiths' plea for the use of their churches to raise money for Clyde's appeal. She is not a member of a definite sect or school of theology. A Jew finally lets her use his movie house for a lecture after her Christian brethren have turned her away.

By bringing together all these numerous elements of American life, Dreiser has drawn the picture of a society which pays homage to material success rather than to spiritual and intellectual achievement. An American Tragedy suggests that those who adhere strictly to the teachings of Christ, such as Clyde's parents, are the losers in the struggle, for religion is illusory and not at all helpful in the practical business of making a living. Conventions serve to keep the ignorant ignorant, and only the stupid adhere to them. Of the weak, those like Clyde who hunger for luxury and position are in some cases led to break the law to achieve their dreams. Lack of cunning, however, entangles them in these conventions and brings about their downfall. "To read about him [Clyde] is to walk a tight rope over a gulf of imagined experiences, shuddering to think how little separates those who cross from those who fall," says Van Doren. 27 Indeed, after the novel was

27 Van Doren, p. 258.
released, many wrote Dreiser that they could very well have been in Clyde's shoes. Of course, as George J. Becker maintains, it is not accurate to say that such a tragedy could only happen in America, but it is "likely, common, even normal" in American society because of our society's unique characteristics. 28

In writing this novel, Dreiser shows that these unique characteristics lead Americans to profess restraints and limitations which in actuality merely serve to ruin lives of those who are unable to cope with them in their efforts to obtain material comforts. No longer does Dreiser find the struggle in which the strong triumph and the weak fail a fascinating symphony. The limited have now become a subject for pity and the superior in adaptation a detriment to society.

CHAPTER VI

THE BULWARK AND THE STOIC

Dreiser's _The Bulwark_, which ends with spiritual triumph for its Quaker-businessman hero, is a fitting climax to Dreiser's lifetime philosophical wanderings. Dreiser started writing _The Bulwark_ as early as 1912, and he intended to finish it following the trilogy. Instead, he became more involved in other works and in social protests, and it was not until thirty-three years later, in 1945, that he brought it to a conclusion. It was published posthumously in 1946.

Had he followed through with his original plans, the novel would have been written from a different perspective. Indeed, it was not to end in spiritual victory for its hero, Solon Barnes. As the original plan stood, it was to be an ironical tale of a puritanical Quaker father whose family is disrupted in spite of his strict adherence to the Decalogue.\(^1\)

Basically, Dreiser was writing of his own father and his own family, and his opinion of his father then was not tolerant. Solon was to die a disillusioned man, and it was only when Dreiser's own faith was awakened that he changed his mind about his father and consequently about Solon's fate.

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During his long career, Dreiser's main concern had always been with values, particularly those Christian and nineteenth-century values which had become inadequate in a materially oriented, rapidly changing twentieth century. The drive for material possessions which flourished around him and in himself puzzled him greatly. The characters in his previous novels—Carrie, Lester Kane, Cowperwood, Witla, and Clyde—all had succumbed to the lure of wealth and its manifestations and had not found peace of mind or lasting happiness.

Since material success was not the answer, and he had been wearied and depressed by the social events that were plunging the world into war, Dreiser turned to a sort of pantheism which brought him profound peace. He no longer saw the world's creatures as strong and weak beings fighting for survival in an indifferent universe. Now he contemplated them in religious awe as infinite variations of the creative force. As for himself, "he had become a kind of 'transparent eyeball'" with powers inherent in his being driven by the creative power and not by his own initiative. To finish The Bulwark he must wait for the creative force to work through him. The novel was a tribute to this creative force, of which he said after he completed the book: "It's funny . . . how a fellow can go along for years and not get it . . . . And when it's there all the time." In this mood, he felt love and reverence for all things.

\[^2\text{Ibid.}, \text{pp. 292-293.}\]  \[^3\text{Ibid.}, \text{p. 304.}\]
The Bulwark is considered one of Dreiser's poorest works, but for Robert H. Ellas, his biographer, it is the "logical aesthetic embodiment of Dreiser's philosophic beliefs," and James T. Farrell remarks that the mystical or religious features caused him no surprise. Lionel Trilling, however, considers it an offense which "lies in the vulgar ease of its formulation, as well as in the comfortable untroubled way in which Dreiser moved from nihilism to pietism." The fact is that Dreiser in his old age had achieved a personal spiritual peace which cannot be explained but simply was, regardless of its logic. For the purpose of this paper, it is highly significant because he rejects the motives, procedures, and ethics of American business.

The Bulwark is the story of a Quaker boy who grows up close to Philadelphia in the late nineteenth century, marries the girl he loves, prospers in the banking business through industriousness and fair play, raises a family of five, and achieves an enviable position and respect in his community. He has always tried to live by the dictates of his

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4 Maxwell Geismar blames the novel's failure on Dreiser's declining gift for narrative and on the tone which substitutes piety for the tragic mood of earlier works. Rebels and Ancestors (Boston, 1953), p. 377.

5 Ellas, p. 166.


7 Lionel Trilling, "Reality in America," The Stature of Theodore Dreiser, p. 144.
faith and has turned always to the inner light for guidance. When his children grow up, they are lured away by the temptations of luxury and excitement, by the urge to get money by ruthlessness or dishonesty, and by the temptations of sex. The glitter and show of the materialistic society make the inner light a wan flame to the younger generation.

Dorothea and Orville achieve the success of the outer world, but Solon knows that this success has not brought them the spiritual peace which he and his wife, Benecia, have found in the inner light. Isobel finds some satisfaction in scholarly pursuits, for her homeliness prevents marriage, and her faith is not enough to make up for it. Etta and Stewart participate in sexual affairs in their search for gratification, with Etta eventually coming to a new understanding of her father's faith and Stewart blundering into tragedy and suicide. Assailed on all sides by troubles, Solon begins to doubt his faith, but in the end his belief in the inner light triumphs.

Solon is sturdy and sensitive, possesses no vanity in any form, and believes in the teachings of his parent's faith in every way. Many of the Quakers around him interpret the rules of the early church in more liberal terms, but Solon tries to follow the dictates of his fathers in observing the commands of the church. The more liberal Quakers have discarded the Quaker habit for more conventional dress; Solon, however, is content to wear his collarless habit all his life. His sincere intent is that his children should be perfect examples of the faith--earnest, truthful,
just and kind. Benecia, his wife, is more tolerant than her husband, who
tends to be stern, but not harsh. "Love and gentle suasion were most
important and effective, in the opinion of both." 

Solon, due to his upbringing, is hard-working, sober, and thrifty
and succeeds admirably in the ultra-conservative bank where he is
employed in Philadelphia. But more and more, he is confronted by the
problem of "where lay the dividing line between ambition and an
irreligious greed, between the desire for power and wealth and a due
regard for Quaker precepts." All around him, "a lust for wealth and
power was in the air." No one except for a few strictly conforming
Friends seem eager to avoid riches, and disturbing rumors reach Solon's
ears that political plots to cheat the city of funds have been uncovered.
The smaller businessmen, furthermore, are behind the powerful
financier of the new order because they believe that these businessmen's
success brings about their own success. Solon is well-liked for his
kindness, sincerity, and consideration for all, including his employees:
"He was a good man--one of the nation's bulwarks." He is well-to-do,
but he is charitable and never forgets his duty to the Friends who are
not doing so well as he. He takes care of the small businessmen and

8 Theodore Dreiser, The Bulwark (Garden City, New York, 1946),
p. 109.

9 Ibid., p. 113.  

10 Ibid., p. 114.  

11 Ibid., p. 124.
backs his bank's policy not to participate in speculative ventures which may endanger its customers' savings.

One incident which leads Solon to commit the first and most serious spiritual offense against his faith comes about through business considerations. A Quaker boy whom he recommends to a position in the bank, fascinated by the lures of the city, steals money from the bank to finance the whims which his overly-severe father has denied him. Solon does not know what is the correct thing to do. In the eyes of the other directors, the youngster's offense deserves imprisonment, but Solon's interference may help keep the boy out of prison. Then again, perhaps prison will help the offender mend his ways, he reasons. Solon's religious teachings tell him to help "restore the offender," but he does not know how to interpret the phrase. "In the light of his religion, he should have assisted him--and he had not," he concludes after the boy is sent to reform school and the enormity of the error weighs on Solon's conscience. 12

As Walcutt states, Solon's error is that he believes he can serve both God and Mammon simultaneously. 13 By harboring such a belief, he leaves himself wide open for his children's downfall. He accumulates wealth, and by so doing, opens the doors to the materialism which

12 Ibid., p. 120.

undermines their characters. Although he adheres to simplicity in living, his manner is more ostentatious than that of his forefathers, but still nothing like that of conventional society. Whereas a peaceful and simpler life has been adequate and satisfying for him and his wife, it is only boring and unsatisfying for their offspring.

The fact that Dreiser for the first time tells the story from the viewpoint of the older generation helps the reader in sympathizing with Solon and supporting his views. What he wants for his children is really what is best for them in the long run, and it is evident that their father's way of life will bring them ultimate peace of mind and happiness, as nothing they will find in a materialistic world ever can. In like manner, Dreiser preaches that the business world would be much better off if its participants concerned themselves more with morality, kindness, and fairness rather than with quick profits achieved through cut-throat tactics and speculation. As the bank's directors change with the times from fair and honest men like Solon to free-wheeling speculators, their methods of doing business take a turn for the worse. No longer are these bankers high priests of the people who act as stewards for God's property. Their customers' money is being used to further the investments of these new directors, and shaky stocks are replacing sound investments. Solon temporarily squares this problem with his conscience by secretly going to Washington and telling the Treasury Department about the situation. When an examiner comes and gives
them a few days to get things in order, the shaky deals are eliminated.

But after Stewart's death, he can no longer bear the thought of returning to the bank:

The idea was distasteful to him: cold, profit-seeking business seemed to him utterly corrupting and destructive of normal human life. He had been no less guilty than those others; sitting beside them as director and furthering their schemes for the lunatic accumulation of wealth: money that meant only such unnecessary luxuries and pleasures as had been flaunted before the eyes of Stewart and had finally destroyed him.  

When Solon resigns from his directorship, he explains to the group that his decision has not come about solely through his son's death, but as a consequence of the bank's changes in policy:

"As you know, I am a Friend, and our religious faith is opposed to this craze for the accumulation of wealth which seems to influence so many people. Far, far too many are being corrupted by this desire. Perhaps there is little that one individual can do, but as for me, at least I can withdraw from a situation which I consider demoralizing and destructive."  

Through Solon, Dreiser was at last condemning materialistic American business society as an implement which creates for individuals false ideals and values and prevents them from developing their better natures. What he was really observing, says Thomas K. Whipple, is that "a world given over to practicality is inevitably a tragic world, because it denies full humanity to human beings."  

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14 The Bulwark, p. 300.
15 Ibid., p. 304.
The businessmen who had been directors of the Traders and Builders Bank when Solon had first come to them were such men as Justus Wallin, his wife's father. Wallin is a shrewd, dynamic man who enjoys working even though he has inherited a fortune. He can see no harm in accumulating wealth and possessions so long as he follows the dictates of George Fox and the Book of Discipline governing his role as the lord's steward. He is not impressed with social status or durability of wealth. He achieves his money through skill and helpfulness to others, not through tricks or deceit. After much meditating, he resolves that "business or trade was a creation of the Lord and intended by him for the maintenance, education, general welfare, and enlightenment of all of His people on earth." In those times, apparently such a course could be followed without much conflict. (Solon's own father had been a religious but practical man who desired to help others.)

Another director, Ezra Skidmore, is a man of fixed values who believes that the Quaker religion is the only feasible religion, but he recognizes that he has prospered by the business of those of other faiths and so keeps his idea to himself. Adler Sableworth, polite and genial and not as set in his beliefs as Skidmore, still adheres to the rules of his Episcopal faith and is a model citizen. However, he worships such financiers as Sage, Gould, Jay Cooke, and Vanderbilt as men of genius.

17 The Bulwark, p. 40.
Abel C. Averard is neither rich, socially prominent, nor religious, but he has faith in acquiring a fortune and has no moral scruples to restrain him. He is waiting for his opportunity to come. When Solon rejects the craze for wealth, Averard feels a twinge of guilt. The new directors who take the places of Skidmore, Sableworth, and others are all of the new order, eager for wildcat speculation in city utilities, street railways, and other ventures which will make them rich quickly. The reactions of these men to Solon's condemnation of their actions is one of self-defense and "every other bank is doing it," but there is still a sense of discomfort. When he leaves, their comments are what would be expected:

"The man's crazy!" exclaimed Wilkerson.
"It can't be anything but his family trouble," said Baker.
"All this publicity would upset anybody," commented Seay.
"For myself I feel sorry for him."
"The strain's too great for him; it's lucky he's leaving," added Baker, to which Wilkerson agreed. "Yes, it's better that way," he said, "but I will say this: we couldn't have a better treasurer."

"And he's not altogether wrong," said Averard, who had been moved by Solon's indictment of them all. "The only trouble with his principles is that they're too high for these days..."18

These days of "progress" cannot accommodate Solon's "weakness," the inability to adjust his inner life to the ruthless character of American materialism.19

18Ibid., pp. 304-305.

Solon, at first disheartened and gloomy over the incidents that have struck him through his children, soon regains his faith. He changes from a stern father to a more kindly one, and he recognizes that he has achieved new understanding and a great peace. His wife, whose sheltered serene life has not prepared her for her children's problems, takes to her bed following her son's suicide and dies a year later. She, too, retains her faith. Solon tells his daughter, Etta, who has returned from the city to take care of her parents:

"Daughter, until recently I have not thought as I think now. Many things which I thought I understood, I did not understand at all. God has taught me humility—and, in His loving charity, awakened me to many things that I had not seen before. One is the need of love toward all created things."

In this detached, religious mood, he feels an understanding between himself and a puff adder and with vegetative and insect forms. All things in the universe are devised and given energy by the same creative force which is within him. "Surely," he concludes, "there must be a Creative Divinity, and so a purpose, behind all this variety and beauty and tragedy of life. For see how tragedy had descended upon him, and still he had faith, and would have." Like Dreiser, he sees that happiness must be accompanied by sorrow, life with death, but it does not sadden him now. All are a part of the creative force. When Solon dies, Etta, who has come to understand the depth of her father's faith

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20 *The Bulwark*, p. 319.

and love, replies to her brother: "Oh, I am not crying for myself, or for Father--I am crying for life."22 Solon has ceased being an individual and has become one with life and nature.

Although Dreiser had started out predicting dark doom and spiritual defeat for Solon, he had rewarded him with victory. Solon had attempted to combine a religious life and a business life and had succeeded in doing so until the ethics and values of his bank had begun to make such a union incompatible. His children, who rejected his way of life, found either unhappiness or death or a superficial and trivial existence in conventional society. Yes, times had changed, as Averard had observed, and Solon's Christian principles were no longer possible in the battle for wealth. Dreiser did not resolve the problem. He could only have Solon reject materialism and follow the spiritual faith and inner light which guaranteed him inner happiness and lasting peace of mind. To Dreiser, it is not Solon who is wrong; it is society.

For Dreiser to jump headlong from a novel in the spiritual mood of The Bulwark to the harsh realities of materialism in The Stoic was a hazardous move which he found difficult to see through. It had been thirty-three years since he had last dealt with Frank Cowperwood--the highest expression of the acquisitive society which he had just recently

22Ibid., p. 337.
rejected in *The Bulwark*-- and it was a rigorous task to keep his new ideas from intruding on the old. 23

Nevertheless, Dreiser returned to the long-delayed final volume to the Cowperwood trilogy which he completed on December 3, 1945. He had had about three-fourths of the book finished and had originally planned to show in the ending that wealth and vanity led only to a tombstone. 24 In his new religious mood, however, he could not keep from redeeming Cowperwood by emphasizing his search for beauty which leads to Berenice's (his young mistress) conversion to Yoga and an understanding of all that has happened. Toward the final chapters, Dreiser, who was sick and exhausted, concentrated more and more on Berenice's spiritual awakening instead of closing the story with Cowperwood's death. Up to the night of his own death, Dreiser struggled to revise the final chapters, but he was not able to resolve the issues at the end of the novel. 25

The weakness in this final novel is attributed to Dreiser's difficulty in completely ignoring his new-found philosophy and in allowing himself to devote the final four chapters to Berenice. Walcutt says "that if Dreiser's novel appears wooden, it is because the mixture of new ideas and old is grotesque; . . ." moreover, "the style and the techniques of characterization have not accommodated the new ideas." 26

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23 Elias, p. 304.  
24 Ibid.  
25 Ibid., p. 305. Dreiser had asked James T. Farrell for his appraisal of the finished manuscript, and Farrell had suggested some changes in the ending, but there was not enough time for Dreiser to make the necessary revisions.  
26 Walcutt, p. 266.
Bulwark, The Stoic is considered one of Dreiser's weakest works.

These two posthumous novels are vital, nonetheless, for the light they cast on Dreiser's complete change from his supposed materialism to pure spirituality, and from his support of business to its rejection.

In The Stoic, Cowperwood concentrates on working out his business and personal plans now that he has decided to terminate his fight for the franchise to Chicago's street railways. In some ways, he is still the same Cowperwood of The Financier and The Titan. He tells Berenice, who in The Titan had come to him in his defeat:

"I have no excuses to offer for the way I am," he said. "Intelligently or unintelligently, I try to follow the line of self-interest, because, as I see it, there is no other guide. Maybe I am wrong, but I think most of us do that. It may be that there are other interests that come before those of the individual, but in favoring himself, he appears, as a rule, to favor others."

She agrees with him. At Berenice's suggestion, he decides to go abroad to London to get control of the street railway system, but not so much for the profit involved. He tells her that he would now prefer to take it easy and not work so hard, for money means less to him than she does. Notwithstanding his good intentions, in a few months he is involved in the political and financial machinations to build and control London's railways. His coup is similar to his previous ones, but he considers this particular one the greatest of his financial adventures, for he wants it to be on a higher level and through it "atone for all sins coupled with his

This seeming change of heart does not mean that he is ready to give up entirely all of his old tricks connected with organizing and controlling a railway system. "This was the way of some things," he reasons, and proceeds with his plans. He also retains most of the major profits in his own hands—higher level or no—that is the only way to do business!

As in the two other novels, women cause Cowperwood's troubles in this volume. Even though he has promised Berenice that she will be the only one, he engages in a brief but fiery affair with a young girl in New York on one of his trips there. Aileen, who refuses to divorce him, is still in the public foreground as his wife, while Berenice, set up in a house in London, remains in the background to avoid scandal. The way he explains his lapse to Berenice is that there is a sensuousness in him which overrules reason and will, and so she must forgive him. And so she does. He keeps Aileen content by providing for her a paid companion to amuse her, a plan that proves rewarding until Aileen finds out that Cowperwood is directing the entire affair. She, too, succumbs to his entreaties for forgiveness and causes no scandal.

In London Cowperwood for the first time feels his age, and he wonders to what purpose his life has been spent. On a trip to Norway, he observes the simple living habits of the Lapps in a social arrangement
which would have no use for his talents. "He felt that these people had more from life in sheer beauty, simple comfort, and charming social customs than he and thousands of others like him who were so strenuously engaged in accumulating money."\(^{30}\) Compared to this peaceful existence, his own business troubles, chronic domestic problems, and irritations due to public opinion seem pointless. However, "he smiled to himself ironically. He must not think too much. Take things as they come and make the best of them. After all, the world had done more for him than for most, and the least he could do was to be grateful, and he was."\(^{31}\) Also, for the first time he realizes how his way of life has left him little room for reading and appreciation of intellectual and artistic genius in many areas. People still put flowers on the graves of such men as Chopin, but Cowperwood, more amused than irritated, knows that even a year after his death there will be no one who will bother to put flowers on his grave.

In London he also finds a business community that operates differently from American business. Englishmen manage to mix rest and pleasure with business, Cowperwood notes, whereas in the U.S. "business was business."\(^{30}\) Even in England, however, the habit of joining forces to defend themselves from Cowperwood is a part of the business scheme. In this case, nationalistic sentiment combines with

\(^{30}\)Ibid., p. 224. \(^{31}\)Ibid.
human selfish motives in defensive action. What Cowperwood has to do is to learn to reconcile himself to their objections to radical changes, and to concentrate on gaining the favor of the respectable element of English society. Their social and financial backing are indispensable, and he manages to win both. The press, which in the U. S. has caused him so many headaches, approves of Cowperwood. Editors respect him for his talent, and hope that his initiative will wake the English railway executives from their doldrums. Besides, things can be hushed up if the top businessmen want it: "Here, the truer the scandal, the more libelous it is. And it becomes very dangerous to say anything unless the biggest people want it said," one Englishman tells him.  

English businessmen have a definite and fixed social class on which they focus their ambitions, whereas in America the social scale is in constant flux brought about by new money. Elverson Johnson, a lawyer-businessman, has worked himself up from the lower class, but he hopes to rise on the social scale not necessarily for himself but for his children. He concentrates on doing all he can for the members of that higher social class to which he aspires, but his methods are not crooked. He is a stickler for the law but will make use of all the loopholes he can find. Henry De Soto Sippens, who has previously been

\[32\text{Ibid.}, \ p. \ 75.\]
adequate for Cowperwood in Chicago, is a hindrance to his work in London. He is too American-acting for their tastes, and regardless of a long friendship, Cowperwood ruthlessly adheres to his policy that friendship must not interfere in business. Sippens is sent back to Chicago to take care of Cowperwood's affairs in that city. Sippens expounds a peculiarly American business philosophy to Cowperwood when he tells him:

"Well, Chief, I'm not going to pretend to speak for you, because you're a great man, and anything you do or don't do is important. As for me, I look on it all as some sort of game that I'm here to play. I used to feel that everything was more important than I feel it is now. Maybe I was right then, for if I hadn't gotten busy and done a lot for myself, life would have slipped by me and I wouldn't have been able to do a lot of things I have done. And I guess that's the answer: to be doing something all the time. There's a game on, and whether we like it or not, we have to play our parts."  

While Cowperwood still has a great many things to do to complete his plans for the railway system, he is taken ill. He has Bright's disease, and, the doctor tells him, not too long to live. If he takes care of himself and cuts down on his activities he may live longer. He cannot even do this comfortably, however, for if the public learns that he is seriously ill, his London affairs will suffer as a result. Worried by the thought that he will not get all of his financial affairs in order, he scurries frantically around until his activities speed up his death. When he dies, Berenice is at his bedside, but Aileen, who runs into her

33Ibid., pp. 113-114.
in the hall by accident, is so outraged by her presence that she refuses to have anything else to do with the dying Cowperwood. She will not even allow his body to be brought into their home, and the casket is secretly smuggled in in the middle of the night. She lets it stay. His last requests are that part of his fortune be used for his art museum and another part for a hospital for the poor. Aileen is in control of his fortune.

After Cowperwood's death, his fortune is tied up in litigations, delays, and all types of legal entanglements until in the end Aileen is forced to accept a settlement of less than a million dollars while the legal battles continue in the courts. She is forced to move out of her home and dies a year later. Cowperwood's art collection and all of his personal property is auctioned off and the hospital is not built. In five years, the fortune has dwindled from something like twelve million to three and a half million. The newspapers, meanwhile, paint Cowperwood as something of a criminal and social failure because his fortune has been dispersed. One newspaper article runs a story with the question "What Availeth It?" and portrays Cowperwood as a complete failure. These articles are based on the fact that Cowperwood's fortune has dwindled to almost nothing through the legal connivance of the many who take advantage of Aileen's ignorance in financial and legal matters.

During all these proceedings, Berenice, who luckily was left an endowment by Cowperwood, has traveled to India where she has studied
and been converted to Yoga. After about six years of living in the East, she returns to build a hospital with her money in memory of Cowperwood. She has been washed of the Western materialistic point of view and is ready to devote her life to helping others and to seeking an understanding of life.

In *The Stoic*, Cowperwood actually has undergone no great change in his views and has expressed few regrets. Certainly Dreiser does not condemn him. If at times Cowperwood wonders at the scheme of things and the course his life has taken, it is not to pity himself. He is thankful to those men and women who have made his life such a dramatic and exciting spectacle. In short, Cowperwood has played his role in life and played it to the full. Whether he has missed the point in life totally is not for him to say, and he accepts what is. If his fortune is to be scattered, it is not so bad, for while he was living, he had enjoyed the power which he had craved.

Where Dreiser imposes his new point of view is in the figure of Berenice, and she expresses his new point of view by choosing spiritual purity over material matter. What Dreiser intended to do to the ending of *The Stoic*, of course, cannot be known. He may have made Berenice's conversion to Yoga more credible, or he may have made Cowperwood's end more important. The fact remains that he was really not too interested in the financier any more—Berenice and her spiritual awakening had overthrown Cowperwood's materialism.
CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

In his eight novels, Theodore Dreiser portrayed a wide range of American business, from the relatively small family enterprise to industrial empires. Critics have seen these novels as valid interpretations of our industrial life from the time of the Civil War through the early years of this century. In these novels, he presents characters from the top to the bottom of the financial scale, from tycoons to factory hands. These characters vary widely in intelligence and cunning as well as in moral nature. But all are affected in some degree by the changing nature of American industry and the changing ideals of our society. Dreiser's nature and background enabled him to write with notable understanding of the drives which impelled his various characters in their battle for wealth and luxury or for survival.

In his first two novels, he shows us primarily those who were victims of a society whose sexual conventions were relatively stern but which allowed full play to the acquisitive instinct. Jennie Gerhardt and her lover Lester Kane are in differing degrees victims of the morality which governed the American businessman. Hurstwood is broken when he yields to his urge for youth and beauty in the person
of Carrie. Carrie, herself, does not fit the role of victim, for, despite her period of near starvation as an assembly line worker, she rises to popular success as an actress. But Carrie is not happy; she feels that much of life has eluded her. The reality is sadly different from the dream. Of the major characters of Sister Carrie only Drouet is successful and happy because his role as a salesman does not limit him in his pursuit of sexual satisfaction as Hurstwood's managerial position hinders him in his search for the ideal. Drouet's nature, too, craves only physical comforts which money can readily buy.

In the elder Kane of Jennie Gerhardt, one has the representative of an older order, for not only has his sexual life been governed by conventions, but in his business life he is led by the principle of "Do unto others as you would that they should do unto you." But he is of a disappearing order which respects "honest but shrewd" men. His son Robert is of sterner stuff. He governs his emotional life, and whatever passion and aesthetic sense he may have is subordinated to his drive for power. He is a hard and ruthless competitor, although he abides by the law or finds a loophole within it.

In The Financier and The Titan, Dreiser abandoned the victims of society for the ruthless, amoral superman financier who respects no creed and no law outside himself. His motto is "I satisfy myself," and he finds an outlet for all his passions. His desire for power is fulfilled by his giant financial enterprises both in the stock market and in the
development and control of public utilities. By virtue of supreme cunning, he believes, he is entitled to rule and to manipulate human beings and laws to suit his own purposes. Ruthlessness and hurting people does not bother him as it does Lester Kane, and, unlike Lester's brother Robert, who only makes use of loopholes in the laws, Cowperwood makes the loopholes himself by bribing officials, or he breaks the laws if he has to. He allows nothing to stand in his way.

Cowperwood, too, like Hurstwood and Jennie and Lester, gets caught in the meshes of sexual convention combined with criminal law and is railroaded into prison as a result, but in his case his enemies use the moral code as a weapon to get rid of him as a financial competitor and to seek revenge for a seduction. Unlike the aesthetically barren Robert Kane who subordinates all other feelings he may have to the drive for financial power, Cowperwood denies himself nothing. He fulfills his yearning for beauty in love affairs with beautiful and artistic women and in appreciation and possession of art objects. The flaunting of sexual conventions is what causes his downfall in Philadelphia, and it also is partly responsible for society's closing its doors on him and Aileen. Even Cowperwood cannot transgress against all of society's laws without paying a penalty.

Cowperwood, like Drouet, comes the closest to being happy in Dreiser's novels, for the society in which he finds himself allows him to develop his personality to the fullest. He happens to have been born
at a time when American capitalism was in the flower of its glory and neither convention nor law prevents him from obtaining what he wants.

In Eugene Witla, the artist-businessman of The "Genius,"
Dreiser again created a superman—although a somewhat weaker one than Cowperwood—who lives by his own code in fulfilling his desires. Just as Cowperwood considers himself exempt from society's conventions because of his supreme cunning and financial acumen, so does Witla consider himself outside the realm of ordinary convention by virtue of his artistic nature. But while in Cowperwood the desire for power through wealth is his strongest drive, in Witla it is the search for beauty which motivates his actions. This search for beauty is satisfied through his painting and through his passion for beautiful young women. Witla succeeds in the business world because his sensitive and understanding nature draws talented fellow-artists to work for the magazines he edits, but it is this same nature and lack of ruthlessness which allows his co-workers and employees to take advantage of him and use him for their own advancement. His inability to adjust his artistic temperament to a business world which requires that he abstain from his search for beauty through women undermines his business success. Had his drive for power and success in the business world been as strong as that of Cowperwood's and had he not been diverted by beauty, Witla might have been as successful in his own way as Cowperwood.
In An American Tragedy, a young boy without the gifts of a Cowperwood and Witla but with all of their desires is caught in a mesh of his own weakness and of circumstance and ends in the electric chair. By implication, Dreiser condemns a society which finds Clyde Griffiths guilty but not itself. Clyde is one of the little people caught up in the socio-economic struggle set in motion by the industrialist and used by him as his tool for achieving success. The ambitions of individuals like Clyde are kept alive by looking up to these men and hoping that they, too, may someday be successful and enjoy the same material advantages. But opportunity is limited for this class of people and even for Clyde who can make some use of family connections in his pursuit of wealth and social standing. For others in this class, such as Carrie's sister and brother-in-law and the mill hands in Clyde's uncle's factory, there is only hard work and complete devotion to their job if they expect even the slightest rise in position. For them, it is difficult to hold on, let alone climb. And, if they falter, there is cheap foreign labor to take their places.

In his two posthumous novels, there is evidence of the change in Dreiser's own set of values, a shift from materialism to mysticism. His protagonist in The Bulwark is Solon Barnes, a Quaker-businessman who looks to the inner spirit as his ideal, just as Witla finds his ideal in beauty. Solon is a member of the same disappearing order to which the elder Kane in Jennie Gerhardt belonged. As long as that order exists,
he is able to live by the Christian ethics to which he adheres, but when that older order is replaced by the new system (represented by Cowperwood) which is dominated by ruthlessness, he finds Christian and business ethics no longer compatible. Solon Barnes can only withdraw from a society which he feels threatens his spiritual being and has destroyed his youngest son with its lures of materialism. His children are corrupted by surroundings which create in them false ideals and values and prevent them from developing their better natures. He retires from the business world and turns to a kind of pantheism in which he finds the spiritual peace that he was unable to find in society. The ruthless character of American materialism, says Dreiser in The Bulwark, makes it impossible for people to live by the inner light and Christian ethics.

In The Stoic, Dreiser concludes the story of Cowperwood's life, and he remains true to his original concept of him to the end. Cowperwood has no regrets and no change of heart. He, too, is subject to laws which do not respect his money or power. Cowperwood catches glimpses of other cultures in which his talents would not be needed, and he realizes that the people who lead a simple existence are as happy or happier than are those in his society who spend their lives accumulating wealth. But he does not complain. He has had an exciting life, and he is grateful for it. Nevertheless, Dreiser makes clear his rejection of business and materialism by turning his attention from
Cowperwood to Berenice whose spiritual awakening constitutes the concluding portion of the novel.

In his novels, Dreiser has created a series of memorable characters drawn from the business world and its surroundings. He rendered an objective portrait of the business tycoon without apologies for his actions. He has not condemned him or treated him as evil; rather, he has interpreted him as an element of capitalistic society who came as a part of America's industrial development. While the lives of Sage, Gould, Carnegie and other tycoons are practically forgotten in history books, Cowperwood is still alive in the books of Dreiser. While most of the young people who sought their fortunes in Chicago at the turn of the century are lost in the past, Carrie is still remembered through Dreiser. No one would ever think of Chester Gillette and Grace Brown unless he examined newspapers and court files, but Clyde Griffiths and Roberta still exist. Eugene Witla and Solon Barnes can be more easily forgotten, but Witla still represents the artist who cannot adjust to the demands of convention and the business world.

As Dreiser observed his society with its manifold drawbacks, his philosophy more and more condemned the materialistic environment in which he had been nurtured. The drives which had once led men to adventurous action to conquer a new land and to develop their talents had now become the mighty chase for the dollar, and Dreiser could not accept this pursuit as a fulfilling way of life.
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