

COWPER WOOD TRILOGY THROUGH DREISER'S MIND

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ABSTRACT

*In the times of American transformation, Dreiser observed the sudden rise of great financial barons. The conservative mercantilism changed to the period of finance capital. Dreiser exposed the misdirected American energy and his trilogy of novels revealed a new materialistic aspect of the American Dream. Money, art, and glory including women were shown to dominate average American life in cities. Greed turned humans into predators and survival in society was based on their predatory skills. The trilogy that included *The Financier*, *The Titan*, and *The Stoic* actually revealed the enterprising business orientations of average Americans. These novels connected the American capitalism that spread in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Here Dreiser was inspired by the life of a Philadelphia tycoon Charles Tyson Yerkes and replicated a fictional character Frank Algernon Cowperwood who reflected contemporary American life. American social fabric showed a drastic change from the middle of the nineteenth century up to the end of the civil war. Industrialization of America was on the horizon and necessary infrastructure including canals and railways were being planned to link all the regions of America thereby connecting them to nodal centers of growth like Chicago, Philadelphia, and New York. Several opportunities opened up and enterprising people including many manipulators rose from rags to riches in this newly evolving world order. Average Americans became more greedy and rapid colonization of western lands was in progress. In the late nineteenth century, Dreiser put his observations about American capitalism in the form of three connecting novels that made a trilogy. Cowperwood was an over-ambitious businessman and his life was wrecked by the financial crisis of 1873. This was described by Dreiser in *The Financier* which was his first novel of the trilogy. In *The Titan*, which was his second novel of the trilogy, Dreiser continues to elaborate on the life of Cowperwood who now left the prison and goes to Chicago to salvage his fortune but had to suffer due to his past. Later Cowperwood moves to London and tries his fortunes in a new underground railway system. So, American capitalism was well described by Dreiser in his *Trilogy of Desire*.*

Keywords: *American transformation, Trilogy, American Dream, American life, American Capitalism, Trilogy of Desire.*

Introduction

The beginning of the twentieth century observed the American transformation from the period of conservative mercantilism to the period of finance capital. In 1911, Theodore Dreiser put forward his idea of a trilogy of novels where he planned to showcase the spectacular rise of the financial power of the great financial barons in the fast-changing American community. This period was the beginning of industrialization in America. Here the enterprising people with sharp business orientations acted as engines who powered the economic strength of America. In the trilogy of novels, each of Dreiser's novels expressed capitalism in America. The trilogy of desire is a fiction in which Dreiser expressed the story of Frank Algernon Cowperwood in a realistic style but it appears more of biography as it is based on the real-life character of Charles Tyson Yerkes who was a Philadelphia tycoon and before writing *The Financier* Dreiser did substantial research.

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The greed of the common American people was rising. Even the social order in America was changing and the western land was being rapidly colonized. Many developmental works were in progress that connected vast regions of America with cities of major industrial growth like Chicago, New York, and Philadelphia. Several possibilities arose and many spirited American and even some manipulators achieved miraculous success. This appeared to have fulfilled their so-called American promise that assured the rise from rags to riches. In *A Hoosier Holiday* Dreiser presented different aspects of American prosperity. Average Americans just thought of accumulating wealth and achieving power. They just thought that money can solve all their problems. (Dreiser, T.(1916).) In *The Financier*, Dreiser visualized the entire socio-economic and moral life of American people who in any situation always followed the natural course of action that prevailed in their mind. (Pizer, D.(1976).)

Life in America observed social stratification where capitalistic society showed division into different classes and resources, as well as power, were unequally distributed among the people. (Ndah, N.H.(2017).) There was a distinct superior-inferior divide in the American community. In *The Financier*, though Cowperwood is born in a poor family by his business orientations he rises to the upper class in the society. But later by his shady deals, he lands in difficulty. In *The Titan* also class stratification is distinct and after completing his present term Cowperwood shifts to Chicago from Philadelphia. Here also by his show of wealth, he declares his upper-class credentials. But here the behaviour of a person also counts along with the accumulated wealth to qualify to be a part of the upper class. The plight of the proletariat is shown in *The Stoic* where the wage earners are deprived of their basic rights in order to survive.

Evolution of Cowperwood Trilogy

The Financier has been reported to contain vast records establishing naturalism in American life. (Lydenberg, J.(Ed.)(1971).) Dreiser even copied several public documents and court records in his literary works. (Matthiessen, F.O.(1951).) In his trilogy of novels, including *The Financier*, *The Titan*, and *The Stoic*, Dreiser put on record several documents related to the life of Charles Tyson Yerkes and Wilson Knight even substantiated by calling the included novels the works of fiction. He observed that after the literary material from any source has been transformed into some drama then this product becomes the work of art through some creative process and now the source becomes secondary. In the same way, Dreiser nourished the sources by his work of art and his trilogy was considered as an unfeigned creative fiction. (Knight, W.(1971).) Even Matthiessen considered Cowperwood as an adequately evolved character out of contemporary American timeline and he was not simply a replica of Yerkes. (Matthiessen, F.O.(1951).) Actually, Dreiser wrote Trilogy as a saga of the financial life of an average American during and after the civil war in an advanced society, and here Cowperwood was observed as an epic hero. In American society, the hypocrisy based on Calvinistic ethics prevailed during the late nineteenth century. Calvinistic morality preached self-restraint, decency, and abstinence but practiced sanctioned greed, selfishness, and dominance. Such an ethical foundation was needed to justify the spirit of capitalism that was primarily based on oppression and exploitation of the weaker section of the society. So the stratification of society was the basic requirement of capitalism and hypocrisy was the way of life. In *Trilogy of Desire*, Dreiser put Yerkes in a fictional costume and reflected his character closely in Cowperwood. Their emotional attachments, business orientations, and acute love for arts go in proximity. The fiction is presented in close association with the past adventures of Yerkes though some variations are also observed with regards to their funeral details. So the historical events were reconstructed in fictional texture. The *Trilogy of Desire* composing *The Financier* (1912), *The Titan* (1914), and *The Stoic* (1947) uncovered the prevailing corruption and immorality in the American Dream that existed in the American progressive community. In the trilogy, Dreiser also focussed on the desire for money, women, and art collection which were three common desires of both Cowperwood and Yerkes. This connected form of fiction and reality was observed as metafiction. (Aurangzeb, A., Hassan, S., & Bilal, M.(2021).)

Dreiser was socially obsessed and desired to write about American financier and Yerkes perfectly fitted in this character that sprouted in the form of Cowperwood. Yerkes was the choice of a large number of capitalists and represented the socio-economic and moral life of the average Americans in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Here the soul of Yerkes showed up in the body of Cowperwood and the resulting fiction powered the novels that shaped Dreiser's trilogy of desire. The social life of Americans during the turbulence of the industrial revolution was realistically represented by *The Financier*, the first novel of the trilogy series. Cowperwood's father achieved moderate success as a banker while Cowperwood himself was a born leader and was too thoughtful about the secrets of life. (Dreiser, T.(1912).)

In most of Dreiser's fiction, the episodes are repetitive and show apparent monotony. The hero does not achieve anything but sensations and the character show lack of development through experience. (Kazin, A., & Shapiro, C.(Eds.)(1965).)Through these experiences, Dreiser just presents the different facets of American social life. In *The Financier* Cowperwood, the protagonist is dynamic and enterprising. He has limitless aspirations and believed in the doctrine of success. Like any American businessman Cowperwood shows opportunistic traits. He has learned from his experiences that one has to succeed in life at any cost and only the fittest can survive. Dreiser favours a Machiavellian mindset to achieve the goals. (Matthiessen, F.O. (1951).) The social life of an average American reflected a conflict between the strong and the weak and Cowperwood realized that an agile brain was an essential key to success. In the American capitalistic system, success was the only revered goddess and morality had no existence in the material world. (Dreiser, T.(1912).) Morality and ethics were just the words used to cover the failures of the weak. (Lydenberg, J.(Ed.)(1971).) Cowperwood just thought of people in terms of weak and strong while morality defining anything good and evil was ignored. Even Friedrich Nietzsche assumes that nobleman is the incarnate will to power. (Russell, B. (1979).) In America, the concept of free will was openly displayed in the nineteenth century. This Nietzschean concept was also reflected by Cowperwood. If this formed elementary principle of social existence like capitalism then every person will turn into a demiurge and will openly resist any type of imposed restrictions. American democracy is more a form of plutocracy. The rich and the poor were distinct races with rich living with pleasure and poor living with misery forever. American Dream fosters democratic assumptions but American reality appears to invalidate this view. Cowperwood observed inherited social disparity in the prevailing system. A large number of people in America were not above slavery even though the constitution guaranteed to prevent it. (Dreiser, T.(1912).)

Cowperwood has also been shown as a lover of art and beauty. His love of beauty was particularly for women and we find him attracted to Aileen Butler and many more. This aspect may be due to his struggle for existence and also because of the philosophy of individual will which appears to govern American society. Even Matthiessen acknowledged that Dreiser found Cowperwood as an egocentric person having an artistic mind. (Matthiessen, F.O.(1951).) Dreiser reveals the single-mindedness of Cowperwood and he is shown to concentrate more on his money and career but at the same time, his interest in art and his taste in girls is also exhibited. His business aspirations roll together with his intense interest in women and his passion for the girls is more often self-destructive. (Aurangzeb, S., Khan, A.H., & Jehanzeb, S. (2021).)

Cowperwood was a financier by instinct and was active in the financial world. He learned finance from his father and was interested in money from early childhood. As a young boy, he even made a profit from a clever deal he transacted without any investment. Further, he wanted to get rich by achieving higher financial activity. Getting richer and satisfying himself was his motto. (Dreiser, T.(1912).) *The Financier*, like the other novels of Dreiser, has three main segments. These constitute the triadic movements that characterize Dreiser's art. Here Cowperwood the apprentice ventures through the conventional world in the first segment. In the second segment, Cowperwood enters the field of high finance and politics. In the third and the last segment, Cowperwood experiences the majesty of law and justice which is the basis of the American way of life. Thus Cowperwood Trilogy adheres to the triadic movement of Dreiser's art. Earlier Frank Cowperwood could manage small jobs in some companies but he knew that real power lies in a financier who can employ an agent or a gambler and can use them as his tools. So Cowperwood starts his own business with a legacy of twenty-five thousand dollars and shaped his business.

The social and financial life in America became self-centered and in society, there was an intense struggle for existence. The society resembled a forest where Cowperwood was a lion with the cunningness of a fox. The people were full of greed with the qualities of a predator and the soul of a beast. Though he was not very intelligent he was sensible enough to reach the top and succeed in all situations. So in the first segment of his life, Cowperwood becomes a successful minor financier and shifts to his new house with stable domestic married life. The second segment of Cowperwood's life starts with the outbreak of the civil war. He takes it as an opportunity to succeed further in life. Many people were filled with the emotion of patriotism but he did not care to fight because personal interests were more sacred to him. (Dreiser, T.(1912).)

Cowperwood finds vast hypocrisy in American society. Public officials together with the politicians and the financiers robbed by the manipulation of huge financial resources of the country. They earned great profits by combining hypocrisy with theft by falsely engaging in public welfare. (Pizer, D.(1976).) Cowperwood made such an unholy alliance with one politician Edward Malia Butler and made

huge profits. The capitalists, the politicians, and the officials together sucked the public finance. In America, the talk of liberty, equality, and freedom was just false propaganda by the capitalists and the greedy nexus of politicians and businessmen cheated the public. Cowperwood aptly made profits from this type of system and Dreiser proved American Dream a myth. Cowperwood even exploits the city treasurer and achieves a financial peak by manipulating public funds but becomes vulnerable and lands into crisis.

Dreiser's treatment of love and marriage was condemned as immoral. Cowperwood's social and economic progress was also associated with triumphs in the field of sex. He did not follow the idea of one-life, one-love morality. He did not associate himself with the Christian philosophy of monogamy. Cowperwood even becomes unfaithful to his wife when he meets Aileen Butler who was the young daughter of his financial patron. Later, when Cowperwood's affair with Aileen is discovered then Butler becomes his inveterate enemy and offers him as a scapegoat to the other politicians for the party's lapses in Philadelphia. Though there were even more morally corrupt people Cowperwood has to suffer since others were stronger and he was merely weak at that crucial moment. Here Dreiser shows the prevailing insecurity in the capitalistic system. Cowperwood lands in jail not because he misused the public funds but because he seduces the daughter of a powerful political boss. His trial and imprisonment expose the fragility of the American economic and legal system. (Aleer, M., & John, J.(1968).)

Even the victims are treated on the basis of their financial status. So the alleged equality of a man before the law is only theoretical. Privileges could be purchased and the judiciary was under the influence of the power of money and wealth. The man possessing prosperity and power was always thought to be right. So politicians were considered great and always thought to be right because they were powerful. So Cowperwood was sacrificed by the political bosses and the corrupt practices prevailing in the American legal system are forcefully shown. After observing Cowperwood's trial it could be assumed that strength and cunning were necessary to succeed in life and weak cannot win. (Dreiser, T.(1912).) Even when Cowperwood was in prison he enjoyed all benefits arising out of his affluence. He also manages to get pardoned from the governor and is released from jail. Now he becomes extra cautious as only his weakness led him to a trap that now he could avoid.

In *The Financier*, Cowperwood is shown to be self-reliant but his vision is still limited. Although Cowperwood could achieve materialistic advantages but still in the capitalistic society man is disillusioned by the reality. The second segment of Trilogy, *The Titan*, shows up with Chicago to reveal greater heights of the world of finance and beauty. Cowperwood re-established his lost ground by the art of financial manipulation but quits Philadelphia to achieve big in Chicago. This metropolis of finance was a destination for every youthful aspiring soul who like Cowperwood summed up the philosophy of life in personal satisfaction only. In Chicago, Cowperwood met many men of strength who controlled the world of finance. They were like many beasts in the jungle who had different natures but none had any weaknesses. Now Cowperwood had realized that they will all have to adjust together without hurting one another. In Greek mythology, Titans were the children of the primeval rulers of the universe who captured power by removing their parents. Titans were strong and they controlled and ruled the world by the force of their strength but later they were untimely overthrown by the Olympians who were their more efficient successors. Hence Dreiser wrote his second novel *The Titans* to express the weakness of the capitalists. Cowperwood's main aim in his new destination was to accumulate wealth and rise to some recognized authority. (Dreiser, T.(1984).)

Dreiser shows in *The Titan* the organizational skills of Cowperwood in tackling the hurdles that come in the way. Cowperwood chooses his local generals who could implement his dictates in Chicago. These were his minor characters whom he uses as his instruments like a surgeon selects and uses various instruments in an operation. (Dreiser, T.(1984).) Dreiser depicts the reality of American life in *The Titan*. In Chicago Cowperwood's commercial life spreads in three phases and each subsequent phase is at a higher status level of his life. In his first phase, Cowperwood tries to gain hold of the supply of Chicago gas showing his skills in financial manipulation. In the second phase Cowperwood ventures into the larger field of Chicago street railways. In the third phase, he tries to become the greatest of the financiers. Though Cowperwood could not succeed in the last phase it was an organized withdrawal for him so as to re-emerge at greater heights at some higher place like New York or London or elsewhere.

Cowperwood understood the nature of society in Chicago. Here money was the main necessity while rich had three categories. The first was of those who suddenly grew rich from poverty and could not easily forget their earlier standards. The second category was of those who inherited wealth or had wealth from before and they had social grace and ability. The third category was of those who were

newly born into wealth and these were young people who wanted to shine further. Cowperwood in different stages of the financial world conquers different types of women relative to their age and purity. (Pizer, D.(1976).) Dreiser exactly knew the real social status of women in America. But in totality, the lawlessness in the world of finance actually dominated the American society in the times of Dreiser. The press, along with the politicians and the financiers were also not independent in the American democratic system. They promoted the interest of their owners. Even the editors were almost sycophants and blackmailers.

The Stoic was the last novel of the Trilogy that Dreiser wrote towards the end of his life and was published two years after his death. Its completion got delayed and in the course author's mental and artistic outlook changed and his spiritual and philosophical thoughts surfaced. But Dreiser's theme and structure in The Stoic were to be kept the same as was in the first two novels of the trilogy. (Pizer, D.(1976).) The Stoic was actually designed to reveal the last phase of Yerke's life. After the defeat of Yerkes in Chicago, he goes to London to reorganize the entire transport system. There he was appreciated for his work. He returns to New York after being struck by some mortal illness. (Gerber, P.L.(1964).)

Dreiser in 1932 made some changes in the plot and character list of The Stoic that was not in the theme or structure earlier. (Pizer, D.(1976).) Dreiser completed about two-thirds that made forty-nine chapters of the published version of the novel. Now he discontinues writing of The Stoic and resumes only after completing The Bulwark in 1945. The last one-third of the version has some influence of the changed theme and focus that crept in due to the gap in writing after a long period of time. Now in the changed perception even, in the end, the failure of the American socio-cultural society is not targeted but rather spiritual rejuvenation is perceived.

In The Titan, Cowperwood is presented as a young man while in The Stoic there is a sudden transformation in the character of Cowperwood. In Chicago, there was no indication of his advancing age but in The Stoic this was perceptible. Cowperwood needed someone faithful enough to be understanding and full of affection. Here Berenice came closest to Cowperwood and fitted well in his conception of the ideal woman. (Dreiser, T.(1981).) Berenice acts as a catalyst to him and he was so rejuvenated as if it was love that made life and not the wealth alone. (Dreiser, T.(1981).) Cowperwood regains his valour and shrewdness. His clever subjugation of Berenice is counted as a great achievement. He gets the entire London transport system. But apart from this instead of getting huge profits, he wanted to gain credits also. His old tricks and financial manipulations were in place to achieve the greatest of his financial adventures. He resided in the Cowperwood mansion which was one of the most decorated and beautiful houses in New York. (Dreiser, T.(1981).) Cowperwood easily outwitted the two budding financiers Messers Greaves and Henslow where during negotiations he ties them in knots. Even on dealing with Johnson and Lord Stane in London, it appears as if English partners are not his equals and are just children lost in the forest and he is there to teach them some basic lessons of finance. (Dreiser, T.(1981).)

At one time Berenice thought of going with Lord Stane but she soon realized that her temperament and general viewpoint crave for Cowperwood and not Stane. (Dreiser, T.(1981).) Now in the trilogy towards the end of The Stoic, there is a sudden shift of thought from industrialized western society to a society that is entirely free from industrialization. On the advice of Berenice, Cowperwood on his return from New York decides to go to Norway. Here he finds some different views of life that were different from his own. People were simple and all their needs were sustained by nature only. They keep cows and get pleasure from books and music. They are all educated. Cowperwood realizes that real happiness is not in acquiring wealth. Now as he is getting old, the best part of his life is already gone and so it is worthless to go after money. On returning from Norway he realizes that he needs to do something significant in the world of spirit. He visited several tombs and saw flowers scattered over the graves but he found no possibility of this on his grave even after a year of his death. (Dreiser, T.(1981).)

Sometime later Cowperwood faces a fatal disease when he was at the pinnacle of his socio-economic financial career. Lord Stane was so impressed by his creativity and original ideas that he staged a social affair in honour of Cowperwood where he was appreciated for completing a great project of London transport. Cowperwood was thankful but the next moment he finds himself gasping for air and died in the hotel. (Dreiser, T.(1981).) It was an important moment where life had come to an end but none of his family members were near him. His life appeared pointless and failed to achieve what was intended. Trilogy here revealed this aspect of life where Cowperwood ruled the financial world but apart from materialistic achievements real love was missing from his life. But as a shift from

here Dreiser transforms Berenice from a self-seeking cool woman to a socially devoted conscious one. She even visited India to study Yoga. She follows the doctrine of non-attachment as put forth in the Bhagvad Gita.

Conclusion

In the financial world, Cowperwood wanted to reach the top and wished that man should swing around him like planets around the Sun. Dreiser here tries to emphasize that in modern times Caesar or Napoleon will not be warriors who fight battles in the field but they will be people like Yerkes who will manage skills to reign the financial world. In *The Titan* Dreiser reflects the strengths and limitations of modern American society. In sketching *Trilogy* Dreiser writes about Cowperwood's public life which projects the materialistic growth and political corruption in nineteenth-century America. This way Dreiser writes the history of his time that even reveals the growth of cities. (Pizer, D.(1976).) Cowperwood's history in *The Financier* exposes the hollowness of the American Dream. Corrupt practices in the field of finance and law project the fragile nature of American society that appears strong but does not benefit the average American. It appears as if the Dreamers are not the achievers. Those who dream stand cheated with time and their hopes smashed. *The Stoic* as a novel did not have any sense of struggle, uncertainty, and excitement that was there in the earlier two novels of the trilogy. Dreiser through Cowperwood showed in *The Stoic* that the world of public finance was the same everywhere and capitalists never change their methods. But in *The Stoic* towards the end of the trilogy, the negativity that prevailed due to the false American Dream and hollowness in the American society is shifted to the spiritual regeneration of thoughts and this brings in some positivity in the end.

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