

A Spatial Analysis of the Working-Class Industrial Experience in Theodore Dreiser's "A Certain Oil Refinery"

by

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Today's identity of America as the great industrial colossus and as a standard-bearer of capitalism has not always been the same. The shift from an agricultural colony to a heavily mechanized society did not happen overnight, and while it worked for the prosperity of eminent business and farm owners, at the same time it came at the expense of the working class and of the natural environment. The adversities faced by the workers, along with deepening class stratification, were only some of the effects of these socioeconomic transformations, which were made visible on the American city and industrial scape. Against this backdrop, an oil refinery becomes this exact naturalistic and physical space through which Theodore Dreiser in his nonfiction text "A Certain Oil Refinery" (1919) emphatically comments on the repercussions of American industrialism and capitalism on a social and spatial level in the early twentieth century.

Dreiser in his non-fiction story accentuates the harsh working and living conditions of the working class by drawing parallels with the spaces where they inhabit, mainly the oil refinery, and their homes. In the space that the writer has crafted, everything seems somber, pessimistic, grey and dull, as if colors are entirely absent. The oil refinery is described as a "mass of black and grey" (187) and their homes as "tumble down shacks" (188). Likewise, the underprivileged workers are described as a mob, who is "not very bright intellectually" (187) and who is exploited and overworked in monotonous and repetitive jobs. The hardships that these people endure are "engraved" on their faces. They do not expect anything, they do not hope for anything. Trapped in a common job, which does not offer them any mental satisfaction and, most importantly, adequate means for survival, they and their families face dire conditions. Dreiser's depiction of these difficulties is also testified by Robert Bahlheda, who crudely states that in capitalism, workers had the same value as animals did (107), confirming Dreiser's description of their inhumane treatment. It is worth mentioning how throughout the story the characters remain silent and are not treated as individuals, rather as a feckless mass. Similarly, Roger Daniels claims that immigrant workers bore the greatest burden of the industrial workforce (23). Unfortunately, industrialization and capitalism were not for them a chance to

flourish financially. Through bleak spaces, Dreiser manages to showcase the deplorable conditions that working-class individuals, predominantly newcomers, had to face during industrialization.

The element of space in Dreiser's story becomes even more important, by being utilized to demonstrate how urbanization and industrialization initiated the endless destruction and pollution of the environment. Space also mirrors the exploitation and the exhaustion that the workers suffered to the extent that their physical health was gravely affected. The atmosphere of the oil refinery is contaminated with oil, gases, and smoke, which does not leave the workers unaffected. They are "splotched and spotted" with chemical substances, while the prolonged exposure to them has led to bodily symptoms, such as "an irritating cough" (Dreiser 189). Apart from the contamination of the environment and their bodies, with "oil and acids greet[ing] the nostrils and sight everywhere" (189), what is also striking is the absence of personal hygiene. The workers huddle in small and suffocating places to eat or clean themselves from the acids (190). The damaging nature of industrial practices is confirmed by Shackel et al., who note that toxic residues had a harmful impact on the workers' health and the atmosphere as well, leading even to death or to the contamination of a whole community. (51). It is once again shown that the mechanization of land and labor was a toxic enterprise, which not only polluted the environment, but the bodies of the workers too.

In the text, the element of space is also utilized to accentuate the discrepancy between the social classes and the unequal accumulation of wealth, as the environment of the oil refinery is juxtaposed with the prosperity of the upper class. The final paragraph of the story is full of contrasts between the working and the upper class. One of the most striking juxtapositions is the one between the "most prosperous manufacturing establishment" and the "solemn life representation which it represents" (109). This ironic remark clearly states that, while the oil industry is thriving, the labor force exploited to fuel this exact prosperity, is in a deplorable situation. Dreiser keeps making contradictions about the two worlds, referring on the one hand to "masters of great force and wealth" and on the other to "victims of this same penuriousness and indifference" (190). Through these strong juxtapositions and the use of the two antithetical spaces, the author exposes the exploitation of the working class. As Robert Bahlida states, "[t]he primary benefits of industrialization have always accrued to the upper middle class" (107). The workers do not profit from their hard labor. In contrast, they are feeding the

accumulation of wealth in the hands of the industrialists, as becomes evident in the text as well. The disparity between the classes is vast, thus further deepening social stratification.

Furthermore, the somber spaces where people in the fringes of society act on, contrasted with the luxurious environments of the privileged few, reflect the basic principles of naturalism. Naturalism focused on the hardships of the lower classes and, influenced by Darwinism, embraced the theory that only the fittest could survive in society. Even Dreiser seems to ironically embrace this ideology, by calling the workers “of the darker moods of nature, its meanest inspiration” (188), or even wondering whether this increased inequality between the rich and the poor is the natural order of things (191). These ideas are further expressed by Donald Pizer, who states that the common man is unable to control his own life, which is determined by the choices of the powerful (4). As Stephen Crave also wrote, “Environment is a tremendous thing in the world and frequently shapes lives regardless” (qtd. in Pizer 4). In the case of industrial America, profit-driven operations reigned over underprivileged groups’ fate and free will (Pizer 4). These views express the ideology that people’s lives are not a matter of personal choice but rather bound to external circumstances, which rarely favor the weak. The marginalized populations are seen as “doomed,” unable to free themselves from the restrictions and the destiny that their environment confines them to.

From what has been said so far, it is clear that in “A Certain Oil Refinery,” space operates as a multilayered element, upon which Dreiser scorns the living and labor conditions of the working class, during industrialization, capitalism and mechanization in America. The workers were exploited, overworked, and forced into a lamentable everyday life, in order to fuel this socio-economic system, yet they did not benefit from their hard work or from the privileges that industrialism supposedly offered. On the contrary, they lived a gloomy and pessimistic life, exactly like the environment of the oil refinery where they worked, which raises questions about the elitist aspect of industrialism. The upper class seems to willfully ignore the violation of human rights in the name of profit. One cannot help but wonder if things have changed nowadays, a century after this text.

If we, as a society, self-contemplate, we will come to the realization that even today, this kind of reality still exists. On an environmental level, the human-caused climate disaster is close to becoming irreversible, and several headlines on my creative representation underscore the significant share of damage that is attributed to the activities of high-income individuals. On a social level, capitalism has long established its identity as the dominant financial system, hence

favoring a global wealth inequality. On the one hand, there are those who accumulate unfathomable financial resources, and are able to live an abundant and frugal life. This is clearly illustrated through a news bulletin in my creative project: billionaires' total wealth reached the enormous amount of 6.5 trillion dollars over the past decade. On the other hand, there are people whose survival is a constant battle, literally and metaphorically. From being war victims to lacking the basic means of existence, millions of people struggle every day to survive, as demonstrated through the project, with famine sadly remaining a global issue. In between these two polarities stands the middle class, another victim of capitalism. But in what other ways has the middle class been influenced by the current socioeconomic stratification?

Social and environmental conditions are heavily affected by consumerism. In modern society, the largest percentage of buyers is made up by members of the middle class, who, influenced by advertisements and a materialistic lifestyle, fall into the trap of overconsumption. Buyers ardently seek to obtain material goods from big corporate companies, especially products related to fashion, beauty, and technology. Many of these companies have a bad reputation for workers' exploitation (especially in developing countries) and environmental destruction, due to overproduction and prioritization of profits over ethical operation. Notwithstanding the harsh reality that lies beneath these industries, consumers' habits are not affected. On the contrary, each year, the companies and their owners reach new peaks in revenues, while at the same time their workers are neglected, with poor working conditions and a meager salary. In my creative project, I have included the examples of two popular companies, Apple and Shein. Both have been blamed for exposing their employees to hazardous working conditions and for having a heightened carbon footprint. Still, every new product that Apple launches sees a huge demand, and Shein remains the most popular fast-fashion brand with their alluring cheap prices.

Comparing the current class and wealth stratification with Dreiser's narration, we can detect more similarities than we would probably imagine. Multimillionaires pulling the strings of economy and amassing wealth, workers and impoverished populations deprived of any opportunities and prospects, and middle-class people, quasi-carefree, benefiting from the goods of capitalism. Through the examples in the creative project emerges this exact discrepancy and yet complicated interrelation between the social classes, with antithetical, concurring headlines, as for example Elon Musk's astronomical net worth and famine in Gaza, or the financial anxieties of the younger generation and their simultaneous support to unethical brands.

Upon considering all the facts, it seems that we, as a western capitalist society with a self-awarded authority, perpetuate labor exploitation by prioritizing our convenience and well-being. It seems relatively easy to condemn the upper class for all the damage done both to humans and to the environment. But can they be the sole culprits of all the injustice taking place in our world? We need to admit that all of us hold a share of responsibility because we are all members of society and everyone's habits have a direct or indirect impact on the planet and our fellow human beings.

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