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WOMEN IN DREISER'S COWPERWOOD TRILOGY

WOMEN IN DREISER'S COWPERWOOD TRILOGY: A STUDY  
OF THE MAJOR FEMALE CHARACTERS IN THE FINANCIER, THE TITAN  
AND THE STOIC, WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THEIR ROLE IN  
EXPOSING THE CHARACTER OF THE TITAN HIMSELF, FRANK COWPERWOOD

By

ROBERTA MARGARET PATTISON, B.A.

A Thesis

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies

in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements

for the Degree

Master of Arts

McMaster University

March 1976

MASTER OF ARTS (1976)  
(English)

TITLE: Women in Dreiser's Cowperwood Trilogy: A Study of the major female characters in The Financier, The Titan and The Stoic, with special reference to their role in exposing the character of the Titan himself, Frank Cowperwood

AUTHOR: Roberta Margaret Pattison, B. A. (University of Saskatchewan)

SUPERVISOR: Dr. J. D. Brasch

NUMBER OF PAGES: vi, 87

## ABSTRACT

The women of Dreiser's Cowperwood Trilogy are supporting, not central, characters in the novels; however, to understand them and the roles they play is important for a reader trying to understand the protagonist, Cowperwood, himself. Dreiser has chosen to write about a man who seems to be a superman, but who is in the long run just as weak and vulnerable as those more ordinary souls who surround him. Cowperwood is a complex man, who has strength which is sometimes merely the illusion of strength, who is intelligent, but only up to a point, and who is attractive, sometimes destructively attractive, to those he meets and associates with. Because of the kind of man he is, he lives in almost total spiritual and emotional isolation, an isolation impinged upon by a very few people, all of them women.

The three major relationships of Cowperwood's life are his two marriages and his affair with Berenice Fleming. The three women involved are very different from one another, and each opens up for scrutiny different sides of Cowperwood's nature. Lillian Semple, a very ordinary, respectable sort of woman, helps point up Cowperwood's immaturity, and his lack of understanding of human nature, a lack which is never corrected throughout his life. His cold-bloodedness also shows through very early on, to be more obviously demonstrated when he comes to be involved with Aileen Butler. Aileen is, next to Cowperwood, the most important character in the Trilogy. Their relationship is the

most disastrous of them all, and best illustrates the tragic effect Cowperwood's narrow, obsessed, dogmatic personality has on those around him. Through Aileen, Dreiser not only amply demonstrates the inhumanity of Cowperwood, obvious enough without her presence, but also how little different he is from other men, and how much he is a victim of illusion. Berenice takes the process one step farther; she is like Cowperwood in many ways, but is able to transcend the same limitations under which he suffers.

The Cowperwood Trilogy is concerned with philosophical matters in which Dreiser took an intense interest throughout his life, but it is also a personal story about one man and the women he knew, loved and, in some cases, injured deeply. This second aspect sheds light on the first, and has never been sufficiently examined. Dreiser is one novelist who chose to write searchingly about women, and in the Cowperwood Trilogy he has created several female characters worthy of close attention.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my thesis supervisor, Dr. J. D. Brasch, for his assistance with the preparation of this thesis, and for his great patience in dealing with my problems with it, a patience which had to span many months, and the many miles between Hamilton and Saskatoon. I would also like to thank my mother, Mary Pattison, whose persistent encouragement was largely responsible for my being able to complete the thesis at last.

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I

INTRODUCTION

In his Afterword to The Titan, John Berryman writes:

Something, but as little as possible, needs to be said about Dreiser's women. Women! At all points they strike one as emerging from his heroes' ears until one sits merely awaiting, with exasperation, the emergence of the next one, and as for the real women, it took him a very large work indeed (A Gallery of Women) to memorialize merely a few. He sweats over them, too--his anxiety that we should be hypnotized by Berenice is patent, and indeed she is one of his best portraits. But the whole topic does not represent Dreiser at his happiest. His interest in them, I think or rather feel, peaks with his hero's and flags with his hero's, and there is a want of objectivity which is fatal. . . . His women are mere objects. Perhaps, for all his experience, he really knew very little of women.<sup>1</sup>

It would seem a daunting prospect, then, to devote an entire thesis to the subject of Dreiser's women, in the face of such an overwhelming indictment. But as is usual with Dreiserian criticism, ample grounds for an opposing opinion can be found. In marked contrast with the preceding statement, Maxwell Geismar writes that Dreiser's "feminine portraits have a remarkable range and variety; they are surely among the best in our letters."<sup>2</sup> Such discrepancies in opinion abound in the writings of critics of Dreiser's work, even among those who show great sympathy for his accomplishments, as both Berryman and Geismar do. One of the great difficulties, then, in writing about Dreiser, is

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<sup>1</sup>Berryman, "Afterword", The Titan, p. 510.

<sup>2</sup>Geismar, Rebels and Ancestors, p. 289.

to make any sort of general statement without the fear that somewhere in his work exists a passage which either directly contradicts that statement, or which can elicit completely antithetical responses. To be aware of difficulties is not to resolve them, but probably in Dreiser's case the best approach is simply to ignore them. Perhaps Berryman best sums up Dreiser's complex contribution to American letters when he writes, "Dreiser remains one of the commanding writers we have had, for the readers who can bear him."<sup>3</sup>

Whatever one's opinion of his skill, Dreiser emerges as one of the few American novelists of his day who has concerned himself consistently with the serious portrayal of women as human beings in their own right, not simply as adjuncts to his novels' male heroes. He offers us no stereotyped view of women--his characters represent a wide and versatile sampling of society, ranging from what might be called the "traditional" innocent purity of Jennie Gerhardt to the superior intellect and awesome capability of Berenice Fleming. Some--not all--are characterized by a strong sense of independence, but in every case each retains her <sup>2</sup>essential femininity, probably because Dreiser does not appear to consider such traits as independence and ambition to be exclusively masculine preserves.

In Dreiser's first two novels, a woman is the central character. Carrie Meeber is possessed of a destructive naïveté; she is a woman very lacking in intellect, who instinctively follows the line of least resistance; she is amoral, and almost deliberately unaware of the

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<sup>3</sup>Berryman, p. 506.

effect she is having on others. Jennie Gerhardt is naive too, but in a far different way; she is the essence of goodness, but, like Carrie, a born survivor. Contrastingly, the three major women of the Cowperwood Trilogy, who differ radically from Carrie and Jennie and from each other, are important, but not central, characters in the novels: the Trilogy is dominated by Cowperwood himself. But without the women we would simply be left with a glorified version of Dreiser's 1920 essay, "The American Financier"; the women give the books intensified interest and life.

The essay is a sort of capsule edition of the Trilogy, setting out in some detail the type of man Cowperwood represents, and defining his place in society:

. . . By and large, the financial type is the coldest, the most selfish, and the most useful of all living phenomena. Plainly it is a highly specialized machine for the accomplishment of some end which nature has in view. Often humourless, shark-like, avid, yet among the greatest constructive forces imaginable; absolutely opposed to democracy in practice, yet as useful an implement for its accomplishment as for autocracy; either ignorant or contemptuous of ethical niceties as related to thine and mine, yet a stickler for all that concerns mine; moral and immoral sexually--both types abound; narrow to all but an infinitesimal line in nearly all that relates to the humanities as applied to individuals; wise and generous in the matter of large, even universal benefactions, yet guilty of the meanest subterfuge where their own interests are concerned; and seeking always to perpetuate their own fame. In other words, typical men and women of an avid pagan world . . . yet surrounded by religious and ethical abstrusities for which they care little and of which they understand less.

Such may be called the pathology of the genus financier, not only in America, but everywhere.<sup>4</sup>

The essay's importance as a guide to an understanding of the novels cannot be overemphasized, but at the same time, the final overall im-

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<sup>4</sup>Dreiser, "The American Financier", Hey Rub-A-Dub-Dub, p. 80.

pression it gives is very different from that of the novels. The financier of the essay is not an appealing sort; still, he gets the job done, is basically a force for progress, and, after all, one does not have to live with him. But Cowperwood--someone does have to live with him. The distinction is important. Despite Dreiser's obvious admiration--in some ways--of his protagonist, the final impression of him left by the novels is an indictment.

Dreiser has faced himself with a difficult task. He must give life to this "highly specialized machine", a man superhuman in some respects and almost subhuman in others, whose mind works along a very narrow plane, and whose business is concerned all but entirely with abstractions. Dreiser does so in large measure by placing his ruthless hero in a series of relationships with women of widely differing natures. Cowperwood is an almost totally isolated man. Few can break through his shell, and all those who do are women. Because of the type of man he is, the relationships cannot last, but their beginnings and their ends, as well as the relationships themselves, give insight into his character.

In this study, the major emphasis will be on three women, Lillian Semple Cowperwood, Aileen Butler Cowperwood and Berenice Fleming, and they will be looked at from various points of view: to a limited extent as they reflect the Yerkes source material, as they relate to women in Dreiser's own life, and, most important, as original dramatic creations, particularly as they shed light on Cowperwood's character. For, no matter how large a part the other characters play, the Trilogy is Cowperwood's story. The three aspects mentioned are not mutually

exclusive. Dreiser's attitudes toward women must of necessity have been greatly influenced by the women he knew during his life: his mother, his wayward sisters, his first wife, his many mistresses; and the effects of these relationships cannot always be specified. Definitely, his choice of the streetcar magnate, Charles Tyson Yerkes, as his model for Cowperwood, must have been influenced by the various parallels he saw between Yerkes's private life and his own. Publicly, Dreiser was a lifelong supporter of reformist and radical causes, including the feminist movement. In private, he surrounded himself with women (though apparently he treated them--and almost all the men he knew--abominably): they loved him, catered to him, typed his manuscripts, corrected his grammar, inflated his already inflated ego. What Dreiser learned through these associations--assuming, Berryman to the contrary, that he did learn something--he put to good and effective use in his novels.

Like all of Dreiser's novels, the Cowperwood books are carefully, if not obviously, organized. And into the fabric of that organization are woven the characters of the three women, each fulfilling an actual and a symbolic role in relation to Cowperwood. Dreiser's conception of his hero is not a simple one. Cowperwood is a man who thinks in terms of black and white, but who must operate in a society of grey. The ironies of such a situation become more apparent when he moves out of his world of stocks and bonds and into the world of human relations. It is to that more subtle, but essential, realm that the women of the Trilogy hold the key.

## II

### THE CONVENTIONAL: MRS. COWPERWOOD, SR. AND LILLIAN SEMPLE

Although she is only a very minor character in The Financier, Cowperwood's mother is worthy of mention, and presents a useful starting point for the study of the more important women in the Trilogy. In the course of the novel's great length, we find out a great deal about Frank Cowperwood--perhaps more than we might ordinarily care to know about any man--and Dreiser introduces very early on the basic themes which run through his story, as well as presenting many clues to an understanding of the character of his hero. The upbringing of young Frank Cowperwood bears an important relation to his fate later on.

In most ways, Frank has never been a child, though in other ways--for example, emotionally--he never grows up. He seems to have emerged into the world complete, with all his assets and liabilities; he does not develop: he is. He has no use for books, history, education; he knows it all, or so he believes. For one to whom experience is all, who, as a thirteen year old, asserts grandly, "I don't want to be a boy. I want to get to work",<sup>1</sup> he may be considered a little naive, since by the time he leaves school and starts working in

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<sup>1</sup>Dreiser, The Financier, p. 15. Subsequent page references to The Financier, and to The Titan and The Stoic, will appear at the end of each quotation within the text of this paper.

his first significant job, "Life had given him no severe shocks nor rude awakenings. He had not been compelled to suffer illness or pain or deprivation of any kind." (p. 25) But as a young boy he witnesses a natural drama, or "tragedy", as Dreiser terms it, "which stayed with him all his life and cleared things up considerably intellectually" (p. 7): a live squid has been placed in a tank as food for a lobster, who eats his prey piece by piece, while young Frank and others stop by every day to watch. Unfortunately, however (perhaps symbolically, considering later events), Frank misses the final act, arriving one day to find that the squid has at last been killed, and Frank must hear the story of its end second hand. All along he has realized he is watching something significant; now he believes he knows what it is:

The incident made a great impression on him. It answered in a rough way that riddle which had been annoying him so much in the past: "How is life organized?" Things lived on each other-- that was it. Lobsters lived on squids and other things. What lived on lobsters? Men, of course! Sure, that was it! And what lived on men? he asked himself. Was it other men? Wild animals lived on men. And there were Indians and cannibals. And some men were killed by storms and accidents. He wasn't so sure about men living on men; but men did kill each other. How about wars and street fights and mobs? He had seen a mob once. It attacked the Public Ledger building as he was coming home from school. His father had explained why. It was about the slaves. That was it! Sure, men lived on men. Look at the slaves. (p. 8)

Full of this new and startling knowledge, he rushes home to tell his parents--and is met with complete indifference. Already he has entered a totally different world from that of his father and mother, one into which they cannot hope to follow.

The passage has been presented and described in detail here because it is one of the central episodes of the novel, and of the Trilogy. Ten year old Frank Cowperwood proceeds to shape his philosophy

of life around the lesson learned from the lobster and the squid. As he sees it, all society can be fitted into this rigid code of survival of the fittest; he admits no exceptions. Dreiser makes no editorial comments, either at this point or later on, about the philosophical conclusions drawn by Cowperwood, but as the novel proceeds, it becomes obvious his outlook on life is very different from his hero's. Over and over again, Cowperwood is faced with evidence that the strong do not always win, that force is not always the most successful method to employ, that a much more complex understanding of human nature than he possesses is necessary for success, either in one's business or one's personal life. In 1913, the year following the publication of The Financier and preceding that of The Titan, Dreiser indicated something of his own beliefs:

For myself, I accept now no creeds. I do not know what truth is, what beauty is, what love is, what hope is. I do not believe anyone absolutely and I do not doubt anyone absolutely. I think people are both evil and well-intentioned.<sup>2</sup>

Later, in 1928, he took this line a step farther:

As I see him the utterly infinitesimal individual weaves among the mysteries a floss-like and wholly meaningless course--if course it be. In short, I catch no meaning from all I have seen, and pass quite as I came, confused and dismayed.<sup>3</sup>

Such a philosophy--or anti-philosophy--is about as distant from Cowperwood's theories of "misapplied Darwinism"<sup>4</sup> as any could ever be. When Cowperwood formulates his ideas of life he is a child in years, but

<sup>2</sup>Quoted by Matthiessen, Theodore Dreiser, p. 235.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 235.

<sup>4</sup>Hazard, The Frontier in American Literature, p. 238.

already he is totally self-reliant. His parents have proved to be inadequate guides; their minds do not operate on the same level. At the same time, his outlook is limited; although he may be led to wonder from time to time about the meaning of life, he is content to settle for the first reasonable-sounding answer, however facile, that comes along. Whatever his shortcomings as a thinker, he is a step ahead of his mother and his father, but his own imperfect vision--and his dogmatic nature--have already, at age ten, misled him onto the path of his eventual defeat. His victories are always temporary, and even at the peak of his power he is still left vaguely dissatisfied.

If Frank's intellectual upbringing is hampered by his total lack of a meaningful relationship with his parents, his emotional growth is also affected. There appears to have been no communication at all between himself and his mother (he and his father at least share a basic interest in money and banking), her favourite response to any of his questions being, "Go wash your hands." Such a reply might be considered a standard mother's reaction, and it is, in a shallowly humorous way, but it must be remembered that Dreiser himself had had an extraordinarily close relationship with his own mother, one which he felt had a great influence on his entire outlook on life. Mrs. Dreiser had been a remarkable woman, however, and there appears to have been nothing remarkable about Mrs. Cowperwood. She fits well into the comfortable, superficial world of Frank's formative years, a world in which success is gauged by the size of one's house, and the neighbourhood in which it is located. The Cowperwoods move up the ladder, from Buttonwood Street to New Market Street, a house three stories high as opposed to their former

home's two, as soon as the elder Cowperwood's promotion warrants it. While young Theodore Dreiser grew up, he moved with his family too, through lodgings of steadily increasing dreariness in more and more disreputable neighbourhoods, the family held together by the emotional strength and sheer will power of Mrs. Dreiser. The contrast could not be any more complete, and it adds a dimension to Dreiser's treatment of Cowperwood's youth by emphasizing the narrowness of Cowperwood's experience. Frank is isolated ~~intellectually~~ because of his intelligence and talent; he is a child prodigy of finance. But his parents do give him a sense of social and material values which never leaves him, or which, one might better say, he can never leave behind. He always sees progress in terms of a bigger house in a better neighbourhood, and furnished in up-to-the-minute styles. His taste in art might improve over the years, but along with it his eye for a good investment in the art field also improves. Allied to this, the emotional vacuum of his early life has left a gap which can never be filled. Consciously, of course, he has no sense of missing out on anything in his younger years; he is too much filled with the feeling of his own strength and importance. But there is an underlying impression of insecurity beneath many of the actions and attitudes of this man who is supposedly completely self-assured. Frank's relationship with his mother may never have been very close, but the women to whom he turns in later life often seem to fulfil a sort of mother function. His first wife is older than he is by several years, and one of the things which attract him to her is her sense of security, her assurance that she and the world around her are safe and unchanging. A mother, too, offers a safe haven for a child.

Aileen attracts him in a much different way, and yet, in the prison scene in which she meets him for the first time after his conviction, it is he who breaks down and cries like a child, while she comforts him, referring to him as "My baby" and "My darling boy" (p. 413). In The Titan, the relationship between Cowperwood and Berenice is in some ways that of a father and daughter (in fact, newspapers of the day reported rumours that the real-life prototype of Cowperwood, Yerkes, was the natural father of Emilie Grigsby, model for Berenice<sup>5</sup>), but by the end of the novel, positions have strangely reversed. She has a "mothering affection" (p. 425) for him, and he feels in her "a large, kindly, mothering intelligence which could see, feel and understand." (p. 422) Like the mothers who appear in Dreiser's other novels--Mrs. Gerhardt, Jennie Gerhardt herself, Mrs. Griffiths--the women of the Trilogy whom Cowperwood loves most deeply are sometimes capable of great sacrifice (a quality Dreiser notes to be peculiar to mistresses as well, The Financier, p. 154), but, also like mothers, they are capable of dominating him, particularly Berenice. Dreiser is not often praised for his achievement as a psychological novelist, and yet there is in his portrayal of Cowperwood a kind of psychological density which is impressive.

Young Frank Cowperwood could almost be an Horatio Alger hero, with his clean-cut good looks, his industriousness, and his business-like attitude. But there are already some unsettling differences

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<sup>5</sup>Philip Gerber, "The Alabaster Protégé: Dreiser and Berenice Fleming", American Literature, XLIII (May 1971), 217.

showing through. "This dynamic, self-sufficient, sterling youth" (p. 16) is developing a keen, but roving, eye for pretty girls, a taste for "liberal spending" (p. 21) and tendencies to disregard public, and business, morality. He is charming and attractive, superficial virtues which mask serious mental and moral flaws. But the suspicion remains:

Mrs. Cowperwood looked at her boy curiously at dinner. Was this the son she had nursed at her bosom not so very long before? (p. 21)

The Cowperwood Trilogy is not an Horatio Alger story, but a grotesque parody of one.

The Financier, The Titan and The Stoic are subtitled "A Trilogy of Desire." The phrase is fitting, not only because there are three books, but because there are, in effect, three desires: Cowperwood wants to make a great deal of money, own and appreciate great works of art, and enjoy the company of beautiful women. The aims are not distinct in his mind, and he employs similar methods in achieving all three, with varying degrees of success. Cowperwood views life only in terms of force and conquest, an outlook which serves him moderately well in business, but which, although it does not hinder him in attracting women, poses problems when it comes to trying to sustain a relationship. Dreiser draws attention to his hero's singlemindedness and narrow motivation by running the two major threads of Cowperwood's story--his financial career and his love life--in exact parallel, and at the same time shows his taste in art evolving with his taste in women. Thus, crises in his business life occur at the same moment as crises in his personal affairs, and time and time again events in one sphere will have a profound effect on events in the other. The trend is consistent

throughout the books. Cowperwood reaches puberty and begins to take an intense interest in girls at about the same time he completes his first successful business venture, selling seven cases of soap at a handsome profit. The Cowperwoods have just moved to a grand new house (now four stories instead of three) and Frank has just become involved with the stock market, when he meets Lillian Semple. Immediately after he sets himself up in his first brokerage business, he marries her. He meets Aileen Butler at the time of his first great financial coup. His affair with her is revealed right in the midst of his financial difficulties resulting from the aftermath of the Chicago fire. The women who matter most in his life are each closely associated with a particular phase in his commercial affairs, and in no case is this more apparent than with his first wife, Lillian.

The first Mrs. Cowperwood, the former Lillian Semple (née Wiggin), is a shadowy figure to the reader of The Financier and, one might also be tempted to assume, a somewhat shadowy figure to Cowperwood himself. She is, according to Dreiser's description, "thoroughly conventional" (p. 44), and has a "none too brilliant mind" (p. 216); still, Cowperwood is unable or unwilling to understand properly even what shallow bit of character she has. With her he begins the trend which carries on more or less throughout the Trilogy: he feels a strong attraction to a woman, an attraction which fades as his sense of values, and of his own needs, changes, but never does he have any conception of what is going on in the mind of that woman. He is merely fulfilling his own dictum, "I satisfy myself", but his relations with women, which seem inevitably to end unsatisfactorily, go far to prove the inadequacy of that philosophy.

Initially, Lillian Semple suits him well in some ways. She is a well-regarded member of respectable, middle-class, if not high, society; her looks fit his current notion of feminine beauty; she is the very sort of reliable, conventional wife needed to aid the aspiring young businessman on his climb toward financial and social success. His family disapprove of her, slightly, but only because they feel that, with Cowperwood's talent and assets, he could have done even better. But perhaps even at this stage Cowperwood is thinking of her only as a temporary partner, for as soon as she shows the slightest sign of losing her looks he wonders, "And anyhow was a man entitled only to one wife?" (p. 73). In any case, Dreiser makes it plain that she appeals to Cowperwood's sensibilities at that time, recognizing that although the man's basic outlook does not vary, his interpretation of his own wants and needs, and of his goals in life, does. If his successful brokerage business is a step on the way to his dreamed-of street-railway monopolies, if his "I know what I like" choices of American original paintings represent his first sign of interest in art, an interest culminating in his acquisition of a world famous art collection, then his attraction to Lillian Semple is the first stage on the way to Berenice.

The attraction is a peculiar one, difficult to explain. "Just what it was about her that attracted him at this age it would be hard to say, for she was really not suited to him emotionally, intellectually or otherwise." (p. 36) She is not bright or vivacious, but she is good-looking, "shapely, artistic in form and feature" (p. 37)("artistic" in appearance only, for her mind does not tend that way in any sense), and similarly she has "a certain unconscious placidity of soul, which came

more from lack of understanding than from force of character." (p. 37)

She is a sort of 19th century Barbie Doll, grown up. She is one-dimensional, resembling the consumptive heroine of a bad Victorian novel, and perhaps this is the clue needed. Cowperwood never bothers with books, thinking them useless in his world of practical, completely material self-interest, yet he has his unconsciously romantic side too; as Robert Penn Warren says,<sup>6</sup> "illusion" is the key word to an understanding of Cowperwood's character. He believes he is a totally practical man, making sensible judgements based only on fact, though aided by his own considerable talent in some fields, yet he is really just deluding himself. His success with women (and in business) is a chimaera. His women never live up to the image he initially has of them; he sees something in them that he cannot rightly understand and is attracted by it, but when they come to the test, so to speak, that quality turns out to be something different from what he had anticipated. Lillian Semple attracts him with her "lymphatic body" (p. 50), and her somehow detached peace of mind; Cowperwood sees her as a sort of grey goddess. Then he marries her and finds that her inner peace is due to stupidity and that she is on the verge of losing her good looks, defects (from his point of view) that he should have spotted in the first place if his much vaunted keen judgement had been in working order.

Berryman complains that the women of the Trilogy are "mere objects"<sup>7</sup>, but the charge is true only in the sense that the women are

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<sup>6</sup>Warren, Homage to Theodore Dreiser, p. 81.

<sup>7</sup>Berryman, p. 510.

objects as far as Cowperwood is concerned. And Cowperwood is not Dreiser, although, as so often is the case, the line between Dreiser's identification with his major characters and his objectivity as an author is sometimes obscure. It is a problem which comes to the fore in most of his novels. He usually writes about groping, inarticulate people who speak in clichés and think about immediate problems, not profundities, most of the time. One of his great virtues as a novelist is that he is able to communicate to his readers the feeling that he knows these people very well, that he understands them, and sympathizes deeply with them. It is a short step from the recognition of such sympathy and understanding to seeing an identification with his characters and an easy one to take for a reader who also recognizes parallels between the novels and Dreiser's own life. In the case of Lillian Semple, Berryman's accusation comes closest to hitting the mark. Dreiser makes no real effort to get inside her, to understand her, the way he does later with Aileen, though Lillian is not devoid of interest. However, she is a member of a small group of female characters created by Dreiser, who appear to bear a certain relation to Dreiser's first wife, and knowledge of that relationship is helpful in appreciating Dreiser's treatment of them. While a young newspaper reporter in St. Louis, Dreiser had met and fallen in love with an attractive country schoolteacher named Sara White, had left her behind when he moved on to greater things in New York, but had at last married her, "after the first flare of love had thinned down to the pale flame of duty."<sup>8</sup> The marriage, undertaken with such dubious motivation, on Dreiser's side

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<sup>8</sup>Dreiser, A Book About Myself, p. 415.

at least, was of course doomed to failure, though Jug (as Sara was known) never did divorce her wayward husband. Understandably, Dreiser's relationship with Jug could not help but have an effect on his writing. The character bearing the most obvious resemblance to her is, of course, Angela Blue of The "Genius", an avowedly autobiographical novel, but at least two others deserve to be considered along with her: Lillian Semple and Roberta Alden (An American Tragedy). The three women emerge as rather different from one another, reflecting perhaps, in the case of Roberta Alden, the passage of years with its accompanying enhanced objectivity, but the similarities remain, and are worthy of attention.

Angela, Lillian and Roberta are all quietly beautiful women, who come from narrow, old-fashioned, religious homes, and who, at bottom, share the beliefs their parents have taught them, though a strain of repressed passion runs through each of them, a passion brought out by the men they encounter. The men with whom they become involved--Eugene Witla, Frank Cowperwood and Clyde Griffiths--are all younger than they are, by several years, a difference which might not seem important, except that Dreiser obviously considers it one of the key reasons (in the case of Eugene and Frank at least) for the eventual breakdown of the relationships (and of his own marriage, for Jug also was older than he). The men are younger in years, but older in experience, and, by accident or choice, are largely cut off from any personal or family ties, giving the impression that part of the attraction these women hold for them is their connection with the solidity of family traditions. These women all have great emotional stability, and in the cases of Roberta and

Angela anyway, this can be traced directly to their secure, loving and conservative upbringing. Dreiser treats the parents of each of them with great sympathy. We do not know so much about Lillian's background, except that it was conventional, and that she always adheres to its conventions. But for whatever reason, these women prove irresistibly attractive to the young men of the novels, an attraction which in each case begins to fade soon after its inception. The reasons for this gradual erosion of affection are many. Eugene and Frank believe it has come about because of a deepening of their own intellectual capacity with which the women have been unable to keep pace, an argument Cowperwood again puts forward as an excuse for his treatment of Aileen, later on in the Trilogy. Clyde, with his passions for beauty, sex, love, and material and emotional fulfillment totally jumbled in his mind, simply throws Roberta over for what he considers something better, again vaguely rationalizing that he has gone beyond Roberta's simple charms. Behind all three men is Dreiser's conception of them as essentially fickle, incapable of any sustained emotional involvement, exhibiting a weakness Dreiser had to contend with in his own life.

For Cowperwood, love means infatuation, an impulse which blinds him totally to all other considerations, while it lasts. By the time his vision clears he is, like Eugene and Clyde, caught like a spider in a web of his own making, an image which recurs in various forms throughout the Trilogy. And while Dreiser stresses the innocence of the women's involvement, Lillian and Angela come across in the end as tiresome, whining parasites, dull and deserving of their fate. At the same time there is a nagging--and distracting--sense of the unfairness of

such an attitude on Dreiser's part. By the time Dreiser came to write An American Tragedy<sup>in 1925</sup>, however, he had become detached enough from his own experiences (he and Jug had still been living together, after a fashion, while he wrote The Financier and The "Genius") to create, in Roberta Alden, a woman whom he knew well but about whom he could now write objectively, and with great sympathy and insight.

All the women of the Trilogy are introduced as victims for the predator Cowperwood; they do fall prey to him and are made to suffer. But in the end he is victimized just as surely as they are. Lillian is totally guileless, but she is an unwitting lure for Cowperwood, and eventually he is trapped in an unsuitable marriage with her. The pattern is repeated over and over again throughout the novels. Any attempt to view Cowperwood as a strong, totally self-reliant, near-omnipotent individual is thwarted, because he is so obviously at the mercy of his sexual impulses. Just as he had been misguided in forming his philosophy of life because of his intellectual isolation, he could perhaps have benefited from the advice of someone such as Dreiser's mentor, John Maxwell, who gave the young newspaper reporter a colourful warning not to marry too young, and certainly not to marry Jug.<sup>9</sup> But undoubtedly Cowperwood would have been as heedless of the advice as was Dreiser, who worried over it for a time, but ended by disregarding it entirely.

It is through his relationship with Lillian Semple that Cowperwood is first revealed as the imposter he essentially is. Despite his

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<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 284.

cunning and his ruthlessness--traits also dramatically demonstrated by his treatment of his first wife--he is prey to illusion, as all men are, in Dreiser's view. As has been mentioned, the financier is more romantic than he seems: Cowperwood, the hard-headed realist, who considers himself amoral and completely outside the laws of society, and believes himself free of any taint of sentimentality, falls in love (if such a term could ever precisely apply to Cowperwood) with a woman who is a stock representative of the type of society for which he reserves his deepest scorn. But to him she is "the shadow of an ideal"(p. 38), something "more worth while"(p. 36) than other women he has known--mostly prostitutes. There is something of the attitude of a school-boy's crush on his teacher in Cowperwood's attraction to Mrs. Semple. Her "beauty measured up to his present sense of the artistic" (p. 37), a sense which Dreiser indicates elsewhere is largely undeveloped at this stage. The scene in which he proposes to her is almost comic, as he chases her, "a la Harpo Marx, around her house, catches and embraces her passionately while thinking (most incongruously) "how attractive he could make her look in other surroundings. Neither she nor her family knew how to live."(p. 52) Earlier he has carelessly dismissed the discrepancy in their ages as unimportant. She has pointed out that she is five years older than he:

"In years," he said, "certainly. That's nothing. I'm fifteen years older than you in other ways. I know more about life in some ways than you can ever hope to learn--don't you think so?" (p. 50)

Years later he has no trouble reversing his field when he wants a divorce:

"I married you when I was twenty-one . . . and I was really too young to know what I was doing. I was a mere boy."(p. 420)

When he meets Lillian Semple, he is a brash youth, proud of his seeming maturity and experience. He has no conception of the problems faced by Lillian, still only 26, who has lived through several years of marriage, followed by the sudden, unexpected death of her husband, problems of a type he has never had to cope with. She may be conventional and narrow, but Frank--unconventional as he certainly is--is just as narrow in his own interests, which have nothing to do with his wife's. Lillian and Frank exist in their own mutually exclusive boxes.

For Frank, Lillian Semple is a symbol of respectability. Frank, who always insists he has no use for society's artificial restrictions, becomes increasingly obsessed, throughout the course of the novels, with winning the respect of that society. Somehow he expects to be able to break all the rules, with everyone watching, and still win the game. But in Lillian he has found someone who is a legitimate member of respectable society; his marriage to her is the first--and last--liaison he will undertake that might maintain, if not enhance, his reputation, though he does not appear to have considered consciously this aspect of the affair. The attraction he feels toward her is, however, just as coldly impersonal. She, like the women who follow her, is essentially an object before his eyes, a valuable possession, like his art treasures and paintings. He cannot help but view her in material terms, and he sees her, not as a person, but as "a figure on an antique vase, or out of a Greek chorus."(p. 44) He finds her "really pleasing to look upon, making a picture wherever she stood or sat."(p. 43) "Making a picture" is a particularly apt description of her. In that sense she is the

perfect wife for Cowperwood, whose appreciation of women is to a high degree aesthetic. Many years later he will be enchanted by a picture he sees of young Berenice Fleming, and he will carry it about with him for years before he actually confesses to her that he has fallen in love with her, via the photograph. If his wives and mistresses could be paintings or statues he might relate to them better; of all the women he loves, Aileen is the farthest removed from such restrictions, and it is her involvement with him that becomes the most tragic. By comparison, cool, impassive Lillian Semple drifts in and out of his life making the vaguest ruffle.

In some ways opposed to the aesthetic lure women have for Cowperwood is their intense physical attraction:

He wanted [Lillian] physically. He felt a keen, primitive interest in the children they would have. He wanted to find out if he could make her love him vigorously and could rout out the memory of her former life. Strange ambition. Strange perversion, one might say.(p. 49)

Lillian is a challenge to his masculinity, and Cowperwood cannot live without challenges. There is something almost psychopathic about his character, for although he presents a charming, normal-seeming face to the world, he must continually seek new experience to stimulate his senses, as though there is something inside him which forces him on. The sexual drive he feels is somehow related to the force which drives him in business. His urge to have children is "acquisitive"(p. 57). He worries for Lillian's safety when she bears his children--the first real worry he has had to contend with in his short, untroubled life--but his primary concern is whether she will lose her looks.

And lose her looks she does. Cowperwood the businessman sees

his marriage going the way of an ill-advised investment: "He tried to be gentle and considerate, but he was too much of a utilitarian and practical-minded observer not to realize that he was likely to have a sickly wife on his hands later on."(p. 73) At the time Aileen first comes into his life, he is 27, his wife 32, and Aileen in her teens. Mrs. Cowperwood is just starting to look a bit haggard around the edges; her pleasing slimness is becoming angularity. Though Frank could say "That's nothing" in reference to the difference in their ages before the marriage, it suddenly looms more important: physical age does matter. And it is Aileen's youth and vitality which appeal to him, for, whatever his mental age and experience, his body is still young. With Aileen, however, the circle begins again. She, several years younger than Cowperwood, grows old even more rapidly than Lillian (though instead of becoming bony and sharp, she goes to fat), while Frank again turns to younger women. It is as if the women in Cowperwood's life are to him as the picture is to Dorian Grey, because as they grow old, he seems to gain in strength. Lillian ages; Aileen ages; Cowperwood does not. He has never been a child; it seems he will never be an old man. In a changing world, he is constant, the catastrophes which beset him and the conquests he effects mere ripples on the surface of his life. By playing with time in this manner, Dreiser gives Cowperwood the illusion of greatness, preparing for the crash which will come at the end of The Titan, when Cowperwood--having had his own way for so long--suddenly awakens to find himself growing old, a process which accelerates through The Stoic. The Stoic stands in ironic contrast to the preceding two volumes. Cowperwood does not

fail dramatically; he gradually succumbs to Bright's Disease, and slowly, weakly, withers away.

But at the time of his marriage to Lillian Semple, Frank Cowperwood can be viewed as little more than a young man on the make, talented, and with a supreme sense of his own superiority, already hampered by a singularly restricted outlook on life and weakened by his inability to accommodate an already somewhat abnormal sex urge. The pattern for his later years is set; his attitudes largely formed. Lillian is the first victim of his enormous sexual appetite, an appetite which can never be sated because the only food which is tempting to it is that which is unattainable. When Cowperwood first becomes attracted to Lillian, she is inaccessible--she is married. Suddenly she is available to him, and he wins her over, only to find she is not what he wanted after all. The process is repeated with Aileen, with Berenice, and with all the others in between. The danger, the near-impossibility, of each situation make up a large part of the fascination he feels for these women. His desire for them is pathological, self-destructive.

But what of Lillian Semple, awakened temporarily from her comfortable lethargy, only to be cast aside when her husband tires of her? Her fate is an illustration of a point Dreiser makes later on in The Titan, when Cowperwood is setting up his Chicago office and considering a potential employee, Peter Laughlin: "His limitations were so marked that to a lover of character like Cowperwood he was fascinating--but Cowperwood only used character. He never idled over it long artistically."(p. 29) This lack of insight on Cowperwood's part may prove

unfortunate for him later on, when he makes serious miscalculations in assessing character, but in Lillian's case the misfortune is mostly hers. He uses her, plays on her weaknesses. "How different she was from him! She took her second marriage quite as she had the first--a solemn fact which contained no possibility of mental alteration."(p. 60) In other words, she is a perfect dupe when Frank wants to carry on an affair under her nose. The marriage may restrict him, but he knows best how to avoid the restrictions. He knows how far he can push her, how much he can get away with. She is not bright, and her life is governed by rules of society which she accepts unquestioningly. Her narrowness is both her weakness and her strength. Unlike Aileen, who accepts Cowperwood's philosophy of utter self-reliance and is left helpless when he pulls the rug out from under her, Lillian has her rules and conventions to fall back on. We can sympathize with her; we can appreciate her dismay at her husband's inhumanity toward her, but we do not need to worry too much about her. Dreiser gives her a fitting send-off in the early pages of The Titan; she has consented to a divorce, and Cowperwood has sent her on her way with a sizeable alimony packet:

So she went to church on Sundays, and tried to believe, come what might, that all was for the best.(p. 35)

Lillian Semple, like so many of Dreiser's women, is, in the end, a survivor.

### III

#### THE UNCONVENTIONAL: AILEEN

In his presentation of the first Mrs. Cowperwood, Dreiser does not stray too far from the known details of the life of the first Mrs. Yerkes. He barely alters her name, for example, from Gamble to Semple, and his major departure from fact is to shorten the length of the marriage by a few years, and reduce the number of children produced from six to two.<sup>1</sup> The effect of this change is to weaken slightly the ties between Frank and his wife, and make his abandonment of her, so to speak, somewhat less reprehensible. It is one thing to leave a wife and two well-grown children, and another to leave a mother of six to manage on her own. In any event, the changes are relatively insignificant, and Dreiser's main contribution is to use the limited information he has about the woman and flesh it out slightly by drawing upon his own experience with women of an apparently similar type. With Aileen Butler we are confronted with an entirely different situation. She is almost entirely Dreiser's creation.

Dreiser begins by making her, not the daughter of an insignificant chemist, as was her prototype in Yerkes's story,<sup>2</sup> but the daughter of a powerful businessman and political organizer, Edward Malia Butler, a man with considerable clout, if he wishes to use it. He becomes the

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<sup>1</sup>Lehan, Theodore Dreiser: His World and his Novels, p. 104.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 104.

key figure in Cowperwood's first major downfall, and the creation of his character is one of Dreiser's best achievements. The two threads of Cowperwood's story--his business and personal life--run in parallel but separate tracks until Edward Butler brings them dramatically together. Cowperwood's fate turns on Butler's involvement, since it is Butler's shift from the role of sympathetic business associate to that of outraged parent which marks the difference between Cowperwood's suffering a minor financial setback or losing everything and going to prison besides. That Butler is a compelling addition to the story on his own account is an added bonus. In The Titan, Dreiser duplicates the pattern of the earlier book by having Cowperwood always attracted to women whose associations can do him harm: almost all are the daughters or wives of men who can, and will, be powerful enemies, as if part of these women's attraction is the danger they bring with them. It is a good touch, and helps to drive home the idea of Cowperwood's essential vulnerability, but it is just that, a touch, while Butler in The Financier becomes a vital part of the novel.

Aileen is virtually a direct opposite of Lillian Semple, in looks, in thought, in action. "She was all vitality"(p. 69) is Cowperwood's reaction the first time he sees her: nothing lymphatic here. That first day he meets her she has on a scarlet cape, and throughout her life she prefers bright, gaudy colours. Lillian Semple, on the other hand, dresses mostly in greys and blues. Berenice can wear all colours, a particular one reflecting her mood at any given time. On the rare occasions Aileen chooses to wear something less obviously showy--in brown or black--her clothes still seem to contribute

to, rather than tone down, her air of voluptuousness. While Lillian becomes thin and bony with age, Aileen's attractive but ample curves turn to fat, and her strong features coarsen. Aileen has all the will and determination Lillian lacks; when Lillian receives the information that her husband is having an affair she is upset, but remains outwardly calm, but when Aileen discovers, in The Titan, that Frank is being unfaithful to her she reacts with fury, and proceeds to try to choke to death her rival, Rita Sohlberg. Lillian is older than Frank; Aileen many years younger. Lillian is conventional in outlook, "chilled and shamed by the vision of the late Mr. Semple and the force and quality of public opinion"(p. 49) when young Cowperwood starts to court her; Aileen cares nothing (at first) about society's opinion of her bizarre behaviour. The list of differences between the two women is almost endless. And yet Cowperwood is attracted to each of them in a remarkably similar way. Something inside him he cannot understand or control is aroused, and he is drawn to them in spite of himself. Lillian is "a mental and physical lure" that is "irresistible"(p. 49); he is "carried away"(p. 37) by her, and "her body extracted a form of dynamic energy from him"(p. 50). Aileen sets "his feelings and ideas . . . leaping and plunging like spirited horses."(p. 113) They both stimulate him, although the qualities within each of them that excite him are different, and both present challenges to his senses which he feels compelled to meet. He cannot help himself.

If Lillian Semple is a symbol of respectability, Aileen Butler symbolizes emotion. She does not have a brilliant mind, just a certain raw intelligence, but she has a tremendous depth of feeling, the great-

est capacity for passion of any character Dreiser ever created. She is selfish, and yet she can involve herself totally with someone she cares about. And to Cowperwood she commits herself absolutely. Through Aileen, Dreiser lays bare the character of Cowperwood, and drives home the points he wants to make about man's role in nature and society, and the complex interaction of reality and illusion. Aileen compels attention; she is the emotional core of the Trilogy.

Aileen's story can be traced through a series of bravura scenes beginning in The Financier, when she and Cowperwood mutually seduce one another at a party, through her passionate confrontations with her father and the key scene with Frank in prison, to the wild assault on Rita Sohlberg and an attempted suicide, in The Titan, ending with her last flare of rebellion in The Stoic, when she refuses to allow Cowperwood's body to come into her house. The splendid, vital, passionate young girl of The Financier is relentlessly, cruelly worn down through the pages of the three novels, changing from spirited teenager to devoted mistress to triumphant young wife to uncertain middle-aged matron to haggard old woman, deadened by the overpowering influence of Cowperwood himself. In a sense, the two of them are reliving the tragedy of the lobster and the squid: he is devouring her bit by bit, slowly killing her. Unlike the lobster's, Cowperwood's victory (if it can be called that) is not perfect. Aileen, living what tiny bit of life he has left her, survives him.

For Dreiser does not believe in the absolute. He is not concerned with success or failure, but with something much more complicated: relative success (or relative failure, if you like). The

ironies of the Trilogy rebound off one another until no event seems to have simply a straightforward meaning; the real and the illusory are difficult to define. Cowperwood believes he is taking his cue from nature when he forms the view that only the strong prevail; what he should have inferred from his experience is that sometimes the strong prevail. He sees only the side of nature he wishes to see. Cowperwood never can achieve the perfect control he seeks, but he after all does not do too badly. On balance, the strong have an advantage. Cowperwood may be stopped short of his ultimate goals, but he does not suffer deeply. Defeated in Chicago at the end of The Titan, he retreats to his New York mansion to count his millions. Dreiser is stymied by the very nature of his message: "a balance must be struck." (The Titan, p. 500) Cowperwood's victories and defeats do not seem to matter enough; we cannot care enough about them because we do not care enough about Cowperwood himself. The problem is inescapable as far as Dreiser is concerned; he is dealing with that vague middle ground where life is lived, Cowperwood's life as well as Clyde Griffiths', and part of his method is to blunt the edges of Cowperwood's experience. The extraordinary is much more ordinary than it seems.

To understand why the Cowperwood novels work at all, given the limitations Dreiser has imposed upon himself, is to understand why any of Dreiser's novels work, since in all the rest (with the possible exception of The Bulwark) he has chosen to convey his themes through the voices of uninspired, nearly inarticulate people, an ostensibly insurmountable handicap to assume. But they do work, and the reason they do is hinted at in an offhand remark by, of all people, Cowper-

wood, who observes in a rare moment of insight that "life is between individuals" (The Titan, p. 115). Dreiser's novels are conceived on a grand scale, but what gives them weight and meaning is his unswerving dedication to the significance and eloquence of individual human experience. In the Cowperwood Trilogy he is dealing with a man who does not comprehend the triviality of his position in the total organization of human existence, but the portrayal of Cowperwood's inflated opinion of his own importance in the cosmos does not deflect Dreiser from his task of assigning profound significance to individual characters and events, within their own sphere.

It is to this personal, not metaphysical, world of one to one relationships that Aileen Butler wholeheartedly belongs. Dreiser tells us more about Aileen than about any other character outside of Cowperwood himself, and since her involvement with Cowperwood virtually spans their lifetimes, it follows that a close look at that involvement might prove revealing.

Aileen is a flamboyant character, her earthy exuberance offering a sharp and effective contrast to Cowperwood's more abstractly expressed panache. Her life seems to move from crisis to crisis, consisting of high points and low points with very few periods of "average" existence in between, and perhaps the best way to deal with her character is to examine its development through analysis of these half dozen or so dramatic, keystone scenes of her career. Through them, a definite pattern can be traced, a pattern which explains much about Aileen and Cowperwood, and Dreiser's attitude toward them.

We meet Aileen at the same time Cowperwood does; she is a

bright, intensely alive teenager, brimming with health and beauty, wearing a red cape. To Cowperwood's eye she is perfection, and he is haunted by this first transcendent vision of her for the rest of his life. Each time she revolts against him in later life he conjures up this picture of her as a young innocent girl in a red cape, and he feels both disappointment in her failure to live up to his impossible expectations and guilt because of his own involvement in her debasement. Aileen, just as much as Lillian Semple, is to him "the shadow of an ideal", and she, more than any other of his women, is clearly unsuited to fulfilling this idealized role. Dreiser outlines the significant events of her childhood, her cheerfully unappreciated Catholic schooling, her developing sensuousness, her half-serious romantic interest in a handsome young priest, to whom she teasingly liked to confess her feelings, "then walk demurely, repentantly out." (p. 80) In appearance she is richly, almost too richly, endowed; she has an engaging personality and a remarkably free spirit; she is also highly impressionable. Cowperwood at this time is an impetuous, self-assured young man, well on the way to amassing his first million, beginning to tire a little of his wife, and he is taking the first tentative steps toward his semi-legal and totally unethical involvement with Philadelphia city finances which will later bring about his downfall.

The stage is set, then, for an affair. It begins at the reception given in honour of the opening of the latest Cowperwood home (two houses, custom-designed, and in the very best neighbourhood). Dreiser gives prominence to the scene by, in effect, leading into it twice; first, observing Aileen's overwhelmingly stunning entrance

through the eyes of two not exactly unbiased female observers, Cowperwood's rather plain Jane sister Anna and his wife, and ending with the totally captivated reaction of Cowperwood himself; then, backtracking to Aileen's careful but assured preparation of herself for the event (a scene foreshadowing a later one in The Titan in which Aileen dresses for the first dinner she will give as Mrs. Cowperwood) before beginning again with Aileen's arrival at the party. The scene then shifts to Cowperwood, and we become witness to an amazing phenomenon, the "highly specialized machine" losing his self-control. He realizes what is happening, but is helpless to stop himself. Aileen upsets him, makes him nervous, and perhaps most surprising--leaves him at a loss for words:

He was a little keyed up because of her--slightly cloudy in his thoughts--because she was generating a problem in his life, or would if he let her, and so his talk was a little tame. He was thinking of something to say--some words which would bring them a little nearer together. But for the moment he could not. Truth to tell, he wanted to say a great deal. (p. 117)

Despite the "slight intellectual intoxication"(p. 117) that dancing with her produces, his mind is still functioning in a curiously objective way:

. . . Strong thoughts of her were in his mind. And despite his involved social and financial position, which he now recalled, it was interesting to him to see how deliberately and even calculatingly--and worse, enthusiastically--he was pumping the bellows that tended only to heighten the flames of his desire for this girl; to feed a fire that might ultimately consume him--and how deliberately and resourcefully!(p. 119)

It is amusing to note that Cowperwood's alter ego, so to speak, his passionate self that manages to get out from under the tight control of his customary logic and reason, is deliberate, calculating and resourceful, just like his usual self.

Aileen, too, is experiencing confused feelings of a different sort. Despite her apparent self-assurance--she knows how attractive she is and the impression she is making--she is afraid of Cowperwood. He dominates her; she cannot meet his eyes. Clearly, any relationship between Aileen and Frank will prove hazardous for both of them, but it is Aileen who has the most to lose. She is blind to the difficulties; he is not, realizing that "however much breaking of the rules under the surface of things there might be, the rules were still there"(p. 119), and the responsibility is his to protect her, which of course never occurs to him.

Cowperwood spends his life looking for the right woman; obviously Aileen is not the one, and the consequences of his mistaken judgement reverberate through both their lives for years to come. Cowperwood's attraction to her is ironic because he falls in love with her beauty and her vitality; her beauty is the kind which does not last long, and her vitality makes her too earthy a sort ever to be accepted among the anaemic ladies of high society. Just as he had misjudged the true nature of Lillian Semple's tantalizing passivity, he is misled about Aileen's strong inner force. She is strong, it is true, stronger in some ways than he is, but the strength he admires in her is not just like his own. For a time things work out well:

They ran together temperamentally from the first like two leopards. Her own thoughts--crude, half formulated, half spoken--nevertheless matched his to a degree in the equality of their force and their raw directness.(p. 146)

That is to say, the forces of their characters are equal in intensity, but not necessarily the same, and initially that equality is enough.

But it is hardly the foundation on which to build a lasting relationship.

Aileen also shares with Cowperwood a love for beauty, in life and in art. But neither has a well-developed taste for such things. Aileen's artistic sense is simply instinctive; she knows that her parents have none to speak of, but her own is not an enormous improvement, largely tending toward the obvious, the gaudy and the rather crude, reflecting her own robust temperament. Cowperwood, typically, has no taste at all, though he has a deep yearning for the artistic. At first he is totally the slave of fashion; next he turns to experts for advice, who tell him art is a great investment, that pieces on the market for "a few hundred thousand now will be worth millions later." (The Financier, p. 144) Again it is made plain how inextricably the desires, the drives which run his life, are tied together:

His mind, in spite of his outward placidity, was tinged with a great seeking. Wealth, in the beginning, had seemed the only goal, to which had been added the beauty of women. And now art, for art's sake--the first faint radiance of a rosy dawn--had begun to shine in upon him, and to the beauty of womanhood he was beginning to see how necessary it was to add the beauty of life--the beauty of material background--how, in fact, the only background for great beauty was great art.(p. 145)

Whether one might accurately describe Cowperwood's new-found love of art as love of "art for art's sake" is debatable, of course. But it is plain that Cowperwood's only motive is an acquisitive one--in whatever field. He is an archetypal capitalist.

Cowperwood fancies himself as intellectual; Aileen most certainly is not, although she is a bright, quick-thinking, imaginative girl in many ways. However, the likelihood of Cowperwood finding a woman to match him is remote from the start. His is a peculiar kind

of intelligence, specialized and essentially limited. Dreiser compares him to a chess player, an image which seems particularly apt:

. . . Imagine yourself one of those subtle masters of the mysteries of the higher forms of chess--the type of mind so well illustrated by the famous and historic chess-players, who could sit with their backs to a group of rivals playing fourteen men at once, calling out all the moves in turn, remembering all the positions of all the men on all the boards, and winning. This, of course, would be an overstatement of the subtlety of Cowperwood at this time, and yet it would not be wholly out of bounds. (The Financier, p. 99)

A chess master is only a genius in his own field. His ability is a quirk of nature more than a mark of true intelligence, in the same category as someone with a photographic memory. Cowperwood has the same skill in finance: handling money is like second nature to him. But in other fields he is inclined to fall down rather badly; in fact, Dreiser at one stage points out that "it would be too much to say that Cowperwood's mind was of the first order." (The Financier, p. 396) In his relations with people he relies heavily on his force and magnetism; he tends to overawe and impress people as soon as he walks into a room, but his impressiveness would not necessarily stand up under examination. Dreiser explains it in this manner:

Raw, glittering force, however, compounded of the cruel Machiavellianism of nature, if it be but Machiavellian, seems to exercise a profound attraction for the conventionally rooted. Your cautious citizen of average means, looking out through the eyes of his dull world of seeming fact, is often the first to forgive or condone the grim butcheries of theory by which the strong rise. (The Titan, p. 175)

Cowperwood is an excessive person. Dreiser knew the species well: he was one himself, as were most of the members of his family, notably his brother Paul, whose excesses brought him to an early grave.

In her own way, Aileen is just as excessive, and just as single-

minded, a condition which blinds her to her husband's weakness. Others eventually see through him; Aileen never will, although she in the end achieves a certain amount of objectivity about him. Their relationship is subtly analyzed in an unassuming scene in The Titan. Word has recently reached Chicago of the Cowperwoods' scandalous past in Philadelphia, and their attempted conquest of Chicago society, which had at first gone very smoothly, is suddenly stopped dead in its tracks. Aileen is the first to feel the coolness, suffering through several encounters with snubs and insults, only to come back and try again; the first time Frank is subjected to this treatment, he withdraws, goes downtown, "to avoid discussion"(p. 99). He gives no thought to Aileen or her feelings; she eventually becomes so upset she is physically ill and takes to her bed, where he comforts her, saying, "Money will solve all this sometime"(p. 100), and he truly believes that it will. He, who has no notion of the strain she has been under, is "sorry to see her yield so weakly"(p. 101), while she, ironically, is "ashamed of her weakness when she saw how forcefully he faced it all."(p. 101) Dreiser then reveals what has been going on in Cowperwood's mind during the preceding touching moments with his wife:

He was thinking of the brilliant manner in which he had adjusted his affairs with the old gas companies and Mr. Schryart, and how thoroughly he would handle some other matters when the time came.  
(p. 101)

While Aileen is admiring his strength in dealing with a difficult and humiliating situation, he is actually thinking about something else altogether.

One does not associate with Dreiser any sort of gift for coming

out with just the right turn of phrase in a given situation, and in fact, when he does produce a particularly graceful line, or a good insight, one is sometimes uncharitably disposed to wonder, after appreciating the words or the thought in themselves, where he stole it. However, as such critics as Ellen Moers and Robert Penn Warren point out, his actual skill in writing is often underestimated. The scene just mentioned provides a good example of that skill. The ironic overtones might even be missed, were it not for Dreiser's introduction to the scene, in which he comments on the difficulty of human communication:

If it had not been for Cowperwood's eventual financial triumph over all opposition--the complete routing of the situation would have been hard indeed. As it was, Aileen suffered bitterly; she felt that the slight was principally directed at her, and would remain in force. In the privacy of their own home they were compelled eventually to admit, the one to the other, that their house of cards, resplendent and forceful looking as it was, had fallen to the ground. Personal confidences between people so closely united are really the most trying of all. Human souls are constantly trying to find each other, and rarely succeeding.(p. 100)

The implications of these last two lines underscore the meaning of innumerable scenes in the Trilogy, and to a certain extent the Trilogy itself; Cowperwood, "narrow to all but an infinitesimal line", can communicate only on an impersonal, objective level; Aileen can feel things much more deeply than he can, but the feelings remain locked within her because she lacks the ability to articulate them. Cowperwood's second marriage goes the way of his first, and for much the same reason. The scene just discussed marks the turning point; the relationship deteriorates rapidly from that moment on.

But the trend toward eventual disaster begins much earlier.

The relationship between Aileen and Frank takes on an unnatural cast from the beginning, Aileen hurling herself into it with all her heart, Cowperwood, although involved emotionally as he never has been before, still unable to overcome the influence of the streak of cold, remorseless inhumanity which runs through him. Exchanges between the two lovers read like conversations between people speaking in two different languages, a quality which could be ascribed to Dreiser's inability to write effective dialogue, but which, when analyzed, in fact seems entirely appropriate. Aileen is "a victim of her temperament" (The Financier, p. 124), and very susceptible to Cowperwood's magnetic charms. She has "no spiritual dread whatever"(p. 125), and whatever influence her upbringing within the Catholic Church once had, has long since disappeared. But the trappings of the Church still attract her, "the altar, during high mass, lit with a half-hundred or more candles, and dignified and made impressive by the rich, lacy vestments of the priests and the acolytes, the impressive needlework and gorgeous colorings of the amice, chasuble, cope, stole, and maniple"(p. 43); Aileen, with her "sense of grandeur coupled with a love of color and a love of love"(p. 79), in effect transfers her spiritual allegiance from God to Cowperwood, who has no notion of what is going on in Aileen's mind, and who would have no idea of what to do about it if he did realize the situation. A representative encounter between Frank and Aileen occurs just before their relationship is discovered by

Butler:

". . . Oh, I love you, love you, Frank! I would do anything for you. I don't care what people think or say. I love you."

"Oh, you just think you do," he replied jestingly. "You'll get over it. There are others."

"Others!" echoed Aileen, resentfully and contemptuously.

"After you desert me, I'll go to hell. You'll see."

"Don't talk like that, Aileen," he replied, almost irritated. "I don't like to hear you. You wouldn't do anything of the sort. I love you. You know I'm not going to desert you. It would pay you to desert me just now."

"Oh, how you talk!" she exclaimed. "Desert you! It's likely isn't it? But if ever you desert me, I'll do just what I say. I swear it."

"Don't talk like that. Don't talk nonsense."

"I swear it. I swear by my love, I swear by your success-- my own happiness. I'll do just what I say. I'll go to hell."

Cowperwood got up. He was a little afraid now of this deep-seated passion he had aroused. It was dangerous. He could not tell where it would lead. (The Financier, p. 258)

Cowperwood, the chess-player, has to plan ahead; Aileen refuses to, thoughts of the future being to her "like rats that showed their heads out of dark holes in shadowy corners and scuttled back at the least sound." (p. 126) The two of them are almost talking at cross purposes; they hear one another's words but assign different meanings to them. Aileen's oath, "If you desert me, I'll go to hell", is both a promise and a threat, the import of which goes right over Cowperwood's head.

Aileen becomes a martyr for Cowperwood, a martyr whose sacrifice is only superficially appreciated and is totally unnecessary besides. Before she meets Frank Cowperwood, Aileen is a lively, independent young woman with thoughts and opinions of her own, opinions which dovetail nicely with his in some respects one must admit, but after she becomes involved with the financier, she identifies her views with his completely. At first they simply share a similar outlook on life; gradually Aileen comes to echo Cowperwood's thought in almost every respect, though her actions sometimes belie her words. Even in The Titan, when she has become almost totally estranged from Frank, she ushers visitors

to her home through the already famous art collection with comments and descriptions she has heard Cowperwood use, never her own, even though on one such occasion her guest, ironically, is Polk Lynde, a man about to become her lover.

The gradual erosion of her independence and individuality can be traced through The Financier, the key scene occurring when she goes to meet Frank in prison, demonstrating, paradoxically, not only the extent to which she has fallen under Frank's spell, but also her great strength in the face of his weakness, and her immense capacity for love and compassion, when she is sufficiently motivated. Earlier, however, Dreiser has shown her in a rather different light, in two moving, dramatic confrontations between Aileen and her father, episodes which graphically illustrate the tragedy of "human souls . . . constantly trying to find each other and rarely succeeding." Dreiser's portrayal of Aileen's relationship with her father looks forward to his (in some respects) similar account of Solon Barnes and his children in The Bulwark many years later. Both men are devoutly religious (Butler in a slightly more unconventional way), and have sincerely tried to do their best by their children, only to have their rebellious offspring turn from them. In each case, blame for the breakdown in communication can be laid on both sides, but one is also left with the disheartening feeling that the breakdown has been inevitable from the start. In The Bulwark, Solon Barnes is able to come to terms with himself, and to communicate his understanding to one of his daughters, a partial victory which Dreiser indicates might be the best one can hope for in an uncertain world; Butler is not so fortunate. He and Aileen become hope-

lessly alienated, and their estrangement helps hasten his death, at seventy, "a weary and disconsolate man"(p. 427). Aileen and her father are temperamentally very much alike, which intensifies the drama of their conflict. Both react emotionally, and neither has the least understanding of the other's point of view. Aileen swears she will go to hell if Cowperwood leaves her; her father is just as certain she will go to hell if he does not. They do and say things which deeply hurt one another, realizing only afterwards the mistakes they have made. Butler does not understand that to send detectives to trap Frank and Aileen together, and to confront Aileen at the scene publicly, is a "brutalizing thing to do"(p. 257), nor does Aileen realize how much she is wounding her father when she rashly blurts out that she has lost her faith in the Church. Butler believes Cowperwood has corrupted her, but he is only partly right. "Cowperwood's laissez-faire attitude had permeated and colored her mind completely. She saw things through his cold, direct 'I satisfy myself' attitude."(p. 268) But her open, impetuous personality has made her willing prey not only to his influence, but also to that of the fast-moving, colorful world around her.

Butler emerges from the encounters with his daughter a broken-hearted, despairing man. Later, when Aileen discovers the role her father has played in Frank's prosecution, she turns against him "in an almost brutal way"(p. 423), intensifying his misery. Her courage and determination are admirable, but the streak of uncompromising, unforgiving obduracy which runs through her and which has been brought to the surface at least partly through Cowperwood's pervasive influence, is not. Aileen has lost a great deal through the affair, though she does

not realize it. She has cut herself off from her family, from the people who mean most to her, in favour of a man who, even at this stage, admits only that he is "fond" of her, and "would not hurt her feelings for the world"(p. 281). And Aileen is the only character in the entire Trilogy who has been conceived by Dreiser in a true family context. Cowperwood's parents, his brothers and sister have never been an important factor in his life, but Aileen is viewed as very much a product of her home environment. Aileen, as opposed to Cowperwood, is a child who never truly becomes an adult. When he writes about the Butlers, Dreiser evokes a strong sense of their family feeling, and when Aileen breaks away from them, he conveys a great impression of loss, affecting not only Aileen, but the entire family. They can never come together again. Aileen, in her immaturity, never considers the finality of her decision, nor its implications.

Dreiser realizes his characters not only as individuals, but also as crucial elements in social and material structures which go far beyond the individuals themselves. Disruption of even a small part of this organization can therefore have far-reaching effects. Just as Aileen, independent and individual as she is and feels herself to be, is conceived as someone emerging from within an influential and close-knit family framework, both she and Cowperwood--most specifically Cowperwood--are in a sense inseparable from their material environment as well. Dreiser expands on this idea in a passage describing Cowperwood's feelings as he watches his splendid new Philadelphia house going up:

The effect of a house of this character on its owner is unmistakable. We think we are individual, separate, above houses and material objects generally; but there is a subtle connection which makes

them reflect us quite as much as we reflect them. They lend dignity, subtlety, force, each to the other, and what beauty, or lack of it, there is, is shot back and forth from one to the other as a shuttle in a loom, weaving, weaving. Cut the thread, separate a man from that which is rightfully his own, characteristic of him, and you have a peculiar figure, half success, half failure, much as a spider without its web, which will never be its whole self again until all its dignities and emoluments are restored.(p. 98)

Dreiser returns to this image of the spider and its web when he analyzes Cowperwood's position at the critical point of his Philadelphia career, when he must decide whether to proceed with his potentially lucrative, but very dangerous, involvement with the city treasurer Stener. His affair with Aileen is in its initial stages too, and the urge to follow up on both these opportunities is great, despite the serious reservations lurking in the back of his mind concerning each of them. As usual, he is confident:

Like a spider in a spangled net, every thread of which he knew, had laid, had tested, he had surrounded and entangled himself in a splendid, glittering network of connections, and he was watching all the details.(p. 140)

It is a very well-chosen image. Cowperwood has spun his web, and feels he is in control. A spider can live off the unsuspecting insects he catches in his web, but he is also tremendously vulnerable, for a careless (or deliberate) brush of a human hand can destroy in an instant the world he has painstakingly created. And this is what happens to Cowperwood. He is wiped out, by chance, in the aftermath of the Chicago fire. And he goes to prison.

In dramatic fashion, we are given an opportunity to observe a man cut off from his material possessions, "separate . . . from that which is rightfully his own, characteristic of him". In Cowperwood's first true moment of weakness he becomes, for an instant, a sympathetic

figure. Aileen visits him in prison, and Cowperwood, his elaborate camouflage of power stripped away, breaks down:

He felt, for him, an astonishingly strange feeling, a desire to cry, which he did his best to overcome; it shocked him so. There then combined to conspire and defeat him a strange, rich picture of the great world he had so recently lost, of the lovely, magnificent world which he hoped some day to regain. He felt more poignantly at this moment than ever he had before the degradation of the clog shoes, the cotton shirt, the striped suit, the reputation of a convict, permanent and not to be laid aside. He drew himself quickly away from her, turned his back, clinched his hands, drew his muscles taut; but it was too late. He was crying, and he could not stop.(p. 413)

Aileen senses the change in Cowperwood brought about by his altered circumstances as soon as she sees him: "Against such a background . . . he seemed unnatural, weird even."(p. 412) His relationship with her undergoes a curious evolution:

Her love was so full--so genuine. It was so soothing at the same time that it was unmaning, as now he could see, making of him a child again. . . . The depth of Aileen's feelings, the cooing sound of her voice, the velvety tenderness of her hands, that beauty that had drawn him all the time--more radiant here perhaps within these hard walls, and in the face of his physical misery, than it had ever been before--completely unmanned him.(p. 413)

He becomes a child at his mother's knee, a reaction which fills him with "combined rage and shame"(p. 413), and Aileen becomes both mother and mistress. For once she dominates him; she is the stronger, holding him "tight in a grip that he could not have readily released."(p. 413) But equally important, the strength of his hold on her increases remarkably:

She stroked his head, tenderly, while wild, deadly, unreasoning opposition to life and chance and untoward opposition surged in her brain. Her father--damn him! Her family--pooh! What did she care? Her Frank--her Frank. How little all else mattered where he was concerned. Never, never, never would she desert him--never--come what might. And now she clung to him in silence while she fought in her brain an awful battle with life and law and fate

and circumstance. Law--nonsense! People--they were brutes, devils, enemies, hounds! She was delighted, eager, crazy to make a sacrifice of herself. She would go anywhere for or with her Frank now. She would do anything for him. Her family was nothing--life nothing, nothing, nothing. She would do anything he wished, nothing more, nothing less; anything she could do to save him, to make his life happier, but nothing for anyone else. (p. 414)

The responsibility now placed on Cowperwood's head is enormous, and to say he abdicates it would be an understatement. To this point, Cowperwood has had a hand in the break-up of three lives--Butler's, Stener's and his own father's--but Aileen is affected by his tremendous capacity for destruction on a much more personal level. At the same time it is ironic that the fullest extent of her slavish commitment to Cowperwood should be expressed at her moment of supreme power in relation to him, when for once in his life he is vulnerable, unable to analyze his situation in terms of profit and loss, risk and reward, benefit and disadvantage. It is a fleeting moment. Almost immediately he is able to re-erect the barriers--sexual, emotional, intellectual--which customarily surround him; his mind once more locks into its precise, mechanical routine which is so effective in distancing him from other people. For an instant, however, he is the "peculiar figure" Dreiser refers to; he is an incomplete man, and in a way we are seeing him for what he really is.

Aileen has no sense of artifice, a lack unusual among Dreiser's characters. She is always exactly what she seems; she cannot hide her energy and physicality; she can only emphasize them. Cowperwood is the direct opposite of this, his confident air, strong features and piercing, inscrutable eyes promising a degree of mastery he does not quite possess, though he is aware of his gifts and is adept at using

them to best effect. One is reminded of Carrie Meeber, who is a successful actress because her face and expression convey a great sense of depth of character, and who "long[s] to be equal to this feeling written upon her countenance."<sup>3</sup> Cowperwood, on the other hand, feels himself more than equal to the task of living up to the promise of his arresting appearance, and to be sure there is more behind his look than there is behind Sister Carrie's. Dreiser ends The Financier with a passage "Concerning Mycteroperca Bonaci", the Black Grouper, a fish which "lives a comfortable, lengthy existence because of its very remarkable ability to adapt itself to conditions." (p. 446) Cowperwood often demonstrates that he has the same ability; Aileen does not have it at all. Dreiser continues: "Its great superiority lies in an almost unbelievable power of simulation, which relates solely to the pigmentation of its skin . . . You cannot look at it long without feeling that you are witnessing something spectral and unnatural, so brilliant is its power to deceive." (p. 447) Cowperwood's "power to deceive" is great, but not invincible, because he can never resist showing off; he has too much ego to be a truly successful con artist, and that is what he really is: a glorified confidence man. Aileen is one of his first victims.

The extent of her victimization is only hinted at in The Financier. Following the Black Grouper reference is a section entitled "The Magic Crystal", in which Dreiser looks into the future, seeing discontent and disillusionment for Cowperwood, and "a more pathetic

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<sup>3</sup>Dreiser, Sister Carrie, p. 403.

promise, one that concerned hope and failure"(p. 448) for Aileen.

"To have and not to have! All the seeming, and yet the sorrow of not having!"(p. 448) This is to be Aileen's fate. The passage is redundant if The Financier is viewed simply as the first third of a unified whole, but in the context of the novel as a workable entity, this rather high-blown epilogue, along with its companion piece about the Black Grouper, has a place in that it draws attention to strains of foreboding which run through the book. Most specifically it adds emphasis to the words which close the novel proper. Cowperwood and Aileen, together at last, leave Philadelphia for Chicago, Aileen full of enthusiasm for their new career, her ties with her family and her past irrevocably broken:

"Isn't it nice to be finally going?" she commented.

"It is advantageous, anyhow," he said.(p. 446)

The incompatibility of their characters, and the impossibility of their finding happiness together, is perfectly delineated in these innocuous-seeming lines. As Dreiser concludes in "The Magic Crystal", "What wise man might not read from such a beginning, such an end?"(p. 448)

With these words, Dreiser moves from The Financier to The Titan, and although his theme is unchanged and the story proceeds in an unbroken chronology, there is a definite shift in style and emphasis. The Financier is more clearly conceived as a dramatic unit, its events and characterizations carefully intertwined, each contributing a strand to the completed fabric of the novel. The Titan is, on the surface at least, composed of a series of dramatic set pieces, many of which bear significant relation to events both in the preceding The Financier and the concluding The Stoic, as though Dreiser had his mind more on the

themes already introduced and the conclusions he would eventually come to, than on elucidation of the material at hand. Stuart Sherman's criticism (in 1915) of the novel's "club sandwich"<sup>4</sup> effect is well-taken, although Dreiser's arrangement of Cowperwood's alternating business triumphs and romantic entanglements (the love affairs seem to flower and die in remarkable succession) is obviously deliberate. Both The Financier and The Titan are successful as engaging documentaries of an important era in American history (their titles appear regularly in the bibliographies of history books dealing with the period), but success on this level seems incidental to The Financier while it is a prominent feature of The Titan. Still, the shift in tone is in some ways effective. Dreiser opens up his story, making more obvious the universal application of his message. The book gains immeasurably when it is viewed as the middle third of a trilogy, rather than as a free-standing imaginative work, though it does get by fairly well on its own.

Taken as a unit, The Financier comes close to being an evocation of Cowperwood's belief that "force was the answer--great mental and physical force." (p. 121) Cowperwood believes in himself, and he has prevailed. The irony of his position has yet to be revealed; Dreiser's assertion that "Life cannot be put into any mold" (The Financier, p. 131) has been borne out by exposure of the artificiality of society's code of ethics, but its application to Cowperwood's own dogmatic theories has yet to be demonstrated fully. There have been some hints, and there is

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<sup>4</sup>Sherman, "The Barbaric Naturalism of Mr. Dreiser", Dreiser: A Collection of Critical Essays, p. 7.

always Dreiser's pretentious epilogue to the novel, but little else. In The Titan, the hints are taken up, and the prophecy that Cowperwood is "master and no master, prince of a world of dreams whose reality was disillusion"(p. 448) is fulfilled.

The Titan opens with a superficial burst of optimism, a sense that life has been given a fresh start, in a modern, young, ambitious city, and that success is to be had for the asking. But from the start, underlying this brave illusion of freshness is the realization that, while the stage is new, the players are the same as before, playing new roles to which they may not be entirely suited. Time moves relentlessly on, and even Cowperwood cannot roll it back. His youth is gone; so is Aileen's; the past is just a bad memory, but it is a memory which will not go away. For Cowperwood, who refuses to learn either the lessons of history, or of his own experience, the past will continue to repeat itself.

Aileen is his one physical link with the past, and it is she who is forced into undertaking roles she cannot hope to perform. She is no actress; she can only play herself. Further, her personality is the sort which does not fit well into many situations. Early in The Titan, Cowperwood goes to call on the political backroom boss, John McKenty, at his home, where he meets Mrs. McKenty:

On his arrival he was offered a drink, a cigar, introduced to Mrs. McKenty--who, lacking an organized social life of any kind, was always pleased to meet these celebrities of the upper world, if only for a moment--and shown eventually into the library. Mrs. McKenty, as he might have observed if he had had the eye for it, was plump and fifty, a sort of superannuated Aileen, but still showing traces of a former hardy beauty, and concealing pretty well the evidences that she had once been a prostitute.(p. 84)

The passage deserves attention for several reasons. First, it is a good example of the kind of offhand humour of which Dreiser is fond and which regularly goes unnoticed by readers who like to skim the books in order to miss the tiresome verbosity of which he is also capable. Second, it offers an insight into Aileen's future, for she, like Mrs. McKenty, is condemned to life on the fringes of society. Mrs. McKenty's private life we know nothing about, but from these few lines we can guess that her husband keeps her where she will not embarrass him, and rather takes her for granted. One also gets the feeling she is of a temperament much better suited to this sort of treatment than is Aileen. Third, we get Cowperwood's reaction, or lack of it, to Mrs. McKenty; he, as well as the reader, could have caught a glimpse into his future with Aileen, "if he had had the eye for it", but he does not notice. Like the chess-player, he can plan his street-railway games fifty moves into the future, but he cannot apply the same skill to the field of human relationships.

In The Titan, the relationship between Aileen and Frank enters a new phase: they are caught in "the grasping legality of established matrimony" (The Financier, p. 154). Cowperwood has already shown that he is incapable of acting the part of devoted, responsible husband over any sustained period of time. Aileen, who has gone through many shifts in circumstance in her short life, finds it difficult to adapt to being a wife instead of a mistress. Somehow, the rewards for having achieved her one ambition in life--to have Frank all to herself--are not what she thought they would be. For the first time she feels awkward, out of place. Her independence is gradually ebbing away.

Dreiser effectively demonstrates Aileen's uncertain position and her shifting attitudes in his depiction of the first dinner party given by the newlyweds after their arrival in Chicago. Before the event she is eager, but somewhat uneasy:

For the first time in her life she felt matronly--as if now she were not a girl any more, but a woman grown, with some serious responsibilities, and yet she was not really suited to the role.  
(p. 38)

In The Financier she has held momentary doubts concerning the depth of the affection Cowperwood feels for her, but she has never doubted herself, or her ability to carry out whatever task she may set herself. Now she does, and her uncertainty persists. As she dresses for dinner, we are reminded sharply of an earlier occasion, in The Financier, when she has dressed herself for the Cowperwood housewarming party, absolutely sure that her choices of apparel are right, and confident of the picture she will make on her entrance at the party. In this first scene, she has tried on many outfits, but when she comes to the right one she knows it, and she knows exactly how beautiful she looks. She chooses a necklace:

Finally, her jet necklet, which she did not value very highly, came to mind, and, oh, how lovely it looked! How soft and smooth and glistening her chin looked above it. She caressed her neck affectionately, called for her black lace mantilla, her long, black silk dolman lined with red, and she was ready.(p. 115)

The contrast between this and the scene in Chicago is striking. Now, as Mrs. Cowperwood, she puts on her expensive new dress, and her maid tells her how lovely she looks:

Aileen glowed, but with scarcely a smile. She was concerned. . . . It was the necessity to put her best foot forward now that was really troubling her. She must interest men mentally, perhaps, as well as physically, and with social graces, and that

was not so easy. . . . She felt beautiful, and yet she was a little nervous--truly. (The Titan, p. 37)

She worries about what Frank will think about her, and when he assures her how beautiful she is, she does relax slightly:

He drew her into his arms, and she put up her mouth with a sense of relief. Obviously, he must think that she looked charming. (p. 38)

Still, she feels a sense of "self-distrust"(p. 39), and Frank has to reassure her once more. Throughout the evening she is nervous and unsteady; she is not the Aileen of The Financier. As might be expected, she need not have worried about impressing the men at the party; when the time comes it is their wives with whom she has difficulty. The men, as usual, find her stunningly attractive, and entirely satisfactory, whether she can carry on a quick-witted conversation or not.

At the same time, the men, however envious they might be of Cowperwood's audacity and good fortune in marrying such a luscious prize, sense that she is out of place. They all have mistresses; even the conservative bank president Addison has them, but only "very carefully, very subterraneously."(p. 41) And they certainly do not marry their mistresses. Cowperwood lacks the sensitivity to appreciate what is going on; he can only blame Aileen for her inability to be something she is not, when at last he realizes that he and she are not to be accepted on their own terms. For her part, Aileen lacks the wit to understand completely, but she instinctively feels the discomfort of those around her.

Aileen, out of her depth, becomes even more a creature of her husband. Ironically, this is what is expected of the wife of a man

in Cowperwood's position: the business world is entirely a male world. According to the modern stereotype, the wives of Titans are supposed to give parties, look beautiful, and work for charitable organizations in their spare time; in Cowperwood's day, the situation was little different. The first Mrs. Cowperwood performs her function admirably, because she has been brought up to believe that a woman's role is secondary, and because, for whatever reason, she is narrow-minded enough to look no farther for happiness in life. She actually gains sustenance from the conventions which rule her existence. The wives of the Chicago financiers, to judge from the evidence given in The Titan, also seem to fit happily into their narrow subsidiary roles, although their lives appear to be, if anything, more empty than Lillian Cowperwood's, with nothing more substantial to entertain their minds than the latest rumour making the rounds of their exclusive circle of friends. They seem to enjoy their petty lives; their husbands leave them contentedly at home to fulfill their roles as well-preserved household ornaments, while they, the men, go about the real business of living. The men all have mistresses--they seem to require them--which their wives either do not know about, or, perhaps more likely, do not care to know about. Aileen could never live that way: she has too much zest for life. Cowperwood has taken his mistress, and installed her in his house as his wife, and the effect is grotesque. The men who come to call ogle her; the women resent her. Both can see what apparently Frank and Aileen cannot, at least at first: that Aileen is out of place in this contrived society, with its false fronts concealing more false fronts, governed by superficial, hypocritical moral standards. There is

nothing false about Aileen.

The Titan is a much more objective book than The Financier. Dreiser's habitual technique is to use a shifting focus (a technique best under control in An American Tragedy), moving from the mind of one character to that of another, drawing back from time to time, taking in a panoramic view. He still writes this way in The Titan, but more often than before he occupies a middle ground, maintaining some sort of distance from his characters. This method, if that is what it should be called, serves not only to emphasize the patterns of Cowperwood's business machinations, but also to bring into sharp relief the "big", melodramatic scenes which punctuate Aileen's life. Aileen may move from the centre of Cowperwood's consciousness, but she can still make her presence felt in dramatic fashion. A case in point is her violent, but also theatrical, assault on Rita Sohlberg.

Dreiser's elaborate lead in to the scene is written with great comic flair. Rita Sohlberg is the first woman since Aileen to make an enormous impact on Cowperwood; she is characterized as "the semi-phlegmatic type, soft, full-blooded, with a body that was going to be fat at forty, but which at present was deliciously alluring." (The Titan, p. 107) She is self-consciously artistic, and Cowperwood falls prey to her charms:

She was a graceful dancer, could sing a little, could play feelingly--sometimes brilliantly--and could draw. Her art was a makeshift, however; she was no artist.(p. 108)

Cowperwood rightly characterizes her husband Harold as a dunce.

Dreiser's treatment of him is hilariously cruel:

At times he was not sure whether he was cut out to be a great

violinist or a great composer, or merely a great teacher, which last he was never willing really to admit. "I am an arteest," he was fond of saying. "Ho, how I suffer from my temperament!" . . . "Oh, Harold!" Rita used to exclaim at first, ecstatically. Later on she was not so sure.

Life and character must really get somewhere to be admirable, and Harold, really and truly, did not seem to be getting anywhere. He taugth, stormed, dreamed, wept; but he ate his three meals a day, Rita noticed, and he took an excited interest at times in other women.(p. 109)

Rita becomes Cowperwood's resident art critic, the last word in taste as far as he is concerned, and brings him to a "really finer point of view."

(p. 121) Cowperwood is remarkably easily taken in by the pretensions to knowledge of this entrancing daughter of a Wichita, Kansas grain elevator agent. But he is "captivated"(p. 111) once more, and as usual his judgement is impaired. She is smarter, more sophisticated than Aileen, as well as being younger and just as attractive to him sexually; she stimulates him in a slightly different way, and his body thrives only through endlessly changing stimulation. Also as usual, he deludes himself into thinking Rita might be the one with whom he could undertake a permanent relationship. Thanks to Aileen, however, he never has to discover his mistake.

Aileen's attack on Rita comes like a dash of ice water into the midst of this good-natured, serio-comic affair. Aileen's intense character brings Dreiser abruptly back from his objective pose and into the lives of his characters again. The scene is funny, in a way, but with an edge of horror to it: Rita and Aileen make grotesque opponents.

On one side is Aileen, gradually working herself into a frenzy of jealousy, hate and frustration; on the other side are the Sohlbergs, arriving unsuspectingly at the Cowperwood house, Harold making odd Danish noises, and Rita "exquisite in a pale blue and lavender concoction,

with silver braid worked in here and there."(p. 137) (One is never sure whether Dreiser is presenting descriptions such as these with a straight face or if he is intentionally doing a take-off on over-exuberant fashion writers). Aileen, half-insane, holds herself back with difficulty; she lures Rita upstairs:

With a courage and rage born of a purely animal despair she turned and locked [the door]; then she wheeled swiftly, her eyes lit with a savage fire, her cheeks pale but later aflame, her hands, her fingers, working in a strange, unconscious fashion.(p. 137)

The fight itself is a melodramatic affair, Aileen's murderous intent and Rita's sincerely felt fear for her life balanced by Dreiser's slightly humorous emphasis on the threat to Mrs. Sohlberg's poise, as opposed to the physical danger she is in. Cowperwood, the decisive man of action, grandly breaks down the door with a chair, trailed by Harold, who is "moaning helplessly."(p. 139) Frank's mind is ticking over efficiently as he considers all the angles, his own interests paramount, as usual.

The cloak of humour falls away completely, and Aileen and Frank are left together to come to terms with the situation. Aileen has a power possessed to a greater degree by no other woman in the Trilogy--not even Berenice--an unconscious ability to strip off Cowperwood's facade of charm and composure; once more she is able to expose him, as he has never allowed himself to be exposed since the scene in the prison. But it is a different side to his nature which is revealed at this point; circumstances have changed. This time, "her lord and master held her in an ugly hold."(p. 141) She tries to stand up to him, but "he wore a look now she had never seen on his face before--a hard, wintry, dynamic flare, which no one but his commercial enemies, and only those occasionally, had seen. . . . She wavered, quailed, gave way. All the fury of

her tempestuous soul fell, as the sea falls under a lapse of wind."

(p. 142) The menace which has always been inherent in Cowperwood's nature comes through more vividly at this moment than it ever has before; Dreiser brings home the idea that he is a very dangerous man.

The psychological build-up to this episode is masterfully handled. Tension has been gradually mounting in Aileen's mind as feelings of doubt, frustration, loneliness, suspicion intrude upon her; the concrete discovery of Cowperwood's simultaneous involvement with Rita Sohlberg and Antionette Nowak (Cowperwood's secretary) snaps her resistance. Cowperwood is caught up in the romance of a serious entanglement with Rita (the affair with Antionette is purely sexual); his response to Aileen's hysteria is coloured by his own resentment at her disruption of his happiness, as well as by the undercurrent of guilt he feels. Aileen's tumultuous feelings ebb and flow; Cowperwood is genuinely moved, but his motives are inevitably tainted:

. . . Her voice trailed off into a kind of sob and her eyes filled with tears, hot, angry, aching. Cowperwood saw them and came over, hoping in some way to take advantage of them. He was truly sorry now--anxious to make her feel tender toward him once more. . . . He put out a smoothing hand, but she jumped away.(p. 146)

Frank, never a profound judge of character, and helpless in the face of Aileen's emotion, which is entirely outside the realm of his perception, makes the ultimate blunder when he heartlessly throws back at Aileen the memory of her past:

"I wouldn't be so hard on mistresses if I were you, Aileen," he ventured pleadingly. "I should have thought your own experience would have--"

He paused, for he saw on the instant that he was making a grave mistake.(p. 147)

Aileen feels "a great revulsion of feeling"(p. 147); as Cowperwood

rightly perceives, the reference to her past is "crucial"(p. 147), And it marks "the end of that youthful dream that had begun so beautifully." (p. 148)

The dream is over, but reality must go on. The scene ends on a note of compromise, Cowperwood refusing to admit his feeling for Aileen is dead, Aileen, continually weakening under the effect of his soul-destroying presence, relenting in her courageous---in this context--- resolve to leave him. Ironically, it is Rita Sohlberg who emerges from the episode with the clearest insight into the significance of the event:

She had loved him, as she thought, but through the rage of Aileen she saw him in a different light, and she wanted to get away. His money, plentiful as it was, did not mean as much to her as it might have meant to some women; it simply spelled luxuries, without which she could exist if she must. His charm for her had, perhaps, consisted mostly in the atmosphere of flawless security which seemed to surround him--a glittering bubble of romance. That, by one fell attack, was now burst. He was seen to be quite as other men, subject to the same storms, the same danger of shipwreck. Only he was a better sailor than most.(p. 155)

Rita looks forward to Berenice, her balanced acceptance of the reality of disillusion contrasting with Cowperwood's present rejection of it.

Aileen's descent into the "hell" she has previously prepared for herself in The Financier occupies much of the body of The Titan. On the surface, it does not amount to much: she begins to lose her looks (relatively speaking--men still find her attractive); she starts to drink too much; she carries on guilt-ridden affairs with other men. She is no Hurstwood: she survives, and she never suffers materially. But the tragedy comes in the ruinous sabotage of her courageous, generous spirit by Cowperwood in his unperceiving cruelty and pitilessness. Life proceeds for a time in the semi-delusion of the aftermath of the Rita Sohlberg incident, but events inevitably reach a climax in a scene which

suggestively parallels the former affair: Aileen attempts suicide.

Again, she is moved to action through the discovery of yet another of Cowperwood's intrigues, this time with Berenice Fleming, and again her mind preys on the injustice and frustration of her position, until her emotion blazes forth. In a gloriously sustained vituperative outburst--triggered by one of Cowperwood's typically thoughtless and cold-blooded remarks--she denounces him thoroughly, and he responds to her with the one statement which can truly penetrate her life-hardened shell: he does not love her any more. A Utopian belief in his basic love for her, although it has not been outwardly expressed by him for some time, has sustained her over the years, and with one stroke he has knocked the last leg of support out from under her. His words "seemed to throw her back on herself forever and ever to be alone"(p. 461). At the time of the Rita Sohlberg affair, Cowperwood had been on the defensive, to a certain extent; now positions are reversed:

She tried to reach him and put a hand on his arm, but he stepped aside. To him, as he looked at her now, she was the antithesis of anything he could brook, let alone desire artistically or physically. The charm was gone, the spell broken.(p. 460)

This time it is Aileen who out of necessity, because her self-reliance has been destroyed completely, seeks a compromise, but it is too late. In a last desperate move, she locks herself in a room and slashes her wrists.

It is a theatrical move--or is it? Even Aileen herself is uncertain. "Now she would see whether she could die, whether he would let her."(p. 462) For one last splendid moment she has the power to move him; then it is gone:

He drew himself up and looked at her--cool, unbelieving, the light of control, even of victory in his eyes. As he had suspected, it was not truly real. She would not have killed herself. She had expected him to come--to make the old effort. Very good. He would see her safely in bed and in a nurse's hands, and would then avoid her as much as possible in the future. If her intention were genuine she would carry it out in his absence, but he did not believe she would.(p. 463)

It is an ambiguous scene, for Dreiser chooses not to explore Aileen's consciousness at this final moment. It is almost as if she really has succeeded in her suicide attempt. In a way, she is dead from this time forward, Cowperwood and herself having been accomplices in her murder.

The chapter in which the attempted suicide occurs is entitled "Aileen's Last Card"; she does not appear in The Titan again. And she does not reappear in the Trilogy until the tenth chapter of The Stoic, when we find her, "weary and disillusioned", trying to exist in Cowperwood's New York mansion, which is now "but a hollow shell, an emotional as well as a social grave."(p. 34) She comes to life, so to speak, when Cowperwood arranges for a handsome gigolo to pretend to be interested in her and squire her around Paris, but this is a temporary interlude. The young man, Tollifer, takes his job seriously: he not only diverts Aileen's attention and keeps her out of her husband's way; he remodels her, makes her lose weight and dress tastefully, until she is even attractive to Cowperwood's eyes again. But this new life is artificial; she is like a doll whose owner can dress it in new clothes. When Aileen discovers what has been done to her, she flares up at Cowperwood, but it is not the same as before: she goes toward him "trying to arouse her treasured anger."(p. 214) He placates her by telling her that he has bought a new house and she is to decorate it; he has left her with so little spirit that this is enough to distract her completely. The doll

is left forgotten in her doll house.

But Aileen has one last scene, one in which a spark of her former self is momentarily revived, but one which also demonstrates Cowperwood's unrelenting hold on her, even after his death. After visiting him in his sickroom shortly before his death, she catches a glimpse of Berenice, and suddenly realizes that even though Cowperwood is dying he is carrying on a charade to deceive her. She refuses to be with him when he dies, and she refuses to allow his body to lie in state at her house. Thinking that such obstinacy on her part is foolish, and that it might cause scandal, Cowperwood's friends smuggle the body into the house in the middle of the night. Aileen is wakened, and goes down to discover the open coffin. Once more, the waves of conflicting emotion which have characterized her life sweep over her: fear, remorse, love-- and anger:

Who had brought him, and how? At what hour? For only the previous evening, she, by her orders and commands to the servants, had barred all doors. Yet here he was! Obviously, his, not her, friends and servants must have collaborated to have done this for him. And so plainly now, all would be anticipating a change of attitude on her part, and if so, all the customary and formal last rites due to any such distinguished man. In other words, he would have won. It would appear as if she had altered her views and condoned his unfettered self-directing actions. But no, never should they do this to her! Insulted and triumphed over to the very last! Never!  
(p. 270)

But at this moment a letter is delivered at her door, a letter Frank has written just before his death, and in which he remorsefully asks for her forgiveness (while reminding her that he has left her well-provided for in his will). The effect is predictable; Aileen surrenders once more.

The episode finds its source in the Yerkes story, to a certain extent. Mrs. Yerkes did find Emilie Grigsby staying with her husband;

she did refuse to visit him on his deathbed, although she eventually relented and allowed his body to be brought to the house. But Dreiser has chosen to omit a dramatic event which actually occurred: Mrs. Yerkes and Miss Grigsby in fact met face to face outside Yerkes's room, and the ensuing uproar made the headlines.<sup>5</sup> In altering this detail, Dreiser is being true to Aileen's character, for the aging Aileen is long past being capable of entertaining such a scene; this Aileen is no longer the woman who attacked Rita Sohlberg.

Dreiser's account of the rest of Aileen's life is sketched in: the reading of the will, the dispersal of Cowperwood's wealth via the chicanery of courtroom politics, the final auction at which the last of the objects and possessions accumulated over the years of their marriage are sold, Aileen's death. The money disappears because Cowperwood himself is not around to protect it, but also because it was never a real fortune at all, just a "house of cards" (The Titan, p. 100), a mirage. And also because, ironically, of another wrong judgement of character made by Cowperwood during his life-time: his trusted secretary Jamieson, whom he has made executor of his will, is a crook. Life for Aileen has ended a long time before her actual death. And yet Dreiser communicates a small sense of victory for her when he offers a last glimpse of her: her name carved in stone beside that of her husband-- AILEEN BUTLER COWPERWOOD. She had sacrificed everything for that name: so little, so ironic, an achievement, but forever hers.

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<sup>5</sup>Gerber, "The Alabaster Protegé", p. 226.

IV

THE IDEAL: BERENICE

The critic Richard Lehan writes:

When Dreiser introduces a character, he delimits his personality and the character always remains true to this essential self. There is no existential realm in Dreiser's novels, no character over-leaping himself, having limitless possibility.<sup>1</sup>

While this generalization is true when applied to almost any character one could name in the Trilogy--Lillian, Butler, Aileen, even Cowperwood himself--there is one to whom it does not fit: Berenice Fleming.

Berenice suffers, as do many notable characters in fiction, through her creator's attempt to make her a kind of symbol as well as a dramatically realized woman. While other women in the Trilogy manage successfully to embody symbolic, as well as realistic, roles, Berenice fails, and the reasons for this failure are complex. First, she symbolizes something not easily expressed in a few words. Cowperwood himself defines it as some sort of ideal beauty, not the "physical perfection" (The Financier, p. 81) of nature which he sees initially in Aileen, but something more transcendent. But Dreiser means to imply even more than this:

Berenice is the ideal woman, as not only Cowperwood, but Dreiser, sees her; she achieves the perfect balance--physical, intellectual, moral--that Dreiser feels is necessary for harmonious human existence. She alone is able to walk the thin line between the resigned appreciation of

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<sup>1</sup>Lehan, p. 109.

reality, and the suffering of disillusionment. Since Dreiser views his ideal in terms of a shifting balance of forces, rather than as a fixed property, representation of that ideal becomes more difficult. Second, the character of Berenice, as Dreiser initially conceives it, is not a promising vehicle for his message. Throughout The Titan, and more particularly in the first part of The Stoic, she comes across most clearly as a nasty bit of work, a breathtakingly beautiful, clear-minded young woman who knows just what she wants out of life and has no qualms about using any method at her disposal to get it. In other words, she out-Cowperwoods Cowperwood. This aspect of her character is essential to Dreiser's conception, but at the same time, it makes belief in her final conversion extremely difficult to achieve. The third reason for Berenice's failure as a successful characterization is closely connected with the second. Berenice is very much a character of The Stoic, a novel written when Dreiser was in his final physical decline, and left unfinished at his death. It is little more than a shell of a book, reflecting its author's knowledge that he was dying and he had better get his novel written while he had the chance. As a result, the ending, with Berenice's lightning transformation, via her experience in India and her new-found faith in eastern religion, from materialistic socialite to philanthropic social worker (having discovered within herself a "deep maternal instinct" (The Stoic, p. 308)), becomes nothing more than ludicrous. Oddly, Dreiser did have some justification for this turn to the story in his source material--Emilie Grigsby did travel to India in her later years to study Yoga, although there is no evidence her motives were at all related to those of

Berenice and she did not return to build a hospital for the poor--but it is likely, as Philip Gerber suggests,<sup>2</sup> that a primary influence on Dreiser at this time, weak and open to suggestion as he was, was that of his sentimental and not overly perceptive wife Helen, who had dabbled in oriental philosophy, and who did in fact construct the unfinished closing chapter of The Stoic from notes Dreiser had left. Perhaps though, the best approach is not to try to rationalize away Dreiser's failure at all, but rather to accept the conclusion of the Trilogy, and Berenice's part in it, in all its sheer unbelievability. For what could be a more fitting compliment to give a writer who asserted that "the most futile thing in this world is any attempt, perhaps, at exact definition of character"(The Financier, p. 82), and that "life cannot be put into any mold, and the attempt might as well be abandoned at once"(The Financier, p. 131)?

On some levels, the character of Berenice succeeds very well. Dreiser is able to suggest with some conviction the semi-idealized role she plays in relation to Cowperwood at least; she is all things to him-- daughter, mother, mistress, wife (in all but the legal sense), friend-- and she shifts from one role to the other with a chameleon-like skill which Dreiser makes totally plausible. Her gradual intrusion into the story is also handled well. As Robert Penn Warren indicates,<sup>3</sup> her appearance is foreshadowed in The Titan by the account of Cowperwood's affair with Stephanie Platow; Stephanie, like Berenice, is an artist,

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<sup>2</sup>Gerber, "The Alabaster Protégé", p. 228.

<sup>3</sup>Warren, p. 83.

and she defeats Cowperwood at his own game. She is a consummate actor-- every pose she takes creates an effective illusion--and Cowperwood is unable to deal with her. Also like Berenice, Stephanie "reminded him of himself." (p. 217) She represents something--"illusion within illusion"<sup>4</sup>--as Warren puts it--that Cowperwood is unwilling or unable to comprehend. As Cowperwood rationalizes it to himself, "he could not forgive her for not loving him perfectly, as had so many others." (p. 218)

The Stephanie Platow episode not only looks forward to Berenice's part in Cowperwood's story, but also echoes another event, from The Financier: it offers an ironic comment on Cowperwood's reaction to the outrage felt by Butler over the seduction of Aileen. At that time, wondering "how he might feel if it were his own little [daughter] Lillian", Cowperwood "did not believe he would make much fuss over the matter" (p. 195). People should be allowed to live their own lives, he feels. And yet now, faced with Stephanie's infidelity, he follows Butler's course exactly, employing a detective, and bursting in to catch Stephanie and her lover together. The emotion which runs through him is different from that felt by Butler, but it is of equal intensity. Once more Dreiser implies that Cowperwood's understanding of human nature, even (or perhaps particularly) his own personality, is incomplete.

Dreiser prepares the way for Berenice in other, even more subtle, ways than by his introduction of Stephanie. As has been mentioned, Cowperwood, until The Stoic, seems to exist outside of time; he appears

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 83.

to remain constantly young--perhaps ageless is a better word--while those around him grow old. And Berenice is inextricably connected with the moment at which time catches up with him. From then on it is as if she gradually drains him of his strength and youth, paralleling the deadening effect Cowperwood has earlier had on Aileen. But leading up to this moment are several references to Cowperwood's age, reminders that he is in his fifties and the women he associates with are much younger, although he refuses to allow such reminders to affect him. Stephanie almost breaks through his shell of invincibility; her betrayal "smacked of age, his ultimate displacement by youth. It cut and hurt."(p. 217) He escapes only by shutting her out of his mind: "He was determined that his path and that of Stephanie Platow should never be allowed to cross again."(p. 221) At the end of The Titan there is no such escape. He is utterly alone, despondent:

But as for him he was tired, sick of Chicago, sick of this interminable contest. Only recently he had promised himself that if he were to turn this great trick he would never again attempt anything so desperate or requiring so much effort. He would not need to. The size of his fortune made it of little worth. Besides, in spite of his tremendous vigor, he was getting on.(p. 498)

It is at this point that Berenice comes to him, not because of his irresistible attraction, but because she feels that he needs her. Moreover, she is also willing to admit, as he is not, that no victory is ever perfect, that something is always lost:

"You bring me here." she replied, with an indefinable something in her voice which was at once a challenge and a confession. "I thought from what I had just been reading that you might really need me now. . . . Besides, I ought to pay sometime."  
"Berenice!" he exclaimed reproachfully.(p. 499)

The relationship begins on her terms; the final decision is hers. She

lays down conditions, and she keeps him at a distance. The evolution of the affair in The Stoic confirms her control. As well, the closing lines to The Titan offer a significant contrast to those of The Financier. Now it is Cowperwood who possesses the romantic illusions, who is seeing the rosy future stretched out before him:

"Berenice!" He smothered her cheek and hair.  
 "Not so close please. And there aren't to be any other ladies, unless you want me to change my mind."  
 "Not another one, as I hope to keep you. You will share everything I have...."  
 For answer--  
 How strange are realities as opposed to illusion!(p. 499)

Berenice may not be able to see into the future, but she knows her man, and she knows her own motives.

The groundwork for the gradual transfer of power from Cowperwood to Berenice is laid in The Titan, when Cowperwood first confesses to her that he now believes there is such a thing as an ideal, and that for him the ideal is Berenice herself:

As he said this Cowperwood realized that for him he was making a very remarkable confession. He had come here primarily to magnetize her and control her judgement. As a matter of fact, it was almost the other way about. She was almost dominating him.(p. 422)

He is forced to try to explain himself, something which has never before happened, because it has never become necessary; he has always been "relentless . . . in hewing life to his theory"(The Titan, p. 456), a course which does not allow for explanation. Now he wonders "at the ingenuity and complexity of her mind--and of his own, for that matter--of all mind, indeed. Deep below it lay, staggering him at times by its fathomless reaches."(The Titan, p. 422) This is an incredible admission from a man who has simply looked at Aileen and taken "her mental measurement exactly."(The Financier, p. 81)

The transfer is completed in The Stoic, and the scene which most clearly, and symbolically, represents this is one in which Berenice brings Frank out, at dusk, to see a snowman she has made of him. She has captured his likeness remarkably well, somehow, and Cowperwood is struck by it. She is in a playful mood, but Cowperwood is in a way bothered by what she has done. She takes his cane and gives it to the snowman:

"Now, see how perfect you are! All snow and cones and snow buttons." And she reached up and kissed the mouth.

"Bevy! If you're going to do that, come here!" and he seized her in his arms, feeling that there was something here that was eerie, elfin. "Berenice, dear, I swear you puzzle me. Have I a real flesh-and-blood girl, or a sprite, a witch?"

"Didn't you know?" and she turned and spread her fingers at him. "I'm a witch, and I can turn you into snow and ice" and she came eerily toward him.

"Berenice, for heaven's sake! What nonsense! Sometimes I think you are the one who is bewitched. But you may witch me all you care to, only don't leave me." And he kissed her and held her tight in his arms.(p. 58)

The scene seems to take on a nightmarish quality. Cowperwood tries to dispel the feeling, but Berenice is running this show, although she seems simply to be playing a game:

But she drew away and turned back to the snowman. "There now!" she exclaimed, "you've gone and spoiled it all. He's not real, after all, darling. And I made him so real. He was so big and cold, my poor snowman, so that no one will have ever truly known him but me." And all of a sudden she dashed the figure apart with Cowperwood's cane. "See, I made you, and now I'm unmaking you!" As she talked she powdered the snow through her gloved fingers, while he gazed at her wonderingly.

"Come, come, Bevy, sweet. What are you saying? And as for making and unmaking, do both, but don't leave me. You are taking me into strange places, new and strange moods, a wonder world of your own, and I am happy to go. Do you believe that?"

"Of course, dear, of course," she now replied as brightly and as differently as though no such scene had ever been. . . . She appeared to have come out of some trance or illusion of her own, concerning which he would have liked to question her, but he felt that he should not.(p. 58)

Although Dreiser is being rather obvious here, the passage seems to work, and it becomes one of the comparatively rare instances in which Dreiser is able to merge his realistic and idealized conceptions of Berenice. Perhaps it is because the image of the snowman is so perfectly suited to his purpose, representing as it does both the coldness and remoteness--the inhumanity--of Cowperwood, and his vulnerability. Each sentence has its own significance, from Cowperwood's repeated plea "Don't leave me" which echoes Aileen's frantic pleading of The Titan, to Berenice's destruction of the snow figure with Cowperwood's own cane, strengthening the reader's growing perception that Cowperwood himself bears much of the responsibility for his failure to succeed perfectly, either as a financier or as a human being.

Berenice exercises her power over Cowperwood on all levels. Even their sexual relationship is for him "shaking and reducing" (The Stoic, p. 59), and "it was not Berenice but himself who was most ravished mentally and sensually." (p. 59) In fact, Berenice is not ravished at all:

And on the purely sensual side, there was something about her which from the beginning not only surprised but enticed him. . . . She refused to permit herself either to be lost in or wholly ravished by the male. . . . On the contrary, and always, however amorous or fevered she might be, still she was quite definitely conscious of her charms. (p. 59)

This ability to maintain a sense of reserve under any and all conditions attracts Cowperwood because it is closely akin to his own talent for detachment. Ironically, it is in his relationships with women that Cowperwood inevitably loses this detachment.

From the time Berenice steps into Cowperwood's life, she "makes"

him; she shapes his future, puts his ideas into his head. Lillian Cowperwood had known absolutely nothing of her husband's business affairs (nor had she wanted to), and Aileen had been no more than a sympathetic listener when he felt the need to talk about his financial problems, but Berenice is almost an equal partner. It is she who suggests that he investigate prospects in London, and she is also the first to think of diverting Aileen by hiring someone like Bruce Tollifer; she is, however, of the opinion that "this idea was really too shrewd and too cunning to come from her as a suggestion to Cowperwood" but also "too shrewd to be neglected." (The Stoic, p. 19) She knows Cowperwood well though: "Her mother, perhaps, might throw out the hint to him. Once the bare thought of it was flicked before him, he could be counted on to react in a practical manner." (p. 19) Berenice and Cowperwood have, in fact, undergone an ironic reversal in roles: in the beginning, Cowperwood had "made" Berenice; he had supported her mother financially, made sure Berenice would be introduced in the right circles, made her his ward. Perhaps because of his influence, she had grown up to accept points of view very near his own. The two of them very closely resemble one another--an identification essential to Dreiser's purpose, and one which aids in making his initial portrait of Berenice realistic and credible, but which is seen by the end of The Stoic to have been so well done that it helps to make the final switch in character hopelessly unbelievable. Berenice is practical about handling problems; in fact she is too practical. The Bruce Tollifer episode allies her with Cowperwood in what is really one of his nastier coups, and she makes his favourite mistake of failing to understand that

human feelings and dignity are at stake, not just the practical matter of keeping Aileen out of everyone's hair for a few months. When Aileen discovers the truth, the only concern of either Frank or Berenice is that she must be calmed down to ensure that she will keep quiet about the matter. There is no room for remorse. Berenice's attitude at this time is only the logical culmination of Dreiser's gradual build-up of her character, but he has made this materialistic side of it so strong and compelling that when he comes to insert the humanity later on we find he has not really left himself enough room.

Like Cowperwood, Berenice never really was a child; she enters the world of The Titan already grown-up and self-assured. She knows what she wants ("I think I should prefer to be unhappy with wealth than to be without it"(The Titan, p. 400)), and she has the talent to get it. Dreiser continually uses to describe her the same adjectives he applies to Cowperwood: "shrewd", "self-controlled", "frank", "condescending", "superior", "aggressive", "subtle". She also has a "wondrous natural charm"(The Titan, p. 326), something Cowperwood also has, and which he always uses to his own advantage. She, it must be admitted, is never shown to be so completely mercenary as he is. She is, of course, not often in a position to do much damage to anyone, and perhaps this is the difference. Her acting skill can be admired on its own merits (particularly when Cowperwood is the victim of her role-playing), but when Frank strikes a phony pose, it is somehow threatening. An excellent example of Dreiser's artistry in putting forward the innocent side of her talent for simulation occurs in The Titan:

Once when she had been lost in dreamy contemplation, her hands

folded on her knees, her eyes fixed on the stage, both Braxmar and Cowperwood had studied her parted lips and fine profile with common impulses of emotion and enthusiasm. Realizing after the mood was gone that they had been watching her, Berenice had continued the pose for a moment, then had waked as from a dream with a sigh.  
(p. 408)

The scene neatly illustrates both her adept acting skill and the cool calculation of her mind, but here there is nothing sinister about either. Rather, the effect is to make Berenice more attractive.

But it is clear that Dreiser is treading a narrow line when he chooses to idealize a woman with such a chilly array of talents. She is a manipulator, but she must manipulate carefully, or she will lose sympathy altogether. She must be like Cowperwood, but she must have the potential to be more than Cowperwood. The degree of Dreiser's success in solving the difficulty is arguable, but there is evidence he was aware of the problem. In The Titan, he tries to balance her knowing opportunism with a kind of youthful naiveté:

Youth is optimistic, and Berenice, in spite of her splendid mind, was so young. She saw life as a game, a good chance, that could be played in many ways. Cowperwood's theory of things began to appeal to her. One must create one's own career, carve it out, or remain horribly dull or bored, dragged along at the chariot wheels of others.(p. 482)

So, in one sense, the impression she gives of being grown-up and old beyond her years is partly an illusion. And by having Cowperwood's philosophy appeal to her because of her immaturity, Dreiser, by implication at least, condemns the philosophy. Berenice's close association with Cowperwood also, oddly enough, redeems her. Viewed in relation to him, she cannot help but seem attractive to a certain extent.

Dreiser may have trouble making Berenice outdistance Cowperwood in human and moral terms, but he is on slightly firmer ground when he

tries to express her intellectual superiority. Somewhat paradoxically, his success is partly due to his restraint in the matter: he refrains from putting too many words into her mouth and allows his readers to share Cowperwood's reactions, feel her intelligence through Cowperwood's sense of inadequacy in relation to her. Later on, in The Stoic, she easily steps into her role of leader and teacher. Together she and Frank tour the historical landmarks of Britain, Berenice thrilled with the sense of history they communicate to her, Cowperwood bored to tears:

Cowperwood, who saw things in the large, could scarcely endure this minutiae. He was but little interested in the affairs of bygone men and women, being so intensely engaged with the living present.  
(p. 137)

He has not changed in this respect since his school days. His mind cannot completely bridge the gap between the actual and the abstract. He sees in the beauty of the cathedral at Canterbury only the contradiction between real life, as he sees it, and life as represented falsely by the church. He looks into the past for once, but all he can see are "selfish and self-preserving creatures like himself"(p. 137). He has the ability only to extrapolate from his own experience, which has been in a narrow, restricted field, not to look beyond it. Berenice, however, showing some benefit from the "liberal" education Cowperwood has provided for her, and applying her own native intelligence, can move intellectually beyond Cowperwood, and, in fact, attempt to guide him. Admittedly, her influence is slight.

Cowperwood's relationship with Berenice is unique in the Trilogy. He is "a mixture of father and lover"(The Stoic, p. 92); he never knows exactly where he stands in relation to her. He is proud of her, and her achievements, as a father is proud. Meanwhile, she gives him

"a sense of added strength"(p. 92), which is illusory, because immediately he becomes involved with her his strength begins to fail. He comes to lean on her, rather in the way of a person whose eyesight, adequate if not perfect before, comes to depend on spectacles soon after he starts to wear them, so he can never go without them again. It is a paradoxical position for someone who has to this point "had little faith in women aside from their value as objects of art"(The Titan, p. 112). Berenice is stronger than Cowperwood, in ways the other women of the Trilogy are not, but not because she is "more like a man", as Henry Higgins would wish it. Rather, she is strong in her own unique, human, one might say feminine, way. Although she is in general far removed from any sort of female stereotype, Berenice remains every inch a woman.

She does, however, offer a sharp contrast to Aileen, who is also very much a woman. She is as cool as Aileen is impassioned, as intellectual as Aileen is instinctive. Berenice is always one step ahead of Cowperwood in any conversation; Aileen is always a step behind. At the same time, Berenice and Aileen are both very different from Lillian. Yet Cowperwood, who changes remarkably little over the course of the novels, becomes infatuated with each of them in turn. Cowperwood accounts for the temporary, and diversified, nature of his attractions toward women by saying that he has matured, that his two marriages were "mistake[s] due to inexperience"(The Stoic, p. 4). But the psychological and philosophical implications run deeper. First, Cowperwood is simply a man with a sexual appetite too huge to be satisfied by one woman. Dreiser suffered from the same problem himself, and worried

about it a great deal, according to evidence gathered by his biographers. In The Titan Cowperwood's appetite assumes proportions which may be categorized as pathological, particularly when it is considered in association with his other character traits: his amorality, his ruthlessness, his rashness and compulsion to court danger, all concealed under a translucent veneer of charm. Dreiser has, in fact, written a case-history of a psychopath, if one wishes to view the novels this way. But as well, Dreiser is trying to portray in Cowperwood a man whose vision is incomplete, whose mind is attracted to the imponderable, but who is unwilling to take the last step past the fringe of the totally rational. As a result, he seeks to find physical representations of the shadowy abstractions he cannot understand. Beautiful women move him in a way nothing else can: he sees in them something of the mystery of the universe. Unfortunately, human beings cannot be confined to the narrow symbolic boxes Cowperwood wants to supply for them. Of the three women most closely associated with him, only Berenice escapes more or less unscathed, because she has some awareness of what he is trying to do. Further, she comes closest to the actual embodiment of an ideal, even if the ideal is ultimately expressed in terms of Dreiser's half-digested version of Hindu philosophy.

Dreiser--revealing his kinship with Cowperwood perhaps--is most successful, however, when he chooses to communicate his thought through the use of concrete images. Though he recognizes that physical force and presence is not a complete answer (as Cowperwood does not), Dreiser is willing to admit that it is an important aspect of successfully balanced existence. Cowperwood controls--to a point--because he is

there. Berenice can control Cowperwood--but only when they are together. On the other hand, those who are unable, through weakness or stupidity, to impose however slightly their individuality against an unyielding and uncaring universe, those people, such as Stener or even Lillian, may be worthy of sympathy, but certainly not admiration, at least in terms of these three novels. At the same time, Dreiser remains true to his contention that man is very much a part of his environment, that his possessions are as much a part of him as are his fingers. Dreiser introduces this idea through the image of a house, built by Cowperwood according to his individual wishes and taste, and the image subtly recurs throughout the Trilogy. Each house the Cowperwoods live in--and they live in many--represents its occupants at a clearly definable stage, and each has associations relevant to their various states of mind. Dreiser does not impose this structure; it comes easily and convincingly out of his peculiar, dense, naturalistic style. Cowperwood's career can be traced through a study of the women he has associated with; it can also be followed through an examination of the houses he has lived in. The next to last, reappearance of this image is clearly associated with Berenice. As Cowperwood's Chicago career draws to a close, he becomes more and more obsessed with her. She is in New York; he wants to be near her. "Cowperwood would scarcely have cared to admit to himself how great a part this played in a thought which had recently been creeping into his mind. It was that of erecting a splendid house in New York."(The Titan, p. 347) Later it is made clear how important this house is to him; it is "one of the central achievements of his latter years"(The Titan, p. 398). As well, his idea

for it is that it "should not only reflect his private tastes as to a home, but should have the more enduring qualities of a palace or even a museum, which might stand as a monument to his memory."(p. 398) It of course does not: after his death, the house is sold, its furniture and paintings are dispersed, and nothing remains to remind anyone of Cowperwood's part in its construction. But through Berenice--so closely associated with this house--his memory does live on; she erects a hospital in his name. Cowperwood, with his singleminded faith in himself and the money he can draw to himself, fails, while Berenice, more open and human, succeeds.

The hospital symbolizes both the apotheosis of Dreiser's intentions in writing the Trilogy and the nadir of his technical achievement. His characterization of Berenice falls victim to this confused conflict of purpose and the realization of it. If the women of the Trilogy provide clues to the discovery of missing factors in Cowperwood's character, Berenice is perhaps the most important of them all. Unfortunately, she emerges, in Dreiser's portrayal, as something unequal to the sum of all her parts.

## CONCLUSION

The Trilogy is full of unbalanced people: Lillian Cowperwood, who has no imagination and only repressed emotion; Aileen, who has imagination and emotion, but no common sense; and Frank Cowperwood, who has sense, a little bit of imagination, but almost no humanity. Only Berenice has a balanced character, and it is she who succeeds. Dreiser sees life in terms of the paradox between illusion and reality: the victims of illusion will inevitably fail, but at the same time illusions are necessary to maintain one's sanity. Berenice is the only one who manages to escape the vicious circle, most directly because of the transcending conception of reality she has acquired in India, but also--and more believably--because she is able to make the most of her varied gifts while escaping the disfigurement of being extravagantly gifted in any one area, as are Cowperwood and Aileen, for example. Cowperwood's talent in one field so dominates him that while he can succeed on one level, because of his talent, he is doomed to failure on another because of his narrowness.

Ultimately, then, the over-riding tone of the novels is ironic, ranging from the central irony of Cowperwood's position to the ubiquitous, incidental, often humorous, ironies which crop up throughout the three books, and help make them memorable. On one side is Cowperwood the erstwhile Titan, failing grandly in the midst of his success; on the other is the Cowperwood who has reservations about using a sex scandal

to blackmail the recalcitrant mayor of Chicago because he (Cowperwood) does not "like to mix heart affairs with politics" (The Titan, p. 298), while he himself is carrying on intrigues with the wives and daughters of almost every powerful business enemy he has in the city. The first Cowperwood is interesting philosophically; the second compels attention personally.

The other characters of the Trilogy, particularly the women, assist in making these two Cowperwoods merge into one. For the novels are densely constructed books; the human relationships complex, interconnected, and ultimately crucial to a complete understanding of Dreiser's larger themes. Cowperwood is an inhuman, human figure, a bizarre manifestation of an aspect of human ambition, and the women with whom he becomes involved serve as his contacts with normalcy, the description of the relationships acting as a medium through which Dreiser communicates with his readers.

Dreiser is concerned with human motivations. More than almost any writer, he gives emphasis to social motives: Clyde murders Roberta because he wants to move up in society; Cowperwood turns away from Aileen because she is not presentable among the mannered gentry of the upper classes he wishes to join. That emphasis, and the recognition of its particular relevance to the American scene, have helped secure Dreiser's position among American novelists, representing as they do one of the few points on which critics of Dreiser can agree. But Dreiser's study of motivation in the Cowperwood Trilogy (or in An American Tragedy for that matter) goes much deeper; he examines human drives from almost every angle. His characters are complex mixtures of physical and mental

urges, and none is more complex than Cowperwood, who is driven by the demands of a vigorous body and a seeking mind. His world is the world of finance, and to him "finance is an art" (The Financier, p. 120); it is his life; it is the beginning and end of his knowledge and experience. So when he comes to step out of that world--as he must do--his only approach is to apply the same principles and methods which have served him well in finance. His mind is not of the first order, though it is keen; he cannot fully comprehend the "artistic", he can only be attracted by it. So he amasses a great art collection, even though his appreciation of it is superficial, and strongly influenced by outside opinion. He is attracted to women in the same way he is attracted by great art, but unfortunately he never seems to realize that the same principles of acquisition and control which serve him well in finance, and which provide him with the trappings, if not the essence, of artistic sensibility, cannot be applied to living, breathing, thinking human beings. He stops being simply an inadequate thinker and becomes a destroyer. Dreiser's achievement is in his ability to make these women something more than Cowperwood's "objects of art"; they must be--and are--worthy of compassion.

The Cowperwood Trilogy is also concerned with the illusions and ironies which play around the corners of the surfaces of things. It is peopled with actors: poor ones, like Aileen, and consummately good ones, such as Berenice, whose "eyes lied to all the world." (The Titan, p. 321) The leading actor, the star, is Cowperwood; the other players are there to give him support--or to steal scenes from him, as the case may be. Their stage is industrial America at a particular point in time, and the

props are the opulent period costumes, the houses with their rich, stylish furnishings: material extensions of the actors, themselves, in Dreiser's view. That Cowperwood, for example, is, partially defined by the houses he occupies has been indicated. The hospital built by Berenice (which he does not live to see) becomes his apparent living legacy. But the home which most nearly defines him is his last: his tomb. It is a magnificent, impressive edifice, its completion perfectly timed (like all of Cowperwood's successful business conquests) to coincide with the death of its first inmate, a neat touch which provides an apt postscript to the story of his life. Moreover, the sight of this "gray, austere, and northern version of a Greek temple" (The Stoic, p. 272) (Cowperwood's houses are always architecturally derivative, never original) prompts one last--and in the end perhaps the most revealing--insight into the nature of the man to whom Dreiser has devoted three long novels. Appropriately, if not characteristically, the insight is offered by Aileen, who, as she comes "into full view of the tomb . . . was again and finally impressed by her husband's power of self-presentation." (p. 272) Cowperwood has created one final illusion. Like his prototype Yerkes, Cowperwood "did for the hour illuminate the terrors and wonders of individuality." (The Titan, p. 500) But the light fades. For a brief moment, Cowperwood, like Yerkes, is a Titan: within a few years of his death he merits no more attention than a footnote in a history book.

In fiction, it is often in the final analysis more valuable, and more involving, to study a character through the eyes and impressions of those who surround him, rather than to rely on the thoughts and opinions

of the character himself. Nowhere is this generalization more appropriate than in the case of Dreiser's Trilogy, in which the hero's perception of himself is both misleading and persuasive. He is forced to betray his true nature through his relations with others. Cowperwood may be the central figure, but it is the women of the Trilogy who give him life, and substance, and because of this, his story attains the dignity of art.

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