

# How Much Dreiser Does a Man Need? | Shalom Carmy

*Authors*

Theodore Dreiser is ranked among our great authors; he was a syllabus mainstay for as polished a master as Saul Bellow. Yet he is neither among the great English-language prose stylists nor a writer of nuanced or profound moral vision. His idea of human life was crudely mechanical and deterministic. When, some years ago, I studied [Sister Carrie](#) and [An American Tragedy](#), I had something other than literary style or ethical enlightenment in mind. I was interested in how novelists, some committed to free will, others to determinism, succeed in communicating a sense of freedom or lack thereof through the shaping of a story and the description of their protagonists' decisions. Think what you will of his philosophy, Dreiser makes determinism plausible, depicting convincingly in his novels the feeling of passivity and of being driven by impulse. The man knew his characters and their milieu. Reading him was a self-imposed duty that turned out to be a pleasure.

White-collar crime is in the news. In that spirit, I returned to Dreiser, this time to [The Financier](#), first of the Cowperwood trilogy. The book starts with Frank Cowperwood's childhood discovery of moneymaking's delights, and chronicles his rise in the financial and political world of post-Civil War Philadelphia. Dreiser depicts the breakdown of his first marriage and his affair with the daughter of a powerful political ally who is thereby transformed into an implacable enemy. The narrative culminates in his imprisonment for fraud after his shady practices and alliances with politicians are uncovered. The story is fairly close to the life of the mass transit developer Charles Yerkes, and Dreiser knows how to tell it.

At the same time, I also read [Why They Do It](#), by the Harvard Business School professor Eugene Soltes, who details a variety of big white-collar cases, including interviews of the perpetrators. Dreiser's long, somewhat-clunky-though-unfailingly-entertaining American literary classic, based on one old-time manipulator, covers the same ground. For those interested in reality, doesn't Soltes's broad, nonfictional survey of the contemporary scene better inform us? Dreiser and Soltes together demonstrate that books-juggling accounting schemes have not changed that much since 1870 and often unravel due to similar unforeseen accidents. But the historians could have taught me this efficiently, with more detail and greater accuracy.

That said, history books cannot replace novels. We read Dickens or George Eliot because these writers have vision and insight. They show us new and striking perspectives on the world, bringing to the fore aspects often invisible in works of nonfiction. They articulate a profound understanding of human nature, illuminating the often-obscure motives and reasoning that guide our behaviors. They give us something we cannot get from a social scientist, historian, or journalist.

This kind of greatness is not what we typically find in Dreiser. In *The Financier*, for example, the boy Cowperwood is fascinated by an unequal contest in a fish tank where a lobster patiently devours a squid. It is a vivid scene foreshadowing the amoral, competitive business world that Cowperwood seeks to conquer. It's also a

textbook example of an early-twentieth-century novelist's crude Social Darwinism: survival of the ruthless. Dreiser occasionally throws in a word about Cowperwood's personality. In his business pursuits and amorous affairs, he comments, the protagonist simply does not feel the inhibitions that limit other people. Soltes says the same of Bernard Madoff. Dreiser is probably right about the advantage that a man without conscience has in the single-minded pursuit of wealth, power, and success. But we know this already. It doesn't require art.

Dreiser's art does, however, provide me with a perspective that I could not otherwise gain easily. I am trained first and foremost in the study of Torah. This inculcates a discipline of close, attentive reading that is labor intensive. One mines the text carefully with the expectation of many hidden treasures. This has shaped my approach to the humanities, which is about close reading. Those of my habit of mind value authors who, in the words of Keats's letter to Shelley, "load every rift of [their] subject with ore." I seek after sharp psychological insights or astonishingly apt turns of phrase. This kind of reading, even in a secular context, has much in common with Paul Griffiths's idea of "religious reading," which is characterized by close attention born of the confidence that what is being read has many precious truths to reveal. Such reading is well suited to sacred writ, lyrical poetry, and lapidary fiction and prose. Reading in this spirit allows the narrative to deepen our understanding of moral choices and the subtle nuances of human character.

For all its rewards, the tradition of intensive reading to which I am devoted is not generally good at conveying the way life is shaped by the slow passage of time and the agonizingly prolonged playing out of circumstances. Straightforward narrative prose—and workaday prose at that—rather than coruscating dialogue or penetrating character analysis, is often best for piling on the mundane scenes of human desperation that capture the seemingly interminable rehearsal of hopes and fears, the day-by-day, hour-by-hour scheming to achieve one's ends or forestall the inevitable.

The story of Joseph in the book of Genesis would be magnificent literature even if it were not canonized as Scripture. Yet the attempted seduction of Joseph by Potiphar's wife, his unjust imprisonment, and his finding favor with the prison authorities and his fellow prisoners are all related in a few verses. We hear nothing of his efforts to clear his name of false accusation. He requests the minister of the cups to remember him when his position is restored. But all we are subsequently told is that the minister is restored to his position and "did not remember Joseph but forgot him."

Midrashic reading fills in the gaps. We can read between the lines or use our imaginations to add the details that the laconic biblical narrative omits. But these strategies of reading, excellent as they are, nevertheless move too quickly to bring home the anxious grittiness of the accused criminal or the convict grasping at every opportunity to improve an unpromising situation.

Dreiser has his literary limitations. Cowperwood's undoing and his struggle against it are as deterministic as his success. His character is neither admirable nor extraordinary. Dreiser's gift is the ability to maintain our engagement with his prosaic story. In the last few hundred pages of the book, when he is facing unavoidable disgrace, Cowperwood continues to engage the reader as he anxiously intercedes with every contact that might supply help in his hopeless effort to escape prosecution or avoid conviction. He devises effective strategies to befriend the prison staff and dreams of a comeback. His distress, his methods of coping with it, his

relentless search for rescue, and his desperate resourcefulness are typical of life as we know and live it. If we read literature to better understand ourselves and others, this is the kind of vicarious experience we ought not to miss. Dreiser is not Holy Writ. No secular literature is. Yet he has his place, and we should be grateful for the pleasure and insight he yields.

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