

-ENGLISH B CATEGORY 3-

**HOW DOES “OIL!” BY UPTON
SINCLAIR, REFLECT THE IMPACT OF
ETHICAL PREDICAMENTS IN THE WAY
ONE PURSUES LIFE, IN THE 1910’S?**

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Analysis of the Research Question

Oil! by Upton Sinclair, written in 1927, is a novel of power dynamics in the 1910's in the United States. It dwells upon the socio-economic, socio-cultural artefacts and societal structure through the story of an oilman and his son, and explores themes such as such as corporate greed, and the integration of socialism in America.

The book starts off by mainly describing the events around 'Dad' to elaborate his power and genius, but through the middle, it tells and describes the events surrounding Bunny, giving the readers an image of his predicaments, between his ethical beliefs and his state of power. The main theme that will be explored in this essay, is the impact of the ethical predicaments and contradictions that Bunny Ross, faces, on his life. To explore this theme, certain elements are discussed such as the external reality of the novel's plot, which takes place during the 1910's to late 1930's and the worker, business and national perspective within the novel are evaluated.

The reason why this book was picked was to reflect the values and the ethics of the driving forces in the 1910's, which revolved around the oil industry, to today's ethics and values of the driving forces. The content of the story resonates the ethical predicaments one might face in today's capitalist system, that is based on maximizing the profit (*Smith, 2021*), between one's materialistic comfort and principals. *Oil!* takes the reader through the adventure of a young mind, who acquires a sense of awareness for the events that revolve around him, identifying the moralities of the situations.

Specifically, in the United States, because of rapid industrialization and urbanization, labor unrest and social inequality has increased (*Friedman, 1962*). However, it also led the United States to become one of the leading countries of the world, maintaining and keeping its power and relevance still up to this day.

The author of the book, Upton Sinclair, was an American author and political activist who advocated for various progressive causes, including workers' rights, socialism, and environmentalism (*Encyclopedia, 2021*). In account of this fact, Sinclair also elaborated his advocacy on workers' rights and socialism with *Oil!*, using historical references, like The Bolshevik Revolution and Teapot Dome Scandal. Both events are evaluated while examining the research question, since both of them are pinpoint events in the United States' history, which revealed the values and ethical implementations of power in the 1910's(*Brody, 2011*).

Part I: American History of Labor, in the 1910's

Examining the external reality of the book, the 1910's was a decade of great tumult and change in the United States, reflecting the ethics and values that drove the system at the time. It was a moment of peace and prosperity when the decade started. Due in major part to the expansion of massive corporations that sold goods all over the world, America became the richest country in the world. William Howard Taft (1857–1930), who served as president, followed Theodore Roosevelt (1858–1919) as the head of the Republican Party, which supported American companies. As the number

of car owners and household power users increased year over year with the increase in oil use and many Americans experienced an improvement in their level of living.

The United States' long-standing foreign policy goal of avoiding "entanglement" in other countries' conflicts saw significant change during this time period as well. World War I (1914–18), a horrible war that would kill nearly nine million lives, began in 1914, including the majority of Europe. Due to its economic ties to nations on both sides of the conflict, the United States strove to maintain its impartial position (*Neiberg, 2013*). However, American involvement in the war against Germany began in 1917 because of German attacks on American ships and the country's longstanding ties with England and France. One hundred thousand of the two million American soldiers who served abroad were killed, half of them through sickness. Although President Wilson hoped that American involvement in the war would “make the world safe for democracy” and lead to more American engagement overseas, senators in Congress refused to ratify Wilson’s peace treaty.

Several of the country's racial and economic problems were brought to light by the war. Foreign trade was becoming more and more important to American enterprises. Some have claimed that the war was fought to keep foreign markets open to US commerce because it had jeopardized international trade. Labor unions were founded as a result of the power dynamics between employers and employees in the 1910's(*Dubofsky,2001*). Even after the United States entered World War One, American workers, particularly those who were members of labor unions, continued to struggle for better pay and working conditions.

Once the war ended, labor unrest grew. Thousands of American employees in the steel, coal, drilling, and other industries went on strike in 1919 (*Dubofsky, Melvyn, Warren Van Tine, 2001*). Politicians and businesspeople were alarmed by this surge of strikes and protests. Authorities were repressing strikes, sparking rioting across multiple cities. Thousands of people were detained, and hundreds were deported during the so-called “Red Scare” of 1919, which was a campaign against those who were seen to be Communists, Socialists, or other radicals (*Kazin, 2001*). A rush of riots, arrests, and frenzy marked the end of the decade.¹

Upton Sinclair was able to elaborate this hysteria, with creating a character who consistently faces the dilemmas of being just and honest and being rich and powerful. And the novel dwells upon the corruptions and exploitations of power during this era, explaining the power dynamics between individual and collective power; therefore, giving the reader an image of how the ethical contradictions one faces can impact one’s life.

The power is carried out in the book from the start with certain events that imminently reveals J. Arnold Ross’ or ‘Dad’s behaviors. With the first chapter of the book describing a car ride with Bunny, ‘Dad’ drives the expensive car regardless of and scornful about the rules of traffic: “But for the most part you sat silent and

¹ Encyclopedia.com. (2022, September 6). . " *bowling, beatniks, and Bell-bottoms: Pop culture of 20th-century America*. . *encyclopedia.com*. 25 Aug. 2022. Encyclopedia.com. Retrieved September 6, 2022, from <https://www.encyclopedia.com/history/culture-magazines/1910s-tumultuous-decade>

dignified- because that was Dad's way, and Dad's way constituted the ethics of motoring." (*Sinclair, pg.4*), 'Dad' understood that signs were for people who did not know how to drive; for the initiate few the rule was, whatever speed left you on your own half of the highway." (*Sinclair, pg.4*). 'Dad' is very disciplined and cautious which lead him to earn the trust of the people of Los Robles (the region which the Watkins' home is in). And many consecutive events, identify J. Arnold Ross as a successful, powerful man. He uses his own men(drillers), doesn't have a contractor, provides his own tools that he owns, doesn't lose them, and has business connections to start things in moderate time and money (*Sinclair, pg.37*).

Although Bunny is very young, 'Dad' already begins teaching him to continue the legacy and estate which he will leave). Even while having business meetings, Bunny is there to learn about the career path which his father has (*Sinclair, Chapter III*). Of course, with being the son of one of the richest oilmen in the country, he only benefits from the money and prestige which his father imposes to him, even from such a young age. However, observing the father-son relationship, there is a particular distance and insincerity that underscores the dominance of 'Dad' over Bunny. And this instance gives the reader an opportunity to understand the internal ties that Bunny has with his father, which then later on become an issue to Bunny for his ethical beliefs (*Sinclair, Chapter III*).

Part II: The Poor, The Bad, and The Rich

A. The Rich

The book starts to describe J. Arnold Ross as a hardworking and rich, yet an earnest man, compared to his peers, (*Sinclair, Chapter I*), reflecting the sacrifices one must make to succeed. This community of people, J. Arnold Ross and his peers, is a part of the societal norms that represent the business perspective in the novel that imply the relativity of ethics. For this community, profit comes before anything else and the only justification of doing something moral, is that you become richer and more successful in the end, so as a result, whatever works on the arbitrary direction's behalf, passes ethical judgement (*Harman, 1996*). And this outlook mainly reflects the integration of consequentialism in the time which the novel takes place in. For this novel specifically, the oil tycoons are the consequentialist that prioritize individual power over collective power. These societal norms consider any support to collective power as a threat to their own and supported by their money and reputation, have the ability to designate the perceptions of society that determines the poor, the bad, and the rich (*Brink, 2022*). This is mainly important to keep in mind since this community forms one of the sides of the ethical contradictions that Bunny faces.

As determined by the ruling class, which is the business perspective, the poor stands for anyone without esteem and mainly money. This is mainly emphasized from the starting of the book where 'Dad' has, indirectly, a degrading outlook on anyone else, who would be less esteemed and prestigious than he is (*Sinclair, Chapter I*).

This this instance implies that money is the ruling factor in determining a person's hold in a society for the novel and the time period it takes place in.

B. The Bad

The bad, which forms the other side of Bunny's ethical predicaments, are also determined by the rich, reflecting the unethically implemented by the people in power in the United States, in the 1910's. This community, referred as the bad, is the representation of the worker perspective that alludes virtue and endeavor since its formed by the forces that are considered as the very threats to individual power. Throughout the book, the threat is from the reformers in the proletariat class, to the leading employers, or patrons of The United States of America. These threats to individual power demand for a change in the system from one that capitalizes individual gain and prosperity, to one that provides prosperity collectively. The worker perspective mainly implies the integration of utilitarianism, which is a form of consequentialism, in the time-period which the novel takes place in (*Mill, 2001*). The workers are the people that the businesspeople exploit their power on, to maximize profit. The businesspeople, which are the consequentialist, as stated prioritize individual gain.

Utilitarianist, however, which are the workers justify the orality of the actions if it provides the greatest overall amount of prosperity and comfort for the greatest number of communities affected by the action. For this community, virtue exists only when the reward of any labor is compensated and in threats raised from 'the bad' are

against the capitalist system that consistently aims for more demand, therefore, more supply (*Bentham ,1996*). For the time-period that “Oil!” takes place in, this revolt against individual power is quite inspired by event based on reality, The Bolshevik Revolution.

The Bolshevik Revolution started in 1917, under the lead of revolutionist Vladimir Lenin (*Figes,2001*). This revolution intended to precipitate a system where seizing power through private ownership was prohibited, and the victimization of the capitalist system was minimized, where the range of revenues of workers did not allow any form of exploitation of power.

The Bolshevik Revolution reflects to the story through the fact that the dominant system that ruled the land of Los Angeles, was reactionary towards change and fair designation of people to powerful positions of the government. And in a system, that willfully ignored the existence of bribery and underpayment, the Bolshevik Revolution was praised as a deliverer of peace and justice and triggered the proletariat from all around the world for a revolt (*Service, 1995*). In the book, the perception that powerful men in mighty positions have of the participants of the Bolshevik Revolution or the ‘Bolsheviks’, is an absolute reprimand. And every time, the topic of discussion revolves between J. Arnold Ross and his co-workers as he refers to, the Bolsheviks, or ‘Reds’ are called ‘tramps’, who do not want anything but attention, and whatever fight they give is worthless (*Sinclair, Chapter VII*). The morality of this predicament is evaluated by remaining one-sided at first. Before we meet any Bolshevik or a socialist in the book, a certain doubt about the virtue of

Bolsheviks is provoked, making the reader involuntarily in hatred of socialism paved by the Bolshevik Revolution.

Being in support democracy, Socialism, in its own terms, proudly fights for a world where the rich or the employer, does not exert the power they have through money on their employers financially or physically (*Marx, Karl, Friedrich Engels, 1998*). Employers whom on long term exponentially benefit from this system, exploit labor by increasing workforce and time, and maintaining steady wages, or even decreasing them (*Lipset, 1966*). In late 1910's, Southern California, right before World War 1, J. Arnold Ross and his co-workers premeditatedly utilize this employer-employee constitution by the substantially increasing oil prices: "The newspaper told about battles that lasted for months, the price of petroleum products continued to pile up fortunes for J. Arnold Ross." (*Sinclair, pg. 130*). The increasing 'fortunes' J. Arnold Ross obtained, however, did not reflect to the wages of his employees or nor to any other employees working under any other employer.

C. The Bad

During the late 1910's, especially, as the basis of the Industrial Revolution settled in political and financial constitutions all around the world, the desire to earn, produce, and therefore, consume has increased. The employers rendered themselves to compel employees to work more and earn less. Shortly after this has started, employees, the proletariat, found themselves consumed mentally, and physically under undesirable conditions (*Zinn, 2015*). Nerve entrapments and scars in hands, an unfed

body, and poor life standards finally led employees to establish labor unions that demanded fair and humane employment terms, meaning collective bargaining (*Kenton,2022*). In an extremely industrialized governance, the establishment of labor unions, especially in the United States, was highly objected. The very initial intention of labor unions was, in its basis, to combat the unjust working conditions. As it became a collective movement all around the world, the threat to the prosperity and comfort of silk stockings, has gotten more serious. Unions were opposed vulgarly, leading to convert the movement into a worldly fray. This event corresponds to a real-life instance called “Red Scare” which was a protestive campaign against communists and socialists that remained as a threat to the ruling class of the governmental system (*History.com Editors, 2010*)

So, the poor, the bad and the rich, in the 1910’s, not only in the United States, but in different parts of the world, Russia, were identified by the capital elements which were the businesspeople that formed that ruled the system in the first place. The leading factor of this time period was avarice. Creating corrupt bureaucratic systems, avarice has broken perceptions of morality, making mankind blind with the ambition of earning more.

Part III: Class Warfare and Ethical Predicaments

In a capitalist system where the rich only got richer, and the poor became poorer, social structure of the system is destined to have distinctive classes of people.

This may result in a class warfare, which was the absolute case for the time period that the novel dwells upon. The class warfare is evaluated by the interactions of figures from opposing sides: the employers and the employees, meaning the businesspeople and the workers.

Portrayed as an obsessive man with success, J. Arnold Ross or 'Dad' is in a constant look for drilling spots, taking his son Bunny to everywhere with him, to teach him 'how to business works'. The environment which Bunny consistently finds himself in, consists of men like his 'Dad', meetings with communities who have lots to drill, negotiations to maximize profit full of foreseeing calculations, Bunny becomes the very bridge that connects the parts that form the ethical contradictions. In a very calculative manner, 'Dad' teaches Bunny how to remain his power by maintaining distance and never allowing anybody come close, creating a view that absolutely denies any form of vulnerability, and having a strategic vision, revealing the assets one must offer to become successful in the oil industry, in the United States, in the 1910's. Being consecutively blown away but his 'Dad' methods, Bunny from such a young age understands the stakes of becoming a household name in a capitalist system, one that provides him the silk stocking and endless prosperity (*Sinclair, Chapter I*). The relationship Mr. Ross and Bunny have remains mainly as a distant mentor-mentee type relationship. There is certain things Bunny must learn firsthand firstly, before learning anything about other fields: "Grandmother made her usual remark about Bunny's education going to pot; and Dad made his usual answer, that Bunny would have all his life to learn about poetry and history- now he was going to learn about oil, while he

had his father to teach him.” (*Sinclair, pg. 69*). Bunny, without any stated desire to do so, is appointed to become the successor of his father’s oil empire, simply because he is J. Arnold Ross’ son. This instance expresses the internal ties that Bunny has to his father’s job, and the expectations that are held upon the prospect of the legacy: possessing loyalty, compromise, and physical sacrifice.

Going on hunts, for drilling spots with his father, one encounter he has that is significant to him in a fashion which changes to whole way he perceives his surroundings, is when meeting the Watkins family for their back land rumored to have oil beneath it. Meeting a member of the family that ran away from the house, Paul Watkins, Bunny feels immensely propelled to him. “What decided Bunny was the voice, which he liked; even before he laid eyes on Paul Watkins’s face, Bunny felt the power in Paul Watkins’ character, he was attracted by something deep and stirring and powerful.” (*Sinclair, pg. 42*). Running away from the house, Paul Watkins is determined to get away from the vicious, yet immoral way his family makes money which he believes through the exploitation of religion. Bunny, who meets Paul in discreetly because Paul’s aunt would force him to stay if he ever saw him, is instantly curious about what Paul aims by leaving and what he’ll do in such compelling conditions. After refusing Bunny’s offer to give him money, Paul wants to leave. “Such a wise boy- he knew so many things! A clear-sighted boy, and so interesting to talk to! And an honest boy- he wouldn’t lie or steal!” (*Sinclair, pg. 50*).

Bunny was impressed by Paul mainly because of the rareness of meeting such a person. “And Paul wouldn’t take any of Dad’s money; but this boy refused it!”. Unlike most people Bunny meets, Paul remains as the most virtuous; however, as Bunny does find Paul virtuous, he also feels a particular shame because of all the lies he told until that point in his life which makes Paul unforgettable to Bunny.

From this moment on, Bunny constantly thinks of Paul and what he has been through while the land of the Watkins is drilled by Mr. Ross and his oilmen. This encounter remains as part of the novel worth remembering, since it reveals the opposing side the businesspeople: the workers (*Sinclair, Chapter II*). The consistently contradicting argument of the plot is caused by interactions directly or indirectly the businessperson, J. Arnold Ross, and worker, Paul Watkins.

Starting off as a fugitive away from his home, Paul Watkins is the very person who initiates a slight paradigm shift for Bunny. Paul’s pride and earnestness leads Bunny to start idolizing Paul. As admirable Paul gets, he also provokes a form of discomfort for Bunny as stated above, reminding the ladder his prosperity and comfort, and he had all the ease in the world thinking he did not earn any of it (*Sinclair, Chapter I*).

Paul, by making Bunny feel ashamed, becomes a certain bridge for Bunny between the ladder’s own realities and the world’s realities. By coming across someone who just holds so much virtue within them, Bunny becomes more cautious and slightly more judgmental of how everything around him works, including and

especially his 'Dad's work. From this moment on, Bunny starts to understand the ethical elements of it and taking part in combating the immorality of this capitalist vocation, "Also, the meeting with Paul had caused Bunny to become suddenly aware what an easy time he was having in life." (*Sinclair, pg.56*) The ethical contradiction that Bunny faces is between his father and his conscience. His loyalty to his father, so also indirectly to the way his father makes a living is consistently opposed by the remarks of Paul Watkins.

Part IV: Oil! and Teapot Dome

As investigated in *Part II*, the time-period that the novel takes place in is a time of avarice, and corporate greed. The morality of the certain ways businesses was conducted, remained questionable and even some events that were notoriously known to be scandalously corrupt happened. One of the major corruption scandals in the American history was the Teapot Dome Scandal (1920), which occurred during the administration of the 29th President of the United States, Warren G. Harding who was opposed to labor unions. At the center of the scandal was the leasing of oil reserves that were in Teapot Dome, in Wyoming and other places in western states of America (*Smith, 1998*). The main reason of the leasing was for bribery and to maximize profit for the Harding administration which consisted of the President's family members and friends. And this meant that the governmental office appointment was subtly done, not by aptitude and expertise, but by cronyism.

With a reference to Warren G. Harding and his administration, the exemplification integrated in the novel, from a real-life event was identified. As the protagonist is the son of a massive oil tycoon, in California, in the novel, drilling as a profession specifically represented all components of social injustice from uncompensated physical labor, to maximizing profit with one the most vital needs of human-life: petrol.

Since the events that revolve around J. Arnold Ross' business are justified to be immoral by a real-life reference, the answer to the research question could be answered directly by investigating Bunny's position. As his father, J. Arnold Ross, represents the business perspective and his real hero, Paul Watkins, represents the worker one, Bunny has the opportunity to observe the corruption and the lies that revolve around his status in society (*Sinclair, Chapter X*). For this reason, he represents the national perspective, which takes its place as a bridge between the business and worker perspective. With the enlightenment that Paul provides to Bunny, he begins to internally contradict his father and his father's business, questioning the justness and the ethicality of his professional choices. This implies that the national perspective follows deontological ethics, meaning that the moral laws must be implemented on the action, regardless of its outcome (*Jones, 2019*). Of course, this perspective slightly shifts to the worker perspective, since all in all, the legislations and ethical laws can firstly bring fairness to businesses, and then distribute the benefits of the action collectively.

As this essay investigates the impact of ethical contradictions, in the way we pursue life, Bunny's deontological point of view outlines his approach towards the oil industry from things he refused to compromise, to political injustice and untruthful fabrications of the Bolshevik Revolution. "Hadn't the Socialists in opposing the war right along? And wasn't it a fact that the country had an attorney general who is intriguing to get the nomination for president at the next democratic convention and was basing his claim to that distinction upon his feline companion to put down the red menace?" (*Sinclair, pg.286*). The compulsiveness of this predicament is, for Bunny, between going against his powerful father and ignoring the indispensable truth, "I know how it is son. You won't do it, you haven't the nerve for it-your soft.' He waited while those cool words sank in. 'Yes, that's the word, soft. You've always had everything you wanted -you've had it handed to you on a silver tray and it's made you weakling you have a good heart you know what's right, but you couldn't bear to act you'd be too afraid of hurting somebody.'" /Paul to Bunny. (*Sinclair, pg. 194*).

Eventually, Bunny goes against his own father where he does not take over the oil company, but instead decides to take a job as a worker in one of the big industries:

"Just that I want to understand the working people, and that's the only way.'

'You can't ask them what you want to know?'

'No, Dad, they don't know what themselves-except dimly. It is something you have to live.'" (*Sinclair, Chapter XV, pg.449*)

This event displays the impact of deontological reasoning to the ethical contradictions one faces, and Bunny chooses to pursue his life without disregarding the moral distortions present in the oil industry.

Part V: Conclusion

“Oil!” written by Upton Sinclair, is a novel that highlights the ethical contradictions that arise in the way one pursues life, particularly in the oil industry during the early 20th century in Southern California. The book depicts how the pursuit of wealth and power can lead to political and social dilemmas that can have far-reaching consequences. For example, Ross and his co-workers(associates) engage in unethical practices such as bribing government officials, exploiting workers, and destroying the environment for drilling spots to maximize profits.

Sinclair's novel shows how these ethical predicaments affect not only the individuals involved but also the wider society. The pursuit of wealth and power by the oil industry leads to environmental degradation, political corruption, and social injustice. Through the experiences of the characters in the novel, Sinclair also explores the impact of ethical predicaments on personal relationships. For example, Ross's daughter, Bunny, becomes estranged from her father when she learns of his unethical behavior and decides to join the socialist movement. The novel shows how ethical dilemmas can have long-lasting effects on personal relationships, which in turn can have wider societal implications.

As we reflect on the themes presented in "Oil!", we are prompted to ask ourselves how we can avoid ethical predicaments in our own lives and how we can pursue success in a way that is both morally and socially responsible. The novel highlights the importance of ethical considerations in our pursuit of success and serves as a cautionary tale about the dangers of unchecked greed. In conclusion, "Oil!" by Upton Sinclair is a powerful reminder of the ethical predicaments that arise in the pursuit of wealth and power.

The novel portrays the consequences of these dilemmas for individuals and society and underscores the importance of ethical considerations in our pursuit of success. As we navigate our own lives, we can draw on the lessons of the novel to ensure that our pursuit of success is not at the expense of our values and the well-being of others.

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