

PERSONAL MORALITY AND ECONOMIC INTERESTS IN THEODORE DREISER’S THE FINANCIER

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| ABSTRACT | KEYWORDS |
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| <p>This article examines the complex interaction between personal morality and economic interests in Theodore Dreiser’s novel The Financier. The study analyzes how the protagonist, Frank Cowperwood, navigates financial ambition, ethical compromise, and social expectations within a rapidly developing capitalist society. Using textual analysis, the article evaluates the ways in which Dreiser illustrates the tension between individual moral responsibility and the pursuit of economic power. The findings show that Cowperwood’s actions are shaped not only by personal character but also by structural economic forces that redefine the boundaries of moral choice. The study concludes that The Financier provides a nuanced representation of moral ambiguity in modern economic life.</p> | <p>Frank Cowperwood, morality, economic interests, capitalism, social ethics, Theodore Dreiser.</p> |

Introduction

Theodore Dreiser’s The Financier is one of the early twentieth century’s most significant explorations of the relationship between economic power and personal morality. Set in the post–Civil War period, the novel offers a detailed portrayal of America’s growing capitalist structures and the individuals shaped by them. Frank Cowperwood, the central character, embodies the rising financial class—ambitious, calculating, and often morally ambiguous.Scholars have long debated whether Cowperwood’s behavior reflects personal moral failure or the inevitable outcome of a system driven by profit and competition. This article seeks to investigate how Dreiser uses Cowperwood’s psychological traits and social environment to reveal the tension between moral judgment and economic necessity. The study focuses on whether the novel presents Cowperwood as an independent moral agent or as a figure molded by the economic forces surrounding him.

METHODOLOGY

This research employs **qualitative textual analysis**, focusing on close reading of selected episodes in The Financier. The analytical framework includes:

- Moral-psychological interpretation** – evaluating Cowperwood’s motives, decisions, and ethical self-perception.

2. **Socio-economic contextualization** – situating the character’s behavior within broader capitalist developments of the nineteenth century.
3. **Comparative reference to ethical theories** – including utilitarian and pragmatic ethics to assess Cowperwood’s moral reasoning.
4. Primary sources include the novel’s original text, while secondary sources consist of scholarly studies on Dreiser, American naturalism, and economic ethics.

RESULTS

The analysis shows that personal morality in *The Financier* often emerges under strong emotional pressure, especially in situations involving family honor. The selected passage demonstrates this through Butler’s profound distress, which is described as coming across “like a breath of cold air.” This metaphor highlights how deeply he feels the danger posed to his daughter’s reputation. His repeated insistence— “I want to know, if it takes a month or two months or three”—reveals that his moral stance is non-negotiable and rooted in paternal duty rather than convenience. [1.500] This example indicates that Dreiser portrays moral commitment as something that can surpass economic rationality when family bonds are threatened.

The passage also illustrates how economic motivations reshape or limit moral responses. Martinson’s reaction is particularly telling. Although he sympathizes with Butler and recognizes the seriousness of the situation, he ultimately reminds himself that “business was business.” [1.502] This brief but powerful statement encapsulates the tension between human empathy and professional obligations within a capitalist system. Dreiser thus suggests that the structural logic of economic activity often forces individuals to bracket their moral impulses in favor of efficiency and obligation to clients or institutions.

Martinson’s internal commentary—that it “looked bad for Cowperwood” and was “a bad move on Cowperwood’s part”—shows how moral judgment in the novel is shaped by social expectations and reputational risk rather than universal principles. Cowperwood’s actions are judged not simply on their ethical content but on their potential consequences within the social and political environment. The passage demonstrates how morality becomes relative, influenced by status, professional relationships, and the consequences of public scandal. Dreiser uses this scene to highlight the instability and subjectivity of moral evaluation in a modern capitalist society.

The interaction between Butler and Martinson further illustrates the conflict between private emotional life and economic considerations. Butler’s demand for investigators who are “men that are fathers... and... have sinse enough to hold their tongues” underscores that he views the situation not in professional or legal terms, but as a deeply personal crisis involving family honor and paternal identity. In contrast, Cowperwood’s involvement with Butler’s daughter complicates his economic pursuits and exposes him to social and political risk. The scene thus reinforces the broader pattern in the novel: personal relationships inevitably collide with financial ambition, and such collisions reveal the fragile boundary between emotional obligations and economic goals.

DISCUSSION

Additionally, the episode detailing Butler’s planning and the detective’s surveillance of Aileen emphasizes the intersection of personal morality and strategic action. Butler’s determination to safeguard his daughter’s honor illustrates how private ethical concerns can motivate careful, calculated

measures, even within frameworks influenced by business-like procedures. The detective's discretion and selective reporting demonstrate a nuanced understanding of ethical behavior, balancing professional obligations with respect for personal boundaries. This scene mirrors Cowperwood's navigation of financial ambition, highlighting Dreiser's depiction of morality as negotiated within social, economic, and familial contexts.

Furthermore, Dreiser's detailed depiction of Butler's elaborate plan to confront Aileen underscores the complexity of moral decision-making under emotional duress. The narrative reveals Butler's oscillation between a straightforward, rational approach—simply confronting his daughter—and a more elaborate, violent scheme designed to shock her into compliance. His internal conflict, described as sensing “a deadly contest with his daughter,” highlights the tension between paternal duty and ethical restraint. Dreiser presents Butler's choice as a morally ambiguous act: motivated by concern and affection, yet expressed through coercion and fear. This scenario parallels Cowperwood's own ethical compromises in financial dealings, reinforcing the novel's broader theme that personal morality is constantly mediated by circumstance, relational dynamics, and societal pressures. Moreover, the indirect channels through which Aileen receives information—from Butler, via Owen and Callum—illustrate how social networks and communication shape perceptions of moral and economic actions, reflecting Dreiser's nuanced exploration of reputation, secrecy, and influence within a capitalist society.

The passage describing the detective's visit to the Butler household provides important insights into the interplay between personal morality, social observation, and economic interests. The meticulous planning of Butler and the detective demonstrates how moral concerns and social reputation motivate strategic action. Butler's orchestration of Aileen's observation—where she believes it is merely a discussion about horses—illustrates a calculated effort to protect his daughter's honor while gathering information. This reinforces the pattern observed earlier: **emotional and moral stakes drive practical actions**, even within contexts influenced by business-like procedures.

Moreover, the characterization of Jonas Alderson, the detective, emphasizes professional discretion and ethical awareness. He hides behind curtains, pretends to observe the street, and only reports what is necessary, stating, “That's all I need to know.” [1.507]. His behavior underscores the selective nature of moral judgment: while he participates in surveillance, he exercises restraint and respects personal boundaries, reflecting Dreiser's attention to nuanced ethical behavior within socio-economic frameworks. This episode also highlights the conflict between personal life and external observation. Butler's concern for Aileen is deeply paternal, yet he engages an external agent to monitor social interactions—demonstrating the tension between **family-centered morality and strategic oversight**, which parallels Cowperwood's own navigation of financial ambitions and ethical considerations. The novel consistently illustrates that the pursuit of economic and social advantage is rarely divorced from personal relationships; **morality is performed and negotiated in tandem with strategy**.

Finally, the narrative shows how appearances and perception mediate moral and social judgment. Aileen interprets the detective's presence as a horse-related business matter, not realizing the true motive. This indicates how **social performance and deception** function as mechanisms to preserve honor and manage ethical dilemmas, reflecting Dreiser's interest in the interplay between external actions and internal ethical commitments.

CONCLUSION

The *Financier* offers a sophisticated exploration of the tension between personal morality and economic interests. Dreiser shows that moral decisions are inseparable from social and financial contexts. Butler's paternal vigilance and Cowperwood's ambitious calculations illustrate how emotional, social, and economic factors converge to shape ethical behavior. The novel remains relevant in its depiction of moral complexity within capitalist societies, highlighting that ambition, family, and social perception are intertwined in determining moral action.

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