

## A GLASS HALF FULL: CAPITALIST ETHICS IN THE NOVELS OF WILL PAYNE

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### ABSTRACT

*Will Payne (1865–1954) was an American financial journalist and novelist with unique and interesting views on capitalism and society. Most turn-of-the-century American novelists who wrote about economics inhabited opposite poles of the political spectrum: they tended to write either overt socialist tracts (e.g., Upton Sinclair, Jack London, Theodore Dreiser) or hagiographies of captains of industry (e.g., Samuel Merwin, Henry Kitchell Webster, Mary Hallock Foote). Payne's work, however, defies such simple categorization. In novels such as *The Money Captain* (1898), *Mr. Salt* (1903), and *When Love Speaks* (1906), Payne challenged readers to consider a longer term view of the effects of capitalism.*

The able men—the men who can do things—are going to run the world, you know. They've got to; for the other crowd simply can't.

—Will Payne, *When Love Speaks*

Judging only by the books still read today, it is easy to conclude that American novelists of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were uniformly hostile toward capitalism. Asked to consider American novelists who took economics or business as major themes, modern readers tend to mention names like Upton Sinclair, Theodore Dreiser, and Jack London—none of whom harbored much love of capitalism. Sinclair, who ran for governor of California on the Socialist ticket, complained that while readers keyed on the revolting details of the meat-packing industry in *The Jungle*, his goal had been to convert people to socialism. “I aimed at the public's heart,” he lamented in the October 1906 edition of *Cosmopolitan*, “and by accident I hit it in the stomach.”

Yet despite the strong socialistic vein apparent in the American literary canon, there were plenty of turn-of-the-century American novelists who celebrated the merits of capitalism. Once-popular authors like Alice French, F. Hopkinson Smith, Edward Fuller, George Lorimer, and Mary Hallock Foote all penned novels in which businessmen (and sometimes women) were the protagonists. Literary critic Walter Fuller Taylor identified a genre he labeled the “romance of business,” in which capitalists were the heroes and socialist forces the enemy.<sup>1</sup>

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Typical of the genre were the works of Samuel Merwin and Henry Kitchell Webster, prolific novelists who wrote more than fifty books between them. One of their best-selling efforts, the jointly authored *Calumet "K"* (1901), depicts—as unlikely as it may sound—a tense race against time to build a grain elevator. Protagonist Charlie Bannon struggles against rival firms, dishonest labor organizers, and various other obstacles to get the job done. Unlike the shallow, unscrupulous businessmen in socialist novels, Bannon is a man of integrity and unquestioned work ethic. Here the achievement of a business objective is an intrinsically worthy cause.<sup>2</sup>

The trouble is in romance-of-business novels the labor organizers and socialists are all as shallow and unscrupulous as *The Jungle's* businessmen. While socialist writers nearly always portray businessmen as fat, loud, unfeeling rats, capitalist writers nearly always portray socialists as greasy, whining, embezzling rats. Few novels on either side attempt to address the larger moral and philosophical issues of capitalism through anything approaching evenhanded intellectual curiosity. One of the only novelists who even tried was Frank Norris, and he has generated a well-deserved amount of critical attention.<sup>3</sup>

However, Norris had a contemporary who also wrestled with the morality of capitalism yet who remains forgotten by history: William Hudson Payne (1865–1954), who wrote under the name Will Payne.<sup>4</sup> Before his career as a novelist, Payne worked as a reporter and as a financial editor for the *Chicago Daily News*, the *Chronicle*, and the *Economist*—jobs that provided the raw materials for much of his fiction. Payne published nine novels: *Jerry the Dreamer* (1896), *The Money Captain* (1898), *The Story of Eva* (1901), *Mr. Salt* (1903), *When Love Speaks* (1906), *The Automatic Capitalists* (1909), *The Losing Game* (1910), *The Scarred Chin* (1920), and *Overlook House* (1921). He also placed a number of short stories in *Century* and other popular magazines; many of these were gathered and reprinted in *On Fortune's Road: Stories of Business* (1902).<sup>5</sup>

Payne's work illustrates one writer's internal struggle with the ethics of capitalism. This might not sound unique—after all, the work of many American writers might be described similarly—except that Payne's worldview differed from that of his contemporaries on both sides of the economic fence.

Payne's first novel, *Jerry the Dreamer* (1896), introduces many of the themes that permeate his work. Ambitious and optimistic, young Jerry Drew leaves the country for Chicago to seek his fortune. Although initially overwhelmed by the bustle of the city, he eventually finds work as a newspaper reporter, falls in love, and marries. Bright and good-hearted, Jerry seems destined for happiness.

But this is no Horatio Alger tale. Jerry's story includes a dark, complicating twist: the specter of socialism. Although he works for *The Evening Call*, a daily newspaper with conservative economic views, Jerry's own politics lean toward those of *The New Era*, a small, radical socialist paper. *The New Era's* editor believes the American economy

is just like a game of freezeout between Capital and Brains and Labor. Capital and Brains have stood in cahoots and they've finally got all the chips. There sits Labor, he's willing to play—in fact, he's anxious to play; but he's got no chips. And Capital and Brains scowl at him, and ask each other why the devil that fellow doesn't play. Well . . . you wait until we get socialism established here and we'll have blue chips for the babies to cut their teeth on. (P. 155)

Jerry secretly moonlights for *The New Era* while struggling to reconcile his political views with those of his primary employer. His inner conflict intensifies when Jerry writes a fervent pro-labor editorial for *The New Era* but then must produce an anti-union piece for *The Evening Call*. Although he rationalizes the latter act by thinking himself merely a "writing-machine" for hire, he is overcome by guilt. He quits his day job and whole-heartedly embraces the socialist cause.

Jerry was the prototype for what would become a recurrent character in Payne's novels: the well-meaning but misguided social reformer. What makes Payne's novels so intriguing is not that these opponents of capitalism usually lose (their counterparts in the romance-of-business genre always lose) but that they lose even though in Payne's eyes they sometimes appear to be morally right. Jerry's ultimate fate is typical for one of Payne's social reformers. As time passes, Jerry moves further into socialist ideology, alienating himself from the rest of his world. This "weakness of character," as one contemporary reviewer put it, costs Jerry his job, his marriage, and the life of his child. In the end, however, the broken young man returns to his forgiving wife—presumably having learned his lesson, ready to reconcile with capitalism and to renounce his impractical dreams of social reform.<sup>6</sup>

Payne never punishes his socialist agitators; they do not end up in jail like their counterparts in the works of John Hay, Mary Hallock Foote, or Thomas Bailey Aldrich. Instead, experimentation with socialist doctrine seems a rite of passage for young idealists, a forgivable sin. This differs markedly from the one-dimensional social reformers and union organizers portrayed in the more typical

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appropriate; Payne and Herrick were close friends, and Herrick's novel is dedicated to Payne. The influence of Payne's 1903 *Mr. Salt* on Herrick's 1905 *Memoirs* can hardly be overstated. Even at a glance, Herrick's E. V. Harrington and Payne's Henry Salt seem nearly identical. Both remain true to the type of rugged American businessman already well defined in earlier business novels: gruff, largely uneducated, and physically strong. Both men best other ruthless businessmen to create large industrial conglomerates. Both marry their beautiful young stenographers. Moreover, both Harrington and Salt make their first large chunks of money in exactly the same way: by shorting pork on the Chicago commodities exchange.<sup>9</sup>

Although the authors were good friends and their novels tell outwardly similar stories, these are nonetheless very different books. While neither Payne nor Herrick believes uncritically in his captain of industry, Herrick's viewpoint is significantly more judgmental than Payne's. The essential difference between Payne and Herrick may be seen in their fictional responses to the 1893 Chicago World's Fair. Payne's description of the fair in *Mr. Salt* displays the author's own genuine wonder.

Bess heard the water of the lagoon, stirred by a small boat, lapping cool against the stone wall. In the magic of this mellowing light the scene transcended experience . . . The voice of the people rose, not abruptly or harshly, but in a prolonged, increasing swell of admiration. Quickly, in flash after flash, the base of the dome, the roof, all the lines of the building burst into light. The fire darted along the eaves of the Manufactures and Electricity buildings, the colossal façades were suddenly spangled with burning lamps . . . The golden-bronze statue of Diana, so high that it looked in mid-air, was enveloped in light in which it seemed to soar. The gigantic figure of the Republic mirrored itself in the water of the lagoon, which reflected a dazzling duplicate of the whole Court. The entire Fair stood forth in light. It was like a spectacle of creation, which the sound of the people's admiration rose to meet. All that had been promised was accomplished. The passion of fulfillment succeeded the passion of expectation. Life itself was lifted to a higher power. (Pp. 58-59)

Payne constantly marvels at the fair's technological advances and, by extension, at the men who created them. "It's the Chicago business man's fair," one character says. "The business man—he did this" (p. 55).<sup>10</sup>

*The Memoirs of an American Citizen* also includes a description of the fair.

[We] took an electric launch and glided through the lagoons beneath the lofty peristyle out to the lake, which was as quiet as a pond. The long lines of white buildings were ablaze with countless lights; the music from the bands scattered over the grounds floated softly out upon the water; all else was silent and dark. In that lovely hour, soft and gentle as was ever a summer night, the toil and trouble of men, the fear that was gripping men's hearts in the market, fell away from me, and in its place came Faith. The people who could dream this vision and make it real . . . their sturdy wills and strong hearts would rise above failure, would press on to greater victories than this triumph of beauty—victories greater than the world had yet witnessed! (P. 147)

This sounds quite similar to Payne's description of the same event; but in *Memoirs*, the thoughts of the first-person narrator, Harrington, cannot always be taken at face value. In the very next sentence, Herrick has him add, "Nevertheless, in spite of hopeful thoughts like these, none knew better than I the skeleton that lay at the feast, the dread of want and failure that was stealing over all business" (p. 148). No matter how impressed he is with the achievements of capitalism, Herrick cannot help remaining haunted by its deficiencies.

Payne, on the other hand, acknowledges that skeletons lay at the feast something that most capitalist authors never quite do—but he ultimately agrees with the logic of Andrew Carnegie, whose "Gospel of Wealth" contends that society should not dwell on this troubling point. According to Carnegie, everyone is better off because of capitalism.

The poor [now] enjoy what the rich could not before afford. What were the luxuries have become the necessaries of life. The laborer has now more comforts than the farmer had a few generations ago. The farmer has more luxuries than the landlord had, and is more richly clad and better housed. The landlord has books and pictures rarer and appointments more artistic than the king could then obtain.<sup>11</sup>

For Carnegie and Payne, the growing gap between rich and poor is better than universal squalor, the presumable socialist alternative.

Of course not all readers cared (or care) to accept this judgment. Critic

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V. L. Parrington was particularly irked by *Mr. Salt's* assertion that the ultimate effects of capitalism would prove worth its frequently tumultuous "creakings and lurchings." Parrington complained that *The Money Captain* had "seemed to give promise of honester work than this."<sup>12</sup>

For those troubled by Payne's developing economic philosophy, *When Love Speaks* (1906) would prove even more disturbing. Despite its title, *When Love Speaks* is less about love than about corruption. In a growing industrial city near Chicago, honest district attorney Winthrop Holmes combats a local political machine controlled by greedy lawyers and cold-hearted businessmen. "I've found out well enough that most of the rottenness in politics runs into business somewhere or other," Holmes observes. His most powerful foe is an aspiring distillery trust willing to crush opponents by any available means. Ruthless trust bosses and their henchmen resort to bribery, extortion, and arson in order to consolidate and thereby monopolize their industry. Unfortunately for them, Holmes's brother-in-law David witnesses the arson, a crime masterminded by a trust member named Thomas. The novel's climax occurs during Thomas's trial, which Holmes expects to win on the strength of David's testimony.<sup>13</sup>

The trust, however, conspires to keep David from the courtroom through deception, blackmail, and a very large man named Mulholland. Dramatic tension builds as David struggles to reach the courthouse in time. In most novels, David would enter the courtroom at the last possible moment, thwarting the villains and justifying Holmes's moral high road. But in *When Love Speaks*, corruption wins. David does not appear. The judge scornfully dismisses the case, and Thomas escapes prosecution. Rather than his long-anticipated moment of triumph, Holmes faces mocking laughter from the victorious defense team. This unusual conclusion jarred Payne's contemporary readers. Even the similar ideological stance of *The Money Captain* and *Mr. Salt* did not prepare them for the utter defeat of the good guys in *When Love Speaks*. In the two earlier novels, Payne presents his law-stretching capitalists as sympathetic characters; although Payne does not paint Dexter and Salt as wonderful human beings, the reader never doubts the author's obvious admiration for their abilities. In *When Love Speaks*, however, the dishonest businessmen are clearly villains, making their victory all the more disturbing.

Many contemporary readers could not accept the apparent moral of *When Love Speaks*. William Morton Payne, the *Dial* editor often mistaken for Will Payne, offered a typical response.

The injunction implicit in the novelist's treatment of his theme seems to be that we should take the world as we find it, with its mingling of evil motives with good, and not hope to eliminate the evil all at once. It is a counsel of practical wisdom, no doubt, but it seems to us also to have a tinge of despair. Probably he makes a little too much of the soul of good in things evil, finding too ready an excuse for compromise with wrong, and allowing indignation to cool when it were better to keep it white-hot.<sup>14</sup>

Perhaps the *Dial* editor would have been even more upset had he appreciated that Payne's point is not that society should be patient in eliminating "evil." In fact, Payne does not view people like Thomas, Dexter, and Salt as evil *per se*. True, he admits that they frequently disregard law, morality, and common decency, and he offers no apologies for their actions. He understands that capitalism can be cruel, that corrupt exploiters of the system sometimes hide behind corporate veils and industrial trusts. Yet to Payne, capitalists are neither good nor evil. They are, quite simply, *necessary*. For the social progress created by a skilled capitalist, Payne is willing to accept certain costs—even outright injustices. It is a philosophy not of despair but of dispassion. Like an economist, Payne is interested in the long-term effects of human actions. This viewpoint is not unusual for a historian looking back a hundred years; but for a novelist writing about his own time period, it is very unusual indeed.

Early in *The Story of Eva*, in a passage that might be equally at home in Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*, Payne's young heroine confronts the toiling mass of humanity in Chicago.

Although a train had just pulled away, there was a crowd waiting for the next, which was wheeling into view down the tracks. Again there were so many women. Most of them were young; many were pretty: stenographers, saleswomen, waitresses, book-keepers, cashiers, what-not—a contingent of a great army . . . At all the myriad cogs and joints of this huge, intricate machine of business one found these young women. Eva had long known the general fact; but now it struck her in a new way. She imagined them specifically, the pretty ones, the gentle ones, the hard ones, the reckless ones, the bright ones, the dull ones, with their need of food, clothing, warmth, sympathy.<sup>15</sup>

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For Dreiser's Carrie, such a scene might lead to despair; but for Eva just the opposite occurs. Rather than wonder how she can survive among such a mass of humanity, she immediately looks from the crowd to the "huge fantastic signs" of State Street, the "amazing jumble of far-stretching lights" visible from her window. "The immense picture glowed in Eva's mind," Payne writes. "Its very size and brilliance comforted her. She thought, with a stir of exultation, 'There is a place for me here!'"<sup>16</sup> Surrounded by contemporaries who chose to completely glorify or completely vilify capitalism, Will Payne chose to view the glass as half full—or perhaps as only half empty.

## NOTES

1. Walter Fuller Taylor, *The Economic Novel in America* (New York: Octagon Books, 1964).
2. Samuel Merwin and Henry Kitchell Webster, *Calumet "K"* (New York: Macmillan, 1901). Novelist Ayn Rand—whose 1957 *Atlas Shrugged* would become the staunchest literary defense of capitalism—once called *Calumet "K"* "my favorite thing in all world literature." See Ayn Rand, letter to Barbara Brandt, December 11, 1945, in *Letters of Ayn Rand*, ed. Michael S. Berliner (New York: Dutton, 1995), 252.
3. *The Pit*, especially, displays an undeniable attraction to the excitement of business while never losing sight of the painful effects of capitalism so poignantly portrayed in *The Octopus*.
4. Payne went by the name "Will" to differentiate himself from William Morton Payne, a fellow Chicagoan who by the 1890s had already earned some notoriety as a literary critic, but the diminutive has confused modern scholars. Arun Mukherjee, in *The Gospel of Wealth in the American Novel: The Rhetoric of Dreiser and Some of His Contemporaries* (London: Croom Helm, 1987), erroneously credits William Morton Payne with having written *The Money Captain* (p. 168). Harvard University's 1963 reprint of Robert Herrick's *Memoirs of an American Citizen* actually misattributes the book's dedication, stating that the "Will Payne" of the dedication was W. M. Payne. In truth, Herrick and Will (William Hudson) Payne knew each other quite well. The Robert Herrick Papers at the University of Chicago contain a number of letters from Payne to Herrick. In an unpublished August 16, 1905, letter to Herrick, Payne wrote "I have just finished the Memoirs in book form. It is solid and admirable. I wish heartily that my name appeared on the other [title] page—or was to appear, in that position, on as good a piece of work."



Contemporary biographical dictionaries indicate that the two Paynes were not related.

5. Will Payne, *Jerry the Dreamer* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1896); *The Money Captain* (Chicago: Herbert S. Stone, 1898); *The Story of Eva* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1901); *On Fortune's Road: Stories of Business* (Chicago: A.C. McClurg, 1902); *Mr. Salt* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1903); *When Love Speaks* (New York: Macmillan, 1906); *The Automatic Capitalists* (Boston: Gorham Press, 1909); *The Losing Game* (New York: G.W. Dillingham, 1910); *The Scarred Chin* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1920); and *Overlook House* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1921).
6. *The Dial* 21 (August 16, 1896): 95.
7. Payne, *The Money Captain*, 231.
8. Payne, *Mr. Salt*, 86, 91.
9. Composition history according to Daniel Aaron, ed., introduction to Robert Herrick's *Memoirs of an American Citizen* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963), xv.
10. A similar ode to technology appears in *When Love Speaks*, where David Donovan lovingly assesses his power plant.
11. Andrew Carnegie, "The Gospel of Wealth," in *The Gospel of Wealth and Other Timely Essays*, ed. Edward C. Kirkland (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962), 15–16.
12. V. L. Parrington, *Main Currents in American Thought*, vol.3, *The Beginnings of Critical Realism in America* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1930), 187.
13. Payne, *When Love Speaks*, 29–30.
14. *The Dial* 42 (April 1, 1907): 228. Payne would publish four more books over the next fifteen years, but none would address the kind of serious ethical issues tackled in *When Love Speaks*. *The Automatic Capitalists* (1909) and *The Losing Game* (1910) delve Wall Street machinations, but the tone is lighthearted. Payne shows more interest in the complex workings of the financial markets than in deeper questions of morality. This movement toward less troubling subjects became even more pronounced in Payne's final two novels, *The Scarred Chin* (1920) and *Overlook House* (1921), both mysteries dealing only incidentally with economics.
15. Payne, *The Story of Eva*, 19.
16. *Ibid.*, 19–20.