


The Library of America • Story of the Week

Excerpt from *American Earth: Environmental Writing Since Thoreau* (The Library of America, 2008), pages 186–191. First published as “The Standard Oil Works at Bayonne,” *New York Call* (March 16, 1919). Reprinted in *The Color of a Great City* (1923).

THEODORE DREISER

One of America’s great literary naturalists, Theodore Dreiser (1871–1945) turns his lens here, in a 1919 newspaper article, on the Standard Oil works in Bayonne, New Jersey. The result is a classic description of American industrial squalor and an early, albeit pessimistic, sounding of themes later addressed by the environmental justice movement. It is easy to fault Dreiser for his sense that these workers were of a less feeling, “not very attractive” order; we could also fault ourselves and face up to our current willingness to move dirty and dangerous occupations like these out of sight, to the sweatshops of Bangladesh or the coastal plain of China, for instance.

A Certain Oil Refinery



There is a section of land very near New York, lying at the extreme southern point of the peninsula known as Bayonne, which is given up to a peculiar business. The peninsula is a long neck of land lying between those two large bays which extend a goodly distance on either hand, one toward the city of Newark, the other toward the vast and restless ocean beyond Brooklyn. Stormy winds sweep over it at many periods of the year. The seagull and the tern fly high over its darksome roof-tops. Tall stacks and bare, red buildings and scores of rounded tanks spread helter-skelter over its surface, give it a dreary, unkempt and yet not wholly inartistic appearance which appeals, much as a grotesque deformity appeals or a masque intended to represent pain.

This section is the seat of a most prosperous manufacturing establishment, a single limb of a many-branched tree, and its business is the manufacturing, or rather refining, of oil. Of an ordinary business day you would not want a more inspiring picture of that which is known as

manufacture. Great ships, inbound and outbound, from all ports of the world, lie anchored at its docks. Long trains of oil cars are backed in on many spurs of tracks, which branch from main-line arteries and stand like caravans of steel, waiting to carry new burdens of oil to the uttermost parts of the land. There are many buildings and outhouses of all shapes and dimensions which are continually belching forth smoke in a solid mass, and if you stand and look in any direction on a gloomy day you may see red fires which burn and gleam in a steady way, giving a touch of somber richness to a scene which is otherwise only a mass of black and gray.

This region is remarkable for the art, as for the toil of it, if nothing more. A painter could here find a thousand contrasts in black and gray and red and blue, which would give him ample labor for his pen or brush. These stacks are so tall, the building from which they spring so low. Spread out over a marshy ground which was once all seaweed and which now shows patches of water stained with iridescent oil, broken here and there with other patches of black earth to match the blacker buildings which abound upon it, you have a combination in shades and tones of one color which no artist could resist. A Whistler could make wonderful blacks and whites of this. A Vierge or a Shinn could show us what it means to catch the exact image of darkness at its best. A casual visitor, if he is of a sensitive turn, shudders or turns away with a sense of depression haunting him. It is a great world of gloom, done in lines of splendid activity, but full of the pathos of faint contrasts in gray and black.

At that, it is not so much the art of it that is impressive as the solemn life situation which it represents. These people who work in it—and there are thousands of them—are of an order which you would call commonplace. They are not very bright intellectually, of course, or they would not work here. They are not very attractive physically, for nature suits body to mind in most instances, and these bodies as a rule reflect the heaviness of the intelligence which guides them. They are poor Swedes and Poles, Hungarians and Lithuanians, people who in many instances do not speak our tongue as yet, and who are used to conditions so rough and bare that those who are used to conditions of even

moderate comfort shudder at the thought of them. They live in tumble-down shacks next to "the works" and they arrange their domestic economies heaven only knows how. Wages are not high (a dollar or a dollar and a half a day is good pay in most instances), and many of them have families to support, large families, for children in all the poorer sections are always numerous. There are dark, minute stores, and as dark and meaner saloons, where many of them (the men) drink. Looking at the homes and the saloons hereabout, it would seem to you as though any grade of intelligence ought to do better than this, as if an all-wise, directing intelligence, which we once assumed nature to possess, could not allow such homely, claptrap things to come into being. And yet here they are.

Taken as a mass, however, and in extreme heat or cold, under rain or snow, when the elements are beating about them, they achieve a swart solemnity, rise or fall to a somber dignity or misery for which nature might well be praised. They look so grim, so bare, so hopeless. Artists ought to make pictures of them. Writers ought to write of them. Musicians should get their inspiration for what is antiphonal and contra-puntal from such things. They are of the darker moods of nature, its meanest inspiration.

However, it is not of these houses alone that this picture is to be made, but of the work within the plant, its nature, its grayness, its intricacy, its rancidity, its commonplaceness, its mental insufficiency; for it is a routine, a process, lacking from one year's end to another any trace of anything creative—the filling of one vat and another, for instance, and letting the same settle; introducing into one vat and another a given measure of chemicals which are known to bring about separation and purifications or, in other words, the process called refining; opening gates in tubes and funnels which drain the partially refined oils into other vats and finally into barrels and tanks, which are placed on cars or ships. You may find the how of it in any encyclopedia. But the interesting thing to me is that men work and toil here in a sickening atmosphere of blackness and shadow, of vile odors, of vile substances, of vile surroundings. You could not enter this yard, nor glance into one of these buildings, nor look at these men tramping by, without feeling

that they were working in shadow and amid foul odors and gases, which decidedly are not conducive to either health or the highest order of intelligence.

Refuse tar, oil and acids greet the nostrils and sight everywhere. The great chimneys on either hand are either belching huge columns of black or blue smoke, or vapory blue gases, which come in at the windows. The ground under your feet is discolored by oil, and all the wagons, cars, implements, machinery, buildings, and the men, of course, are splotted and spotted with it. There seems to be no escape. The very air is full of smoke and oil.

It is in this atmosphere that thousands of men are working. You may see them trudging in in the morning, their buckets or baskets over their arms, a consistent pallor overspreading their faces, an irritating cough in some instances indicating their contact with the smoke and fumes; and you may see them trudging out again at night, marked with the same pallor, coughing with the same cough; a day of peculiar duties followed by a night in the somber, gray places which they call home. Another line of men is always coming in as they go out. It is a line of men which straggles over all of two miles and is coming or going during an hour, either of the morning or the night. There is no gayety in it, no enthusiasm. You may see depicted on these faces only the mental attitude which ensues where one is compelled to work at some thing in which there is nothing creative. It is really, when all is said and done, not a pleasant picture.

I will not say, however, that it is an unrelieved hardship for men to work so. "The Lord tempereth the wind to the shorn lamb" is an old proverb and unquestionably a true one. Indubitably these men do not feel as keenly about these things as some of the more exalted intellectual types in life, and it is entirely possible that a conception of what we know as "atmosphere" may never have found lodgment in their brains. Nevertheless, it is true that their physical health is affected to a certain extent, and it is also true that the home life to which they return is what it is, whether this be due to low intelligence or low wages, or both. The one complements the other, of course. If any attempt were made to better their condition physically or mentally, it might well be

looked upon by them as meddling. At the same time it is true that up to this time nothing has been done to improve their condition. Doing anything more for them than paying them wages is not thought of.

A long trough, for instance, a single low wooden tub, in a small boarded-off space, in the boss teamsters' shanty, with neither soap nor towels and only the light that comes from a low door, is all the provision made for the host of "still-cleaners," the men who are engaged in the removal of the filthy refuse—tar, acids, and vile residuums from the stills and agitators. In connection with the boiler-room, where over three hundred men congregate at noontime and at night, there is to be found nothing better. You may see rows of grimy men congregate at noontime and at night, to eat their lunch or dinner, there is to be found nothing better. You may see rows of grimy men in various departments attempting to clean themselves under such circumstances, and still others walking away without any attempt at cleaning themselves before leaving. It takes too long. The idea of furnishing a clean dining-room in which to eat or a place to hang coats has never occurred to any one. They bring their food in buckets.

However, that vast problem, the ethics of employment, is not up for discussion in this instance: only the picture which this industry presents. On a gray day or a stormy one, if you have a taste for the somber, you have here all the elements of a gloomy labor picture which may not long endure, so steadily is the world changing. On the one hand, masters of great force and wealth, penurious to a degree, on the other the victims of this same penuriousness and indifference, dumbly accepting it, and over all this smoke and gas and these foul odors about all these miserable chambers. Truly, I doubt if one could wish a better hell for one's enemies than some of the wretched chambers here, where men rove about like troubled spirits in a purgatory of man's devising; nor any mental state worse than that in which most of these victims of Mother Nature find themselves. At the bottom nothing but darkness and thickness of wit, and dullness of feeling, let us say, and at the top the great brilliant blooms known to the world as the palaces and the office buildings and the private cars and the art collections of the principal owners of the stock of this concern. For those at the top, the

brilliance of the mansions of Fifth Avenue, the gorgeousness of the resorts of Newport and Palm Beach, the delights of intelligence and freedom; for those beneath, the dark chamber, the hanging smoke, pallor, foul odors, wretched homes. Yet who shall say that this is not the foreordained order of life? Can it be changed? Will it ever be, permanently? Who is to say?

The Color of a Great City (1923)