

Petro-Ecology in Upton Sinclair's *Oil* !:
An Illusion of Pastoralism

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1 . Introduction

Uncontaminated nature cannot be separated from industrial society : Upton Sinclair's *Oil !* (1927) reveals this conception of the environment. Although Sinclair depicts the pastoral conflict between a pristine countryside and an industrial society, he does not regard the earth's inherent attributes and products as sacred or opposed to humans or human inventions. Instead, his description of Southern California indicates a correlation between the rural landscape and the industrial society. This paper will scrutinize Sinclair's exposition of the relationship between humans and non-humans.

Previous studies on *Oil !* have indicated that the novel foregrounds the conflict between capital and labor. The general interpretation of Sinclair's description of Southern California has followed Edmund Wilson's observation that California writers have been dealing with the "theme of the class war" (62). For example, Robert Cantwell elucidates that Sinclair, depicting political activities of some socialist characters based on Sinclair's real socialist friends, is one of the most important American novelists who sees "in the struggle between capital and labor the driving force of modern society" (41). Moreover, Frederick J. Hoffman cites Upton Sinclair as one of the progressivists in the 1920s when he observes that there were those who expressed progressive opinions during the 1920s (378). Further,

Stephen Matterson classifies Sinclair's works as "proletarian literature" (177). To sum up, *Oil!* has been read as a leftist novel focusing on the ideology of socialism.

Oil!, however, does not criticize capitalism and the success of businessmen nor does it advocate socialism. However, it depicts the complicated conflict between political and economic ideals. Sinclair does not portray capitalism as an unrelenting evil that should be defeated by the socialist revolution. Instead, this novel portrays the seeking of an alternative ideal society that does not assign primary importance to the accumulation of material wealth. The oil man J. Arnold Ross, called "Dad" in the novel, is a successful businessman in a capitalist society. He is not censured outright by Paul Watkins, a revolutionary socialist. As Michael Millgate points out, even the communists "respect businessmen of Ross's kind: they have power and do not hesitate to use it; they play the game for all they are worth. Paul Watkins, fighting to take away the power of oil-men, does not in the least blame them for fighting to hold on to it" (68-9). Further, the novel's protagonist, Bunny, J. Arnold Ross's son, is troubled by conflicting emotions: he is torn between his Dad's capitalist success and his own socialist ideals. Although he seeks a nonviolent way to achieve socialist ideals, he consequently holds his judgment on the issue of the political conflict.

Although social and political conflict is one of the most prominent features of this novel, the representation of petroleum should not be ignored because the oil industry and the culture relying on the use of oil in California seem to represent the source of the conflict depicted in the novel. This clash is loosely based on the Teapot Dome scandal of the 1920s.¹⁾ Lauren Coodley insightfully identifies that Sinclair tells us "about oil, and how it created the freeways that destroyed the railroads, and the subdivisions that destroyed the orchards" (x). Although certain scholars such as Peter Hitchcock and Jenny Kerber mention the difficulty of representing oil in literary works because of the oil's saturation that makes us blind

to the material itself,²⁾ Sinclair tries to write about oil changing the environment of Southern California by focusing on the class conflict resulting from the thriving oil industry. Thus, *Oil !* exposes the early-20th century situation of the American society on the basis of oil extraction and discloses the relationship between social conflicts and modern society, which was, in actual terms, an oil-based society.

Sinclair's notion of the conflict between the development of the natural landscape and the oil industry seems to trace the traditions of the pastoral mode. Pastoral literature often depicts the rural landscape as a refuge from the urban. Terry Gifford defines the term "pastoral" as "any literature that describes the country with an implicit or explicit contrast to the urban" (2). Glen A. Love is also aware of the binary opposition between the natural world and human activities in pastoral thought: "the comfortably mythopoeic green world of pastoral is beset by profound threats of pollution, despoliation, and diminishment" (66). Moreover, Lawrence Buell observes that this contrast has played a significant role in American literary history: "American literature has been thought of as markedly 'pastoral' in the loose sense of being preoccupied with nature and rurality as setting, theme, and value in contradiction from society and the urban" (1).

With respect to this contrast in pastoralism, Leo Marx notes the inherent complexity of the concept of American pastoral. American writers who deal with the concept of the pastoral tend to be aware of intruding machinery symbolizing "the progress of the arts and sciences" (Marx 225). Therefore, the representation of the American natural landscape is inseparable from the representation of technology. Marx indicates that the complexity of American pastoralism is rooted in the fact that it relies on the illusion that the progress of the technology that conquers the wilderness will also realize the objective of "a society of the middle landscape, a rural nation exhibiting a happy balance of art and nature" (226). This illusion enables "the nation to continue defining its purpose as the pursuit of rural

happiness while devoting itself to productivity, wealth, and power” (Marx 226). Thus, according to Marx, the inherent contradiction within the idea of American pastoralism emanates from the notion that the advance of technology leads to the achievement of the ideal of the pastoral nation.

This rhetoric of technology’s progress as an aspect of the pursuit of rural happiness, however, does not work in the early 20th century. In *Oil!*, the protagonist’s romantic view of nature tends to display the American pastoral mode and exhibits the complex interactions between the rural landscape and technological development in forms such as the drilling of the derrick. However, his attitude suggests skepticism about the exploitation and the abuse of natural resources. Hence, Sinclair’s view seems to suggest that the oil industry is never going to be the means of achieving the pastoral ideal.

Although the oil business symbolized material success in the 1920s, Sinclair accords his readers an insight into the negative aspect of such a materialistic dream. The 1920s witnessed the ubiquitous use of automobiles, and the nation’s demand for gasoline rose exponentially. Accordingly, as James D. Harte asserts, “more and more refineries came into being, many of them located in the San Francisco Bay area, as even more discoveries of rich fields were made in the 1920s” (360). Considering this situation, it is understandable that the oil boom in Los Angeles also embodies the desire for material success. Indeed, as Jack Hicks clarifies, “some say California is the final heaven for the ancestor of all such legends [legend of mineral riches, legend of golden opportunities, legend of open space and oranges, and land of promise], the great American Dream” (6). Sinclair, however, casts a doubtful shadow on such dreams and depicts the negative aspects and contradictions of the flourishing oil industry.

While Stephanie LeMenager claims that *Oil!* is “written as a warning against global petromodernity” (70), Sinclair depicts both the objection to the oil industry

and the complex condition of a flourishing oil-based society. The changes in Bunny's view of nature especially exhibit Sinclair's awareness of the alteration of the landscape of California, a detail that will be described later. At the beginning, Bunny tends to applaud the human development that conquers nature and lauds the pioneers of Southern California who drill for oil. However, he gradually comes to romanticize nature and abhor its exploitation by material capitalist desires. He begins to doubt his blind longing for development when he witnesses the oil industry's manipulation of the beautiful countryside. His wavering stance toward the oil industry suggests his difficulty in evaluating whether the flourishing oil industry is right.

In Hicks's terms, California is "the final heaven" (6), a phrase that implies the potential of putting the pastoral in order through technological development. However, Sinclair suggests that the 19th century progressive rhetoric noted by Marx is irreconcilable with pastoral idealism in the early 20th century. The following section will focus on Bunny's perception of the landscape through the use of a car. Although the rhizomatic movement of the car that relies on petroleum enables him to realize the ecological notion, his experience of the landscape implies that his view of Southern California is distant. The epistemological detachment between the actual landscape and his viewing of scenery indicates that the experience of the landscape is highly related to the use of oil. In other words, the countryside depicted in the novel implies the saturation of petroleum. The third section of the paper will pay attention to the treatment of crippled bodies connected to the oil industry. The emphasis placed on crippled bodies suggests not only the saturation of oil but also the impossibility of escaping from the influence of oil and of escaping into uncontaminated nature. Sinclair observes that the violent force of the oil industry cannot achieve pastoral idealism. The descriptions of the vistas and of the body images signify the difficulties of grasping the environment through a nature/culture

dichotomy and demonstrate the impossibility of escaping industrial society because oil permeates our world. Bunny's personal experiences of Southern California and the indications of crippled human bodies suggest the limitations of the conception of a harmonious pastoral based on development of oil-based technology.

2. Spectator of the Landscape

Witnessing a part of the natural environment of Southern California places Bunny in the position of a spectator. The use of the car suggests that Bunny's perception of the countryside depends highly on his drive-by viewing. In the opening chapter, Bunny sees some wild animals such as a jackrabbit, a butcher-bird, and a roadrunner through the car window. It grants him a diverse view of the ecological panorama before him. This experience, however, suggests that Bunny can merely witness the landscape that passes in front of his eyes. The drive-by viewing, which relies on the use of petroleum, seems to change the human perception of the surroundings.

It is hardly surprising that Sinclair devotes some pages to narrate the drive-by viewing of the landscape in light of the historical background of automobile travel in the early 20th century. According to Gabrielle Barnett, "automobile travel allowed early-twentieth-century tourists to enjoy aspects of premodern experience that had been lost to train travel" (32). She observes the relationship between automobile tourism and the preservation of the Redwoods in northern California. In 1919, Save-the-Redwoods League activists tried to promote "scenic tourism and redwood preservation" and to protect "road side forests first," which means they tended to protect the landscape that could be seen from the road (Barnett 33). Moreover, a landscape architect, Frederick Law Olmsted, observed in his report of the state park problem in 1929 that "thousands of square miles of land in California, privately

owned but threaded by public roads, present *beautiful landscapes which are possessed in this sense by the riders on the roads*" (28; emphasis added). It is obvious that in his mind, the preservation of the landscape and the preservation of the scenery from the road are synonymous. The drive-by viewing was an important phenomenon in the early 20th century, both for the tourism industry and nature preservationists. The popularization of the car changed human awareness of physical surroundings. The landscape came to be regarded as an exhibition at a certain distance from its spectator.

In the novel, the drive-by viewing mediated by petroleum provides the perspective of the process of regional transformation. Although, as Barnett elucidates, the auto-tourism in the early 20th century mainly focused on raw natural phenomena such as the Redwoods, Bunny's perspective displays the complexity of the entire ecology of Southern California, including its human activities and its non-human world.

Bunny initially observes the transformation of the landscape as the consequence of the human conquest of nature. Bunny and Dad drive to Southern California to sign a contract with ranchers who own a piece of land with an oil deposit. As they speed through the Guadalupe Grade to California, Bunny sees the surroundings and applauds the technology that covers the natural landscape. The opening sentence, "the road ran, smooth and flawless, precisely fourteen feet wide, the edges trimmed as if by shears, a ribbon of grey concrete, rolled out over the valley by a giant hand" (Sinclair 1), shows that the road system cuts through and tames the natural landscape. Moreover, Bunny feels that the "magic ribbon of concrete laid out for you, winding here and there, feeling its way upward with hardly a variation of grade, taking off the shoulder of a mountain, cutting straight through the apex of another, diving into the black belly of a third" is "glorious" (Sinclair 5). The opening part portrays Bunny's exaltation at development. Wild animals such as

birds and ground squirrels give way to human technology in the form of a noisy, honking car. Moreover, the road described as the “magic ribbon of concrete” clears mountains and extends westward. Sinclair dares to depict the ecstasy of the development of technology cutting through nature via Bunny’s admiration for the magic of human technology. Further, when Bunny observes the method by which the derrick is excavated, he thinks, “what could be more fun to watch than job like this? To know what was going on under the ground; to see the ingenuity by which men overcome Nature’s obstacles” (Sinclair 77). Here, he regards nature as the supplier of “obstacles” that should be “overcome” by human power.

On the other hand, he witnesses the disorderly development of the cityscape while he was driving his car :

Here were trolley tracks and railroads, and subdivisions with no “restrictions” – that is, you might build any kind of house you pleased, and rent it to people of any race or color; which meant an ugly slum, spreading like a great sore, with shanties of tin and tar-paper and unpainted boards.... They [Dad and Bunny] skirted the city, avoiding the traffic crowds in its center, and presently came a sign: “Beach City Boulevard.” It was a wide asphalt road, with thousands of speeding cars, and more subdivisions and suburban home-sites, with endless ingenious advertisements designed to catch the fancy of the motorist, and cause him to put on brakes. (Sinclair 21)

Sinclair depicts rapidly developing subdivisions expanded by the early-20th century real-estate boom in Southern California.³⁾ The chaotic development of the city induces the image of “an ugly slum” and implies the inferiority of the urban environment. Although overpopulation may have caused the slum to appear, the city continues to appeal to drivers to stop within its bounds. Roadside

advertisements stimulate the desires of drivers to attract them. Thus, the development of the city is inseparable from the growth of the road system. The developing city seizes the drivers and sprawls outwards in an unlimited expanse. The drive-by viewing of the city suggests chaotic human development that disregards the appropriate arrangement of the urban environment. Sinclair pays attention to the affirmation of the development and to the possibility of the side effects, i. e., the chaotic cityscape makes the urban environment unpleasant.

Although Bunny initially applauds human development and the conquest of nature, he shows a skeptical view toward the growth of the city that also relies on the flourishing oil industry. In a remarkable instance that shows the beginning of Bunny's devotion to the natural world, Sinclair highlights Bunny's sympathy for seals at a beach in Los Angeles. When Bunny comes to the beach on a holiday, he looks at the seals on the shore :

They [seals] were strangely human, a circle of foreign children, watching some visitor who does not know their language and may or may not be dangerous.... Whatever he [Bunny] wanted, they would yield to him, the superior being, and content themselves with the places he had left.... The world was so beautiful, and at the same time strange, and interesting to be alive in ! What must it be like to be a seal ? What did they think concerning this arrogant being who commandeered their resting place ? (Sinclair 337)

The situation seems to be a refrain from the scene in which Bunny sees the surroundings and nature being cut by human development on Guadalupe Grade. Seals, here, yield ground to Bunny just as the birds and ground squirrels gave way to Dad's car. The theme of wild animals giving way to humans who tame the wilderness resonates here. Although the human subjugates the surroundings as "the

superior being,” Bunny becomes conscious of himself as an “arrogant being.” In contrast to his former self who blindly admires the human conquest of nature, he now empathizes with the seals and imagines what it must be like to be a seal. He stands on the side of animals and tries to objectively reconsider human development.

Bunny’s attitude toward the landscape gradually changes from admiration to skepticism toward development through his experience of watching Dad’s ways of exploiting a ranch. Dad buys and drills on a ranch called Paradise, owned by the Watkins family. The piece of land successfully produces oil. Sinclair describes the transformation of Paradise: “this ranch [Paradise] had been a place where Dad could come to rest and shoot quail; but now that they had struck oil, it was the last place in the world where he [Bunny] could rest” (Sinclair 167). Dad and Bunny’s resting area becomes their workplace. Bunny’s romantic view of nature is emphasized when he revisits Paradise. Bunny has become an adolescent, and his feelings about his socialist ideals and his capitalist businessman Dad become ambivalent. Nature functions as an entity that arouses a skeptical view of the enormous human power in Bunny, who now seeks an alternative to capitalism:

And once you were out of sight of the derricks, and out of smell of the refinery, it was the same beautiful country, with the same clear sky and golden sunsets, and you could get the poisons of bootleg liquor out of your blood, and the embarrassing memories out of your soul. Tramping these rocky hills, drawing this magical air into your lungs, it was impossible to think that men would not some day learn to be happy! (Sinclair 379)

Bunny views beautiful rural scenery as a phenomenon that is distant from the derricks and the refinery, and feels free from his mundane life filled with “bootleg

liquor” enjoyed by upper class revelers. For Bunny, happiness does not mean material success or belonging to upper society. In contrast to the former Bunny who was fascinated by human development, the “magical air” of the rural regions distant from the oil industry enthralls him. Bunny’s romanticism with regard to nature is ultimately depicted in the scene where he and his fiancée, Rachel, drive to the planned construction site for the labor school that they plan to operate after Dad’s death. When he sees the valley and the quail, “Bunny’s heart was an ache of loneliness – because quail meant Dad, and those beautiful hills of Paradise, and happiness he had dreamed in vain” (Sinclair 519). Here, the quail reminds him of “those hills of Paradise” juxtaposed with the term “happiness.” Bunny’s idealism, implied in his romantic enjoyment of nature’s pristine beauty, is far from Dad’s capitalist desires. His romantic view of nature is exploited by the materialist dream of capitalism and strengthens his resolve to discover an alternative ideal.

Bunny’s acquisition of the romantic view of the ideal rural landscape, however, depends on his use of petroleum, as represented by the car. One of the most remarkable scenes that reveals Bunny’s drive-by viewing of the rural landscape is the vistas he observes on his way to Vernon Roscoe’s residence called the “Monastery.” As he passes by, he sees the coastal line with fishermen’s shacks :

You drove up behind a chain of mountains that lined the coast : another of those wonderful roads, a magic ribbon of concrete, laid out by a giant’s hand. The engine purred softly and you raced ahead of the wind, up long slopes and down long slopes, and winding through mazes of hills ; there were steep grades and vistas of tumbled mountains, and broad sweeps of valley, and stretches of shore with fishermen’s huts, and boats, and nets drying in the sun ; then more hills and mountain grades.... (Sinclair 321)

Bunny longs for the lifestyle of hobos or poor labors – he wants to “go off with a bunch of youngsters in a rattle-trap old Ford” and to “get a job picking up fruit” to obtain “ten or twelve dollars every week” (Sinclair 318). For him, the rural fishermen’s workplace suggests the ideal pastoral landscape. The view from the car window indicates that the landscape of Southern California is a mix of the natural landscape, oil refineries, the road system, and the pastoral based on the primary industry. Although Bunny often regards the rural landscape as opposing the flourishing capitalist rhetoric that exploits natural resources to achieve material wealth, his own romantic view of the rural landscape is inseparable from the development of the oil industry. In other words, his rhizomatic movement via car enables him to see varied aspects of the landscape, but his experience of the vistas depends on his use of petroleum.

The saturation of oil changes the way people perceive the environment. The exalted power of the machine, represented by the railroads, is esthetically identified with the sublimity of raw nature in the form of huge mountains or raging oceans.⁴⁾ The car, however, is not so conspicuously foregrounded as an aesthetic object probably because the automobile is too widespread to reaffirm its power. The rhizomatic movement that is made possible by the car, however, wields an enormous potential to match the sublimity of railroads. The drive-by viewing makes the countryside an object that is viewed from a certain distance. The power of the car driven by petroleum transforms not only the actual natural landscape but also the human perception of the vistas. This novel treats the car as a phenomenon that holds enormous power and can install humans in the position of spectators rather than the participants of the landscape.

3. Crippled Bodies

The land of Southern California offers diverse vistas that include the road system, flourishing cities, rural areas, and the natural world. The vastness of Bunny's experience suggests that the use of the car and the consequent dependence on petroleum possibly extend the sphere of the human experience of the landscape. Marshall McLuhan regards this characteristic of the automobile as "an extension of man that turns the rider into a superman" (241). In other words, when human bodies are mediated by the automobile, they can extend their physical abilities to see many places in a short time.

Oil !, however, exhibits not only the extended human body mediated by oil but also displays some images of crippled bodies. According to William Bloodworth, *Oil !* exhibits violence as a major aspect including "oilfield fires, labor warfare, and the mobbing of a radical meeting where Paul Watkins is murdered" (109). Although his indication is understandable, this novel should be scrutinized in terms of its treatment of crippled bodies that emerge because of the violent force of the oil industry. While Bunny dreams of a peaceful natural landscape that is the opposite of the contaminated cityscape based on the oil industry, the deformity of rural bodies suggests that Bunny's romantic view of nature is an illusion. In the opening chapter, Bunny admires surroundings that have been overcome by human agency and disguise the natural landscape. Conversely, he observes a victim of human power through the car window: "a mangled corpse—a ground squirrel had tried to cross, and a car had mashed it flat" (Sinclair 15). The insertion of a wild animal's dead body seemingly implies the negative aspect of human development. Thus, Sinclair simultaneously pays attention to the marginal entity subjugated by the human supremacy. The mangled corpse connotes the possibility that the spreading oil-based society can spearhead the mangling of living things.

The violent power of the oil-based society that indirectly severs bodies extends over both wild animals and human bodies. One of the typical images of the mangled body is the accident suffered by Joe Gundha, a derrick worker who falls into an oil well. Although Bunny does not see the “torn body” directly, he envisions the method of recovering the dead: “in his mind he saw the men screwing the ‘grab’ onto the drill-stem—a tool which was built to go over obstacles that fell into the hole, and to catch hold of them with sharp hooks” (Sinclair 153). Joe’s accident makes Bunny realize the damage done to the dead body by the screwing grab. Once a worker is dead in the hole, he is treated as an obstacle to the ongoing work. The accident at the oil field shows Bunny that the workers who try to pick Joe up would ignore the dignity of the dead to remove the “obstacle” from their working place so that they can recommence the drilling as soon as possible. Moreover, Bunny thinks that “they might get Joe Gundha by the legs and they might get him by the face—ugh, the less you thought about a thing like that, the better for your enjoyment of the oil-game” (Sinclair 153). Thus, if he wants to continue to enjoy oil hunting, he must overlook the victims of the oil industry. Although he does not want to think about Joe’s mangled corpse, he unwillingly connects the image of the severed body with the oil industry.

Sinclair also connects Joe’s dead body with the bursting and scattered bodies of soldiers at the European front of World War I. Before the description of Joe’s accident, Sinclair draws his readers’ attention to the relationship between the oil industry in the U. S. and World War I through his treatment of severed bodies: millions of men in Europe rushed “to have their bodies blown to pieces and their lifeblood poured out upon the ground. The newspapers told about battles that lasted for months, and the price of petroleum products continued to pile up fortunes for J. Arnold Ross” (Sinclair 130). This description discloses that Dad’s oil industry has influenced warfare across the Atlantic. The power of the oil industry indirectly

smashes the bodies of soldiers even as Dad successfully accumulates oil money. This representation is probably Sinclair's strategic way of offering his readers a vivid impression of the association between Joe's dead body and the torn bodies of soldiers. A few weeks after Joe's cruel accident, Bunny notes that the violent force of the oil industry that mangles Joe's body is also indirectly responsible for severing millions of bodies in Europe :

Your Thanksgiving dinner was spoiled, because one poor laborer had slid down into a well which you happened to own : but dozens and perhaps hundreds of men had been hurt in other wells all over the country, and that didn't trouble you a bit. For that matter, think of all the men who were dying over there in Europe ! All the way from Flanders to Switzerland the armies were hiding in trenches, bombarding each other day and night, and thousands were being mangled just as horribly as by a grab in the bottom of a well ; but you hadn't intended to let that spoil your Thanksgiving dinner, not a bit ! (Sinclair 155)

The narrator obviously juxtaposes Joe's dead body at the bottom of the well with the mangled bodies of soldiers in European trenches. Although a purely local perspective makes it difficult for people to recognize the relationship between the oil industry in Southern California and World War I, readers come to understand the violent vigor of the oil industry and the manner in which it permeates the world when Sinclair imaginatively exemplifies the connection between a local accident and the global warfare. The vision of severed bodies resulting from the complex of the oil industry and the warfare leaves a profound impression on Sinclair's readers through this strategic description.

The trans-Atlantic imagination of severed bodies related to the oil industry appears not only in the scene of the European warfare but also in the political

violence committed against a young Communist comrade who is tortured by the White Army and escapes from a Romanian prison. When Bunny goes to Vienna, he sees “a creature that had once been a young man, but now was little more than skeleton covered with a skin of greenish-yellow” (Sinclair 481). Although the man is still alive, he has “only one eye and one ear, and it could not speak because its tongue had been pulled out or cut off, and most of its front teeth had been extracted, and its cheeks were pitted with holes made by cigarettes burned into it” (Sinclair 481). Meeting this man who has been cruelly tortured, Bunny realizes “how the flesh had been *ripped and torn by lashes* this way and that, like cross-hatching in a pen and ink drawing” (Sinclair 481 ; emphasis added). The man’s body is torn by the White Army, which is opposed to the Bolshevik revolution. Although his severed body arises from the domestic conflict between political stances that appear to be not related to the U. S. oil industry, Sinclair dares to mention the cooperation between the U. S. oil industry and the “White Terror” squad that supports the republican form of government. The Romanian government is opposed to the Bolshevik revolution and it rules the natural resources of the country. It also leases one of the biggest Romanian oil fields to “an American syndicate” in which Bunny’s father is involved (Sinclair 481). Bunny notes the relationship between Dad’s business and the White Terror. While there is no direct description of the oil industry’s actions in cracking down on the Bolshevik revolution, the oil industry in the U. S. is certainly alleged to be involved in the complexity of the political conflict in Europe. Sinclair depicts the suppression of socialists and communists in America, and it is no wonder that the oil industry, which embodies the capitalist philosophy, supports a government hostile to the Reds.

The saturation of oil wields enormous power both over those who are not directly related to the oil business and over the direct owners of the business such as Dad. He explains that his business is not free from the federation called the “open

shop crowd” (Sinclair 176). He must obey the regulations of the federation in order to run his business. He has to follow the federation’s strikebreaking policy even if he sympathizes with laborers who attempt to strike if he wants his work to continue to progress. The influence of the open shop crowd encompasses the entirety of the industrial world : this federation includes not just “the Petroleum Employers’ Federation, but the Merchants’ and Manufactures’ Association, the Chamber of Commerce, the Bankers’ Club” (Sinclair 176). Therefore, Dad’s business must participate according to the federation’s policies if he desires to maintain his property. Dad definitely understands that the federation has the discipline that emanates from the security of wealth and hence convinces Bunny that “there was no safety for you, unless you stood with the group that had power” (Sinclair 176). Bunny, however, sees the federation as “one elaborate system” and observes that he and his father are “part of that system, and must help to maintain it in spite of themselves” (Sinclair 180) : that is, the system of the industry captures and binds them. Bunny realizes that they have to work within the system. Therefore, they do not have any freedom with respect to their own business. In this sense, although they belong to the capitalist class, they are alienated within the capitalist system : in Bunny’s words, “we don’t own our own business ! we don’t even own our souls” (Sinclair 176).

Although Dad’s body is not directly severed by the oil industry, his body has become weak due to aging and because of the hard work the oil industry demands. For Bunny, Dad is “like an old horse in a treadmill” as he engages in his business (Sinclair 292). Therefore, Bunny takes Dad out of the business and brings him to a refuge where he can briefly be free from the toil and the politics of the industry. Although Bunny believes nature should be a refuge, it does not work well for Dad : “he [Bunny] would take Dad fishing, and they would pretend they were just as happy as of old in the bosom of their mother Nature – though the sad truth was that

Dad was too heavy and too stiff in the joints to get much fun out of scrambling over the rocks” (Sinclair 293 ; emphasis added). Depicting Dad’s weak body, Sinclair implies that leisure in the lap of nature, which according to Bunny should be his refuge from the conflicts of the industrial world, is not comfortable for Dad because of his health problems.

The theme of the deformity of the body awakens the negative aspect of the oil-based society. The novel exhibits the realization that human bodies are directly or indirectly scarred by the oil industry. Although Bunny innocently hopes that escaping into nature will be an experience that is opposite to the encounters engineered by the oil industry, it is impossible for him to escape from the influence of the pervasive oil industry. Dad’s bodily difficulties symbolically suggest that Bunny’s naïve view of the back-to-nature experience is an illusion. Moreover, the final paragraph of this novel especially reveals the relationship between bodies severed by the oil industry and the image of the pastoral. In Paradise, Bunny sees three grave posts under which the bodies of Joe, Paul Watkins, and Paul’s sister Ruth are buried and imagines the fantastic vision of a pastoral landscape that has no “unlovely derricks :”

There will be other girls with bare brown legs running over those hills, and they may grow up to be happier women, if men can find some way to chain the black and cruel demon which killed Ruth Watkins and her brother—yes, and Dad also : an evil Power which roams the earth, crippling the bodies of men and women, luring the nations to destruction by visions of unearned wealth, and the opportunity to enslave and exploit labor. (Sinclair 548)

Sinclair describes oil as the “black and cruel demon” and as “evil Power.” He also clearly asserts that oil deforms human bodies. He depicts the heavenly pastoral

image as a contrast to such a demonic image of oil. He juxtaposes fiendish oil against pastoral illusion to remind readers of his uneasiness with the destruction of nature. This representation, however, shows that it is impossible to enjoy the blessings of nature in an oil-based society unless people can renounce the blind worship of capitalist success, a philosophy that advocates material wealth based on the extraction of petroleum.

Sinclair depicts that the oil industry in California influences human bodies globally. In an oil-based society, human bodies are unconsciously encroached by petroleum. The crippled bodies in the novel highlight the cruelty and the uncontrollability of the oil industry. In other words, there is no refuge where people can flee from the influence of oil, which permeates the early-20th-century society. Sinclair strategically enumerates crippled bodies associated with the oil industry. These descriptions are finally connected to the impossibility of Dad's ability to enter and to take pleasure from nature. Consequently, it is revealed that Bunny's romantic view of nature is illusory and that his eagerness for the pastoral cannot be achieved by human bodies that are saturated by petroleum in an oil-based society.

4. Conclusion

Oil ! discloses the dissemination of oil through human existence. The use of the automobile is totally dependent on petroleum. Moreover, the flourishing oil industry in the U. S. has become an enormous authority that can exercise power over politics, economy, and global issues such as a global war and an international socialist movement. Depicting a protagonist who is torn between the rhetoric of capitalist success and the idealism of socialism, Sinclair seemingly holds his judgment on the political concept in suspense. Instead, he suggests an attitude that

promotes a deeper contemplation of the relationship between humans and non-human entities such as oil, the landscape, and technology.

Although the movement made possible by the automobile suggests human being's physical ability to encounter various aspects of the larger environment in a short time, the oil culture severs and disfigures human bodies. Sinclair emphasizes the violent power of the oil industry and consequently depicts that it is difficult for the crippled human body to experience actual and raw nature. The natural world cannot function as a refuge from industrial society for a body saturated by oil.

The description of the landscape and crippled bodies illustrates the enormous power of the oil industry and discloses that the complex pastoral idea that seeks a rural nation through development is impossible in the early 20th century. This novel summarizes the fact that the modern experience of pastoral countryside vistas is itself mediated by petroleum. Thus, the pursuit of a rural landscape through the progress of technology is an illusion that cannot be realized.

Notes

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- 1) Teapot Dome scandal is the bribery scandal wherein the Secretary of Interior, Albert Bacon Fall, secretly leased the federal oil reserves to the Mammoth Oil Company with exclusive rights to Teapot Dome reserves. For more information of this scandal, see also Kevin Starr's *Material Dreams* (125) and Sarah S. Elkind's "Oil in the City" (82).
- 2) With respect to the difficulty of representing oil, Hitchcock points out that "it is oil's saturation of the infrastructure of modernity that paradoxically has placed a significant bar on its cultural representation" (81). Moreover, Kerber says that petroleum "poses a significant problem for representation since we live by its effects but the material itself is often hard to grasp" (384).
- 3) David Wyatt points out, "Sinclair may have backdated the action of his novel to 1912, but he is writing about the real-estate boom of the 1920s" (37). In terms of the development of the

city in Southern California, see also Kevin Starr (87). He explains that Los Angeles promoted the purchase of lots of combined housing and drilling sites, which predicts wealth by oil production.

- 4) In terms of the sublimity of railroads, Charles Caldwell, in his article in *The New-England Magazine*, observes that “objects of exalted power and grandeur elevate the mind that seriously dwells on them, and impart to it greater compass and strength. Alpine scenery and an embattled ocean deepen contemplations of beholders. The same will be true of our system of Rail-Roads. Its vastness and magnificence will prove communicable, and add to the standard of the intellect of our country” (195).

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