

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
Susan Smith Nash, Ph.D.

# THE TURMOIL

## Booth Tarkington

### OVERVIEW

At the center of this novel is a love story. It is the story of an industrialist who desperately wants his son to continue his empire but of his three sons, to who are the seemingly good ones turn out to be rotten at the core and the one he had considered to be a hopeless dreamer turns out to be the best one by far. The story of the industrialist and his frustrating son and the son's love for an unattainable beauty would be rather dull except for the context of extreme industrialization in the early 20th century Midwestern town of Indianapolis and the idolatrous worship of the God of "Bigness" at the exclusion of human values and respect for the environment.

The God of Bigness takes over and seems to toy with the fates of people and the environment with the only defense being somehow a way to re-embrace one's humanity. And, necessarily, that embrace of humanity requires encounters with machines and the minions of the God of Bigness and those encounters almost invariably leave people either scarred or broken completely. To succumb to the whisperings of the God of bigness is to move ineluctably toward one's death and the sacrifice of one's loved ones. And yet, there is euphoria of progress and change and human creativity. So there is always at the heart of this novel a paradox. America wants to grow and people want to prosper. Creativity and machines have changed the world and yet they still have their rough edges and devour as much as they nurture.

Central to the love story is a star-crossed love element, between the upstart industrialist Sheridans and the Vertrees family. The Vertrees family are aristocratic and yet like all the land-based aristocrats of both Europe and America they are often unwilling or unable to change. In the United States, such agrarian-based well is often found in the South, and that kind of profound decay is both moral and financial. It is moral, because it relies on a belief in a hierarchy of people and does not allow for social mobility or America talkers and or a meritocracy. However, keeping up appearances and the appearance of old wells is the preoccupation of the day, and also, that social cachet is desired by the people who have recently ascended to wealth. The situation in Indianapolis was a mirror of what was happening in England as titled aristocrats who were in reality rather useless, married the daughters of wealthy industrialists to find a shortcut to status. Obviously, those marriages were often loveless and nothing truly good or productive ever came of them. Mary Vertrees, the daughter, is proud and yet compassionate, with a "startlingly kind voice."

*The Turmoil* is also a love story about the love of a father for his children and his wife and the love of a mother for her children and her husband. This love flows through the story and gives warmth to the harsh, dark city and its killing machines.

### STORY

The first of Tarkington's The Growth Trilogy, *The Turmoil*, was published in 1915, and written before the Great War had broken out. There is not much concern in the Midwestern industrial town for the goings-on in Europe, and you do not feel the threat of anarchists or Bolshevik anti-aristocratic rage, except in the sense that fortunes of the past are ephemeral, and the families that considered themselves to be the local gentry, even aristocrats, traced their success back five decades or so, not five centuries. The *Turmoil* has a resolutely American feel, and it immediately connects to the American reader who would instantly recognize people and places in his or her own experience, and forces that have acted upon one's own community, family, and sense of identity and/or self.

It may first appear that Booth Tarkington's *The Turmoil* (1915) is either a simple homage to pluck and American values of individualism, as the ultimate heroes are more free-thinkers than simple cult followers, or, a critique of nature-despoiling aspects industrialization. However, *Turmoil* is not so easily classified along such dualistic lines. Instead, *The Turmoil* explores the space between the two extremes. In fact, the novel never actually inhabits the space representing one extreme or the other, but in reality undermines its own potential as an epic encomium on of human ingenuity to result in growth, jobs, prosperity, or a cautionary parable that seeks to incite social reform.

The novel is a fairly brief and very accessible account of the son of an industrialist in a Midwestern town (ostensibly Indianapolis) who, after resisting the way that factories, industry, automobiles, and coal-fired plants have turned the once slow-paced, bucolic small city into a smoky, noisy, and dangerous metropolis, comes to find a way to live in it, and with it, yet with social and environmental conscious and consciousness. It is also the story of the mind of an industrialist, a soi-disant tycoon who rose up, in an earthy echo of Gatsby's "divine conception of self" but with a heart and values that, in the end, value the human being over the machine. Above, however, *The Turmoil* expresses a modernist metaphysics, which embraces and elaborates the philosophical notions Schopenhauer and others of Being and Becoming, and the mystical heritage of American transcendentalism of earlier in the century (Emerson, Whitman, Thoreau), and of the later 19th-century psychological insights of William James in his *Varieties of Religious Experience*.

From an aesthetic perspective, *The Turmoil* is valuable because, while it appears to critique rapid industrialization, in point of fact, it's a deeply subversive novel capable of generating *joissance* in the same measure as Marinetti's Futurist Manifesto (1909), the idea of dramatic feats of engineering as expressed in the Eiffel Tower (1889), and later with dynamism in Giacomo Balla's *Dynamism of a Dog on a Leash* (1912) and the collective pieces of art displayed at the Armory Show (1913), including notably Marcel Duchamp's "Nude Descending a Staircase" (1912). *The Turmoil* also resonates with the collective artistic zeitgeist on many different levels: Tarkington's city and factories are symphonic in the way of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* (1913) and poetics, if they are to express the perceptible ontology of a world in flux, must by necessity gravitate toward the random, as in Apollinaire's poem, "Un Coup de Des" (1897) and visual poetry.

As mentioned earlier, *Turmoil* is first of the Growth Trilogy, which was launched by *Turmoil*, and then followed by *The Magnificent Ambersons* and finally concluded with *The Midlander*. All but *The Magnificent Ambersons* are out of print. It seems likely that *The Magnificent Ambersons* remains in print only because of Orson Wells' celebrated film which was, in theory, butchered by the studio, but which contains much of the brooding, dark, deep-focus ambience of *Citizen Kane*. *The Magnificent Ambersons* was recently remade, which seemed to trigger a demand for a restored "director's cut" of the original film, but not much analysis of how the film really relates to the book. The book achieves a hard-won rapprochement with technology and growth, while acknowledging a nihilistic undercurrent. The film's main claim to subversion tends to be of sentimentality and of a studio ethos. The deeper issues addressed in the book are largely overlooked.

That said, *Turmoil* is self-questioning on many levels, and it subverts the prevailing narratives, not to undermine completely, but to question assumptions and causal relations.

"Bigness" is the new god, but what does "Bigness" do? It is an obvious driver of change, and consumer. It despoils, and yet "bigness" creates a structure. It is the framework of change and turmoil. Bigness forces a closer look, and an emphasis on subtle, small behaviors that flow together like streams into a river. "Bigness" could be viewed as pure thanatos ("death" or "destruction") drive.

## CHARACTERS

**Mr. James Sheridan** is a typical industrialist. He is brash, self-confident and values pragmatism and the bottom line over all. He is punctual, and believes in a handshake and a promise. He has no patience for romantics or philosophers and is annoyed by the kinds of philosophical ponderings that his youngest son, Bibbs, produces. He has an internal dissonance with Schopenhauer and does not ever want to succumb

to negativity. When things do not go well, instead of being overwhelmed by futility, Mr. Sheridan fights back even if it means injuring his hand as he shows his son the best way to work with machine or he smashes a statue in his home.

**Bibbs Sheridan**, the youngest son, who is fragile to the point of having an emotional collapse after college, is a dreamer. His name is the last name of his mother. It was her maiden name. He is both a dreamer and a philosopher and he questions everything and wants to look at progress from the perspective of the eternal. He also questions the differences between for example the life of a chicken in the life of an industrialist. Those sorts of comparisons drive his father into a rage, but they soon the young son and help him pitch order into the world and it also gives them an appreciation for life of all kinds. It is this contemplative and sensitive soul that his neighbor, Mary, comes to love.

**Mrs. Sheridan:** The loyal wife of James Sheridan, she is stalwart, kind, and sensitive. She worries about Bibbs and also the health of her husband. She is pragmatic and not given to pretention or wasteful luxuries. She has been a loyal companion to her husband, who lovingly refers to her as “Mamma.”

**Edith Sheridan:** The Sheridans' foolish daughter whose head is easily turned by wastrels and playboys. Edith falls in love with the superficially charming but ultimately vice-addled Bobby Langhorn, a relationship which portends nothing but shame and doom for poor, rebellious Edith, whose nihilistic rebellions will never amount to anything except self-destruction. When Mr. Sheridan learns that Edith has eloped with Bobby Langhorn, he destroys the black jockey statue with his fist, resulting in damage so severe he eventually loses two fingers.

**Jim Sheridan:** Mr. Sheridan's older son, Jim, is his bright shining light for the future. He brags to bids that Jim completed a warehouse for months ahead of schedule and thousands of dollars below budget. That is considered to be a good thing. However it leads to a terrible fire and the death of many people including Jim himself.

**Roscoe Sheridan:** Mr. Sheridan's second son, Roscoe, is also a shining light and held up to his youngest son as a hard-working and innovative thinker. And also, a sharp businessman. Roscoe however, is killed in a car accident while cheating on his wife with another woman. The machines of Bigness kill.

**Mr. and Mrs. Vertrees:** The Verhees family lives next door to the Sheridans in an old mansion. The Verhees family was wealthy when wealth could be extracted from land and agricultural pursuits, many with the contribution of human labor rather than machines. They are not industrialists, nor are they the sharp business people of their past. They are like the effete aristocracy of Europe, and their old money ways are desired as a shortcut to social accession and mobility, but this is not to say that they understand or respect each other. In fact, the old money family is quick to feel revolted by a kind of crass grasping for money, especially in the case of the sons, who have lost their core values of honesty, prudence, modesty, and sobriety.

**Mary Vertrees:** Mary is a lovely young woman who has lustrous brown hair and beautiful furs which she eventually sells in order to subsidize her enrollment in a secretarial school, which is a tremendous fall in status for her family, and she hides it. Mary is shy and filled with a kind of existential shame because the appearance of her family is no longer aligned with their impecunious reality. But, she is not snobbish or elitist, and she will do what it takes to help her parents. Nevertheless, she is ashamed and does not want to accept help. She does not feel good about her relationship with their lives once that he ascends to a high place in his father's company, after the death and disgrace of the two sons. When he was simply working in the bowels of the factory and writing whimsical philosophical writings, and contemplating his stay in a sanatorium, she felt very close to him and was not ashamed to spend time.

**Bobby Langhorn:** Mercenary losers such as Bobby Langhorn targeted the wealthy daughter of the wealthy industrialist. Mr. Sheridan recognized Bobby Langhorn as a deadbeats wastrel but his daughter was fascinated by his flattery and wild side which involved parties and superficial entertainment. When Mr. Sheridan received a telegram informing him that his daughter Edith has married Bobby Langhorn, he

takes his wounded hand and destroys the plaster statue of a black jockey outfitted that somehow was considered popular and stylish in the new mansions of the day. One knows that the marriage will not end well and Edith will be ruined.

**City Streets:** The city streets become an entirely separate character in the novel. They are filled with the collision of old and new, which while opening doors of opportunity are very dangerous. So, in the streets once one finds streetcars, cars, motorcycles, bicycles, horse-drawn carts, pedestrians, and other dangerous entities.

**Factories:** The factories are additional characters. They create wealth, that are dangerous because the machines are unsafe. They blow up, they cut, it catch on fire, and even if they create the materials for progress, they randomly kill one or groups of people. And there is actually will or no impunity. Further, factories are expensive. And they also lead to short cuts and also they can result an individual's gambling too much in order to pay for them. This is exactly what happened to Jim, the older son oldest son of Mr. Sheridan. He entered into bad deals and unconscionable swindles in order to achieve what he wanted to achieve. There are real estate deals as well as financing and intellectual property. These are all subject and vulnerable to elicit and unconscionable financial dealings which often resulted in the instantaneous wiping out of the wealth of shareholders. They often contributed to the loss of wealth of the older agrarian families who try to adjust to the new times by investing in new technologies and were often swindles.

**The environment is another character.** In the city, with the factories, the skies become dark with pollution and smoke. People's hands and faces are turned black in hours and curtains and clothing become gray and must be washed regularly. Lungs are corroded and people smoke in addition to breathing in the noxious fumes, and so mind disorders are very common. Rivers and lakes are also contaminated.

## Discussion Questions

### Question 1:

The traditional approach to industrialization and economic growth was largely positive in nineteenth century American literature. In fact, the industrialists became the new aristocracy, and were treated with the same deference as landed aristocracy in Europe. Find examples and explain how this is the case in *The Turmoil*.

### Question 2:

Miss Mary Vertrees represents "old money" in America, and as such, rather tragic. And yet, the "God of Bigness" was really the reason for their changing economic status. Explain what really happened with the Vertrees family fortunes, and how the "God of Bigness" is a god that kills those who do not possess the virtues of pluck, self-determination, and brashness.

### Question 3:

*The Turmoil* takes place in an industrial Midwestern town (Indianapolis) which has grown quickly and expanded with coal-fired factories and the clatter and chaos of streets filled with a discordant and disquieting jumble of people, cars, horses, bicycles, streetcars, motorcycles, bicycles, and omnibuses. It is a deadly admixture which reflects society as well as industry. Explain how and where technology had its most devastating impact.

## Bibbs Sheridan

(Idealistic; Dreamer)

**Character:** Bibbs is the youngest son of Mr. and Mrs. Sheridan, and unlike his hardy, ambitious, and less-than-ethical older brothers, Bibbs is an idealistic dreamer, ambitious only in the sense that he would like to spend all his days pondering obscure thoughts and posing questions that seek to find the underlying truths in ordinary things. He is fragile and as the novel begins, we find he recently suffered a nervous breakdown, which led to an extended stay in a sanitarium. His return home, and his father's attempts to coax him into gainful employment are fraught with ups and downs. His friendship with the lovely girl next door, the kind-hearted Mary Vertrees bolsters his spirit and his resolve to recover. Bibbs

undergoes a dramatic transformation in the story after tragedies befall his family. They become victims of their own ambition and materialism, with lives marked by excess and flouting of eternal verities. He is also affected by the collapse of the fortunes of the Vertrees family, who has become a victim of their own materialism as well, but without the vital spirit or spark of entrepreneurial energy to innovate out of their problems.

**Parallels** Bibbs is an idealistic dreamer who does not seem to fit well in the pragmatic, workaday world. He has a kind spirit, however, and changes from purely nihilistic to a more optimistic, pragmatic person. His philosophical stance seems to move from the pessimistic philosophy of Schopenhauer to a positivist pragmatism of a Charles Peirce. Echoes of Nietzsche's *Thus Spake Zarathustra* inform the new focus of Bibbs as well, and the ideas of cycles (myth of the eternal return) and deep-seated and unavoidable clashes between good and evil.

In Herman Melville's "Bartleby the Scrivener," Bartleby is a misfit scrivener who works in a *law office in New York City*. He *passively resists all work, beginning with his regular work*, and later, he resists everything. His nihilistic, negating intensity is deeply subvertive. Bartleby ends up starving to death.

Christopher Smart's long poem, "Jubilate Agno," is a celebration of philosophy and also of quirky, dysjunctive philosophical musings, and a rather mad intensity at the core. The author, who lived in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, died in a sanatorium (madhouse), Bedlam.

*The Education of Henry Adams* is a memoir that has the feel of a bildungsroman, and the saga of the gradual maturation and transformation of a boy into a man. While *The Turmoil* does not address the making of an author, it does focus on the growth, development, and maturation of a human being.

Friedrich Nietzsche's *Thus Spake Zarathustra* contains many of the larger concepts, and the idea of the God of Bigness directly relates to the discussions of Zoroastrianism. The concepts are the will to power and self-overcoming.

### Illustrative Passages

**Courageous: Enduring Dangerous Jobs** Bibbs was given a job at the factory to get him on the path of working up from the bottom. He was in charge of the "zinc eater" which processed waste metal for reuse. It was a dangerous, dirty, noisy job, and was literally killing him. As Bibbs put it, "He laughed ruefully. "I think it's the noise, though I'm ashamed to say it. You see, it's a very powerful machine, and there's a sort of rhythmical crashing—a crash every time the jaws bite off a circle" (Chapter 19).

**Friendship** Bibbs spent time with Miss Mary Vertrees, who saw immediately how working with the "Zinc Eater" was very difficult for Bibbs. To give him courage, vision, and the ability to endure the horrific conditions, she offered a deep, abiding friendship: "EVERY evening. I want you. They sha'n't hurt you again!" And she held out her hand to him; it was strong and warm in his tremulous clasp. "If I could, I'd go and feed the strips of zinc to the machine with you," she said. "But all day long I'll send my thoughts to you. You must keep remembering that your friend stands beside you. And when the work is done—won't the night make up for the day?"(Chapter 19).

**Philosophical: Wants to Make Sense of the World** Bibbs has a very inquiring mind, and he seeks to make sense of the world and to put things to rights by writing his observations, ruminations, and snatches of poetry on scraps on paper. Those pieces of paper, not intended for general use, are found by Mary Vertrees and also by Mr. Sheridan, with very different reactions from each. Mary

**Self-sacrificing** Jim Sheridan makes an offer of marriage to Mary Vertrees, as it seems a perfect blend of money (his) and breeding (hers). She is humiliated to think that she has sunk so low as to not marry for love, but for money. In a self-sacrificing gesture, Bibbs offers to marry Mary Vertrees out of a feeling of obligation. Sadly, such a move resulted in the destruction of their friendship due to Mary's feeling of shame and Bibbs's feelings of awkwardness. Later, they both come to realize that they did truly love each other, and also that their friendship was much too precious to throw away due to shame.

**Leader** To Mr. Sheridan's surprise, Bibbs demonstrates leadership skills as well as business acumen after he becomes a partner of his father after the death of Roscoe and Jim. Facing the painful reality that what Jim had built was shoddily built and unsuitable as a warehouse, Bibbs takes it upon himself to negotiate an option on warehouse space. Further, he takes the effort to construct an airtight argument in order to persuade his father.

**Steadfast** After the offer of marriage that embarrassed Mary and caused her to do everything she could to avoid him, Bibbs threw himself into work. However, he could not stop thinking about Mary and missing their shared time together as friends. He was a steadfast friend, but afraid to offend her further by approaching her. After Mr. Sheridan made the move to visit the Vertrees family and to express how much good the friendship did Bibbs, and then, the very next day, when Mr. Sheridan saved Bibbs from a certain death by being crushed by a trolley, Mary came to visit Bibbs to see if he was well after his close call. At that moment, which marks the end of the novel, they break through the barrier of shyness and shame, and the steadfast devotion of both is very clear.

### Discussion Questions

1 – Bibbs is depicted as a fragile dreamer at the beginning of the novel. What were the circumstances that made him so vulnerable, and what were some of the ideas he expressed in his notes that provide insight into the reasons for his state of being at that time?

2 – They seem to be good friends. Those who see more closely see that Bibbs has potentially purchased items at the drugstore that will be enjoyed by Mr. Sheridan, but more importantly, will bring pleasure to Mary Verhees. What is the true nature of the relationships between Bibbs and Mary Vertrees?

3 -- Mr. Sheridan sacrificed himself for Bibbs when he threw himself in front of a trolley. How does Bibbs sacrifice himself for both his father and his best friend (Miss Mary Vertrees)?

**Mr. Sheridan** (Brash, Confident, "The American")

**Character:** Archetypal American individualist and entrepreneur, whose dedication, acumen, and good timing contribute to his success as an industrialist. A hard trader, he studies his business well. He is fundamentally honest, kind, and fair, although tough. He has no patience for people of poor character, who are cowards, immoral, dishonest, or braggarts. Self-sacrificing and stalwart, he loves and places his trust in his wife and all his children, even when all except one of his children disappoint him.

### Parallels

There are very few novels that lionize the entrepreneur or the industrialist, so it's not easy to find parallels. However, if one thinks of them of the warrior kings of the industrial age, it's much easier to find parallels.

Shakespeare's *Henry V* could be seen as a kind of psychological parallel to Mr. Sheridan. Granted, it's a long stretch, but the self-sacrifice, the willingness to go to war (albeit a commercial one), forge true parallels.

One might think that industrial novels of the 19<sup>th</sup> century would contain analogues or parallels to Mr. Sheridan, but unfortunately, they tend to demonize the factory owners or make them into romantic anti-heroes.

The English 19<sup>th</sup> century writer Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South*, the manufacturer and factory owner, John Thornton, is a dark, brooding romantic presence, which Mr. Sheridan most decidedly is not.

Later, mid 20<sup>th</sup>-century American Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged* features the railroad magnate Dagny Taggart and the love of her life and soul mate, industrialist Hank Reardon. It's a very dystopian novel,

with an ultimately nihilistic outcome, which is not at all the overall zeitgeist of *The Turmoil*, despite the grime and horrific environmental conditions.

### **Illustrative Passages**

**Work Ethic** Mr. Sheridan arrives every morning very promptly at his offices in the imposing multi-story building that houses Sheridan Industries. He goes to his office where he works with his sons and assistants. He also often leaves his office in order to tour the operations, where he reinforces the values of hard work, punctuality, honesty, and grit.

**Proud** Mr. Sheridan is proud of his accomplishments, and attributes the success of his operations to courage, entrepreneurship, creativity, and a firm belief in self and in one's personal vision. Mr. Sheridan likes to think of himself as the best at everything at Sheridan industriew. However, his pride leads to a painful fall as he gives himself a serious injury when showing Bibbs the "best way" to operate the "Zinc Eater" and almost cuts off his hand.

**Accomplishment-oriented** Mr. Sheridan brags on Jim's ability to build the new warehouses in a way that is faster, cheaper, and more efficient. However, the dark side is that he unconsciously encourages his son to cut corners, with tragic results when a fire breaks out and kills the workers and Jim as well.

**Kind-hearted** When Mr. Sheridan has the bandages removed, he goes home at noon with the idea of sparing his wife's feelings when shows the maimed hand. Tenderly calling her "Mamma," Mr. Sheridan tries to convince her that he never really used that hand anyway. In another scene, Mr. Sheridan takes the time to visit Mary Vertrees with the idea of helping both recover their friendship.

**Visionary** Mr. Sheridan seems to be in the service of the idolatrous God of Bigness. But, ironically, it is not Mr. Sheridan who truly worships the God of Bigness, but instead, Mr. Vertrees, who was not rewarded, but destroyed, for his devotion: "the dainty little man was one of the first to fall down and worship Bigness, the which proceeded straightway to enact the role of Juggernaut for his better education. He was a true prophet of the prodigious growth, but he had a fatal gift for selling good and buying bad. He should have stayed at home and looked at his Landseers and read his Bulwer, but he took his cow to market, and the trained milkers milked her dry and then ate her" (Chapter 5). Instead, Mr. Sheridan sees a world built on human effort and ingenuity, focused on constructing a solid foundation for a world with clear causality: work hard honestly, reap rewards modestly. While at first Mr. Sheridan seems crass and a mesmerized devotee of Bigness, at the end, he is seen as independent of Bigness, and in truth, he and his kind are the hope of a better world.

### **Discussion Questions**

1 – At times, the relationships between Mr. and Mrs. Sheridan seems to privilege the male and give the female very little freedom. However, this is not really the case, as one continues to read. How does the relationship between Mrs. Sheridan and her husband illustrate an ideal marriage informed by mutual respect, shared vision, and a deep love for each other and their children?

2 – The Sheridan children are creatures of their environment. They behave as expected, with a few exceptions – and most of the unexpected moments have to do with Mr. Sheridan's moments of kindness. What are the ways in which Mr. Sheridan demonstrates love and an abiding commitment to the well-being of his children?

3 – Despite Mr. and Mrs. Sheridan's attempts to create the best possible world for their children and to shield them from the hardships they experienced, the children still manage to behave badly. How do the children of Mr. Sheridan betray him? How do their values express the antithesis of all that he has worked for?

### **THEMES**

**Industrialization:** The rapid industrialization of the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the early 20<sup>th</sup> century dramatically affected cities, especially those near raw materials, power, and markets. In Midwestern cities such as Indianapolis, where *The Turmoil* is set, factories spring up to create the components needed to build infrastructure such as bridges, roads, railroads, electric lines and the manufactured products such as automobiles, telephones, household items used in conjunction with them. While the rapid industrialization of the country gave rise to wealthy industrialists and added jobs to the workplace, the jobs were often dangerous and the investments in industry were highly speculative and risky.

**Ambition:** In a time of rapid change and societal transformation, when the “God of Bigness” dominated all aspects of life in the city, ambition likewise grew big, with often disastrous consequences. Jim Sheridan’s ambition to create huge warehouses while cutting costs led to a fatal fire. Mr. Sheridan’s ambition led him to build an empire, but also lose the ability connect with his sons. It was only when he started to suffer and to lose things that he was able to temper the ambition with a desire for a shared well-being, not only for his son, but also in a kindly manner to his neighbors, the Vertrees.

**Honesty:** Mr. James Sheridan is a sharp businessman and an honest one. He has tried to inculcate the same values in his two older sons, but unfortunately, their measure of success tends to be material (money, fast cars, fast women), and they invert and pervert the notion of honesty. Bibbs is honest on a level not first appreciated by Mr. Sheridan, who tends to look at the visible world. Bibbs, however, probes the integrity of things and reality on a philosophical level, which often makes him seem a bit odd in the eyes of his father.

**Old Wealth vs. “Nouveau Riche”:** *The Turmoil* explores the fate of the families who were once held high and who dominated society, but then found themselves unable to compete in the new industrialized economy. In this case, the Sheridans’ neighbors, the Vertrees, illustrate the slow, often humiliating submersion into the dark waters of an inescapable poverty. The Vertrees emerge eventually, largely because of their warm, accepting attitude, deep friendship between Mary Vertrees and Bibbs Sheridan, and then, finally, the kindness of Mr. James Sheridan. The brash, often crass and garish “nouveau riche,” illustrated by the Sheridans, are at times portrayed in caricature, but their essential humanity rescues them, and thus makes the novel much better than it might have been. The second book of the trilogy, *The Magnificent Ambersons* explores the theme much more in-depth.

**Sacrifice:** Whether from an “old family” or from a brash upstart industrialist’s family, individuals across the board sacrifice themselves, their dreams, and even their lives in the service of their values. Bibbs sacrifices his dreams of spending time in contemplative thought in order to heal his broken family; Mr. Sheridan plunges in front of a trolley car to tackle Bibbs and rescue him from certain death; and Mary Vertrees sacrifices her furs, piano, and other treasured items to save her family from poverty.

## Reference

Tarkington, Booth. (1915) *The Turmoil*. Project Gutenberg. <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1098/1098-h/1098-h.htm>