

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

Susan Smith Nash, Ph.D.

BOOTH TARKINGTON (1869 – 1946)

Important Works

- 1899: *The Gentleman from Indiana*
- 1900: *Monsieur Beaucaire* Later adapted as a play, an operetta and two films: 1924 and 1946
- 1902: *The Two Vanrevels* (1902)
- 1908: *The Man from Home* (stage play co-written with [Harry Leon Wilson](#))
- 1913: *The Flirt*
- 1914: *Penrod*
- 1915: *The Turmoil* First volume of the trilogy *Growth*
- 1916: *Penrod and Sam*
- 1916: *Seventeen*
- 1918: *The Magnificent Ambersons* Winner of the 1919 Pulitzer Prize Adapted for a 1942 film by [Orson Welles](#) and a 2002 made-for-television movie Second volume of the trilogy *Growth*
- 1919: *Ramsey Milholland*
- 1921: *The Country Cousins: A Comedy in Four Acts* (stage play)
- 1921: *Alice Adams* Winner of the 1922 Pulitzer Prize Adapted for film in 1923 and 1935
- 1922: *Gentle Julia* Filmed in 1923 and 1936
- 1923: *The Midlander* (re-titled *National Avenue* in 1927) Third volume of the trilogy *Growth*
- 1927: *The Plutocrat*
- 1934: *Little Orvie*
- 1943: *Kate Fennigate*
- 1945: *Image of Josephine*
- 1947: *The Show Piece*

Biography

One of the most popular and respected novelists and playwrights of the United States in the early 20th century, Booth Tarkington has almost been forgotten except, perhaps, for two novels made into films, *Alice Adams*, featuring Katherine Hepburn in the lead role, and *The Magnificent Ambersons*, which was directed by Orson Welles and has a number of scenes famous for their innovative techniques and *mise-en-scene*.

Booth Tarkington's core philosophy aligns resolutely with modernism, with a strong respect yet revulsion for a kind of technocratic society. His work explores the tensions that occur when part of society is eager to break with what is considered to be the obsolete past and explore new forms of art, governance, and enterprise, and yet the other part of society embraces the traditions of the past, and deprecates the "nouveau riche" even as they see their once glorious lives crumble into soon-to-be-forgotten dust.

Born in Indianapolis, Indiana, which serves as the thinly disguised location of many of his novels, Tarkington was educated at Purdue and then at Princeton, where he was immediately recognized for his literary talent. He failed to graduate, missing only one course in the classics. Nevertheless, he was always loyal to the school and they recognized him with honorary degrees, one in 1899 and another in 1918. Tarkington subsequently won a Pulitzer Prize in 1919 for *The Magnificent Ambersons* and then in 1922 for *Alice Adams*. *The Magnificent Ambersons* was the

second of *The Growth Trilogy*, which were in essence industrial novels that explored the social and psychological changes accompanying industrial revolutions.

Many of Tarkington's novels tend to be tragic with many allusions to the Greek classics, and the issues that are addressed are universal and unchanging. However, Tarkington also wrote humorous fiction, with a gift for capturing the delusional dreams of love-stricken adolescents and the picaresque tormenting by their younger siblings and cousins. His depictions of upper middle class America are valuable sociological time capsules, even as the psychology is both universal and enduring.

Tarkington was a prolific writer whose first novel, *The Gentleman from Indiana* was published in 1899. His last novel, *The Show Piece*, was published in 1947, a year after his death.

Accomplishments as a Writer

Capturing the Unique Spirit of the American Midwest : Tarkington's first book, *The Gentleman from Indiana*, was the first of many that explored the mindset and psyche of the Midwest as opposed to the East Coast, where most of the characters in the book both study and conduct business. While it might be tempting to think of the Midwest as small and insignificant, the reality is that with the network of rivers, railroads, and the availability of anthracite coal to the south, high-grade iron ore from the north, and ample supplies of inexpensive energy, Indianapolis, mirrors Pittsburgh, Erie, and other cities that became important and thriving industrial centers and financial.

Captures the Capacity to Dream in both Humorous and Serious Novels: Aspirational dreams characterize the characters in Booth Tarkington's novels. Sometimes the dreams are comical, as in the case of the young boy, Penrod, who builds a fort and imagines himself to be a cowboy or an outlaw. They are also humorous, as William Sylvanus Baxter sneaks out of the house wearing his father's evening clothes to appear debonair and worldly to the visiting Lila whose habit of speaking in baby talk enchants the seventeen-year-old. At other times, however, aspirational dreaming brings an awareness of the limitations of life, as in the case of the Schopenhauer-obsessed self-made philosopher Bibbs Sheridan, whose industrial tycoon father despairs of ever seeing him mature into a businessman.

Humorous Depictions of Youth Tarkington's psychological realism with respect to teenagers and pre-adolescents is unique and marks a turning point in American fiction. In the past, humorists such as Mark Twain achieved humor, but it tended to be from a wryly satirical perspective, and very much as an adult. In Tarkington's *Gentle Julia* and *Seventeen*, part of the humor derives from the fact that the way that the teenager considers himself is very much in opposition with what the adults and children around him see. Further contributing to the humor is the dialogue, which is comical in and of itself, with the hyperbole of the teenager juxtaposed with the calm and rational tones of the mother, and then the raucous and irreverent commentary of the African American onlookers. Sometimes the humor is less light-hearted, but becomes rather ironic, as in the case of *The Flirt*, where a notorious flirt is deceived by her own narcissism and falls in love with an opportunistic womanizer who wants to manipulate her to help him with his larcenous schemes. Her younger brother and sister are constantly saying things that reveal her narcissism and in a different context, it would be light-hearted, but given the context, it becomes more tragicomic.

Themes

The Multiple Impacts of Technological Change The power of technological change to totally disrupt the economy, a community, the environment, and even a person's sense of self is a powerful theme in Tarkington. In *The Turmoil* (1915), the first chapter describes how a once rather sleepy trading and agricultural center transformed into a kind of smoky, dark, noisy, and dangerous inferno where streetcars, bicycles, motor cars, trolleys, and horse and wagons all

share the same streets in utter chaos. Technology maims and kills, and it ruins the quality of the air and the water. The human inhabitants are likewise affected, and yet, technological change and the inventions are seen in a positive sense as well. A good invention can make a person wealthy. However, it can also taint one and tempt them to either steal intellectual property or to gamble on risky ventures, both of which will result in ruin. In a rather stunning contrast, Tarkington's humorous fiction seems to downplay technology and instead to focus on them as a part of dreams or delusions of youth. For example, Julia Atwater, the belle of the town where she lives, receives two white cats that have been turned gray from the smoke from the train's engine. Her young niece's desire to wash the cats (after Kitty Silver has loudly exclaimed, "I ain't no Cat-Wash Woman!") sets up one of the funniest parts of the book.

Social Hierarchies Ann Adams is keenly aware of class, hierarchies, and rigid structures, and it humiliates her to think of her father's reduced circumstances and the cloud under which he left his job. At the end, the family is vindicated, but one keenly feels her existential shame. In *Gentle Julia*, Noble Dill is perhaps the most obsessed of all the young men who are enamoured of Julia Atwater. When she travels out of town for the summer to visit relatives, her cousins use an uncle's cast-off printing press to create their own newspaper, in which Florence announces (mistakenly) Julia's engagement. What makes the mistake poignant is the fact that Noble Dill is not anywhere near possessing the financial security he would need to be able to even approach the thought of asking her hand in marriage. Julia is not actually engaged, and she essentially postpones the inevitable by saying she'll never marry, even though everyone knows it is an inevitability.

Social Stigma and Existential Shame There are many social stigmas in Tarkington's world, and there is a high psychological price to pay. Tarkington's protagonists are hyper-aware of their position in society, and even those who claim to reject materialistic shows of wealth or success, are very sensitive to the way that people perceive them. There is a keen awareness of the impact of sudden losses of wealth and position, which may reflect Tarkington's own formative years, when his family lost their wealth in the Bank Panic of 1873, and never completely regained their earlier standing. Alice Adams wants to transcend her social class and goes to extreme lengths to do what she can to imitate the ways of the town's wealthy residents. Unfortunately, the more she tries, the more evident it is that she is at best a parvenu, and at worst, a fraud. For the Amberson's, in *The Magnificent Ambersons* the long, slow fall from being the wealthiest, most influential family, and arguably the most arrogant in the city to scandal and humiliation is at the core at the novel. The pampered Georgie Amberson goes from scoffingly referring to his fellow citizens as "riffraff" to being utterly humbled, driving a nitroglycerine truck, where the relatively high pay (in exchange for the extremely dangerous nature of the job) will help him afford to marry Lucy, the love of his life.

Discussion Questions:

1. Booth Tarkington had a complex response to the rapid technological change that gave rise to factories, the internal combustion engine, telecommunications, and other disruptors. Describe the way that Tarkington's characters were often both harmed and helped by technology, not only in their finances, but also in love and in their relationships with family members.
2. Some of the situations that were most humorous in Tarkington's comedies had to do with the fantasy life and aspirational dreams of adolescents and young adults. Identify two or three examples of how the collision of the young person's fantasy world with reality had humorous outcomes.
3. Booth Tarkington's protagonists often have to undergo a lengthy journey through a purgatory of their own making, usually due to their pride or hubris. Describe how protagonists such as Georgie Amberson, Alice Adams, and Bibbs Sheridan traveled through a psychological purgatory (sometimes accompanied by physical injury as well), until they came to understand certain truths

about themselves, the world around them, and their family and friends. What happened to them after they emerged from their long purgatory? How did Tarkington create a satisfying closure?