

## Oil! By Upton Sinclair

### Summary

Oil has been struck in Southern California. Soon the landscape is carved up as the drilling begins. One man stands to profit from it - Mr J. Arnold Ross, a kindly tycoon who gets rich by buying up land cheap and bribing public officials to get the work done quickly.

But this brings him into conflict with his beloved son, Bunny, whose growing sympathy with oilfield workers and socialist organizers fuels a running debate with his father. Meanwhile Bunny's childhood friend, Paul, has become involved in the unions, leading to a fateful clash with capitalist forces.

Peopled by diverse characters from strike leaders to politicians, evangelist preachers to Hollywood starlets, the very rich to the very poor, *Oil!* is a humorous and compelling story of corruption and class warfare, idealism and friendship.

### About the author

Upton Sinclair was born in Baltimore on September 20, 1878 to a prominent but impoverished family. He attended City College of New York and later Columbia University before writing for various socialist newspapers. A prolific writer throughout his long life he first earned success with his Civil War novel *Manassus* in 1903. This was followed shortly thereafter with the immensely successful and influential novel *The Jungle* (1906). Its searing depiction of the brutal working conditions in the Chicago stockyards won both critical and financial success. Furthermore, the novel was directly responsible for the establishment of the country's Food and Drug Administration. Its success placed its author in the ranks of other muckrakers at the time, such as Jacob Riis and Lincoln Steffens, who helped usher in the progressive era of American history. With the proceeds from *The Jungle*, Sinclair founded a utopian commune outside of Princeton, New Jersey, called Helicon Hall. Among the guests who participated in this experiment in alternative living were William James, John Dewey, Sinclair Lewis, and Emma Goldman.



At this time, Sinclair became intensely interested in politics, running for Congress in New Jersey as the Socialist candidate. After his bid failed and a fire consumed his beloved Helicon Hall he moved to California. There he founded the state's first chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union and ran for Congress twice on the Socialist ticket, both unsuccessfully. Still an active novelist, in 1917 Sinclair published *King Coal*, a novel he hoped would do for the coal industry what *The Jungle* had done for the meatpacking industry. Based on the miners' strikes in Colorado, the book was a failure, due in part to its lack of a strong central character. Throughout the late teens and early twenties Sinclair devoted himself to journalism, writing especially for the socialist newspaper *The New Appeal*. One series of articles on religion was later collected in the book *The Profits of Religion*, an incendiary indictment of the collusion of big business and religion. The Teapot Dome Scandal and Sinclair's firsthand experience with the oil boom in Southern California gave him the impetus to write his epic California novel *Oil!*. This is generally considered among the finest of his fictional works.

The Sacco and Vanzetti trial was the next social cause that galvanized his literary aspirations. His research into the trial and execution of the convicted anarchists Ferdinando Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti resulted in his long novel *Boston*. He

found it difficult to conclude the novel in part because he eventually doubted the innocence of the two men. The book nonetheless provides a detailed and mostly impartial account of the events leading up to and during this infamous trial. In 1934, Sinclair made his most successful run for office as the Democratic candidate for governor of California. He ran on the "EPIC" platform (End Poverty in California) but his communist past was exploited by his opponent and he failed again to win an election. He published an account of the election and the smear campaign that ended it in the book *I, Candidate for Governor: And How I Got Licked*.

Sinclair continued to write books well into his seventies, including the Lanny Budd series of novels about the son of an American arms manufacturer whose intelligence and luck place him at the pivotal moments in twentieth-century history. One of the novels in the series set during the Nazi takeover of Germany, *Dragon's Teeth*, won the Pulitzer Prize in 1943. In all, he authored more than eighty books, most of them advancing his ideas for social and industrial reform. Sinclair died in 1968 and is buried in Washington, D.C. His former home in Monrovia, California, is a National Historic Landmark.

### Discussion questions

1. *Oil!* contains an extended, richly satirical portrait of California culture in the twenties. With reference to Hollywood and the oil boom, discuss Sinclair's depiction of California as the country's place of last hope.
2. J. Arnold Ross, Bunny's father, is not your typical tycoon, though his company is worth at one point more than \$70 million. Describe his rise to success and his motivations behind it. Discuss his relationship with Bunny. Why does he cave in to Bunny's demands to help his unionizing friends? Do the two ever truly come to a mutual understanding?
3. Although set in the Jazz Age, *Oil!* is hardly your typical novel from the period. Compare this work with those of Fitzgerald and Hemingway that chronicle the same period.
4. Discuss how race plays a role in the novel, especially in the relationship between Bunny and the Jewess Rachel Menzies.
5. If you substitute the red scare as depicted in the novel with our current war on terror, *Oil!* reads remarkably like a portrait of contemporary America. Discuss the parallels as you see them. How do you think Sinclair would react to contemporary American society? Which contemporary writers would you consider to be descendants of Upton Sinclair?
6. From Bunny's nearly absent mother to Vee Tracy to Ruth Watkins, Sinclair portrays women in a highly critical light. Discuss the female characters in the novel. Are there any positive female portraits offered by Sinclair?
7. The novel dramatizes a debate among the American left between radical approaches to social change—the communism of Paul Watkins—and more moderate approaches—the socialism of the Menzies and Professor Irwin. Discuss the arguments made by each side. Which did you find most compelling? To which side do you think the author belonged?
8. The novel was banned in Boston not for its political ideas but for its frank discussion of sexuality, particularly Bunny's sister's abortion. Discuss the sexual relationships in the novel. Do they strike you as authentic or terribly dated? Why do you think marriage is portrayed as a losing proposition in the novel?
9. Sinclair's fiction grew out of the tradition of American naturalism, and as such it bears similarities with the work of Stephen Crane, Theodore Dreiser, and Frank Norris. Compare *Oil!* with other novels in that tradition, such as *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*, *Sister Carrie*, or *The Octopus*.

