

Character analysis: upton sinclairs the flivver king

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Upton Sinclair's "The Flivver King" begins with a young Abner Shutt excitedly telling his mother about the man down the street who is building a horseless wagon. Abner's childlike admiration for the idea is so strong that he tells her he will dedicate his life to working to build these machines. The tension comes not from Abner's decision to work for Henry Ford; rather, the tension in the story comes from the result that his employment has on his 3 children. Sinclair takes special time to note the effect that Ford and Fordism had on the growth, development, and later lives of Abner Shutt's three children. As such, the story is actually less about Henry Ford and more about the effects of scientific management (which heavily influenced the production side of industry during the years in question) on the individuals which it encompassed. As with any company, the values and traits that define its culture near the beginning stages of development are oftentimes not clearly exhibited as the company grows and expands. As with Henry Ford's example, Ford began his firm with the worker in mind. Every detail of how his operation was organized was mindful of the needs of his workers. Ford went so far as to actively seek to bring the cost of the automobile down in a time when prices of new automobiles were only rising; due to the innate belief that he wished his own employees to be able to afford the product that they were manufacturing. However, Sinclair works to show that greed, power, and the endless drive for profits corrupt not only the very top echelons of management but corrupt the company culture from the president of the organization all the way down to the lower levels of production. In this way, Sinclair works to show what the effects of such a form of management have on the Shutt family as a function of the father, and his children. The eldest of Abner Shutt's children are John Shutt. Like his father, John pursues a career

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with Ford motor company and works his way into a position of middle management. In theory and in actuality, John Shutt is the embodiment of what one might describe as the American dream. John was not merely contented with pursuing the same path that his father did and resultantly worked to better himself; albeit through the same company. In this way, the reader is presented with the realization that Ford Motor Company was growing and had the potential to offer a better life and a higher standard of living to those that came after Abner. However, it is at this juncture that the story takes a decidedly different path. The next of Abner's children, Hank, does not immediately opt to follow in his father or his brother's footsteps. Instead, Hank begins life in crime; choosing to run alcohol across the Canadian border during prohibition. Eventually, Hank decides to opt for a quieter life and is able to also acquire work for Ford Motor Company within what is known as their " Service Department". In keeping with his earlier forays into the criminal world, Hank soon finds himself in a position that he describes as an " Internal police force" of the Ford Motor Company; charged with violently putting down any labor disputes that might ensue (The Combative Innocent 6). It is at this juncture that the reader can discern a clean break with the way that the story had up until this point preceded. Originally, the story had been concentric around a nominally benevolent firm that employed both father and elder brother. Now, the story takes a turn for the darker material of how the operation is actually run and what it is evolving towards. Abner's third son, Tom, seeks to better his life as well. As such, Tom goes to college and is soon surrounded by the ideals and friendship of those that would seek a more socialist perspective in politics as well as the workplace (Bak 16). Accordingly, Tom becomes involved in the <https://assignbuster.com/character-analysis-upton-sinclairs-the-flivver-king/>

UAW as a way to combat a great many of the vices that he sees are slowly but surely destroying his family as well as countless others employed by Ford Motor Company. Sinclair uses Tom as a vehicle to call those readers of his book to action. By the point of the story that Tom radicalizes and joins forces with the UAW, it is clear that Ford Motor Company is no longer having a positive effect on the lives of the Shutt family as it at first appeared to. Likewise, the youngest of Abner's children, Daisy, opts for a career with Ford Motor Company as well. Daisy is noted in the book as a working story as a bookkeeper. It is interesting to note at this point that each succeeding child after John ends up working at a lower and lower position in the firm. In this way, Upton Sinclair is able to present the reader with the understanding that although the American dream might have worked for the first individuals involved in the firm, it has evolved to such a massive enterprise so wrapped up in profit margins and production quotas that the individual betterment of its employees no longer ranks as a top concern. This sentiment is especially noted in relation to Daisy as she struggles home along the sidewalks after being attacked on the street. Henry Ford himself sees her and asks his chauffeur what is the matter prior to both men disregarding her as just "another drunk" before speeding away (Upton 212).