Narrative as the Philosopher's Stone: How Russell H. Conwell Changed Lead into Diamonds

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Russell H. Conwell's once famous speech, "Acres of Diamonds," has been dismissed by both historians and rhetoricians as a shallow expression of the Horatio Alger myth. This conclusion does not explain how Conwell was able to win nationwide audiences for over fifty years. A Burkean analysis of the speech reveals that Conwell's formula for success relied upon a masterful transformation of pentadic ratios, carried on through the medium of the "true-life" success story. The speech illustrates the power such narratives have in altering an audience's perception of its role in a greater drama.

The speech that built Temple University still stands as a monument to how the power of rhetoric can make one's fortune. Between 1870 and 1925, Russell H. Conwell earned close to eight million dollars from the repeated delivery of "Acres of Diamonds." He delivered the speech over 6000 times in lecture halls, churches, Chautauqua tents, and even over the radio. Nearly thirteen million heard the speech, some several times, and still they came to hear. Those who could not hear the speech could read it in one of many reprint editions issued over the years. Conwell had somehow discovered the magical formula that guaranteed the success of his speech, no matter what the audience or setting.

Even in Conwell's day, people marveled at how such a conservative and, frankly, shallow little speech could have such power. His thesis was "you ought to be rich." He then dedicated two hours to a series of success stories. Overall, "Acres of Diamonds" was little different from hundreds of similar inspirational lectures that were popular at the turn of the century. Yet, Conwell brought this form to a height of success unmatched by any other. Many have sought Conwell's secret. In his lifetime, Chautauqua managers tried repeatedly to create a second Conwell by studying his text and eyeing his delivery. They failed. After Conwell's death, scholars joined the search. They, too, failed to discover his source of power. Unfortunately, scholarly failure quickly led to scholarly dismissal of Conwell and his speech. Cultural historians such as Merle Curti viewed Conwell as one of a long line of Horatio Alger prophets, popular because he was a minister who could thus put God's

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stamp of approval on the self-made man theory. This attitude is echoed in our own field. Mary Louise Gehring, who earned both master's and doctorate through the study of Conwell, posits that his success simply, "lay in the fact that he told people what they wanted to hear." Her attitude is echoed in Robert T. Oliver's excellent history of American public address.

Aside from these attempts, Conwell has not received much serious attention from rhetorical critics. After all, who is interested in a formula that requires one to give the hoi polloi exactly what it wants? Though Conwell himself would probably have approved of making the consumer the last arbiter of quality, such a formula fails to satisfy the careful critic. Audiences are changeable entities, yet Conwell never changed his basic speech, whether he gave it in Philadelphia or Fargo, North Dakota, in 1880 or 1901. Conwell's secret thus remains a challenge to modern treasure-seekers.

My contention is that Conwell succeeds because of the same formal features earlier critics used to dismiss him. No reader can ignore the fact that Conwell's speech is completely anecdotal. He begins by telling a story, proceeds to argue using stories as his evidence, and ends with a few stories before exhorting his audience to go out and get rich. Previous scholars have concentrated on the substance of the speech, viewing the stories as so much "window dressing" to keep the audience entertained. This is why they have failed to discover Conwell's secret, for the true source of his power is the stories themselves. Conwell discovered that narratives could be used as philosopher's stones, capable of turning lead into diamonds right before his audience's eyes. His success attests to the power of narrative as a persuasive tool.

Conwell succeeded with these stories because they were carefully selected and carefully ordered so as to create a new world for his audiences. Burkean criticism provides the proper framework to reveal Conwell's skill. For Kenneth Burke, words are magicians' tools, capable of changing the world into the rhetor's chosen image. Speakers create dramas and cast themselves as actors in these dramas. If a suitable role is offered to the audience, it will cast itself in that role, and the drama continues. Naturally, not every story is equally compelling to an audience, but Conwell's drama transformed them from poor to wealthy, then exhorted them to use that "wealth" to do good works in the world outside the drama. What audience could resist?

Conwell worked his magic through sleight of hand using several carefully-selected sets of stories that subtly transformed the nature of wealth. Each set emphasized a different pentadic ratio, from scene/agent, to scene/act, to agent/act. The stories capitalized on dramatic tensions already inherent in the belief system of his audience. These tensions were then released in the direction Conwell deemed most healthy. This process was completed through the careful selection and telling of "true" anecdotes, stories that illustrated each ratio and made the drama appear
“real.” My analysis will explore each of these transformations in turn, revealing how the trick was done.

CONWELL AS RHETORICAL ALCHEMIST

Since Conwell was equally successful with a variety of audiences over a long period of time, the critic must concentrate less on any specific situational data involving culture and audience, and more upon those qualities that transcended the decades. The most notable element serving that purpose is Conwell himself. His life is nearly a direct reflection of the dramatic tension he created in his speech. In a sense, Conwell was “Acres of Diamonds,” and delivering it allowed him to relive the struggle of his own life.

One of the central tenets of the speech is that wealth is best pursued in one’s own back yard. Aimless wanderers find that fortune forever escapes them. Conwell violated that advice from the first. In boyhood, he confessed, “I felt that there were great worlds for me to conquer, which I could never find in my native hills.” He ran away from home for the first time at thirteen; when he was brought home he tried again. He went to sea for a short time, but was finally forced to return to his father’s farm. Eventually, he settled down long enough to work his way through Yale. Though this was no small accomplishment, his strongest memories of those years were of the misery of being poor. Education did not quite make up for the humiliation heaped upon him by his wealthier classmates. Thus, although Conwell sought his fortune in the outside world, his rewards were small. In fact, some events seemed tailored to make Conwell wish he had stayed on the farm. The young man was torn between the two contradictory desires of leaving and staying home.

When the Civil War began, Conwell once more became a wanderer, this time as a Union officer. It is perhaps prophetic that, on the verge of building a career, he would find himself under court martial for desertion. He did not flee from battle, he simply went to visit a nearby town without receiving permission. Unfortunately, the camp was raided while he was away. His personal aide de camp was killed attempting to keep Conwell’s ceremonial sword out of enemy hands. When Conwell learned this result of his absence, he collapsed and became dangerously ill. As Conwell later told it, this event converted him to Christianity and gave him the drive to help others, because he had “two lives” to live—for himself and for his fallen comrade. Although the tale is melodramatic, it still reveals the birth of a second tension in Conwell’s life, the tension between personal ambition and altruism.

Despite this dramatic conversion, Conwell spent a few more years roaming the world in search of his fortune. He tried his hand at law, and had a brief but successful career in journalism as a roving reporter. He had retained his ties to the Baptist church during this period, and accepted a call to the ministry in 1874. He was ordained soon after, and became pastor of the Grace Baptist Church in Philadelphia in 1882. There he stayed, after his fashion, for the next forty-three years.
In the church Conwell found the perfect forum from which to pursue his seemingly contradictory goals. He had early discovered a talent for public speaking; now he could use that talent as a means to personal ends. "Acres of Diamonds," which he had initially delivered as entertainment at a reunion of his old regiment, quickly became one of his most popular fund-raisers. Delivering the speech at churches and chautauquas across the country allowed him to conciliate his twin needs for travel and security, for he could always return to Philadelphia to see to his flock. The speech also allowed him to blend ambition and altruism. Conwell was lionized as one of the great speakers of his day and hailed as practically a saint, partly because he donated every penny of his vast earnings to the newly built Temple University. Conwell, at last, seemed to have put his life in order. He then dedicated it to helping put others' lives on what he believed was the proper road.

While "Acres of Diamonds" was a mirror of Conwell's life, Conwell himself was a mirror of the lives of many other middle-class Americans of the era. Social historian Michael Kammen calls Americans "people of paradox" precisely because they have traditionally needed to balance many apparently contradictory forces that infuse their culture. Among these were the two tensions apparent in Conwell's life. The first tension arose as the vast frontiers of the continent filled with settlers. Americans traditionally valued westward movement. "The meaning of America was entangled in its need to move. A peripatetic society was born in movement from Europe and developed amidst a multitude of wanderings." Once the frontier was initially settled, however, this need was balanced by the need for collective development; the building of homes and communities that would provide a stable life. Each individual had to decide whether to leave or stay at home. Each had to worry about consequences of that decision.

A second concept undergoing change was the role of wealth in the social order. The middle-class in the United States was richer than it had ever been, yet there was still discontent. The Horatio Alger myth still held sway in the popular belief that anyone who worked hard enough could become wealthy, yet there was less and less evidence that this myth was reliable. Merle Curti notes that as the nineteenth century progressed, there were fewer opportunities for such material advancement, until the turn of the century marked, for all practical purposes, the end of the dream. This slow change set the stage for another tension "manifest in their wish to succeed, but also in their wish to change the criteria for success."

Conwell's answer to this problem was to redefine wealth in the manner that had worked for him. Money did not matter; personal character did. Wealth was to be used to help the poor develop the internal resources they needed to succeed. His favorite aphorism was, "To help a man to help himself is the wisest effort of human love." His goal then, was to help individuals succeed by creating better individuals. He pursued it through a variety of programs, such as the creation of Temple, which
eventually became the model "working class" university by offering night school and vocational training.

"Acres of Diamonds" was another avenue through which he worked. At one level, the speech functioned as the engine that provided funding for Temple University. It was, however, much more to Conwell than a fund-raiser for Temple. Indeed, he saw it as a further avenue through which to pursue his work. He could not directly improve the lot of all people through the university, but his speech could inspire many individuals to seek their own goals. Beyond that, he desired to inspire other Christians to join him in his efforts. Thus Conwell sought to change American society for the better through the medium of the platform, an ambitious goal that he approached with great skill.

CONWELL'S FORMULA

The casual reader would likely accept Conwell's claim that the speech "had no work on it—thrown together perfectly at random, spoken offhand without any special preparation" (p. 405). It consists of one story after another, and, at first glance, these stories do appear to be pulled randomly from some file in the speaker's head. The sequence begins with the apocryphal tale of one Al Hafed, a Persian who sold his farm to search for diamonds, not knowing that "acres of diamonds" lay on his own land. It then moves on to an anonymous gold seeker who sold his ranch to a Colonel Sutter. Sutter's Mill, of course, eventually became the center of the California gold rush. The rest of the stories are all strictly American in setting, all ostensibly "true," and all aimed at forwarding Conwell's central points: 1) It is easy to get rich in America, thus 2) everyone ought to be rich, because 3) money is power, and is therefore the best avenue through which to do one's Christian duty. Along the way, Conwell stresses how easy it is to accomplish this moral imperative: "We must know what the world needs first and then invest ourselves to supply that need, and success is almost certain" (p. 421). Like Al Hafed, Americans are surrounded by unrealized opportunity. There is no need to leave home to search for wealth, since careful observation of our surroundings will reveal our own individual diamond mines.

Closer examination reveals, however, that the collection of "true life" anecdotes is not casually assembled. Conwell's tales serve as "mini dramas" that draw the audience into the larger narrative. The lesser stories are arranged so that each series reflects the symbolic transformations Conwell attempts on a grand scale. They also serve as the medium through which he magically creates wealth from poverty.

Conwell's transformation results from the careful manipulation of pentadic elements within these stories. Burke recognizes that rhetoric is the main tool through which all such "transformations" are accomplished. All dialectical terms, such as "wealth" versus "poverty," share a common substance that can serve as a rapprochement, since
Distinctions, we might say, arise out of a great central moltenness, where all is merged... Let one of these crusted distinctions return to its source, and in this alchemic center it may be remade, again becoming molten liquid, and may enter into new combinations, whereat it may again be thrown forth as a new crust, a different distinction.¹⁹

The philosopher's stone for this alchemical transformation is the pentad. The five key terms of scene, act, agent, agency, and purpose are simply different attributes of any given situation. A speaker creating a dramatic interpretation of such a situation may choose to emphasize certain of these terms and de-emphasize others. These rhetorical manipulations alter the overall meaning given to a particular drama. As Burke notes, the pentadic elements' participation in a common ground makes for transformability. At every point where the field covered by any one of these terms overlaps upon the field covered by any other, there is an alchemic opportunity, whereby we can put one philosophy or doctrine of motivation into the alembic, make the appropriate passes, and take out another.²⁰

Conwell makes use of the philosopher's stone to change the lead of his audience's middle class life into diamonds. His dialectical terms play upon tensions already felt by his audience, such as the balance between leaving versus staying home, wealth versus poverty, and materialism versus altruism. These tensions make his stories compelling, and lend power to his larger narrative. This process is the basis for the following analysis.

SCENE/AGENT: CREATING WEALTH

The alembic for Conwell's transformation is the "true" story. He distracts the audience from the trick with a welter of detail, all the while casually manipulating the pentadic interpretation of these events. These manipulations come in distinct series. The first set of stories emphasizes a scene/agent ratio. This ratio deals primarily with the relationship between person and place. Given a certain scene, one expects to find a certain type of personality abiding there. The main thrust of such an emphasis is that the scene requires agents who are its "dialectical counterpart."²¹ In other words, the scene demands a certain type of character, one that matches the surrounding circumstances. Conwell uses the ratio to create negative examples for the audience. The first story, that of Al Hafed, is apocryphal. Conwell uses it to create a setting wherein God and nature are the primary powers, as he describes the process by which diamonds are created. Conwell uses the story to claim that God sent out a ball of fire

and it went rolling through the universe, burning its way through other cosmic banks of fog, until it condensed the moisture without... The internal flames burst through the cooling crust and threw up the mountains... If this internal melted mass burst out and cooled very quickly it became granite; that which cooled less quickly became silver; and less quickly, gold; and after gold diamonds were made (p. 406-407).

From the apocryphal Conwell progresses to the contemporary. He sets the scene completely, in the most concrete way possible, by directly naming the sites wherein wealth had been hidden, waiting for the right person to come along: the Golconda mines in Africa, Sutter's Mill in
California, Titusville in Pennsylvania and Newburyport, Massachusetts. Suddenly the audience sees that wealth is everywhere. Acres of diamonds lie where there was only sand. Conwell builds a world where opportunity waits for everyone.

In each of these cases thus created, the "hero" of the story proves himself unworthy of the treasure. He abandons his own back yard in favor of parts unknown, and thereby his fortune falls into the hands of other, wiser, souls. In the earlier stories, the hero fails through mere ignorance. Al Hafed knows nothing about diamonds, and gets bad advice from a wandering priest. The man at Sutter's Mill is a rancher, not a miner. Eventually, however, ignorance becomes stupidity, or, even worse, hubris. The victims are people who should know better. In each subsequent story, Conwell emphasizes the foolishness of the person who left home to find wealth, as in this tale of a man who sold a silver mine:

[This professor of mines and mining and mineralogy... when he sold that homestead in Massachusetts, sat right there on that stone to make the bargain. He was brought up there; he had gone back and forth by that piece of silver, rubbed it with his sleeve, and it seemed to say; "Come now, now, now, here is a hundred thousand dollars. Why not take me?" But he would not take it. There was no silver in Newburyport; it was all away off—well, I don't know where; he didn't, but somewhere else—and he was a professor of mineralogy (p. 413).

The moral is clear: a land full of opportunity requires a noble character, one who will see the wealth and grasp it with both hands. If you are the "right" kind of person, "you ought to be rich; you have no right to be poor" (p. 414). This opening for the drama serves two purposes. First, it serves to explain the cause of poverty. Second, it allows Conwell to create guilt in his audience.

The cause of poverty, as defined by Conwell, is weak character. "Now, when a man could have been rich just as well, and he is now weak because he is poor, he has done some great wrong; he has been untruthful to himself" (p. 415). Thus, the reason not everyone is rich, despite the abundance in the world, is that many people are foolish, or lazy, or blind, or ignorant, or have some other character flaw. This explanation is important, because it allows Conwell to take the second step, that of creating guilt in his audience.

Conwell wins the intellectual assent of his audience through his description of the poor. "The smug, thrifty, tightly moral American middle class... knew precisely what it wanted to hear" and he gave it to them. Allowing them to dismiss the poor, however, was not the same as making them desire more "wealth" for themselves. Thus, his next step was to create guilt in his audience, so that they would be anxious to hear his prescription. He did this by playing upon those tensions in the American character which had played so great a role in his own life.

The eternal conflict between exploration and development provided the first tension. A great number of Conwell's audience had already violated Conwell's admonition to stay at home and seek their fortunes. As Harry Harrison notes, Conwell's chautauqua speeches were delivered on the frontier, which still had a full complement of pioneers. These
people "had not stayed in their own back yards. They had gone west." The frontier was not "officially" closed by the Census Bureau until 1890, so Conwell delivered the speech for nearly twenty years to audiences who had likely strayed from the home neighborhood. Although these people were probably better off than they had been in the East, few had become as wealthy as the characters drawn by Conwell. No person could hear these stories without making an implicit comparison. Thus, the stories created a strong tension between the audience's middle class prosperity and the vast wealth that might have been theirs had they stayed home. No matter how successful these people were, Conwell argued that they could have done better.

Other members of the audience, whose parents had emigrated, might have also felt a pang of lost opportunity, but were probably still complacent in the knowledge that they were staying home to develop their own communities. These people had not strayed. Unfortunately, this actually made them more culpable in Conwell's scheme. If those who abandon opportunity are foolish, how much more so those who stay and still do not see the opportunity? They do not leave, yet they do nothing better by staying. Few of Conwell's listeners were wealthy. They were middle class merchants, farmers, clerks, or soldiers. They thus had to admit that perhaps they, too, were not as good as they should be.

In case any audience member were to be untouched by guilt caused by this problem, Conwell also calls upon the tension between ambition for wealth and the moral imperative to do good. Walter R. Fisher has termed this tension the materialist versus moralist myth. Americans have long felt the need to live up to both standards. Conwell believed that ambition and humanitarianism could be melded under the auspices of charity. This idea, known as "the stewardship of great riches," was a common religious doctrine of the period, and one that his audience would have heard before.

This doctrine gives Conwell his opportunity, for he directly informs the audience that if they are so blind as to not be wealthy, they have therefore violated their duty as good Christians. The Christian mandate is to earn wealth so that one has the means to do good works:

Think, if you only had the money, what you could do for your wife, your child, and for your home and your city. Think how soon you could endow the Temple College yonder if you only had the money and the disposition to give it; . . . We ought to be rich, because "money has power" (p. 416).

The audience is now shaken from its complacency, for somehow they have taken a wrong turn. Lack of wealth, which had just been an annoyance, is now a crime. "Are you poor? It is because you are not wanted and are left on your own hands" (p. 420). A poor person is a lazy person. A poor person is a weak person. A poor person is not doing God's work. No right thinking person then, will fail to seek riches. Even the casual listener who came to hear out of curiosity cannot take this challenge
lightly. Conwell has given his audience a need greater than the one it walked in with. It is now ready for his solution to this dilemma.

SCENE/ACT: GARNERING WEALTH

Once wealth becomes a necessity instead of an option, the audience must seek it. Conwell proceeds to give it to them through a second series of anecdotes. This series still emphasizes the scenic element of the pentad, but shifts the human element from agent to act. The heroes of these stories succeed because they take action. They follow Conwell's prescription: "see the need and set about to supply it" (p. 426). The successful person follows the market. In every story the results are the same; a person who thinks, then moves quickly, never fails. Every circumstance observed by the entrepreneur is detailed, and the resulting fortune is counted to the penny. Action and results are stressed equally with scene. Conwell begins with stories of famous millionaires, such as John Jacob Astor, but the bulk of the anecdotes concern lesser lights, everyday people who found wealth in their own back yards.27

At first, the wealth is literally located in the "scene" of the story. In one narrative, an unemployed man "who owned a wide-spreading maple tree that covered the poor man's cottage like a benediction from on high," made his fortune selling maple sugar candy. "After forty years owning that tree he awoke to find it had fortunes of money indeed in it" (427). The tree had been part of the scene for ages, but it took a thoughtful and determined actor to make it give up its treasure.

Naturally, the treasure can not be had if the actor is somehow unworthy of it. An unemployed shoemaker serves to forward Conwell's point that the development of character is an important part of the road to riches. The man is hustled out of his house by an exasperated wife:

Think of it! Stranded on an ash harrel and the enemy in possession of the house! As he sat on that ash barrel, he looked down into that little brook which ran through the back yard into the meadows, and he saw a little trout go flashing up the stream and hiding under the bank... as this man looked into the brook, he leaped off that ash barrel and managed to catch the trout with his fingers, and sent it to Worcester. They wrote back that they would give him a five dollar bill for another such trout as that (pp. 428-9).

The story does not end here, however. When the man sought more trout, he could not find any. He first had to make himself worthy of the opportunity nature had bestowed. He educated himself on the culture of trout, and started a trout farm in his brook. "[S]ince then he has become the authority in the United States upon the raising of fish.... My lesson is that man's wealth was out here in his back yard for twenty years, but he didn't see it until his wife drove him out with a mop stick" (p. 429).

In each of these stories the wealth lies hidden in the scene, sometimes for a very long time. Thus, opportunity is constantly knocking, and the character who has striven to be worthy of it, answers.
Here Conwell begins the process of transferring wealth directly to the audience. He inspires them to dream of joining the ranks of the great: "But you do have just as great inventors, and they are here in this audience, as ever invented a machine" (pp. 424-5). He creates a realm of winners and invites the audience to share. Thus, he has symbolically made his listeners winners as well. Burke observed this same phenomenon in self-help books of more recent vintage:

_The reading of a book on the attaining of success is in itself the symbolic attaining of that success.... The lure of the book resides in the fact that the reader, while reading it, is then living in the aura of success. What he wants is easy success; and he gets it in symbolic form by the mere reading itself."_

The audience now shares the wealth of some of the finest merchants of New York City. But it is still only symbolic wealth. The gold now being offered will turn to dry leaves when the speech is over. If leading the audience to identify with the wealthy had been Conwell's only achievement, people would have quickly become disenchanted. In contrast, the identification Conwell builds with the achievers is really sleight of hand, the misdirection that allows him to make the magic transformation of dross into gold.

**AGENT/ACT: TRANSFORMING WEALTH**

At first glance, Conwell's speech seems at odds with his thesis. He has told the audience that wealth is only to be pursued for the power to do good that it bestows. His success stories, however, always end with the attaining of wealth. The heroes get rich, but we never hear of what they accomplished with their new found means. Conwell appears to be leaving out the most important part. In fact, he has set the stage for the final moment of the drama, when the audience discovers that there is more to wealth than the possession of capital.

Conwell begins the transformation subtly as he works his way through the stories emphasizing scene/act. Stories that emphasize scene are always materialistic in nature; the objective world controls the actions of the agents to a great extent. Thus, the agents of this earlier series must pry fortunes from some hiding place. Agents who have already left home and hearth behind have no such cache left open to them. Others might despair of overcoming the strong web of circumstance that an emphasis upon scene creates. Conwell solves this problem through a subtle change of emphasis in his anecdotes. His examples are eventually no longer merchants; they are inventors. "Who are the great inventors? They are ever the simple, plain, everyday people who see the need and set out to supply it" (p. 426). Each person succeeds still, but the power of the scene diminishes. No one finds diamonds anymore; they make their own. Slowly the balance shifts until the ratio of agent/act is foremost. Great people do great things, and "there are great men and women in this audience" (p. 430).
Some of these actors were directly inspired by "Acres of Diamonds," as was this person:

I was once lecturing in North Carolina, and the cashier of a bank sat directly behind a lady who wore a very large hat. I said to that audience, "Your wealth is too near to you; you are looking right over it." He whispered to his friend, "Well, then, my wealth is in that hat."... he drew up his plan for a better hat pin than was in the hat before him and the pin is now being manufactured. He was offered fifty-two thousand dollars for his patent. That man made his fortune before he got out of that hall (pp. 426-27).

This man did not have to own a tree, or a trout, or a silver mine to make his money—he used his own inner strength to fashion a fortune. His was an act independent of scene.

In these tales, personal skill becomes the ticket to riches. In another story, a carpenter whittles his way to fame making toys for children. He succeeds "by consulting his own children in his own house. You don't need to go out of your own house to find out what to invent or what to make" (p. 430). Such an inventor would be a winner wherever he went. All one has to do is show a modicum of consumer awareness.

Conwell thus creates a scenario in which good character is the road to wealth. Now, for the magic. Conwell's last series of stories speak of great men, of politicians and soldiers. They do good deeds and serve their country because they are good—and not one of them spends a penny. When the switch has been effected, true wealth is defined as wealth of character. Even a poor person can be a good person, for "men are great only on their intrinsic value, and not on the position that they incidentally happen to occupy" (p. 431). All Conwell does now is stress to his audience that they, too, have the character it takes to be great. Lest someone think that great deeds require money, his crowning story is a Civil War tale wherein the heroes are men who died for their country. Literally everyone can do that deed, rich or poor, if the occasion arises. First, he praises these men as unsung heroes:

Then why is there a tomb on the Hudson at all? Why, not simply because General Grant was personally a great man himself, but that tomb is there because he was a representative man and represented two hundred thousand men who went down to death for their nation and many of them as great as General Grant (p. 433).

Then he ends his speech as he began it, with a personal narrative. Again, Conwell is a listener instead of a teller. But whereas the first lesson, taught him by an Arab guide, involved monetary wealth, the second lesson, learned in the speech of an old man, concerns the role of true courage.

The speaker mentioned them, but they were but little noticed, and yet they had gone down to death for their country, gone down for a cause they believed was right and still believe was right, though I grant to the other side the same that I ask for myself. Yet these men who had actually died for their country were little noticed, and the hero of the hour was this boy. Why was he the hero? Simply because [the speaker] fell into the same foolishness. This boy was an officer, and those were only private soldiers. I learned a lesson that I will never forget. Greatness consists not in holding some office; greatness really consists
in doing some great deed with little means, in the accomplishment of vast purposes from
the private ranks of life; that is true greatness (p. 437).

Thus, Conwell creates a drama whereby the audience, perhaps
dissatisfied with its lot, may see its inner qualities transformed into
great wealth. He skillfully uses his collection of anecdotes to lead them
through this drama. The "true-life" nature of these stories adds
believability to the plot, and allows the audience to participate fully in
the creation and transformation of wealth. First, they symbolically at-
tain wealth in the monetary sense. Then, they accept a redefinition of
that wealth into character, something the audience already has. Final-
ly, they unearth the diamonds of character and find the treasure that
was hidden, literally, under their noses. Conwell gives them nothing
they did not already have, and yet he gives them everything.

Conwell always claimed to be amazed at the success of "Acres of
Diamonds," despite the fact that, on the surface, it followed his own good
advice: find what the audience needs, then provide it. On a deeper level,
however, Conwell moved beyond that dictum. He dared to transform
what people thought they wanted into what he thought they should
have. Monetary wealth became wealth of character. Deeds that required
little or no capital became as valuable as a millionaire's endowment.
Audiences who were willing to cast themselves in Conwell's drama really
were richer when they came out than when they came in. Critics might
scoff at Conwell's naive assessment of the status quo of the period, since
he counseled against rocking the boat. But his assessment clearly
aligned with that already made by the audience. Conwell saw a need,
and he filled it. He thus became his own greatest success story.

CONCLUSION

Conwell's success illustrates the importance of the use of narratives
to provide "mini-dramas" that add verisimilitude to a larger drama.
These narratives can make a speech compelling, especially if they par-
ticipate in "reality" as the audience sees it. Conwell's narratives par-
ticipated on two levels, which provide clues to the source of their power.

On a surface level, these "true life" stories were functional because
the welter of concrete details made them believable. Every fortune was
discovered on a scene that is described to the last detail, even down to
the ash barrel in a man's back yard. Every action is detailed; even the
books one might read are named. The results of these actions are counted
to the penny. These touches make the symbolic transformations offered
by the stories salient to the audience. They are not listening to a speech,
but participating in reality.

Believing a story and internalizing it, however, are two very different
things. For a narrative to function as a transforming agent, it must also
be compelling to the audience. One source of such power is the myriad
of beliefs that are already held by the audience. Conwell's stories de-
rived their dramatic tension from the tensions of American culture. They
capitalized on the dream of wealth to bring the audience into the initial narrative of the series. From there, they called up the drama of pioneers versus settlers to create guilt, thus opening the audience to suggestion. Finally, the cultural tension between materialism and moral altruism served to pull the audience through the final transformation of great wealth into great deeds.

Once the stories’ symbolic construction of reality is completed, and the audience accepts it, the drama becomes mutable through the use of symbolic manipulation. The skilled speaker can reform it in almost any manner without shattering the fragile identification between audience and story.

Conwell used his “word magic” delicately, to move the audience one step further in a direction toward which they were already inclined. His masterful formula is another clue for critics who seek the philosopher’s stone to fit other audiences and times. The goal is always, as Burke notes, to perfect “word magic,” until we “eradicate the wrong kinds, and coach the right kinds.”

ENDNOTES

3. Harry P. Harrison (as told to Karl Detzer), Culture Under Canvas: The Story of Tent Chautauqua (New York: Hastings House, 1958) 22. Harrison was a Chautauqua platform manager and eventually became general manager of the Vawter’s circuit, of which Conwell was the headliner.
6. Robert T. Oliver, History of Public Speaking in America (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1965) 464-66. The theme of the 1988 Speech Communication Association convention was "Acres of Diamonds." Perhaps this tribute will inspire more scholarly work on Conwell.
7. The question of how much or how often Conwell altered his script through many years and thousands of performances is troublesome. One of Conwell’s biographers claimed that Conwell always made small adaptations for audiences, but that the bulk of it remained the same. [Robert Shackleton, in Russell H. Conwell Acres of Diamonds (New York: Harper and Bros., 1915) 163.] Historians of the Chautauqua circuit flatly claim that no speaker, no matter how famous, was allowed to deviate from the original script handed in to the main office before a tour began. Observers were even asked to “spot check” on the road. [Victoria Case and Robert Ormand Case, We Called It Culture: The Story of Chautauqua (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Co., 1948) 103.] A comparison of two texts, one in Conwell and one in Burr, printed about ten years apart, suggests that Conwell updated his examples to keep current with the times, but the basic structure remained remarkably similar. There were also certain apocryphal tales which he never altered. My study will concentrate on the commonalities that lie across the years. Any places where Conwell made substantive changes will be noted.
9. The version of the speech I am using is found in Burr. Page references will occur in parentheses in the text of the paper.
10. Burr 68.
12. All of Conwell's biographers defend him on this charge by noting that his motive was to check on a delayed payroll shipment. Whatever his motive, Conwell was found guilty in the court-martial. He was later reinstated. See also John W. Stokes, The Man Who Lived Two Lives (New York: Vantage Press, 1980).

13. Conwell's career allowed him to travel extensively. His most famous work is a series wherein he visited and described Civil War battle sites.


18. Burr 270.

20. Burke xix.


27. Curti 637.


29. Burke, Grammar 127-31, discusses scene at length.

30. Kenneth Burke, "Reaffirmation and Subversion of the American Dream: The

31. Walter R. Fisher, "Reaffirmation and Subversion of the American Dream: The Reference is to Conwell's Acres of Diamonds, published in 1915, the women's suffrage movement seems to be on his mind. He is careful to choose several women inventors whose inventions were invented in 1915. The examples are of a different gender, but are still of a kind. They stress inventiveness as a road to wealth.

32. Conwell's Acres of Diamonds, published in 1915, the women's suffrage movement seems to be on his mind. He is careful to choose several women inventors whose inventions were invented in 1915. The examples are of a different gender, but are still of a kind. They stress inventiveness as a road to wealth.