

On Life and Meaning

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Episode 91 – Tom Warshauer – Neighborhood Development

A Young Man from the Provinces

And now a personal word,

Tom Warshauer has a twinkle in his eye. He has a mischievous grin. He is a good time about to happen. I imagine Tom in New Orleans at night. I imagine him at the opera during intermission. He loves people, and people love him.

There is a tradition in literature of the young man from the provinces who comes to the city. The city is marvelous from afar. The lights are bright. Towers reach toward the sky. The city is a place of adventure and fortune. Dreams can be realized. The young man gets off the carriage or the bus or the train with just his backpack and ambition and charm. Now he is on the streets, naïve and curious, making his way. He encounters the denizens of the city: the fashionable, the homeless, the hucksters, the swindlers, the lovers, the mentors, the allies, and the friends. There is a grit and grime to the city up close. There is danger at night. The city is sin. The city is money. The city is sex. The young man becomes experienced. He trades. He makes deals. He falls in love. He ages slowly and then quickly in the great salons of conversation. As his life comes to an end, he regrets and raises a glass to the decisions he has made. At the station, the next young man from the provinces arrives with wonder and hope in hand.

In volume III, number 4 of *Lapham's Quarterly*, critic Jamie James wrote about literature that expresses the myth of the city: the quest narrative of the handsome man stifled in the provinces who is taken up by the metropolis. James made these notes: Balzac wrote *Lost Illusions* about an ambitious poet from the countryside who finds lovers in Paris and is ruined by the temptations of pleasure and fame. The French do not flinch about the human condition. The English write about the gravitational pull of London. The character David Copperfield said this upon arrival in the capital of the empire, "What an amazing place London was to me when I saw it in the distance ... and how I vaguely made it out in my mind to be fuller of wonders and wickedness than all the cities of the earth." Americans have their own tales of the city. John Dos Passos wrote in his novel *Manhattan Transfer* about the development of urban life from the Gilded Age to the Jazz Age. It is a series of overlapping stories that portray New York City as merciless yet teeming with energy and restlessness. A young man from a small town steps off a ferry onto Manhattan and searches for Broadway, wanting "to get to the center of things."

The center of things is the lure of the city. It is where we confront and can create a whole new identity for ourselves. Lewis Lapham, editor of *Lapham's Quarterly*, in his opening essay entitled "City Light" in the same issue on the city, said: "What suburban opinion deploras as abomination (traffic, crime, noise, confiscatory taxes, extortionate rents), the urban disposition regards as the price of escape from the tyranny of the small-town majority, as the cost of the blank canvas ... on which to discover the portrait of oneself."

The great cities of the world have always lured us in, whether Rome or Carthage, Paris or Madrid, Tokyo or Beijing. The historian Lewis Mumford wrote, "Mind takes form in the city, and in turn, urban forms condition the mind."

New Orleans was the city of Tom Warshauer's awakening. It is a city that lends itself to literature and a city that lends itself to song. Every resident knows a streetcar named Desire. Every resident knows there is a house in New Orleans they call the Rising Sun. New Orleans has been the ruin of many a poor boy.

In thoroughly modern ways, we read stories now about single women trying to make it in the big metropolis. It began with Theodore Dreiser's city novel published in 1900 about a young woman from the provinces, Sister Carrie, who arrives in Chicago with four dollars in her pocket, compromising her values to realize the American dream. Today we read about smart and driven women who arrive in the city seeking friendship and love. We know the streets. We know the neighborhoods. The cities are familiar characters as important as the protagonists themselves. Tales unfold of secrets, confessions, affairs, offices, apartments, careers, and broken and mended hearts.

Lapham ended his elegy about the city noting that the urban future is the progenitor of the world's energy and the locus of its desire.

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