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**ALWAYS WITH US:
IMAGES OF POVERTY In AMERICAN LITERATURE**

by

JOHN P. LOONAM

**A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English in
partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor
of Philosophy, The City University of New York**

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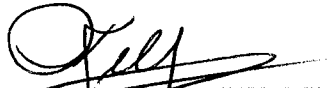
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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in English in satisfaction of the dissertation requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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Abstract

Always With Us: Images of Poverty In American Literature

by

John P. Loonam

Advisor: Professor William Kelly

Prosperity has long been viewed as a defining American condition. John Winthrop, Hector St. Jean de Crèvecoeur, Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson made the rise from subsistence to prosperity a centerpiece in the transformation from European to American. As the American economy grew, this insistence on inevitable prosperity became increasingly problematic.

Chapter I examines how the Crash of 1837 forced American writers to confront the reality of poverty. In *The Wide, Wide World*, Susan Warner puts her heroine through many of the situations that were forcing children into poverty without letting her suffer any deprivation. George Lippard includes

poverty in his portrait of America, but leads his virtuous poor to new lives of prosperity in an Edenic west. Herman Melville is unique in his insistence on the reality of poverty in the young republic. The collapse of his career demonstrates the importance of the ideology of inevitable prosperity.

Chapter II explores the realistic depictions of urban life that became a focus of American culture in the late Nineteenth-Century. Jacob Riis used both prose and photography to create a portrait of the immigrant slum dwellers as an exotically different “other half,” while simultaneously focussing attention on the similarities between the aspirations of the poor and of his audience. Stephen Crane used his portraits of the poor to critique the values of the middle class. Theodore Dreiser illustrated the amoral, random nature of an economy devoid of values other than pleasure.

Chapter III examines the changes to the ideology of prosperity brought about by The Great Depression. Henry Roth’s modernism infuses David Schearl with a rich inner life,

making it impossible to define him simply by his socio-economic conditions. John Steinbeck drew on the earnest photography of Dorothea Lange to portray the Joads as an exemplary American family, with the values of yeoman husbandry now tied to their poverty and homelessness.

The cultural portrait of poverty has thus evolved – a condition once seen as essentially un-American becomes a trait that authenticates a character's status as American.

Always With Us Images of Poverty in American Literature

Introduction

Here the rewards of his industry follow with equal steps the progress of his labour.

- J. Hector St. John De
Crèvecoeur, *Letters From
An American Farmer*
(1782)

The American experience has been linked to prosperity and economic well being from its very inception. John Winthrop's "A Model of Christian Charity" clearly marks the future of the colony as a hierarchical order, one in which "All men [are] (By Divine Providence) ranked into two sorts – rich and poor." [Winthrop, 2] The possibility of individual economic failure became ideologically problematic as writers

such as Crèvecoeur, Franklin and Jefferson constructed an American identity linked to prosperity, a world in which there were no poor Americans.

The myth of inevitable prosperity has endured as a central theme of America's self image, as clear in today's rhetoric of welfare reform and immigration as ever.

According to Amy Kaplan, writers and artists "actively create and criticize the meanings, representations, and ideologies of their own changing culture." [Kaplan, 7] National culture does not simply happen, it must be created, and that process of creation is dynamic, with new voices emerging to criticize, and in the process, remake, the present. The tension between the ideological insistence on prosperity and the actual existence of poverty is an aspect of American culture that has been continually recreated and reanalyzed. To illuminate this dynamic, I propose to examine the treatment of poverty in American literature during three periods: the American Renaissance decade of the 1850's, the Realist period of the 1880's and 1890's, and the Great Depression of the 1930's. In each of these periods, unique and important contributions

were made to American culture as writers and artists sought ways to define America within a context of social uncertainty caused in part by economic collapses in 1837, 1873, and 1929. Each of these crashes generated very real deprivation and suffering on a national scale. More importantly, each punctuated an era of unprecedented prosperity, and as a result generated economic anxiety even more widespread than actual economic suffering. For this reason these economic downturns had important cultural effects - they represent chapters in the ongoing narrative of American identity, as the promise of prosperity runs against the threat of poverty.

Despite these unique differences, key facets of the cultural treatment of poverty re-assert themselves in each period: the association of poverty with urbanization and immigration, a moralistic linkage of poverty with vices like alcoholism and sexual promiscuity, an attempt to feminize poverty by treating domestic economy as a safe site, outside of market competition. I will examine the ways in which these similarities were used to maintain Crèvecoeur's economic definition of the American as one for whom the "rewards of

his industry follow with equal steps the progress of his labour.” [Crèvecoeur 44] The image of poverty presented by America’s writers has undergone a dramatic evolution. It will be the central purpose of my thesis to examine these changes.

Whereas the very existence of poverty was considered impossible by many Americans of the 1830’s, in the 1930’s poverty was a central fact of the American experience. Writers who allowed for the existence of poor characters in 1830 were forced to position them as less than fully American, as outsiders. By the 1930’s poverty had become an essential authenticating device: the poor were more truly American *because* of their poverty. While some of this perspective can be explained by the universal deprivation of the Great Depression, I believe that a close examination of these three periods of American cultural history will illustrate that this change represents the outcome of an evolution, not a sudden appreciation for the character of the poor. In my thesis I will clarify this evolution in three ways: first, I will describe the trajectory of images of poverty over 100 years

by examining key works of literature in the three target periods; second, I will place the changes in these images in historical context by examining them in relation to the economic and social activity of their respective periods; finally, I will analyze the ways in which this evolution is suggestive of other changes in American culture, with special attention to urban-rural tension, the socio-economics of morality, and the economic role of women.

I.

Crèvecoeur's *American Farmer*, Franklin's *Poor Richard* and Rowson's *Charlotte Temple* draw a portrait of a post-revolutionary society based on the ideological assumption that upstanding Republican characters will prosper. That portrait remained popular throughout the nineteenth-century, but Jacksonian America rapidly outgrew its frame. Already wildly inaccurate during the boom years of the 1830's, the ideology of inevitable prosperity is rendered useless by the Panic of 1837. Historians such as Tyler Anbinder, Ann Douglas,

Edward K. Spann, Peter Temins, and Edwin G. Burrows and Mike Wallace have described the enormous changes of this period. Population density grew rapidly as small towns became metropolitan centers. The economics of gender were revolutionized as “female labor was devalued and the feminine identity correspondently reconceived.” [Douglas, 54] Ethnic diversity became a challenging social issue, and tensions between increasingly separated classes became commonplace as the rhetoric of upward mobility was undercut by the anxiety over the possibility of being trapped in economic collapse.

The domestic/sentimental novel, as exemplified by Susan Warner's *The Wide Wide World* (1850) defined a feminine sphere of influence within a male dominated culture. Placed in its socio-economic context, however, it can also be seen as a strategy for ameliorating fears of poverty: domestic happiness and security is made available through a voluntary embrace of poverty which comes without actual deprivation. I will examine how Warner rejects the urban, and

defines morality in economic terms in order to reinforce the perception of a domestic safe harbor.

In contrast, George Lippard's *The Quaker City* (1845) is a direct condemnation of the emerging class structure in New York City. As David Reynolds has pointed out, it borrowed the devices and methods of the reform narrative not to explain poverty or soften the image of the suffering it caused, but to establish its presence and condemn what Lippard saw as its causes. Ironically, Lippard's work simultaneously reinforced the ideology of American prosperity in its acceptance of an anti-urban bias and its vision of a true America that is free of poverty.

Herman Melville's work in the 1850s broke with the confidence of the domestic sentimentalists much more completely. While Melville's stories and novels were not simply attacks on social conditions, class divisions were never far from his thoughts. The images of poverty in *Redburn* (1849), *Pierre* (1852), "Bartleby the Scrivener" (1853), and "Poor Man's Pudding and Rich Man's Crumbs" (1854) documented Melville's caustic response to the economic chaos in American

society. Melville's portraits of urban life and moral conventions eschewed both socialist utopias and economic apocalypse for a more complex vision that marked failure and poverty as part of the American experience.

II.

After the cataclysm of the Civil War, America was launched into the prosperity of the Gilded Age. Though Wall Street financiers believed that the power of the Treasury Department made crises like that of 1837 a thing of the past, issues related to economics and poverty did not so much change as intensify. Factory work was no longer just a threat to the independent artisan: such independent entrepreneurs had all but disappeared, and wage labor was the only employment possibility for thousands of Americans. Fifty years of intense immigration had transformed cities into metropolitan areas, with slums as large and fetid as anything Europe had to offer. And the Crash of 1873 made it clear that post-war optimism was misplaced.

The emerging urban destitution and labor unrest of the last quarter of the nineteenth-century prompted American writers and artists to break with the optimism of domestic sentimentalists and create a new discourse. The work of Jacob Riis built on the tour guide discourse that helped Lippard and other sensationalist writers “discover” poverty earlier in the century. By supplementing his reformist prose with photographs, Riis heightened the spectacle of poverty; viewing the poor became a marketable commodity. While in some ways Riis continued the stereotypes that link poverty with the filth of the slums and the ethnicity of its residents, he also insisted the poor were fully human and American.

Stephen Crane abandoned the guise of the middle class tour guide and developed his portrait of the slum from the perspective of its inhabitants. Crane mocked the conventions of domestic sentimentalist discourse in order to critique the presumed connection of poverty with urbanity, morality, and ethnicity. Crane saw the poor as a distinct class shaped by social and economic conditions rather than as a collection of fallen individuals.

Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* offered a more fully envisioned social map in which poverty was incorporated into the grid of society. The barrier that was highlighted in Crane and Riis was torn away and we see Carrie, and Hurstwood pass through class barriers. The account of Hurstwood's downward mobility echoed *Pierre* and *Redburn*; however, it is part of a realist discourse that put emphasis on the minute social details of the collapse. Hurstwood blends anonymously into the mass of street poor, becoming a detail in a portrait of a class, rather than an individual suffering a Romantic tragedy. Hurstwood's collapse is accompanied by Carrie's rise, further complicating the view of the city and the economy of spectacle.

III.

While in many ways the final period of this study is the most carefully defined – October 29, 1929- December 7, 1941, an examination of the work of historians Bernstein, Leuchtenberg, Watkins and Allen will soften these lines. Much of the suffering of the Depression represented an extension

and deepening of the economic troubles that plagued certain regions and industries long before the Crash. Rural, agriculturally-based economies had been in decline for a generation or more, while labor battles going back several decades had left urban factory workers no more secure or independent. The stock market crash defined the period by making economic insecurity and deprivation universal, finally giving the poor a place at the table of American culture.

The discourse of realism - with its focus on social structures - began to seem confining to artists and writers searching for ways to explore the plight of human beings beset by social forces. The techniques of modernism enabled later writers to pursue a more complex portrait. In *Call It Sleep*, Henry Roth re-imagined urban life, ethnicity, and morality through the complex psychology of a small boy. Here the connection between morality and prosperity, rendered dubious by Crane and Dreiser, was eliminated. In Roth's world of the ghetto, every aspect of social experience has been absorbed into a competitive market. Even while placing the Schearl family in an urban milieu that exerts a powerful

influence on their actions, their dreams, and their characters, at no point did Roth make this influence definitive or overwhelming. David Schearl operates within this brutal market, but is not entirely defined by it. By reasserting the power of the individual personality within a social setting, Roth recast the place of the urban within American experience, subtly rejecting images of Jeffersonian idealism and establishing the urban-immigrant experience as the forge of American character.

Other writers, radicalized by the Depression, attempted to craft a literature that did not hold up the individual psyche as the crucible for social change. Writers like Dos Passos, and Steinbeck offered a cacophony of voices in which striking workers were characterized side by side with wealthy industrialists, while embattled farmers shared the page with powerful tycoons. Steinbeck used this technique to raise his portraits of downtrodden individuals to the level of social criticism. In doing so he reversed the patterns established in Early American culture, giving poor characters equal footing with all others.

Steinbeck's Joad family, of *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) provides a vantage point from which to appreciate the arc these images have traveled. The Joads are desperately poor but do not succumb to desperation. They do not escape poverty into a romanticized, domestic countryside as Ellen Montgomery did; neither are they dragged to inevitable, pathetic ends as was Hurstwood. Steinbeck used the techniques of the collective novel to reassert a link between economics and morality, but like Lippard, he clearly placed the poor in a position of moral superiority. By constantly reasserting the Joads' position as exemplars of a class of migrant workers, Steinbeck redefined the relationship of family life to market forces and delivered a new portrait of domestic life as a safe haven. Steinbeck's work appeared less than a generation after the 1920 census revealed that America was an urban nation. His work drew upon changes in agricultural marketing and technology that had been developing for several generations to re-imagine the urban-rural dichotomy in light of those changes. Ma Joad's classic declaration of survival echoes the Preamble to the

Constitution in a way that the Founding Fathers could never have foreseen: the poor were now a source of national pride and strength.

While such radical sentiments may have seemed surprising in the 1930's, American culture had been building towards such a change for over 100 years. The way American literature views the poor has always been complex - part of a fabric of views that includes conventions of personal morality, dreams of an agrarian ideal, and portraits of domestic tranquility. Because of that complexity, the road from Ellen Montgomery to Ma Joad, from the Glendinnings to the Schearls is one that offers important views of American culture.

Chapter I

Disappearing Poverty: Warner, Lippard and Melville and the Response to Jacksonian Economic Anxiety

When John Winthrop called on the future colonists of Massachusetts to think of themselves as a “City upon a Hill,” he deliberately linked the theological with the economic. The persecution the Puritans had faced in Europe had religion at its source, but was often expressed in economic terms. It was the very purpose of Puritanism to make theology a social and economic doctrine, to translate Christianity’s spiritual dictates into material terms.

Winthrop called for a cooperative social order- to live out God’s preference that He be “more honored in dispensing His Gifts to man by man than if He did it by His own immediate hand.” [Winthrop 2] However, he clearly marked the future of the colony as a hierarchical order, one in which “All men [are] (by Divine Providence) ranked into

two sorts – rich and poor.” [Winthrop 2] This introduction of class rankings may seem unusual from today’s standpoint, however the economic end of the colony was never far from Winthrop’s thoughts. “The end is to improve our lives,” he told his fellow travelers, [Winthrop 8] and it is no coincidence that his call for the Puritans to be prepared to help one another through the hard times ahead ends with a prayer for “our prosperity.” [Winthrop 10]

In J. Hector St. John De Crèvecoeur’s *Letters From An American Farmer* (1782) economic success was not simply a possibility in the new world, it defined the new man this world has made possible:

He is an American, who, leaving behind him all his ancient prejudices and manners, receives new ones from the new mode of life he has embraced ...Here the rewards of his industry follow with equal steps the progress of his labour; his labour is founded on the basis of nature, self interest; can it want a stronger allurements? Wives and children, who before in vain demanded of him a morsel of bread, now, fat and frolicsome, gladly help their father to clear those fields whence exuberant crops are to arise to feed and to clothe them all, without any part being claimed, either by a despotic prince, a rich abbot, or a mighty lord. [Crèvecoeur 44]

Initially, Crèvecoeur, like many American writers to follow him, dealt with the possibility of failure by simply ignoring it. Thomas Jefferson consistently denied the existence of poverty in America. In

his *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1781), for example, he claimed that:

from Savanna to Portsmouth you will seldom see a beggar. In the larger towns indeed they sometimes present themselves. These are usually foreigners, who have never obtained a settlement in any parish. I never yet saw a native American begging in the streets or highways. [Jefferson 180-181]

Like Crèvecoeur, in those instances when Jefferson acknowledged the existence of poverty, he managed to place the condition in a context outside the boundaries of “America.” In “Notes,” he assumed that the beggars he saw on the street of America were, in fact, foreigners. Equally important is the way he placed poverty in an explicitly urban setting. The existence of beggars on the streets of “large towns” was considered, while the possibility of impoverished farmers was not. Jefferson’s rejection of cities is justifiably famous: “The mobs of great cities add just so much to the support of pure government, as sores do to the strength of the human body.” [Jefferson, 217] In fact, Jefferson saw the city as an inherently European social organization, and his criticism of cities linked urban industrialization and poverty with the injustice of European aristocracy. In a letter to Samuel Kercheval in July 1816, Jefferson argued for a limit to government spending by blaming the

excesses of Europe's aristocratic rulers for the suffering of Europe's poor. If America followed Europe's model, then Americans

must come to labor sixteen hours in the twenty-four, give the earnings of fifteen of these to the government for their debts and daily expenses; and the sixteenth being insufficient to afford us bread, we must live, as they now do, on oatmeal and potatoes; have no time to think, no means of calling the mismanagers to account; but be glad to obtain subsistence by hiring ourselves to rivet their chains on the necks of our fellow sufferers. [Jefferson 558]

Within a generation, Americans complaining of the greed of factory owners would echo Jefferson's description of the lives of laborers.

Jefferson's views were argued with sophistication, but they were not original. Joseph Ellis described Benjamin Franklin as the "embodiment of American values in their most seductively simple form," [Ellis, 91] a description that certainly fits the direct way in which Franklin views on poverty simplify Jefferson's:

If we are industrious, we shall never starve; for, as Poor Richard says, 'At the workingman's house, hunger looks in but dares not enter.' [Franklin, 187]

Franklin expressed hostility to the concept of public relief, arguing that the poor lacked initiative and that made them unworthy of assistance. According to Gertrude Himmelfarb, the idea that poverty relief should contain an element of moral education to drive

the poor towards industry and frugality was one of the hallmarks of eighteenth century thought, showing up in the work of writers as diverse as Adam Smith, Thomas Paine, and Jeremy Bentham.

[Himmelfarb, 64-91] In "On the Price of Corn and the Management of the Poor," a 1766 pamphlet protesting economic and social policies imposed on the colonies by Parliament, Franklin adds an element of personal hostility that other writers avoided:

I affirm that there is no country in the world in which the poor are more idle, dissolute, drunken, and insolent.
[Franklin, 230]

Benjamin Franklin was, among other things, an industrial capitalist. While it was his contributions to the Enlightenment that made him famous, it was his position as an owner of printing presses and as an employer of journeymen printers that made him wealthy. His years in Philadelphia and Paris marked him as both urban and urbane. Yet he wrote "On the Price of Corn" from the point of view of a farmer, signing it *Arator*- Latin for farmer. In the essay, he argued that English economic policy explicitly benefited the urban manufacturers, and their employees, "the mob," at the expense of farmers. The perception of an economic battle between the city and the farm remained a consistent theme of American culture. Here

Franklin provided an early example of the battle lines when he, an urban industrialist, placed morality on the side of the oppressed farmer. Idleness, dissolution, and poverty lived in the city.

The power of this trope is vividly demonstrated in one of America's earliest best sellers, *Charlotte Temple: A Tale of Truth*, written by Susanna Rowson in 1794 and kept in print through over two hundred editions for the next century. Charlotte is a well-mannered, upstanding young virgin when Montraville first seduces her. The fact that she is living a comfortable bourgeois life is intrinsically part of her status as a young lady - in fact, she lives beyond the reach of market forces, in a protected domestic world. Abandoned by both Montraville and Belcour, Charlotte is thrust into the world of markets, money and poverty. She is so unprepared for this world she is unaware that she must pay rent to continue living in the rooms her lover had secured for her:

“Oh heavens,” cried Charlotte, clasping her hands, “what will become of me?”

“Come on ye!” retorted the unfeeling wretch: [landlady] “why go to the barracks and work for a morsel of bread; wash and mend the soldiers cloaths, an cook their victuals, and not expect to live in idleness on honest people's means.” [Rowson, 103]

Charlotte is unable to support herself through working in this way- the “complicated evils of illness, poverty and a broken heart” kill her.

[Rowson, 116] Even as Rowson worked with the link between moral failure and financial ruin, she included evidence of poverty that appears above moral reproach. When Montraville, seeking penance, searches for Charlotte in New York City he is “obliged to pass several little huts, the residence of poor women who supported themselves by washing the cloaths of the officers and soldiers.” [Rowson, 117] Rowson was certainly not suggesting that these women were all suffering the consequences of moral failure. Rather the sentence represents a crack in the ideology of her story, a revelation of the tension that already existed between the cultural portrait of poverty and its actual existence.

Following the Crash of 1837 such tension became a more potent force in American literature and smoothing over that tension became a more popular and important practice for artists. Popular writers of the time, often referred to as domestic sentimentalists, used the emerging genre of the novel to support the ideological status quo against the chaos of urbanization, the instability of economic change, and the identity crisis caused by massive immigration. Susan

Warner's *The Wide, Wide World* (1850), which Jane Tompkins refers to as "the *Ur-text* of the nineteenth-century United States," is one of the master narratives of domestic sentimentalism. [Tompkins, "Afterword"; Warner, 585] Warner tells the story of a young orphan abandoned into poverty who weathers the gales of urban blight, homelessness and loneliness through steadfast adherence to conventional morality to emerge comfortable, secure and prosperous. *The Wide, Wide World* responds to the Crash of 1837 and the long depression that followed by burying any evidence of economic deprivation or material suffering in a world in which spiritual and emotional forces carry the day.

i.

American Renaissance writers are often viewed as creating American culture in light of the comparatively meager historical foundation on which they worked. However, these same writers need to be seen within the context of the culture they are responding to if we are to fully appreciate their contribution. David Reynolds has argued that "American Renaissance literariness resulted not from a

rejection of socioliterary context but rather from a full *assimilation* and *transformation* of key images and devices from this context.”

[Reynolds, *Beneath*, 7] A similar pattern existed regarding poverty: Americans were assimilating and transforming key images of their socio-economic context.

When attempting to connect American cultural history to its social context, it is important to remember that the Jeffersonian ideal was never more than an ideal. In fact, the nation has never been made up of yeoman farmers in quite the way Jefferson felt it should be. As Arthur Schlesinger has put it, “The American of Jefferson had begun to disappear before Jefferson himself had retired.” [Schlesinger, 9] Susanna Rowson’s familiarity with the shantytowns that grew up around military installations in the Revolution is but a single reflection of the extent to which poverty was endemic in 18th Century America. New York City opened Bellevue as an almshouse in 1816, only to see the new facility almost immediately overwhelmed by the size of the population it was expected to support. Historians Burrows and Wallace estimate that during these years 1/7 of the city’s population is supported at least in part by charity. [Burrows and Wallace, 493]. Though American writers did not yet concern themselves with

widespread poverty, it was already a serious political and social concern.

This early concern for the poor came at just the moment that urbanization was accelerating in America. There are 667,000 immigrants to America between 1820 and 1859. Most of these immigrants settle in the cities of their arrival. During these years urban areas are also absorbing large numbers of migrants from rural areas, as farming proves every bit as difficult in the nineteenth century as it was for Crèvecoeur in the eighteenth. Women are particularly hard hit: according to Edwin Spann, there are over 30,000 attempting to make their living without male support in New York City alone. Horace Greeley's New York Tribune offered a lurid portrait of city life for America's poor:

"Every hole and corner under a roof, down to the very vaults and cellars within the jurisdiction of the city, have become resting places for the swarms of foreign paupers and idiots emptied daily upon our shores by the governments of a portion of Europe." [Spann, 76]

America's early economy was inherently unstable. Economic historian Marvin Meyers has pointed out that "the bank boom-bust sequence was the primal experience of Jacksonian life." [Temin, 16] This boom-bust cycle stemmed from the unregulated flow of money in

search of profitable investments. As rational investment gave way to speculation, a boom could be reversed by a relatively minor setback—the collapse of a lending institution, a crop failure, an allegation of fraud. With any sudden retrenchment losses skyrocketed, and production cutbacks led to widespread unemployment. Similar cycles were a regular part of nineteenth century economic life, and they tended to have a disproportionate effect on the poor.

Philip Hone pointed out that while men like himself lost the bulk of their fortunes, there were those who had no fortune to begin with whose suffering was more elemental:

“Living in New York is exorbitantly dear, and it falls pretty hard upon persons like me, who live upon their income, and harder still upon that large and respectable class consisting of the officers and clerks of public institutions, whose support is derived from fixed salaries.” [Burrows and Wallace 601-2]

It is worth noting that Hone does not consider the undoubtedly greater suffering of the vast majority of workers who earned even less than this respectable class.

With the Crash of 1837, Americans experienced economic distress unlike any they had known before. Prices for food, coal and rent rose dramatically. In New York, radical Democrats organized a rally under the slogan “BREAD, MEAT, RENT, FUEL! THEIR PRICES MUST

COME DOWN!” which ended in a riot and the ransacking of a flour warehouse. When Mayor Cornelius Lawrence attempted to quiet the crowd, but was chased off with rocks and barrel staves, the city’s gentry began to fear a breakdown in the community’s hierarchical relations. [Schlesinger, 218]

As Peter Temin and others point out, the “crash” of 1837 deserves a more complicated name, for it was a more complicated series of events: it was a lasting slowdown, and when the economy had not recovered by 1839, there came another crash, followed by one of the most severe depressions in American history beginning in 1840. Prices collapsed and 50,000 New Yorkers were thrown out of work. Mills closed in Boston and Lowell, Massachusetts.

These statistics are best understood in the context of the increasingly integrated nature of the American economy. Jefferson’s ideal of the yeoman citizenry still held sway on the imagination, but did not describe the degree of economic interdependence most Americans lived with. What the Panic of 1837 underscored was the degree of instability inherent in an economy that was rapidly expanding, diversifying and urbanizing.

For many Americans the connection between the growing complexity of American life, the growth of cities, the influx of immigrants, and this seemingly sudden economic anxiety was all too clear. Rather than abandoning the identification of America with success, they focussed on identifying and demonizing the threats to that identity. The Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor (AICP) focussed much of their efforts on the behavior of the poor, under the assumption that their behavior was the key to their condition. The AICP approach of sending middle class volunteers into poor neighborhoods and homes had the inevitable effect of applying middle class standards to those homes and neighborhoods.

Among these middle class volunteers was a young Susan Warner. Warner took part in these efforts not as part of a desire to change American social conditions, but because it was one of the things that well to do Protestant women did. She was taking her place within the status quo rather than trying to change it. When her father's business dealings were engulfed in the losses of 1837, Susan's position in that social hierarchy changed drastically. She turned to writing to keep her family from poverty.

Warner's *The Wide, Wide World* (1850) is one of the key works for understanding the dynamics of depicting poverty in part because the novel contains almost no images of poverty. Warner was, in fact, writing poverty out of the 19th century experience as part of her effort to uphold the values that her readers expected her to uphold, the values she herself held as a Victorian woman.

David Reynolds has categorized such writing as Conventional because, by calling for "the elevation of the poor and oppressed through self culture," it promotes the social conventional and mores of its time. [Reynolds, 58] Susan K. Harris has rejected such categories as "conventional" and "sentimental" and includes *The Wide, Wide World* in a group of novels she calls "exploratory" because they examine the "extensions beyond the realm of approved female behavior." [Harris, 20] Similarly, Jane Tompkins argues that a novel such as Warner's "offers a blueprint for survival under a specific set of political, economic, social, or religious conditions." [Tompkins, xviii] Women were drawn to *The Wide, Wide World* because it "deals with the problem of powerlessness by showing how one copes with it hour by hour and minute by minute." [Tompkins, 173] In Warner's novel powerlessness is seen in largely abstract, emotional terms - separate

from the material needs girls like Ellen would have had to deal with in antebellum New England.

In fact, Warner's novel writes the deprivation out of Ellen Montgomery's experience while including situations, settings, and plot details that her readers would have closely associated with poverty. Although Warner's heroine, Ellen Montgomery, lives through experiences associated with poverty in the 1840's and 1850's – sudden financial reversal and loss of support due to abandonment, for example, and though she is sent to live on the kind of small subsistence farm that was losing economic viability, Ellen never faces material hardships. Though she is frequently without the support and protection of an adult, she never goes hungry. Though she is homeless, she is never exposed to the elements.

Ellen's travails are not viewed in economic terms, but in emotional and spiritual terms. Ellen is thrust into the predatory world of the urban market, loses her mother to illness, is abandoned by her father, and is forced to live on a small farm with her emotionally distant and cruel Aunt. Yet, her suffering is almost never physical and certainly never caused by material deprivation. Ellen ultimately

overcomes her own emotional needs and spiritual weaknesses and is rewarded by a marriage to a decent, financially stable man.

Ellen's story contains strong elements of Warner's own. Though Susan grew up within New York society's world of carriages, books, and charitable works, she was denied the opportunity to assume the adult life she had been prepared for. Having lost her mother in childhood, Warner lived with an aunt and her father, Henry Warner. He suffered severe financial setbacks in the Panic of 1837, and, as her family's finances deteriorated throughout the depression of the 1840s, the Warners left Manhattan for a more isolated and difficult life in the rural Hudson Valley. As servants were let go, Susan and her sister took on more and more of the household work. She spent her young womanhood cooking, washing dishes and gathering firewood to stay warm in the drafty 100-year-old house. [Tompkins, *Wide, Wide World* Afterword, 589-590] Realizing that the normal road to financial security for a woman of her class - a profitable marriage - was closed to her, and with her father's creditors threatening even the house itself, Warner began writing to make money. While the Warner's were surviving on \$50 Susan won in an essay contest, she began work on *The Wide, Wide World*. [Kelley, Mary, 91]

Before his financial collapse, Henry Warner had seen to it that his daughters were well educated and familiar with the popular novels of their day. Cathy Davidson has established the novel's position as a morally suspect form of discourse in the early Nineteenth Century. Its associations with leisure and pleasure appeared dangerous in a new society committed to experimental democracy - if Americans developed a taste for leisure, how would they fulfill their responsibilities to the community?

Susan Warner was part of a generation of mid-century writers who built upon the work of Susanna Rowson and Catherine Sedgwick to turn the novel into an instrument of moral education. While the 1840's had seen the proliferation of titillating works by writers like Ned Buntline and George Lippard - whose works had gone beyond the danger of mere leisure to explore the possibilities of sensationalism - Warner continued working in the tradition of moral uplift that made some novels acceptable to men like Henry Warner. She may have needed the money, but she would have agreed with Herbert Brown that "the primary function of the novel was to teach." [Brown, Herbert, 169]

The Wide, Wide World offers its moral lessons within a context of economic anxiety for both author and character. The novel opens with Ellen Montgomery questioning her mother about her father's business troubles. [Warner, 9] It is clear that the father's role is economic and not emotional. When told that he is too poor to stay in New York, Ellen shows no distress at the prospect of his leaving: "He has been away a great deal before and I am sure we were always very happy." [Warner, 11] The financial problems only become a crisis when her father decides to take his wife with him to England and abandon Ellen to relatives.

Warner was not fictionalizing only her own experience. "Downward mobility was not an uncommon experience in the nineteenth century," Mary Kelley reminds us. [Kelley, Mary, 145] The Panic of 1837 had made that year central to Warner's life - as it was to Herman Melville's - and part of the Panic's devastation can be seen in the fact that Warner was still attempting to escape poverty 13 years later. Christine Stansell points out that the move away from a subsistence, agricultural economy to one based on manufacturing and cash left many people so close to poverty that "a rise in prices could mean widespread distress." And, Stansell observes, women were in

much more anxious situation than men, because often “poverty ensued from a sudden loss of male support.” [Stansell 7]

The setting of the novel’s opening chapters further enhances Ellen’s situation. Shortly after learning of the possibility of separation from her mother, Ellen retreats to her room to look out the window. She observes the “ugly city prospect of the back walls of houses...” the “narrow streets” and the “dingy dirty and disagreeable” women and children of her neighborhood. Thomas Bender has written persuasively that one of the reasons Americans developed an anti-urban bias during this period was “the increasing visibility of poverty in their communities.” [Bender, 97] Ellen Montgomery is living that discomfort. She watches children play in the dirty yards and women going for water at the pumps – the only source of water in a cholera plagued city. She is only comforted by the sight of a “poor deformed child,” recently orphaned; whose problems are great enough to put Ellen’s in perspective. [Warner, 16]

This complex framing - a girl soon to be orphaned looking through her window at a boy recently orphaned - highlights problems of urban life that Warner’s readers were familiar with. If women were more prone to economic reversal because of their dependence on

men, children were in an even more precarious position. New York City had established The House of Refuge to take children off the street and out of destitute families as early as 1825. However the institution was quickly filled beyond its capacity, as were various other private and public asylums and orphanages throughout the 19th Century. By the late 1840's Charles Loring Brace was writing of "the immense vat of misery and crime and filth much of the city is! Think of the ten thousand children growing up almost sure to be prostitutes and rogues!" [Bender 139] Brace's attitude towards these children would be summed up in the title of his account of his life's work among them: *The Dangerous Classes*.

Like many of his contemporaries, Brace ultimately located the seeds of moral decay in geography. In 1853 he formed the Children's Aid Society to offer New York's orphaned and destitute children the economic opportunity and moral rectitude that Americans generally associated with rural life. Ultimately Brace's Society sent some 90,000 children to farm families in New England and the West. Warner was writing just as Brace was beginning his work, but she was certainly already familiar with the ideology that informed the Children's Aid Society. The House of Refuge had been sending children to farms in

Queens since 1825. Americans believed that a rural upbringing was preferable to an urban childhood in virtually all cases.

Warner's readers may have felt resentment towards Ellen's emotionally and physically distant father, and may have condemned his decision to separate Ellen from her mother. However moving Ellen to the rural Hudson Valley – even to live with the difficult Aunt Fortune – would likely have seemed the natural next best choice to life with mother. Life on a self-sustaining farm was the America ideal. Thomas Bender points out that middle-class Americans (who were increasingly likely to live in cities) assumed that rural life offered an orderly, work-filled life. “Jacksonian Americans believed that deviant and dependent persons were the product of the disorder and temptations of the city. [Bender 133]

Warner - whose own move to Constitution Island was fraught with anxiety - may have been more ambivalent concerning rural values. Certainly, she arranges for Ellen to take a good deal of the city with her. While they spend virtually no time focussing on Ellen's emotional abandonment, mother and daughter spend several pages buying equipment that Ellen will need to survive the separation.

Virtually every item Mrs. Montgomery buys Ellen relates to work that Ellen must pursue. They are not the tools of industrial labor, of course. In Jacksonian America, thousands of young girls were forced by family circumstances into the labor market every year. They took to the mills of Lowell or hired themselves as domestic help. Women cooked and sewed and sold goods in the street. Girls took in laundry, sold cigars and worked in bawdyhouses. Children scavenged from the streets, selling rags and bits of wood or metal to junk shops. (Stansell, 46-51) Ellen promises her mother she will “never be a slattern.” [Warner, 40] but it is “the keeping up of good habits” [Warner, 31] that she will be working at: to be neat and tidy and industrious, writing letters, sewing, and, of course, reading the Bible. Bourgeois activities require bourgeois equipment, and in the ideology of domestic sentimentalism, possessions were problematic.

Gillian Brown has discussed what she calls “sentimental possession” in regards to Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* as well as Stowe’s writing on domestic economy. Stowe positions “sentimental possession as the antithesis and transcendence of market relations.” [Brown, Gillian, 45] In this analysis, “possessions” take on important attributes of their owners – are sentimentalized –

and thereby become expressions of spiritual, emotional and domestic value in a “Christian purification of the market economy.” [Brown, Gillian, 47]

Urban centers were not identified solely with poverty. They were also seen as centers of wealth, privilege and fashion. For all its emphasis on success, American culture maintained a powerful ambivalence towards wealth and virtually every writer under discussion here – from Crèvecoeur and Franklin through Lippard and Melville maintained a largely hostile attitude towards conspicuous luxury. Though there were great differences among them, there was general agreement that some forms of material comfort – especially those which touch upon fashion, or vanity – were un-American.

The value that Stowe finds in possessions is a response to the perception of growing materialism in American culture. While Mrs. Montgomery allows Ellen very little time to focus on the emotions surrounding their separation, the two spend their time and energy on the selection and purchase of these supplies. Mrs. Montgomery’s preparations for Ellen’s independence fall into the category that Brown has called “sentimental possession” [Brown 45] In order to outfit Ellen in what she considers the proper manner, Mrs. Montgomery

pawns her mother's jewelry. Though she gets but 3/4 of the ring's monetary value, the cost is primarily emotional

'I did love it Ellen, but I love you better.'

'Oh mama, I am very sorry!' said Ellen.

'You need not be sorry, daughter. Jewels in themselves are the merest nothing to me; and as for the rest, it doesn't matter; I can remember my mother without any help from a trinket.' [Warner, 29]

The ring, which had served the valuable purpose of representing grandmama, has maintained its value because it has been converted to a different *use*: "I assure you this use of my ring gives me more pleasure on the whole than any other I could have made of it."

[Warner, 29] This concept of use value is the final lesson Mrs. Montgomery passes on to her daughter. Though Ellen is at first left to "take her own way" in the choice of a Bible, Mrs. Montgomery pointedly criticizes Ellen's first two selections. Both are "beautiful" but impractical for reading - for actual use - and it is use value, rather than beauty, that Mrs. Montgomery wants to pass on to her daughter. [Warner, 30]

All decisions regarding Ellen's outfitting are made with durability, simplicity and convenience - use value - in mind. Ellen shows that she has begun to learn this lesson when she chooses a plain ivory pen over others "that are all cut and fussed." [Warner, 35] Mrs. Montgomery

and Ellen are not bargain hunting. All their purchases are of the highest quality, with quality seen as a function of sentiment rather than economics.

Ellen avoids material deprivation because she avoids fashion and foppery. Sentimental value asserts women's right and responsibility to maintain republican virtue within an acquisitive and materialistic culture. Ellen Montgomery will suffer the two losses that plunged children into poverty throughout the nineteenth century: the death of a parent and the abandonment of a male breadwinner. Yet she will enter this new life with all the equipment necessary for the bourgeoisie. This sentimental view of property allows the reader to avoid confronting the starvation and homelessness that accompanied the loss of material security by rendering materialism as a function of the emotional.

In Hawthorne's *The House of Seven Gables* (1851), Hepzibah Pyncheon's experiment in shop keeping is hardly successful, but she is not overwhelmed by the exposure to commercial capitalism on such a genteel scale. It is when she leaves the protected time-warp of Pynchon Street and – with her brother Clifford – enters the modern world of the railroad that she is forced to confront how poorly her

values have prepared her for this new reality:. “Everything was unfixed from its age-long rest, and moving at whirlwind speed.” [Hawthorne, 256] The interior of the train is crowded with readers, business people, and young people laughing uproariously. Commerce is at the center of the scene: “Boys with apples, cakes, candy, and rolls of variously tintured lozenges – merchandise that reminded Hepzibah of her deserted shop – appeared at each momentary stopping-place, doing business in a hurry, or breaking it short off, lest the market should ravish them away with it.” [Hawthorne, 257] Hepzibah realizes that her quaint little shop has hardly prepared her for this reality - opportunistic capitalism at its most rapid.

Ellen’s mother recognizes that Ellen is in a similar position. Both Ellen and Hepzibah have lived protected lives, safely tucked in by values associated with a receding past. They are the values of what might be called a republican aristocracy - an ideology which held that women who remained true to the spirit and emotion of domesticity were protected from the insecurities and threats of market capitalism. Hawthorne sees that past is built upon lies that go back at least as far as the Puritan settlement. Warner attempts to gather strength from that mythology as a way to - in Ann Douglas’s phrase - “exert moral

pressure on a society in whose operations she had little part.”

[Douglas, 60] However, like Hepzibah's ill-fated train excursion, Ellen's attempt to go into the city alone - to purchase cloth for her mother to make into dresses - must demonstrate to the reader her unsuitability to city life.

In the very act of purchasing merino wool fabric to make Ellen's clothing, Mrs. Montgomery is upholding a fading practice. Though at the turn of the century it would have been considered routine for clothing to be made at home, between 1830 and 1860 the production of ready-made garments was the fastest growing industry in New York. Clothing was produced under factory conditions, and the existence of home labor and small-scale sweatshops was already notorious when Warner was writing. [Jackson, 45] While she is reminding readers of the ways in which women had traditionally been producers, Warner is simultaneously warning them about their more modern role as consumers.

There is general agreement among cultural historians that women's economic role was radically redefined in the first half of the nineteenth century. The Jeffersonian ideal of independent husbandry had assumed an ideal of shared productive labor, with men responsible

for production outside the home and women responsible for the considerable production of meals, clothing, medicine, and household goods, to say nothing of the children themselves. Increasing urbanization and the spread of commercial capitalism rendered much of the female production obsolete. By the 1850's it was increasingly clear that - in Nina Baym's blunt assessment, "Getting is the man's job, and spending is the women's." [Baym, 174]

Warner has placed Ellen within the confusion of that change. Ellen Montgomery is to experience the role of consumer rather than that of a producer, and learn that, in her mother's words " a great deal of skill and experience is necessary for a shopper." [Warner, 44]

The American department store is one of the inventions of the Victorian era. In 1846, A.T. Stewart opened a greatly expanded version of his dry-goods store, which became known as "The Marble Palace." This forerunner of the late century department store was built upon an important marketing change: assuming that the bulk of his shoppers would be women who were including entertainment as one of the goals of their excursions, Stewart abandoned the traditional policy of having salespeople meet and assist customers as they entered, encouraging browsing. Combined with aggressive advertising,

this approach was soon yielding \$10,000 a day in sales, encouraging imitators and making Broadway a popular gathering for the new activity of “window shopping.” [Burrows and Wallace, 667-668]

Gillian Brown suggests that by the 1850's shopping is being absorbed into the “women's sphere.” It is a newly public aspect of the “domestic performances” expected of women. However, as Brown discusses, this shift is fraught with controversy and tension. As domestic ideology rested upon a distinction between the public world of work and the private sphere of home, women are increasingly perceived as spiritually superior, but consequently “divested of their corporeality, defined as different from rather than extensive with the body.” [Brown, 63] As shopping becomes part of this woman's sphere, there is a tension - in Brown's words, a “discontinuity” as the “self is defined as an entity distinct from economic activity, articulated through the organizations of private life.” [Brown, 63]

Ann Douglas has argued that domestic literature bridges this discontinuity by re-imagining shopping: “Shopping for the necessities of food and apparel is painful, even unnatural; shopping to furbish the refined pursuits of religion and literature is delightful, and somehow not shopping at all.” [Douglas, 64] This view is borne out by the

difference between the shopping Ellen does with her mother and her own foray to get clothing. Gone is the quiet, contemplative process of choosing a Bible. Here, amidst the “buzz of business,” “pleasure is certainly not the uppermost feeling in her mind.” [Warner, 45] Gone are the anonymously efficient clerks of the stationer’s, Mr. Saunders is “slovenly,” “bold, ill bred and ill-humored.” [Warner, 46] He is also - the reader cannot help but notice - lazy, dishonest, and far more familiar than business-like.

The ability to know others, to penetrate appearances, understand, and sympathize with the needs of others, is at the heart of the domestic agenda. In this department store scene Ellen’s ability to be herself, to meet the needs of her mother, and have her own needs met, is threatened. To put it simply - the sales clerk refuses to act like a sales clerk. He denies her any opening to establish a business dialogue, refers to her as “little one” and “child” and when Ellen makes an uncharacteristic grammatical mistake, “Mama don’t like green,” he mocks her, “Why don’t she come and choose her stuffs herself then?” [Warner, 47] The young man’s behavior does not allow Ellen to be herself, and threatens her relationship with her mother, which is built on details like grammar and manners.

It is always Warner's priority to focus on Ellen's emotional state, so it is her tears that bring her rescuer. This first mysterious stranger has been watching Ellen's struggle, and when she has been thoroughly defeated by the clerk Saunders, he steps in to make sure the business is conducted properly.

Later, when Ellen is slighted by Mrs. Dunscombe and her sister Margaret on the boat to Thirwall, another mysterious gentleman appears to wipe her tears and offer both kindness and religious counseling. In fact, Ellen appears to pull generosity from the people around her. The Dunscombe servant Timmins admits "I never was famous for kindness, I know; but people must be kind sometimes in their lives," as she prepares Ellen a supper of chicken and oysters and gives her a foot massage. [Warner, 87] Upon arriving in Thirwall, Ellen is befriended and protected by Mr. and Mrs. Forbes, and by Van Brundt. These recurring acts of kindness serve to isolate those who do not protect and support our heroine: the lazy clerk, the superficial, fashion-conscious Dunscombes, and the distant Mr. Montgomery.

In "The Man of the Crowd" (1840), Poe described a city full of "secrets which do not permit themselves to be told." [Poe, 388] We follow the narrator following the man on a purposeless, circular route,

ultimately to be deposited back at the coffee shop knowing no more about this man of the crowd than at the beginning. He is described from the outset as a “fiend” whose face calls to mind “avarice,” “malice,” and “blood-thirstiness,” but these accusations have more to do with the narrator’s inability to characterize the man than they do with any real insight. The man’s “crime” is his impenetrability: “He refuses to be alone,” yet cannot be known or trusted. [Poe, 392] This inaccessibility makes him a threat to democracy and Jeffersonian social order.

The idea of rootless, constant movement is treated differently in Hawthorne’s *The House of Seven Gables*. While Hepzibah is cowed by the crowded, noisy and anonymous community of the railroad car, her brother finds freedom and social energy. Clifford envisions the railroad as a replacement for the home, as humans return to the nomadic existence characterized by an attachment to “beauty” and “Nature.” [Hawthorne, 260] Clifford’s is quite explicitly rejecting domestic ideology: “the greatest possible stumbling-blocks in the path of human happiness and improvement, are these heaps of bricks, and stones, consolidated with mortar, or hewn timber, fastened together with spike-nails, which men painfully contrive for their own torment,

and call them house and home," he says. [Hawthorne, 261] Clifford's argument is explicitly linked to his bitter experiences with the titular house of seven gables, and the perversion of community and family bonds that make up the history of that house. Hawthorne made clear that Clifford's remarks are soundly rejected by his listener who can think of "nothing better for a man than his own parlor and chimney-corner." [Hawthorne, 259]

Both Hawthorne and Poe captured a prevalent anxiety about the limitations to urban community. Jefferson's agrarian ideal stemmed as much for a fear of the anonymity of cities as from a love of farming. "Men cannot be piled on one another with impunity," Jefferson said. [Jefferson, 499]

As Robert Byer has put it,

"For Jefferson, the political and social possibility of democracy depended on institutionalizing moral sympathy, on creating a culture that would liberate and translate by education the (divine and inherent) moral sense into a practical social reason. Thus, democracy depended on the possibility of knowing and trusting other minds." [Byer, 709]

Thomas Bender made clear that the fear that Jacksonian America held for urbanization was centered on "the fragmentation of the traditional community" [Bender 97] which might lead to "the

revolutionary potential of an impoverished underclass.” [Bender 109]
In America that fear was always placed within the hearts and minds of the people. The influence of the urban environment was seen as destructive, but the danger came from the people, not simply their environment: “The tumultuous populace of large cities are ever to be dreaded,” Washington had warned. [Bender 5]

In this context, the steady stream of kind and helpful strangers who come to aid Ellen appears as a counter argument, a comforting re-assertion of traditional community values overcoming the fears of urbanization. The kindness of strangers reassures the reader: the hearth and home will overwhelm the railroad, and the saintly old gentlemen will outnumber Poe’s wandering “criminal.”

The stream of assistance also serves to highlight the ambiguity in Ellen’s economic position. She is without money or family or home, without the support or protection of any one person she can depend upon, yet she travels with servants and gentlemen seemingly at her disposal. They are attracted by her emotional honesty and her struggles with piety. Warner created a portrait of the abandoned orphan who, because she suffers emotional and spiritual distress, does not suffer from the physical deprivations of poverty. When she travels

the last two miles to Aunt Fortune's house she is homeless, friendless and penniless. However the scene is constructed to give a vastly different impression: the Forbes get her an arm chair and a carpet for her legs, Mr. Van Brundt secures the chair and makes sure that she rides "like a queen" for whom everyone transforms themselves into servants. [Warner, 94]

Everyone except the ironically named, Aunt Fortune. Ellen's time with Aunt Fortune will focus primarily upon her emotional and spiritual struggles, however Warner was not solely concerned with Ellen's internal life in these chapters. Through her descriptions of Aunt Fortune, Van Brundt, Alice Humphries, the independent Mrs. Vawse and the mischievous Nancy, Warner painted a vividly romantic portrait of the Hudson Valley's rural culture. Warner was not a realist, and very little of the world she created reflects the reality of her own life on Constitution Island. She was much more interested in developing and reinforcing images of rural life that had been available to Americans for almost a century.

If there was ever a golden age of New England agriculture, it is difficult to find a historical record of it. The journals of John Winthrop show an agricultural economy that grows only through expansion,

despite unstable harvests, difficult trading practices and wildly fluctuating prices for cattle, corn and wheat. It was an economy in which subsistence was more common than success, and the overwhelming number of new arrivals often masked the stories of pilgrims returning to England financially ruined. [Winthrop, 175-183] Even the foremost author of the American myth of the yeoman farmer, Thomas Jefferson, had to rely on "a manufacture of nails" to keep his beloved Monticello from financial ruin.

Americans knew well that the decline of agriculture was related to the rise of industry. A dialectic that had pitted the moral strength of the farm against the dissipation of the city had been a function of American thinking for generations. In addition to being linked ideologically, they were linked economically. The phenomenal growth of urban centers like Lowell is at least in part a function of the poverty of New England's rural population. After touring North America in 1842, Charles Dickens recorded this scene of rural life in New York's Catskill Mountain region - not far from Warner's real life Constitution Island, or her fictional Thirwall:

we came upon an Irish colony. With means at hand of building decent cabins, it was wonderful to see how

clumsy, rough, and wretched its hovels were. The best were poor protection from the weather; the worst let in the wind and rain through wide breaches in the roofs of sodden grass, and in the walls of mud; some had neither door nor window; some had nearly fallen down and were imperfectly propped up by stakes and poles; all were ruinous and filthy. Hideously ugly old women and very buxom young ones, pigs, dogs, men, children, babies, pots, kettles, dunghills, vile refuse, rank straw, and standing water all wallowing together in an inseparable heap, composed the furniture of every dark and dirty hut. [Dickens, 245]

Such a portrait leaves little doubt as to the motivation for moving to cities like Lowell and Lynn. Francis Cabot Lowell and his partners formed the Boston Manufacturing Corporation in 1813, in a small village of about 200 residents. By the time Warner was writing, Lowell, was one of the largest cities in America, with a population of over 200,000. As Thomas Bender makes clear, “young girls flocked to the mill towns from the declining agricultural areas of New England.... There is no evidence of the early factories being at all handicapped by a shortage of common labor.” [Bender, 38]

Bender and others show that these workers were attracted by high wages and amenities like special dormitories that made manufacturing work temporarily respectable. Yet by 1840 wages in Lowell had been cut by more than 25% [Bender, 105] and still “the

bulk of Lowell's working population during the early 1840's was made up of single girls from New England farms." [Bender, 91]

Warner's depiction of a rural New York dominated by females belies reality. The actual economics of male migration were often disastrous for women. In Warner's own life abandonment by the male head of household proved no more pleasant as she and her sister attempted to support the family on rural Constitution Island than it had been on urban St. Marks Place. It is therefore even more striking that she portrayed the Thirwall area as a community of small, independent women farmers. The only important male character in the Thirwall section of the novel is Mr. Van Brundt, Aunt Fortune's employee (though his later marriage to her muddies the hierarchy between them). One of the first things that Ellen learns about her Aunt - from the mischievous Nancy Vawse - is that she is "rich" with "one of the very best farms in the country." [Warner, 119]

Aunt Fortune's generally negative portrayal may stem from this gender reversal. Her bullying and impatience seem to be related to the "male" role she has adapted as businesswoman and head of household. However Ms. Fortune's independence is not seen as unusual in this community: the much better liked Mrs. Vawse is

similarly independent. In fact, Mrs. Vawse is more liked because her independence is not tied to wealth, but to poverty. “Mrs. Vawse has no money or property of any kind...” Alice tells Ellen. She survives because of her willingness to work: “she isn’t above doing anything, and yet she never forgets her own dignity.” [Warner 194]

Both Aunt Fortune and Mrs. Vawse live outside the market, and the language of dignity and independence Warner used to describe their lifestyle is reminiscent of Thoreau. “Men have come to such a pass that they frequently starve, not from want of necessaries, but for want of luxuries,” he declared in *Walden*, [Thoreau, 42] and “to maintain oneself on this earth is not a hardship but a pastime, if we live simply and wisely.” [Thoreau, 49] *Walden* was not published until 1854 - four years after Warner’s novel, however the broad outlines of her argument were readily available long before Thoreau publishes the account of his experiment. We need not go back as far as Matthew 6:26 - “Behold the fowls of the air: for they sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feedeth them.” - to examine these ideas. Emerson’s work would have been familiar to Warner. In *Nature* (1836) he chastised the poor:

The misery of man appears like childish petulance, when we explore the steady and prodigal provision that has been

made for his support and delight on this green ball which floats through the heavens. [Emerson, 7]

In his first series of essays, published in 1841, he continued the argument that simple trust in Providence and self is all that is required for sustenance. In "Self-Reliance," Emerson argued that "the secret of fortune is joy." and that the "cultivated man is ashamed of his property." [Emerson, 145, 152] In "Compensation" Emerson described "the perfect compensation of the universe," [Emerson, 165] in which the differences between work and wages, giving and receiving are eliminated: "Give and it shall be given you." [Emerson, 162] In this conception "wealth" and "poverty" are emptied of meaning:

"But see the facts nearly and these mountainous inequalities vanish. Love reduces them as the sun melts the iceberg in the sea. The heart and soul of all men being one, this bitterness of *His and Mine* ceases. His is mine." [Emerson, 169]

Emerson was not attempting to explain economics, but transcendentalism. However the link between spirituality and prosperity – the "triumph of principles" and triumph in the market was not as simply metaphorical as it might appear today. [Emerson, 153] Thoreau's stay at Walden represented an attempt to make the metaphor real, and as such it was hardly unique. George Ripley's Brook

Farm, and Bronson Alcott's Fruitlands contained a similar attempt at bridging the gap between economic and spiritual discourse.

The flowering and eventual failure of these experiments can be seen as evidence of the anxious reach of market forces into the mythology of American agriculture. That market reach - both hastened and symbolized by the railroads Thoreau complained of - drastically changed Crèvecoeur's dream of an independent subsistence. Farms in New England and New York were absorbed into the New York City market and the same cycles of credit and profit, boom and bust that drove the mercantile economy influenced the agricultural economy. The anxiety over such a change is reflected in Thoreau's famous condemnation of railroads - "We do not ride upon the railroad, it rides upon us" - and in his equally bleak view of agricultural debt: "The man who has actually paid for his farm with labor on it is so rare that every neighbor can point to him." [Thoreau, 22]

In the course of recycling the boards of James Collins's shanty, Thoreau transformed their "dank, clammy" failure into his successful treatise on voluntary poverty. Thoreau's depiction of Collins combined a number of tropes of poverty familiar to antebellum readers. It was a

homestead lost to debt - Collins tells Thoreau to arrive early to pick up his boards or they will be "encumbered by "certain indistinct but wholly unjust claims on the score of ground rent and fuel." [Thoreau, 29] Though he had worked for the Fitchburg Railroad, Collins cannot support his family and becomes an itinerant, homeless laborer, on the road with his family and all his possessions - "one large bundle held their all - bed, coffee mill, looking glass, hens - all but the cat." [Thoreau, 29] In an economy in which such a huge percentage of workers were able to survive by combining a variety of seasonal and part-time jobs, laborers often had to move from town to town, perhaps sharing time between rural agricultural labor and factory work in cities, as did the women of the Lowell mills.

This family leaving even their dark, dirt floored hut with only what they carried on their backs was a mockery of the domestic ideology Warner was so invested in. Thoreau warned us that their desire for possessions denied them the same: "Yet men have come to such a pass that they frequently starve, not for want of necessaries, but for want of luxuries." [Thoreau, 42] Mrs. Vawse seemed to live Thoreau's philosophy, in refusing to long for more than subsistence. She has retreated to a "house on a rock" and Warner links the

cottages sparsely furnished cleanliness with an emotional state: "It looked as if someone was happy there." [Warner, 190] Alice has brought enough food for three suppers in order to be certain of eating at all. "Do you think I didn't know better than to come up to this mountain-top without bringing along something to live upon while I am here?" [Warner, 191]

Aunt Fortune offers Ellen a way to avoid poverty - the acquisition of practical economic skills involved in the kinds of economic production that was fading from women's lives. Alice Humphries holds up the possibility of a world where poverty is not simply avoided, it ceases to exist. It is Alice that continues Ellen's education, in exactly the way her mother would have: studying the Bible, observing nature, appreciating flowers, learning French and Latin, riding horses and reading periodicals. [Warner, 464] When Ellen works, it is in the doing of good deeds: making tea and toast for her dying mother, caring for the dying Alice, helping the aged Mrs. Vawse, and nursing the injured Van Brundt. Day to day labor, stripped of spiritual value and weighted down with material need and daily drudgery, is left to Aunt Fortune.

The extent to which this ideology wipes away the reality of poverty can be seen in the treatment of the one genuinely poor character in the novel: poor, dying John Dolan. His story is reminiscent of the literature of the American Tract Society, the evangelical organization Warner worked for before her own father's collapse into poverty.

The American Tract Society combined an Enlightenment faith in rational process with an evangelical devotion to Protestantism. Their goal was to put their pamphlets of evangelical inspiration into the hands of every citizen in the cities in which they operated. In New York, they divided the city into wards and subdivided the wards, so that each volunteer could take responsibility for the families within a few city blocks. They were the largest publishing facility in the country, publishing 6 million tracts in 1829 alone. Their work often focussed on the need for a spiritual escape from the deprivations of poverty, recounting the stories of impoverished characters who escaped the torments of this world by devoting their final prayers to Christ with the faith that a better world awaited them beyond.

Warner drew upon the conventions of religious tract literature in her story of Johnny's deathbed conversion. Though Father Shannon

has performed last rites, young John has requested “the good jantleman that preaches in the little white church at Carra.” [Warner, 267] John recounts his visits to Mr. Humphries church to hear “the good words,” professes his faith, quotes the Bible and – with Mr. Humphries encouraging him to speak loud enough for the unredeemed Catholic men gathering around the bed can hear – calls out his dying words: “Thanks be to God for his unspeakable gift!” [Warner, 278]

In Maria Cummins *The Lamplighter* the death of Nan Grant is different in detail, but reinforces the same connection between morality and the suffering of poverty. Gerty Flint discovers the woman who abused and abandoned her dying slowly and painfully in a tenement building. Nan Grant's final moments do not contain any glorious spiritual awakening, and there will be no transcendence of earthly suffering. Nan Grant dies a “fevered, diseased and conscience stricken sufferer.” Her final words do not invoke Christ's redemption, but guilty ravings over jewelry she stole from Gerty's mother's dead body some years earlier. [Cummins, 166] These differences serve to underline the overarching similarities. Even when a child like John Dolan must die - and the deathbed redemption of children was a staple of Tract Society literature – they die free from suffering. It is only

those who refuse the opportunity to flee sin who must suffer. The pain of disease and the deprivation poverty are simply agents of moral retribution.

Jane Tompkins has pointed out the similarity of purpose between Warner's novel and the pamphlets printed by the American Tract society: both "were written for edification's sake, and not for the sake of art." [Tompkins, 149]

The trajectory of Ellen Montgomery's story matches the story of John Dolan, albeit with a different ending. Her initial loss is overcome by an ever-greater faith in God, and this faith changes simple repression into transcendence. Neither wealth nor poverty, independence nor dependence matter - material conditions will be overcome by spiritual conditions. Jane Tompkins has pointed out that "In the final chapter, Warner gives her heroine everything that she herself wanted and couldn't get: city living, wealth and position, relief from household cares, people who adore her, and marriage to an all-powerful protector." [Warner, 601]

Ellen's station in this last chapter may be seen as wish fulfillment for thousands of American women. In 1850 "a room

of one's own" would represent the financial and domestic security poor women found so elusive in reality. It would be tempting to argue that this wish fulfillment might have contributed to the extraordinary popularity of Warner's novel, but, of course, the chapter which Tompkins included in the 1987 edition appears there for the first time.

In the ending published in 1850, Ellen Montgomery is living in wealth and comfort, and has developed the emotional discipline to withstand the petty cruelties the Lindsays impose upon her. It is that discipline which is more telling of the book's popularity than Ellen's discovery of the still-wealthy wing of her family. The novel claims that emotional and spiritual discipline – a quality within a woman's control – will overcome economic uncertainty.

In the restored final chapter Ellen has had her spiritual and emotional longings explicitly satisfied. Through her marriage she is once again part of a family, one in which the males are secure and dependable. The lengthy description of her room gives almost no concrete details of color, pattern, fabric or style. Instead, the account centers on value-laden concepts: objects

are “beautiful,” “in harmony,” “old fashioned,” and “tasteful.”

Particular mention is given of bookcases and a writing desk.

[Warner, 574-575] This room is not simply a comfortable refuge from the world; it is a stable recreation of the material preparations Ellen’s mother made for her at the beginning of the novel. By focussing on bourgeois values, Ellen Montgomery has denied poverty its power and escaped into domestic bliss.

ii

In the world of the domestic novel change is ultimately for the best. Tensions ease and crises are averted, losses are restored, and instability yields, inevitably, to greater prosperity. While the ideology behind that confidence was dominant, there were significant alternative voices. Americans in 1850 were convinced that the Republic had seriously deteriorated. The explosion of the cities had transformed them into chaotic, unknowable, and frightening places. This growth was fueled by massive immigration- much of it Irish and Catholic. The advent of Jacksonian Democracy brought such a tremendous surge in

enfranchised voters, that it amounted to a redistribution of power.

In Federalist Number 10, Madison had warned about political parties and factions with their “unworthy candidates to practice with success the vicious arts by which elections are too often carried.”

[Federalist, 59] Just such parties not only fielded just such candidates, but they drew their strength from precisely that segment of the population which represented the greatest menace: the poor, the immigrant, the laboring masses.

Warner, Cummins, and the domestic novelists responded to these changes with a romantic withdrawal from the city, creating an ideologically charged space in which women controlled decision making and the economic anxiety of the capitalist urban market had no power. Domestic ideology was anachronistic even at mid-century when the novels that promulgated it were produced. Elizabeth Blackmar has pointed out that this ideology “presented housing conditions as manifestations of individual or collective morality” and left little room for changes in the urban housing market. [Blackmar, 113]

And the housing market was changing rapidly. Gerty Flint occupies several houses in Boston over the course of *The Lamplighter*.

Yet each apartment is a self-contained, ground floor, multi-room dwelling in a structure resembling a house. In fact, such buildings were fast passing from the neighborhoods of the poor. Edwin Spann pointed out that in New York City's 14th ward, only 125 of the 3,700 residents of the 1850 census were property owners. [Spann, 71]

Neighborhoods in urban America were coming to be dominated by a new form of housing- the tenement. These structures, in which dozens of families were crammed into one or two room dwellings often 6 flights of stairs from the street (and the water supply), "mocked the formally expressed ethics and morals of a Christian Society," in the words of Carroll Smith-Rosenberg. [Smith-Rosenberg, *Religion*, 175]

The years that saw the ideology of domesticity triumph were the very years that witnessed thousands of Americans forced into housing that made the ideals of domesticity a cruel joke.

These conditions were well known to Americans. For city dwellers contact with impoverished tenement dwellers could scarcely be avoided. Horace Greeley's *New York Tribune* made the existence of poverty amidst plenty a regular feature of its coverage of New York. Edwin Spann notes an 1848 article that contrasted the "brilliant and fashionable audience" at the Astor Place Opera House with the "ranks

of beggars in the streets” and the “barefoot and ragged children delv[ing] among the filth for bones and cinders.” [Spann, 70] It was the very visibility of poverty on the ground that fueled the desire to make it disappear from the culture.

In *American Notes*, (1832), Dickens offered a model for bridging the gap between this evident poverty and the dominant ideology of prosperity. He visited East and West, prison, asylum, and drawing room, farm and factory. In addition to introducing (and satirizing) America for his European audience, he interpreted some parts of America for his American readers. He helped close the conceptual gap for an urban middle class that - despite daily contact - found the poor mysterious and dangerous by offering a guided tour of the Five Points, a neighborhood famous for degradation even in London.

In adapting the voice of the town guide, Dickens simultaneously explained and reinforced the mystery of these neighborhoods and their impoverished residents:

Open the door of one of these cramped hutches full of sleeping negroes. Pah!... vapours issue forth that blind and suffocate. From every corner, as you glance about you in these dark retreats, some figure crawls half-awakened, as if the judgment-hour were near at hand, and every obscure grave were giving up its dead. Where dogs would howl to lie, women, and men, and boys slink off to

sleep, forcing the dislodged rats to move away in quest of better lodging. [Dickens 90]

The reassuring and knowledgeable voice of the tour guide cast light into the mystery of areas where “Debauchery has made the very houses prematurely old.” [Dickens 108] However the corners remain dark and the residents are rendered more incomprehensible, animal-like and threatening.

Dickens was not attempting to soothe the fear and tension the middle class felt in such encounters. He was contextualizing that fear. As Wyn Kelley has argued, Dickens guides “the reader safely and vicariously through the urban labyrinth [in order to] assert their faith in a larger moral or social order.” [Kelley, “Pierre in a Labyrinth,” 102] Dickens reinforced the dominant views of bourgeois domesticity by pushing the poor out of that moral social order. At the same time he reinforced the anxiety felt within that ideology by, in the words of Hans Bergman, reminding the reader “how close chaos and meaninglessness are.” [Bergman, 10]

By 1850 this discourse of encounter – in which a knowing tour guide helps an innocent reader “see” urban America – had become a conventional way for the culture to understand the city. Ned Buntline, George Foster, Joseph Holt Ingraham, Lydia Marie Childs, and George

Lippard are among the many writers who had successful books that introduced and explained urban squalor and vice to bourgeois readers, many of whom lived within a few blocks of the neighborhoods these writers described.

As David Reynolds pointed out, these writers were not working in a vacuum. They were involved in a discourse on urban poverty, morality, and vice that had been controlled by reform groups like the American Tract Society and the Advocates for Moral Reform for more than a generation. Reynolds notes that this “reform literature” “was so stylistically restrained and sober that it often overlapped or fed into popular conventional writing” like the novels of Warner. Though they appeared to be motivated by the same reformist impulse that drove Arthur Tappan of the Tract Society, Reynolds has labeled this group of writers “Subversive” because their apparent interest in morality was undercut by prose of “such lurid detail that they themselves were branded as dangerously immoral and sacrilegious.” [Reynolds 55]

Where tract writers and domestic novelists smoothed over the conflict between haves and have-nots by blaming the pain and suffering of poverty on the lack of moral discipline among the poor, Thompson, Buntline and Lippard infused their observations with a

worker's republicanism that upended the ideological construct of domestic sentimentalism. In doing so, these writers re-irritated the tensions between ideology and economic reality that Warner had smoothed over. Their voyeuristic sensationalism was part of a process of redefining the discourse of morality and poverty.

George Lippard's work does not question the rhetorical link between class and morality- he simply reverses the equation. In his work economic issues are just as closely tied to morality, gender and urban life as in the work of domestic novelists and tract writers; however, in what Shelley Streeby calls "counter histories," it is the poor who are moral and hard working, and the wealthy who are dissipated. [Streeby 446]

In his most famous novel, *The Quaker City; or The Monks of Monk Hall. A Romance of Philadelphia Life, Mystery, and Crime*, Lippard stops his various complicated and overlapping plots to tell the story of John Davis, a poor but honest mechanic and Job Johnson, the corrupt Bank President. Despite his "tattered round-about and patched trowsers," [Lippard, 406] we are assured of the Mechanics strength and good heart: "There was Famine in the unnatural gleam of that eye," but his worry is not for himself but for his child: "No bread, no

fire, for two whole days. I can bear it, but God! My child, my child.” Though he walks among the “Fashionable Dames going to the Opera, Merchants in broad cloth returning from the country house, Bank Directors hurrying to their homes, godly preachers wending to their churches,” he finds “not one solitary throb of heartfelt pity.” [Lippard, 406]

Seeing Job Johnson, President of a bank that had failed three days earlier, Davis appeals to him for aid. Even though he proved his worth as a mechanic when he shingled a house for Johnson *and* even though he lost his savings in Johnson’s bank, Davis approaches Johnson with deference. He has worked and been thrifty enough to save, now he cares nothing for his lost money, or his own material comfort: his only concern is for the welfare of his family. These attributes are the hallmarks of prosperity in domestic novels, and when one who holds them is impoverished, it is through no fault of their own and they always find benefactors and good fortune.

In Lippard’s work the appeal to the “corpulent” banker is in vain. Approached while writing out checks – which include \$20 for tract societies, \$200 for his wife’s jewelry, and \$50 to pay off the debts of his “Bad boy” son, he offers not so much as a kind word to the

Mechanic. Lippard is careful to attach Johnson's greed and lack of charity to his conventional view of American opportunity: "You don't mean to say that an able bodied man like you can't get work in this enlightened city of Philadelphia? ... You don't mean to say that an industrious mechanic like you are, or ought to be, can't obtain credit in this enterprising city of Philadelphia?" [Lippard, 407]

The irony of these questions is obvious in Lippard's hands, not only because his prose style was so heavy-handed, but also because the questions were consistently implied, and answered in the work that Lippard was critiquing. When Gertrude Flint leaves the paternalistic care of Mr. Graham, she has no trouble finding a teaching position that affords her a genteel independence. When Willie Sullivan needs work to support his mother and aging grandfather, he is provided with a benefactor who supports his ambition simply because the ambition exists. In the hands of Warner or Cummins a practical and pious man would either rise above poverty or live happily poor without suffering. While their work contained shallow, vain, and materialistic characters, there were few instances of impious excess, and virtually no examples of hypocritical Christianity.

Lippard was interested in the same rhetoric of virtue that we find in domestic fiction, but he was not willing to ignore some of the evils of the society he described. According to Streeby, Lippard was “reinterpreting republican rhetoric and the meaning of America so as to oppose them to the industrial capitalism that he finds so threatening.” [Streeby, 457] However seriously he took that threat, Lippard consistently saw his plots through to an optimistic ending that reinforced the virtues of that republican rhetoric. In *The Quaker City*, the dissipated banker dies, with his final moments bringing him a realization of his own guilt and immorality. The hero moves to Wyoming, having avenged his sister and escaped the corruption of Monk Hall. Lippard challenged the discourse of Domestic Sentimentalism, arguing that poverty will not simply disappear in the face of moral discipline, but must be actively opposed.

In an 1848 lecture he called for massive homesteading as a way to rebuild an American democracy that had become hopelessly debased. His vision of this western future was reminiscent of Jefferson and Crevecoeur:

A land where there are no very rich, no very poor men...A land where the law speaks in plain words and says the same kind of Justice to all men, A land, in fact, where EVERYONE IS RESPONSIBLE FOR THE WELFARE OF HIS

BROTHER; where there are more school houses than jails; where every man can possess a homestead and say to his wife, his children. "This soil, cultivated by my arm, and given to me under the great title-deed of God himself, is yours when I am dead." [Lippard, *Prophet*, 111]

Streeby has pointed out that his vision of an agrarian utopia is not simply a repeat of the trope that has been prominent in American culture since at least Crèvecoeur. He was attempting a "(re)vision" that will "wrest 'America' as a utopian symbol away from capitalism." In that sense his views were similar to those of sentimentalists like Warner and Cummins. All three attempted to create a vision of America that eased the chaos of urbanization and industrialization. While Lippard dwelt on the lurid images of poverty and vice that Warner and Cummins refused to show, both link those images exclusively with cities. While in Lippard's work no amount of moral rectitude could save a poor woman from the grinding pressures of poverty, he was similar to Warner and Cummins in his view that female domestic production was morally superior to the industrial production of male capitalism.

The Quaker City and *The Wide, Wide World* both attempted to prop up the increasingly anachronistic view of America as a rural utopian democracy. Both condemn poverty as an un-American blight upon that utopia. Lippard offered a detailed condemnation of the horror's of city life, highlighting the details that Warner made disappear; however, like them he reinforced a cultural preference for a rural, protestant, pre-market America that is designed to obscure the diverse, urban, industrial and capitalist America that has formed in their lifetimes.

In part because he upheld such cultural preferences, Lippard's work was virtually as popular as that of Warner. *The Quaker City* sold 60,000 copies in 1845 alone, and continued to sell well for at least a decade. [Lippard, *Quaker*, vii] As Melville biographer Laurie Robertson-Laurent has pointed out, mid-nineteenth-century readers demanded "novels [that] would uphold the normative values of civilization." [Robertson-Laurent, 318] Such popularity is a sign of social acceptance in any era.

Her point is reinforced by the life of her subject. When Herman Melville, a popular mid-nineteenth century author, turned his attention to poverty and the urban social order, the novel was not an avenue to

financial success. Melville's novels and stories of mid-century, including *Redburn* (1849), *Pierre or The Ambiguities* (1852), "The Paradise of Bachelors and The Tartarus of Maids," (1855) and "Bartleby the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street," (1853) were unsuccessful both critically and commercially.

The child of a well-to-do and socially prominent family, Melville grew up amidst privilege and economic security. The Panic of 1837 changed his life in much the same way it affected Warner's. In both *Redburn* and *Pierre* Melville described the lives of characters from privileged backgrounds who are plunged into poverty. Melville's portrayal of poverty could hardly have been different from Warner's description of Ellen Montgomery. Rather than smooth over the tension between cultural portrait and socioeconomic fact, Melville seems to revel in it, constantly challenging the assumptions and ideologies that allowed other American artists to ignore poverty.

Beginning in *Redburn: His First Voyage*, Melville rejected the notion of inevitable prosperity in America. Wellingborough Redburn – whom the subtitle refers to as the "Son-of-a-Gentleman" – is neither ignorant nor foreign, diseased nor debauched. He is, rather, a model of youthful republicanism left to scramble for a living through no fault

of his own. Redburn's story is reminiscent of Melville's own – both are children of businessmen who enjoyed brief early success but who could not lift their families permanently out of poverty.

Melville's father, Allan Melvill, had been an importer of fashion accessories. His business, built on speculation and escalating debt, appeared sound and prosperous almost to the very moment of its collapse in the summer of 1830. Herman was 11 years old, and his family's financial struggles suddenly became a permanent part of his transition to adulthood. In this respect his biography is similar to both Warner's and Lippard's.

Allan Melvill's final financial collapse brought on a physical collapse, a mental breakdown and an early death in 1832. Herman and his brother Gansevoort tried several businesses to save the family from ruin, and during the bubble of 1836 they appeared to have reestablished the family's financial security. The Panic of 1837 brought about their final fall from prosperity. Their financial and emotional situation was made worse by the fact that Herman's mother, Maria Gansevoort Melville, was unable to pay back loans from her brother and lost any claim to an inheritance from her own prosperous family.

This combination of financial tragedy and familial alienation is reminiscent of the life of Susan Warner. Indeed, William Gilman's summation of Melville's coming of age could apply to both writers:

For many years afterward the Melville family felt the relentless horrors of lawsuits, mortgage foreclosures, enforced sales of their personal possessions, and poverty. [Gilman, 83]

It could also apply to the hero of *Redburn*. Wellingborough Redburn also suffers the "desperation and recklessness of poverty" [Redburn, 54] due to his father's failures. His father's economic reversals are not detailed. We learn only that he had experienced "storms of adversity, and at last died a bankrupt." [Redburn, 221] The family's former wealth and prominence is made clear in his description of the home he is leaving behind, with its "several pieces of furniture...which had been brought from Europe, ... French Portfolios of colored prints," and "old books, that had been printed in London, Paris and Leipsic." [Redburn 46-47] Redburn introduces his own trip to Liverpool by comparing it to his father's who stayed at the fine Riddough Hotel and dined with a variety of socially prominent people. Wellingborough sets out from New York knowing his family was once part of a cross-Atlantic elite that commanded respect in both New York and London.

A comparison between Redburn's situation and that of Susan Warner's Ellen Montgomery offers a glimpse into Melville's views. Both Wellingborough Redburn and Ellen Montgomery are left to make their way in the world after the death of a parent leaves them without financial or emotional support. Ellen Montgomery left the city and moved inland to a rural American that embodies the values of Jefferson and Crèvecoeur, Emerson and Thoreau. In contrast, Redburn left rural New York to pass through the city and travel across the sea, a symbolic rejection of rural America and the West. He re-crossed the Atlantic to begin again in England. Warner maintains her primary focus on Ellen's emotional moods and touches upon her material condition only to draw attention to the bourgeois values she maintains. Melville virtually ignored any emotional loss Redburn feels at leaving his family, but spent several pages cataloguing the comforts he has lost, drawing particular attention to the ragged state of his clothing. What emotions Redburn does express are related to his poverty, rather than to separation from his family: his "young soul" is "nipped in the first bloom and bud." Where Ellen gathers friends and benefactors at every turn, Redburn feels himself ostracized by "the scent and savor of poverty" Redburn has almost no material possessions: "The gray

shooting-jacket was on my back, and from the end of my brother's rifle hung a small bundle of my clothes." [Redburn, 53-54]

What he carries are the pride and expectations of acceptance that come with being the "Son-of-a-Gentleman." When he attempts to negotiate his employment on *The Highlander*, we learn that, like Ellen Montgomery, he is unprepared for the market economy he is entering. Redburn is not negotiating for the purchase of goods, but is himself the product being offered. He still strikes a poor bargain. Redburn sets out with an expectation that his family background and education should gain him some material benefit, only to discover that absent money social position is meaningless. Even more disturbing to him, he negotiates with an idea to what is fair, only to find that such considerations are not important in the market he has entered.

These incidents can be compared to Ellen Montgomery's experiences with pawnbrokers to show Melville's rejection of sentimental ideology. Ellen and her mother are not thwarted by the pawnbroker's low prices, for they do not value the goods they are trading, or those they will buy, in monetary terms. However Redburn's gun and jacket are simply old, and their age lowers their value in the market and in Redburn's eyes. He is not attempting to convert these

materials into other bourgeois values, but is instead trading them in the market for money that will be used for food and clothing. His utilitarian point of view allows for no other value system except the monetary one.

In these early scenes, Melville has effectively subverted much of the rhetoric of the literary domestics, already prevalent in publications such as *Godey's Ladies Book*. Home is not a safe haven from the brutalities of economic competition, rural values offer no shelter when one is cast out, and a young person thrust into the world finds that character, education, ambition, and honesty do not offer much protection. Redburn's venture forth to find his fortune bears little resemblance to that of Willie Sullivan, whose good character in *The Lamplighter* earned him lucrative training and a salary.

Redburn's setbacks in New York are repeated in Liverpool when he puts his faith in his father's guide book as an "infallible clew" to the intricacies of that city. [Redburn, 217] he reasons that the book "had been thoroughly tested, and its fidelity proved." [Redburn, 217] Wyn Kelley has pointed out that the guidebook reflects the common discourse of the urban guides, from Dickens through Foster and Buntline. Just as the expectation of his father's class hindered

Redburn's ability to negotiate New York City, his father's guidebook hinders rather than helps his understanding of Liverpool. Melville used the disparity between Redburn's guidebook and the actual city of Liverpool to examine the ways that ideology – specifically the ideology of urban mystery - interferes with the actual experience of urban life.

Melville connected the Liverpool Redburn ultimately comes to experience with the New York City he himself was living in when he wrote *Redburn* in 1849. Upon arrival, Redburn notes that the city of Liverpool “bore a most unexpected resemblance to the ware-houses along South-street in New York.” [*Redburn*, 189-190] While dining in a tavern, Redburn is dismayed as “from the street came a confused uproar of ballad singers, barking women, babies and drunken sailors.” [*Redburn*, 197] This ordinary city street activity causes Redburn to question whether he has left home at all:

Where are the old abbeys, and the York Ministers, and the Lord mayors, and coronations, and the May-poles, and fox-hunters, and Derby races, and the dukes and duchesses, and the Count d’Orsays... [*Redburn*, 197]

Redburn recognizes that his misunderstanding of England stems from having relied too closely on sources like his father's guidebook.

“Guide-books, Wellingborough, are the least reliable books in all literature,” he tells himself, [Redburn, 224] though he had previously thought *The Pictures of Liverpool* “unerring.” [Redburn, 218] He explicitly links the failure of his guide book to Liverpool to the futility of using such a guide to New York, which “may send forth explorers to penetrate into the then obscure and smoky alleys of the Fifth Avenue and Fourteenth Street.” [Redburn, 216]

Penetrating the obscure and smoky alleys is exactly what the urban encounter writers like Foster and Buntline claimed to be doing. Melville used the fictional guide to Liverpool to cast doubt upon the reliability of these works. Most obviously he questioned the value of any guide written at one moment in time to future visitors. Melville depicted cities not as the static collections of monuments that show up in guidebooks, but as dynamic and evolving human institutions:

Future inhabitants [of New York] multitudinous as the pebbles on the beach and girdled in with high walls and towers, flanking endless avenues of opulence and taste, will regard all our Broadways and Bowerys as but the paltry nucleus to their Ninevah.” [Redburn, 215-216]

As cities change, the traveler must find his own way: the thing that had guided the father, could not guide the son.” [Redburn, 224]

The decision to abandon his father's guidebook and experience the city on his own initiates a noticeable change in his experience of Liverpool. The most memorable image he provides for the reader is not Lord Nelson's Column, but the remnants of a starving family in a basement. What is striking about Redburn's encounter with the woman and her children is the ordinary nature of the tragedy. Redburn has not penetrated some mysterious alley, but passed through the same narrow street, Launcelot's Hey, that he regularly travels between his boarding house and the docks. When he finds the family in a basement vault "some fifteen feet below the walk, crouching in nameless squalor," Redburn is shocked. [*Redburn*, 252] Though he has previously taken note of the existence of poverty in Liverpool, Redburn himself has never before been drawn to notice an individual's suffering. Now that he has given up his father's guiding ideology he is able to see the poor of Liverpool as if for the first time.

However, he can find no one to share his concern. Turning first to the "ragged old women...groping amid foul rubbish for little particles of dirty cotton," he can get no assistance. Some of these women show a sense of class distinction: they are working and have "no time to attend to beggars and their brats." Others echo a moral

sense familiar to domestic literature and the reform movements associated with it: “that Betsy Jenkins deserves it – was she ever married? tell me that.” [*Redburn*, 253]

Redburn is no more successful with the police: the suffering of a mother and two small children does not bother anyone, so it is not worthy of their notice. In addition, the officer’s initial refusal “It’s none of my business, Jack, ...I don’t belong to that street” [*Redburn*, 254] might remind readers of the American Tract Society’s policy of dividing the city into sections in order to distribute spiritual comfort. [Smith-Rosenberg, *Religion*, 80-82]

Redburn’s own attempts to help the woman are so limited and unsuccessful that he wonders whether he would do a greater service by “putting an end to their horrible lives.” [*Redburn*, 256] It is not until the beggars die that they move someone to action – when Redburn returns on the third day the bodies have been removed and the basement has been disinfected with quicklime.

When the Highlander passed the wrecked schooner, littered with bodies long dead, Jackson told Redburn not to worry about the afterlife – “Do you think...there’s a heaven for *you*?” Will they let *you* in there, with that tarry hand and that oily head of hair?” [*Redburn*,

162] This is not the type of question one encounters in domestic literature- John Dolan is clearly accepted into heaven. In contrast to this boy with the “unspeakable gift,” Melville’s family starves silently, with no one to even offer spiritual succor. Jackson’s question about heaven refers to them as well.

Jackson has already told the men horror-stories of working the middle passage on a slave ship, where “the suffocated and the dead were unmanacled, and weeded out from the living every morning.” [Redburn, 107] Redburn has reminded his readers that many such slave ships passed through Liverpool: Looking at the statue of Lord Nelson, Redburn thinks of “Virginia and Carolina, and also to the historical fact that the African slave-trade once constituted the principal commerce of Liverpool; and that the prosperity of the town was once supposed to have been indissolubly linked to its prosecution.” Redburn’s father had made his son aware of the “struggle between sordid interest and humanity.” [Redburn, 222-223] The slave trade has ended, but Redburn is aware that human’s still remain an important part of the city’s cargo. Liverpool was a major gate of emigration, with thousands of impoverished Irish shipping out of that city for New York, Boston, and Philadelphia. Death rates for

emigrant ships were not much better than for slave ships- as Redburn will soon understand. According to historian Edwin C Guillet, 17,445 Irish die on ships bound for America in 1847 alone. [McCarthy, 409]

This ongoing human trade between Liverpool and America, and Melville's recognition of the shift in the cargo from enslaved Africans headed for Southern plantations to industrial laborers headed for America's cities, is important because it once again link's Redburn's Liverpool to Melville's New York. As late as the 1970's, commentators of *Redburn* have taken Wellingborough's naivete about poverty at face value. Harold McCarthy, for example, claims that Redburn would have "had nothing in his experience to compare with the sight of the Liverpool poor... New York City's ills could not compare with the extreme poverty and sickness to be found in Liverpool." [McCarthy, 398] William Gilman allowed Redburn's inexperience to be taken as Melville's, assuming the author "must have been deeply shocked at the contrast between America and England. In America at the time, such a thing as a native pauper was virtually unknown." [Gilman, 137] Whether the young Melville who traveled to Liverpool in 1839 was shocked by what he saw is less important to an understanding of

Redburn, than is the fact that the Melville, who wrote the bulk of the novel in New York City in 1849, was well aware of urban poverty.

The emigration of impoverished Irish peasants fed the massive growth of poverty in New York during these years. In the decade of the 1840's, the number of immigrants to enter New York each year often exceeded the population of the city for the years before 1840. Accounts of their plight were staples of the urban encounter novels and newspaper stories that reinforced the image of cities as dangerous and chaotic places. One November 1848 story in *The New York Tribune* cited an alley where "barefooted and ragged children delve among the filth for bones and cinders." [Spann, 70]

Alleys were already icons of degradation by the 1850s – Ellen Montgomery watched an orphan play in similar conditions in *The Wide, Wide World*. In a culture dominated by an ideology of domesticity, the fact that almost 30,000 Manhattanites lived in basements in the mid-1840's was itself a threat to the social order. As Carol Smith-Rosenberg has said, "the poor had come to seem a class apart, a moral cancer within the body politic." [Smith-Rosenberg, *Religion* 157] The idea of a family staying in the basement would not have shocked Melville in 1849. He may well have been aware of cases like that cited

by *The Tribune*, as the East Side slums were a short walk from Melville's own residence on 4th Avenue and 11th Street.

Melville not only linked the existence of poverty in Liverpool to that in New York, but Redburn's observations call up the similarities in the Middle Class response to poverty on both sides of the Atlantic. Redburn's image of sailors- before becoming one – is built upon his reading “romantic” portraits in sailor magazines. [Redburn, 205] He is shocked at the grim reality he encounters on *The Highlander*. The cruelty of Jackson, the mendacity of Max and the sensuousness of Lavender are all examined from the perspective of Redburn's idealized sailor. Like many of his contemporaries, Redburn ascribes the poverty of the sailors to their vice. When first thinking of the poor Liverpool, he considers that their drinking “perhaps in some degree, accounts for their poverty.” [Redburn, 198]

This puts him in the same position of moral superiority as the old rag picker who refuses to assist the family starving to death in the vault: “that Betsey Jennings deserves it – was she ever married? Tell me that.” [Redburn, 253] We don't learn whether this old hag was herself married, but we can see that she is little better off than the starvelings she condemns. Redburn's position is similar – he is

impoverished through no fault of his own, yet ties the poverty of others to vices like drinking. Melville was certainly familiar with this discourse. It made up much of the American bourgeoisie's response to poverty. "The chief evils of poverty are moral in their origin and character," was how William Ellery Channing put it. [Boyer, 90]

The strength of *Redburn*, however, lies not in the rather gentle satire Melville addressed towards this point of view, but in the distance the character of Wellingborough Redburn travels to a different perspective. His analysis of the place of sailors in the economic hierarchy evolves into something similar to Jackson's belief that workers will not be welcomed into heaven:

There are classes of men in the world, who bear the same relation to society at large, that the wheels do to a coach: and are just as indispensable. But, however easy and delectable the springs upon which the insiders pleasantly vibrate: however sumptuous the hammer-cloth, and glossy the door panels; yet for all this, the wheels must still revolve in dusty or muddy revolutions. No contrivance, no sagacity can lift *them* out of the mire; for upon something the coach must be bottomed; on something the insiders must roll. [*Redburn*, 204]

Redburn does not adapt Jackson's anger, but during his stay in Liverpool he sees the connection between the sailors and the beggars on the docks. More importantly, he sees his own connection to both.

Having begun the novel with pretensions to aristocracy that separated him from the crew, he has lost his sense that he is separated from either the crew or the beggars of Liverpool. He begins his account of the return passage with descriptions of the ways that the 500 steerage passengers are treated like cargo (“more remunerative than crates and bales”) He describes the emigrants as “friendless” [*Redburn*, 323], a term he has previously used for himself. [*Redburn*, 221] Before the ship reaches New York, Redburn fully identifies with the emigrants: contrasting the squalid conditions of steerage with the “holy precincts” of the cabin passengers, Redburn makes his own allegiance clear:

“But I, Redburn, am a poor fellow, who have hardly ever known what it is to have five silver dollars in my pocket at one time; so, no doubt, this circumstance has something to do with my slight and harmless indignation at these things. [*Redburn*, 325]

Michael Paul Rogin links the return journey to Redburn’s association with the emigrants. According to Rogin, Redburn has “a new American identity ... among the democratic outcasts.” [Rogin, 70] This new identity is class based, rather than national. Having clearly identified with the hated Irish on his return passage, Redburn

joins the crew for their rebellious final salute to Captain Riga – organized by “the Irish cockney,” Blunt [*Redburn*, 401] Redburn’s new identity is more democratic, but by reason of its embrace of poverty and rootlessness in the face of bourgeois domestic culture, it is less conventionally American.

Melville consistently worked with themes, characters and plots that explored his society’s refusal to accept or countenance the unusual, the rebellious, or the unfortunate. Much of Melville’s work is within the bounds of Hawthorne’s definition of a Romance as a work which takes “a certain latitude” with factual accuracy in order to “mellow the lights and deepen and enrich the shadows” in order to arrive at “the truth of the human heart.” [Hawthorne, *Gables*, 1]

Recognizing the romantic in Melville’s work should not limit our understanding of his accomplishment. For the truths Melville arrived at were not limited to the confines of the human heart. Melville explored the truths that exist between people as well as those within them. As Michael Paul Rogin has pointed out, “Herman Melville is a recorder and interpreter of American Society whose work is comparable to that of the great nineteenth century European realists.” [Rogin, xi] “Melville’s fiction,” Rogin points out, “responds to the central historical and public

issues of his time.” [Rogin, 41] In *Redburn* those issues include the instability of American economic life, the desperate suffering of the urban poor both before and after they enter the United States, and the utter inability of the conventional moral framework to respond to that poverty.

In his later novel, *Pierre or The Ambiguities*, Melville attacked domestic ideology more directly. One reviewer, George Washington Peck, accused Melville of striking “at the very foundations of society.” [Higgins, 57] Pierre Glendinning, like Wellingborough Redburn, is a pious, well-educated, rural youth, on the brink of manhood. Like Redburn, Pierre travels to New York where he experiences abject poverty. However *Pierre* is a more complex portrait of these issues, and it is much more vehement in its criticism of American bourgeois values. Rogin points out that “Peck was correct to see [*Pierre*] as a declaration of war against domesticity.” [Rogin, 160]

Pierre is simultaneously “the flower of republican manhood” and an aristocrat. [Robertson-Lorant, 302] He is clean, sober and hard-working, while also being vain, sensuous and wealthy. The Glendinnings association with early settlers and Revolutionary War heroes (a trait the Glendinnings share with Melville and his cousins the

Gansevoorts) and their large land holdings and prosperous tenant income combine to make them a kind of American royalty. Samuel Otter has pointed out that the Glendinning estate, Saddle-Meadows, is not quite the pastoral democracy Jefferson had envisioned. Though it contains “scenery whose uncommon loveliness was the perfect mould of a delicate and poetic mind,” [*Pierre*, 5] it is also introduced as the site of historic battles with the Indians and contemporary skirmishes between landlords and tenant farmers. This often violent conflict, which simmered through the 1840’s, is used to make clear that Saddle-Meadows is “saturated with reminders of those who were dispossessed” to make the Glendinnings wealthy. [Otter, 361]

In reminding readers of the great fortunes in America, and of the blood spilled in building and maintaining them, Melville went beyond the urban encounter narrative’s “discovery” of poverty towards an image of wealth and poverty that are the outcomes of fierce economic competition. Pierre Glendinning is brought up in a world organized as if such brutal competition does not exist. In fact, the Glendinnings act as if the medieval rules of obligation and loyalty, rather than market forces, were still the dominant economic paradigm. Pierre’s mother

makes a brief appearance at Miss Pence's sewing circle in order to see what "benefactions" she can best provide.

When one of the girls, from the sewing circle, a tenant named Delly Ulver, has an adulterous affair and becomes pregnant, Mrs. Glendinning is utterly unforgiving: "I loathe the man, I loathe the woman, and never desire to behold the child," she tells Pierre and Reverend Falsgrave. [*Pierre*, 101] Mrs. Glendinning is personally capable of response because of her wealth, and she is also responsible for Delly in her role as lady of the manor. Yet her response is reminiscent of the rag pickers: "was she ever married? tell me that." [*Redburn*, 253]

Pierre's decision to break away from his mother and to forsake his future as the heir to Saddle Meadows is often seen strictly through the lens of Melville's complicated layering of psychology and sexuality. However, Melville was well aware of the ways that cultural ideas about virtue were tied to economics. One of the major thrusts of his work was to call that connection into question. The heroines of domestic novels, like Ellen Montgomery, lived by the strictest of moral codes. Despite the apparent sacrifices this entailed, these heroines are always

rewarded with a reputation for virtue *and* material comfort. Melville rejected that portrait.

When Pierre attempts to put his own honesty and virtue to the test, supporting his sister and sparing his mother and father, he is cast out:

“If already thou hast not found other lodgment, and other table than this house supplies, then seek it straight. Beneath my roof, at my table, he who was once Pierre Glendinning no more puts himself.” [*Pierre*, 185]

Pierre is punished for seeming to do in public what he suspects his father actually did in secret – consorting with women of lower economic class. It is the public nature of his relationship to Lucy that galls Mrs. Glendinning. She herself introduced the possibility of Pierre having relations with tenant women when she asked him to observe what “really pretty, and naturally-refined dames and girls you shall one day be lord of the manor of.” [*Pierre*, 45]

Upon arrival in New York City, Pierre discovers he has been condemned not just by his mother, but by his cousin Glendinning Stanley, and by all in his cousin’s social circle. He has been cast out of his class as well as his family. Pierre has now entered a very different society. Saddle Meadows was presented as the home of a wealthy

elite, a place where poor residents kept their place and made only occasional appearances under circumstances - like the sewing bee - where their behavior was tightly controlled. In New York City the poor are in raucous control of the social fabric. Here the wealthy must guard their behavior, and enter into the public life of the city at their peril. Pierre, Isabel and Delly are upbraided by their hack driver, caught up in a riot in a police station, approached by a prostitute and left abandoned and homeless on their first night.

They eventually take rooms in "The Church of the Apostles" which has been desanctified by "the tide of change and progress." [*Pierre*, 266] The building combines elements of commerce and debased domesticity: it is in a formerly fashionable neighborhood now filled "chiefly with immense lofty warehouses of foreign importers." [*Pierre*, 265] Like Redburn, Pierre must abandon his aristocratic pretensions and live among "a very forlorn and penniless set." [*Pierre*, 331] In reinforcing the similarities between Pierre and Redburn, Michael Paul Rogin points out that Isabel "could be one of Redburn's immigrant poor." [Rogin, 167]

Only one of the "Apostles," Charlie Millthorpe, rises to the level of character at all. His relationship to Pierre started long before their

association in the Apostles. The Millthorpe family were tenants of the Glendinnings. Pierre has known Charlie since childhood. The aristocratic Pierre and the poor but determined Charlie are social equals now, but in an ironic twist on the Ben Franklin rags to riches story, they have been equalized by Pierre's descent into poverty rather than Charlie's success.

Pierre remembers Millthorpe's father as blending the "coarsely tanned" features of hard labor with the profile of "the loftiest aristocracy." [*Pierre*, 275] Millthorpe is also remembered for maintaining an appropriate attitude of proud subservience by not collecting debts owed him too forcefully. Melville make clear that this construction of the noble working man is a collection of ideologically weighted tropes designed to help Pierre and Mrs. Glendinning avoid facing the actual suffering of the people who work for them. The narrator refers to this attitude by coining the term *povertiesque*.

Povertiesque borrows the concept of the picturesque from landscape painting, and applies it to the social landscape. The picturesque style of painting uses careful framing to manipulate a landscape by including elements considered "wild" and scenic." In the work of Thomas Cole, for example, blasted tree trunks and distant

storm clouds are often used as counterpoints to scenic calm and natural abundance.

Melville was attacking another version of the vision of poverty without suffering that runs throughout domestic literature. Mrs. Vawse, neat and happy in her cabin on a rocky mountaintop in Warner's *Wide, Wide World* is the perfect subject for a picturesque painting. Her life of bare subsistence fits Melville's idea of "throwing the fine *povertiesque* element into the general picture." [*Pierre*, 277] Mrs. Vawse's stubborn independence is praised, as is Millthorpe's. When a clearly destitute Millthorpe allows Mrs. Glendinning to forget to repay a debt for several months, she sees it as a mark of character: "Ah! The old English knight is not yet out of his blood. Bravo, old man!" [*Pierre*, 278] Both Mrs. Vawse and Millthorpe ask the reader to accept the idea that independence is worth cold and hunger, but Melville made it clear that Millthorpe feels the cold and hunger that Mrs. Vawse seems immune to.

Melville was not working an element of poverty into the general picture. In *Redburn*, *Pierre*, and shorter works of the mid-century period, "Bartleby the Scrivener," "Poor Man's Pudding, and Rich Man's Crumbs" and "The Paradise of Bachelors and The Tartarus of Maids,"

he placed poverty at the very center of his focus. In the words of Samuel Otter, his depiction of “poverty ruptures the verbal and visual frames of its representation.” [Otter, 358] Those frames of representation are the limits to American culture’s willingness to see poverty. Domestic ideology created a discourse in which images of poverty were forced into predetermined limits.

Hans Bergmann has placed Melville in a category of “self-conscious” authors who are “always subject to a discourse’s authority because in order to be read and understood by a contemporary audience he or she must work within its rules.” [Bergmann, 11] However, much of the failure Melville encountered after such a promising start can be understood as the result of his refusal to accept the discourse’s authority. In David Reynolds description of that discourse

the great Conventional best-sellers were rhetorical constructs in which the troubled social and philosophical climate of antebellum America was determinedly meliorated and an alternative world of village pastoralism and victorious moral exemplars were offered as mythic correctives for thorny realities such as crime, urbanization, tangled reform movements, and savage frontier life. [Reynolds, 182]

In Melville's mid-century works, those troubling elements of crime, sexuality, disease and hunger overwhelm the conventional pieties.

When Francis Cabot Lowell imported the model for textile manufacture from London in 1810, he attempted to do so in a way that would avoid the association between factories and slums that was already obvious in England. Large urban settings filled with a permanently impoverished male working class would not fit into the conventions of American culture. As Thomas Bender has put it

The question now became whether this tremendously powerful economic organization could be smuggled into American culture under the protective cloak of Jeffersonianism, or whether agrarianism would be frankly repudiated. [Bender 32]

In order to avoid the association with poverty and vice, American factories would be rural, staffed largely by females, and operate under strict moral codes. Lowell was a model factory town not only for its economic and technical innovations, but because it represented what Arthur Schlesinger has called "a kind of pastoral mythology about the laboring classes." [Schlesinger, 271]

A system of boarding houses strictly enforced Protestant morality. The insistence on a female workforce perpetrated the image of temporary workers, rather than a class of wage slaves, and a variety

of community activities gave an air of self-improvement to a lifestyle otherwise associated with oppressive drudgery. The “Factory Girl” of John H. Warland’s poetry is as much a cultural construct as the characters in domestic novels:

O sing me a song of the Factory Girl
 So merry and glad and free –
 The Bloom on her cheeks, of health it speaks! –
 O a happy creature is she!

She tends the loom, she watches the spindle,
 And cheerfully talketh away;
 Mid the din of wheels, how her bright eyes kindle!
 And her bosom is ever gay.

O sing me a song of the Factory Girl!
 Link not her name with the SLAVES. –
 She is brave and free as the old elm tree,
 That over her homestead waves. [Schlesinger,

272]

In “The Paradise of Bachelors and The Tartarus of Maids” Melville ruptured this representation of happy independence. Melville’s narrator first describes “The Paradise of Bachelors,” as being “well up toward heaven,” and “sequestered from the old city’s surrounding din,” [Melville, *Great Short Works*, 204] in a “snug” low-ceilinged room. [Melville, *Great Short Works*, 206] He contrasts this to his trip to the rural mill in terms quite different from the typical American image of bountiful nature. The paper mill is located in a canyon known as

“Devil’s Dungeon,” past “Woedolor Mountain,” and beside the “Blood River.” The mountains the traveler must pass through are “bleak,” “dusky,” and haggard.” The description of the canyon itself includes words more normally associated with the alleyways of cities: “ruin”, “abandonment”, “decay”, “solitary”, “perilous”, “gloomy,” “sullen” and “grim.” [Melville, *Great Short Works*, 211]

The mill girls are not the “merry and glad” creatures of Warland’s poetry, but “pale with work,” and “blue with cold.” [Melville, *Great Short Works*, 214] The comparison between the paper they produce, and the factory workers themselves is unavoidable: virginal and unblemished as the cultural image required, the factory renders the girls as “ruled and wrinkled” as the paper. [Melville, *Great Short Works*, 215] The factory takes the cast-offs of a more prosperous world, whether they be the “old shirts gathered from the dormitories of the Paradise of Bachelors” or the elderly woman who was “a nurse formerly. But the business is poor in these parts, and she’s left it.” [Melville, *Great Short Works*, 217] The story overflows with symbolic references to childbirth and sexuality, writing and civic discourse. For all its symbolism, it retains a streak of what would later be called realism. The narrator is under no illusions about the nature of the

work: “The girls did not so much seem accessory wheels to the general machinery as mere cogs to the wheels.” [Melville, *Great Short Works*, 216] The proprietor spells out the oppressive work-rules of the factory exactly:

“we will not have married women; they are apt to be off-and-on too much we want none but steady workers: twelve hours to the day, day after day, through the three hundred and sixty-five days, excepting Sundays, Thanksgiving, and Fast-days. That’s our rule. [Melville, *Great Short Works*, 222]

The very structure of the story- a literary dyptich- is designed to connect the disparate worlds described in the two sketches. The narrator of “The Paradise of Bachelors and The Tartarus of Maids” is explicitly aware of the link between the two worlds. Melville also used the technique in “Poor Man’s Pudding and Rich Man’s Crumbs,” and in that story he may have had a direct inspiration in a contrasting set of newspaper pictures. James Duban has discussed the relevance of pairs of engravings entitled “Grand Masonic Banquet” and “Condition of Ireland” that appeared in *The Illustrated London News* in December 1849, and were commented on in *The New York Christian Inquirer*. The *Inquirer* places the blame for the contrast of wealth and poverty on the British class system, and repeats the usual declaration of American innocence: “When such unnatural extremes meet our

American eyes, we are shocked,” the *Inquirer* commented. [Duban, 283] Such diptychs - in both words and pictures - were familiar in New York newspapers, to say nothing of the streets of New York. In “The Paradise of Bachelors and The Tartarus of Maids” Melville connected male wealth and privilege in Old England and female poverty and oppression in New England.

He brought both halves of these diptychs together in “Bartleby The Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street,” which is also centered on the relationship of a worker to his workplace and his employer. While the character Bartleby may appear to be as passive as the mill girls of Devil’s Dungeon, he is engaged in a rebellion, albeit a self-destructive rebellion, against the ideology of prosperity and domesticity.

The narrator of the story, a well-to-do Wall Street lawyer, offers Bartleby employment and a place within a social hierarchy that is strict, but quietly enforced. The lawyer wants the power of his class, but does not want to appear undemocratic. His demands upon his workers are put in the form of “requests,” and his reprimands for unsatisfactory work sound like negotiations among equals. [Melville, *Great Short Works*, 47] Bartleby’s subverts such verbal constructions by taking the appearance of equality and democracy at face value,

phrasing his rebellion as mere personal preference: "I would prefer not to." The narrator is stymied, unable to respond to this simple statement. Nippers suggests that he "kick him out of the office," but the narrator rejects such openly authoritative methods, and is unable to control Bartleby within the framework of democratic discourse.

[Melville, *Great Short Works*, 49]

When he later discovers the homeless Bartleby living in his office, the narrator is shocked on two levels. First, Bartleby seems to be demanding a much higher degree of responsibility from him as an employer. The narrator has been dealing with the troubles and needs of Nippers, Turkey and Ginger Nut by ignoring them. Naming them by the weakness that makes them less valuable to him, he simply accepts less productivity from them in exchange for less responsibility for them. Bartleby begins his relationship with the narrator by offering much higher productivity than his colleagues: "At first, Bartleby did an extraordinary quantity of writing." [Melville, *Great Short Works*, 46]

By moving into the office, encountering the lawyer on Sunday, Bartleby is forcing the lawyer to deal with a fuller share of his humanity. Bartleby is disrupting the economic efficiency of the lawyer's office by refusing to remain a cog in the lawyer's system.

Bartleby's residence in the office is also shocking in that it mocks the domestic ideology that the narrator lives by. The narrator discovers Bartleby's living arrangements on a Sunday when "Wall Street is deserted." [Melville, *Great Short Works*, 55] Bartleby's living arrangements echo those of the Apostles, whose neighborhood was "silent and depopulated" after business hours. [Melville, *Pierre*, 269] However, the Apostle's residence and neighborhood are fictional. The setting for "Bartleby the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street- important enough to be mentioned in the title, is not a product of Melville's imagination. By 1851 the name, and the street itself, was at the center of American market forces and commercial interests, and, as such, shows the anti-domestic forces at the center of American life. By having Bartleby take up residence in a neighborhood so stripped of domestic influences, Melville exposed the limits of domestic ideology in ameliorating American economic strains.

Bartleby's poverty and rootlessness overwhelm the narrator's ideology of domesticity and hierarchy. Bartleby's narrator offers Bartleby a job and a home; he attempts to keep Bartleby out of prison and pays for decent food when he is in prison. In his final sigh of pain and frustration "Ah, Bartleby! Ah, humanity!" [Melville, *Great Short*

Works, 74] it seems the narrator even offers genuine sorrow. None of it touches Bartleby.

The narrator learns after Bartleby's death that his previous employment may have been in the Dead Letter Office at Washington. This final association of Bartleby with incomplete communication, with language that has been separated from meaning, punctuated a theme Melville had developed throughout the story. Many of the descriptions in *Bartleby* indicate a world where language has become dead. The name Wall Street combines thoroughfare with blockade, the lawyer's office features windows that look out on walls, he hides his employees behind screens so that "privacy and society were conjoined." [Melville, *Great Short Works*, 46] Like the lawyer's requests that are actually orders, and Bartleby's preferences that are actually rebellions, the language of the office is designed to hide the oppressive nature of the enterprise, rather than reveal it. The very job of a scrivener is to copy what others have said rather than to communicate anything original.

In this sense his conception of the use of paper is even more limited than that of the narrator of "The Paradise of Bachelors and The Tartarus of Maids" who envisions the virgin paper he has seen becoming "sermons, lawyers' briefs, physician's prescriptions, love-

letters, marriage certificates, bills of divorce, registers of births, death-warrants , and so on, without end.” [Melville, *Great Short Works*, 220]

This list is more rich with life than the lawyer’s simplistic summary-
“recondite documents of all sorts.” [Melville, *Great Short Works*, 45]

However, the hopelessness of the Dead Letter Office reaches back and changes the nature of the list of documents in “Tartarus.” In those final paragraphs of “Bartleby,” all communication is reduced to dead letters from “dead men,” offering only “hope for those who died unhoping; good tidings for those who died stifled by unrelieved calamities. On errands of life, these letters speed to death.” [Melville, *Great Short Works*, 74] In this view all language is dead, all possibility for communication between people, and communion among them has been cut off. The narrator of both tales is left with only an expression of frustration: “Ah, Bartleby! Ah, humanity!” is a deeper, more despairing version of “Oh! Paradise of Bachelors! and oh! Tartarus of Maids!” [Melville, *Great Short Works*, 74, 222]

Like Bartleby, Pierre’s death in the Tombs is associated with a failure of language. His rebellion against the conventions and expectations of his mother exposes the shallow relationship between the language of domestic relations and their reality. When his former

fiancée, Lucy Tartan, comes to New York to live with Pierre, the household expands so that Pierre is living as husband and wife with his sister, and as platonic cousin with his fiancée. The labels of family life, signifying the roles available within domestic ideology, have been rendered arbitrary.

Like Melville himself, Pierre tried to write something more than the official version of social relations, attempted to capture “the everlasting elusiveness of Truth.” Melville’s sarcasm, and the excerpts of Pierre’s writing he quotes, make it clear that lack of talent is one of the obstacles to success in Pierre’s writing career. However it is also his refusal to work with language, characters or themes “calculated for pecuniary profit.” [Melville, *Pierre*, 338] Pierre’s struggle against his family and his struggle to write something “True” are symbolically joined when he receives a challenge from Glen Stanley and a threatening letter from his publisher on the same day. The novel closes with Isabel, Lucy and Pierre dead in Pierre’s prison cell, their bodies huddled together against a wall not far from where Bartleby would die.

Pierre represents Melville’s final salvos in a war for the heart of American discourse. *Pierre* was Melville’s attempt to respond to the

domestic genre that was so popular. It was supposed to have been a popular novel. Melville described the unfinished manuscript to a prospective publisher as

"very much more calculated for popularity than anything you have yet published of mine - being a regular romance, with a mysterious plot to it, & stirring passions at work, and withal, representing a new & elevated aspect of American life." [Higgins, 14]

However, the novel aimed for something more than popularity in the strictly pecuniary sense: it directly addresses the themes, plots, character types and settings of the popular literature of the day. Pierre would seem to be the ideal romantic hero set out upon the world to seek a Truth that lurks beneath the social facade. Rogin points out that Pierre's relationship flouts the conventions of domesticity in an attempt to find the substantive heart of that ideology:

Against the false closeness of the conventional outer marriage, Pierre sought true closeness with Isabel. But he proposed to find it, not in a real marriage, but behind the masquerade of an outward one. [Rogin, 169]

The same formula can be applied to issues of poverty. Against the false charity of Mrs. Glendinning, Melville posited the truer charity of Pierre, who comforts and supports Isabel to make up for her

abandonment at the hands of his father. *Pierre* attempted to push poverty back into the discourse of American culture. Melville eschewed both the genteel poverty of the domestic novel in which spiritual development relieves economic crisis, and the romantic poverty of Thoreau's experiment, in which voluntary poverty begets spiritual development. Melville offered America a view of poverty with physical consequences, with cold and hunger and early death. His poor were not immoral, ignorant immigrants, but well-educated Yankees, men of character and women of virtue. In important ways, however, they are not Americans - they are pushed to the margins of society by reason of their economic failure. Melville recognizes their alienation within American culture: his poor characters remain outsiders, scorned and unwanted.

Warner compliantly accepted the doctrine of inevitable success, and was rewarded with popularity for her efforts. *The Wide, Wide World* remained in print and sold briskly throughout the nineteenth-century. George Lippard changed some of the dynamics of that ideology to force his readers to see poverty. However, he accepted the link between morality and economics and continued to locate both poverty and immorality in the city. His most famous novel, *The*

Quaker City, also sold well throughout the century. Melville refused to accept these authoritative discourses at face value. He forced his readers to recognize poverty that arose from a level of market competition that had grown inhumane. He dared to challenge a discourse of philanthropy that focused solely on spiritual comfort for the deserving. These views helped ruin his writing career. *Pierre* registered sales even below the meager printing run his wary publisher was willing to risk, and when Melville died in 1891, the book had still not earned back the advance paid to him in 1851.

In its focus on characters who are shaped by the social and economic system they are part of, Melville pointed the way toward the Realism that will dominate American literature after the Civil War. Of course, Melville cannot be given credit as a precursor of that movement. He cannot be described, even symbolically as the ancestor of Crane, Riis, and Dreiser, because in the years these writers were altering the culture's view of poverty, almost no one in America was reading Herman Melville.

Chapter II

Discovering Poverty: Riis, Crane, Dreiser and the Discourse of Realism

In the America that developed after the Civil War, poverty was impossible to ignore. By 1893, William Dean Howells' said, "the old American maxim that it will all come out right in the end, has less and less acceptance." [Shi, 181] Before the Civil War writers as diverse as Warner and Lippard worked within an ideology that connected poverty, immorality, and urbanism in ways that rendered poverty temporary and un-American. Writer's at the close of the century- including Jacob Riis, Stephen Crane, and Theodore Dreiser continued to explore connections between poverty, gender, morality, and urban life, but with radically different results. They created a conception of American poverty in which the two halves of that concept - America and poverty - were not mutually exclusive. In developing a discourse that focused

on the minute details of social relations and human suffering, known as realism, they offered a challenging critique to the discourse of domestic sentimentality. As America reveled in modernity, its artists gave poverty a part in the spectacle. The ongoing discourses on urbanization, family life, and prosperity now functioned to make deprivation and economic failure increasingly visible. By 1900, the American ideology had been complicated by dueling images of prosperity and poverty, both of which appeared inevitable.

This challenge to the established discourse grew out of profound changes in American society. The factory work that had threatened the prerogatives of independent artisans before the Civil War had become the only employment opportunity for tens of thousands of workers. Cities had been transformed by a half-century of immigration into vast metropolitan areas, with slums as large and fetid as anything in Europe. The permanent underclass that Crèvecoeur had thought impossible and Lippard had warned against was a reality by 1870.

A thumbnail sketch is available with a simple litany of familiar numbers. While in 1850 the population of Manhattan was about half a million, by 1870 immigration was adding about 200,000 people a year, so that by the end of the century New York would contain three and a

half million people. [Jackson 921-922] It has been estimated that two thirds of that number lived in tenements, and 20 – 30 thousand young people lived on the streets. [Lens, 190] While the city continued to be dominated by the Irish, its most famous slum, the Five Points, was fast becoming Italian, its Jewish population was 300,000 by the 1890's, and New York was the world's third largest German city. [Burrows and Wallace, 1110] No longer the Dutch "walking city," New York had become a modern, heterogeneous metropolis.

Numbers alone can not give the proper picture of social dislocation. As Richard Slotkin points out,

conditions in the factories and mills and on the railroads were sufficiently bad to produce a rising tide of labor organization, strikes, and sporadic violence. The inadequacy of housing, sanitation, and essential social services in the mushrooming American cities added to the sense and the reality of impoverishment, to the crime rate, and to discontent. [Slotkin, 301]

Despite this rupture in the cultural assumption of inevitable prosperity, major reform groups continued to deal with poverty as a moral issue. For example, the Charity Organization Society (COS), founded in 1882 was designed to reduce the charity available to impoverished New Yorkers by eliminating dishonesty among applicants. The COS favored a strong program to investigate the worthiness of applicants, and in

the words of James Lane, “blamed most of the instances of pauperism on heredity, drunkenness, improvidence and vicious indulgence.”

[Lane, 37]

Charles Loring Brace, who had been working among the poor since the 1850s displayed the paternalistic pity and contempt with which he beheld his subjects, titling the history of his work among New York’s street children *The Dangerous Classes*. Though often sympathetic to the children, Brace rhetorically condemns them to a life of dissipation and crime:

Naturally, the boys growing up in such places become, as by a law of nature, petty thieves, pick-pockets, street rovers, beggars, and burglars. [Brace, 56]

Not surprisingly, Brace holds out even less hope for females, claiming:

“Few girls can grow up to maturity in such dens and be virtuous.”

[Brace, 57]

For all his emphasis on traditional moral condemnation, in his emphasis on “such places,” and “such dens” Brace is opening the door to the environmental perspective on poverty that Jacob Riis would use to challenge the traditional moralism of economic discourse. For Brace however, the power of the environment in shaping human lives and communities could be summed up by the simple faith he held in the

power of the American farm. Throughout *The Dangerous Classes*, Brace quotes from letters discussing the adjustment and progress of adoptees, many of which are cartoon-like exaggerations of the writings of Jefferson and Crèvecoeur:

I wish you could see the children as they start for school this morning. Fred, with his black plush cap, green tunic, black vest, gray pants, striped mittens, and his new comforter, which he bought with his own money.....and he has not forgotten to go down to the cellar and fill his pockets with apples. [Brace, 259]

Though not all the letters contain iconic images of boys stuffing their pockets with apples, the generous accepting tone of Brace's descriptions of his relocated charges is entirely consistent with his feelings for them. For all the angry rhetoric of his descriptions of "petty thieves, pickpockets, street rovers, beggars and burglars," [56] Brace makes it abundantly clear that his anger and condemnation is directed at city life in general, and the slums in particular. In fact, he holds a very positive, even romantic view of the children of the streets. He sees them as essentially moral, decent creatures who are simply ignorant of Christianity and the healthful values of middle class America. Brace compared the residents of the Newsboys Lodging House with noble savages, who "bore to the busy, wealthy world about

them something of the same relation which Indians bear to the civilized Western settlers.” [Brace, 97]

The function of this comparison- with the street boys as Indians and the industrialized urban bourgeoisie as Western settlers is complex and illuminating. Richard Slotkin has written evocatively of the use of Indian imagery in the discourse of industrialization in America. Slotkin points out that the frontier experience is seen as one of “regression,” as “the pioneer goes back to the past to purify himself...to regenerate the present.” [Slotkin, 63] Slotkin argues that the perception of a need for regeneration springs from an awareness of class conflict, of “history as a competition for resources by classes of fellow citizens.” [Slotkin 79]

Brace draws on this awareness. His newsboys are seen as savages in a dichotomy that places the bourgeois urban world in the role of civilizing force represented by Western Settlement. Yet, in order to be civilized, these boys must be sent out of the city, to families that are free from the corruption of that same city. The well-to-do New Yorker is symbolically linked to the archetypal yeoman farmer while the street urchin – the worst by-product of an urban class system – is linked to the savage. He must be sent “back to the past”

- in Slotkin's phrase - to a lifestyle more in line with America's image of itself.

Brace portrayed these boys as basically decent. He tells us the newsboy "has his code" and that code requires sobriety, honesty and generosity. [Brace, 98] Brace's stories frequently involve destitute boys who sleep under bridges and eat from refuse bins, but who share their meager food with each other and protect one another from danger or misfortune. They are remarkably similar to the fictional portraits of city boys written by Horatio Alger.

A Harvard educated Unitarian minister, Alger was cast out of his one true pastoral position in 1866 for "unnatural familiarity with boys" [Alger, xiv] In his position as Minister to the Newsboys Lodging House he became friends with Brace and the two men shared a similarly idealized view of homeless children. Beginning in 1866, Alger wrote prolifically and ultimately published 103 juvenile novels following the formula that has made his name a household word.

Alger categorized many of these novels as stories of "luck and pluck," and maintained that balance of fortune and character established in his most famous novel, *Ragged Dick*. This formula

maintains some of the traditions of the domestic sentimentalist – morality is clearly linked to the ascent out of poverty.

Whether they were accusing the Bank President of embezzlement or saving his son from drowning, Alger's heroes were always clean, polite and adventurous. In many ways they were reminiscent of Will Sullivan in *The Lamplighter*: poor boys who seized opportunities to better themselves intellectually, spiritually, and materially. However, whereas Will is granted the privileged clerkship after impressing his employer with his integrity and hard work, Alger's heroes cannot succeed through that kind of "pluck" alone. They simply provide the character necessary to seize opportunity when it comes. Dick may possess the qualities necessary to save Mr. Greyson's son from drowning, but unless the opportunity to actually save the boy presents itself, Dick will remain more pious and determined than the average newsboy, but just as poor.

That is one of the noteworthy differences between his work and that of the ante-bellum sentimentalists. Alger portrayed - albeit in idealized terms - a permanently impoverished class in America. Ragged Dick is one of thousands of street urchins, but he is the only one who rises above his station. Alger established the idea that

material success in an industrial capitalist system is at least partially a random process. For all the details that link moral rectitude to prosperity, virtually no Alger hero got out of poverty without the help of blind luck. Other newsboys who are just as morally pure and determined – such as Johnny Nolan in *Ragged Dick*, are left to struggle in poverty, waiting for their lucky break.

i

Jacob Riis disembarked from the steamer *Iowa* in the spring of 1870. At the age of twenty, he entered a New York City of nearly a million and a half people. Penniless and unemployed, he joined a small army of unskilled workers. In his first few years in America, Riis worked as a carpenter, farmhand, common laborer, hunter and trapper, railroad hand, and salesman. When work was unavailable in one place, he moved to another, generally travelling on foot. He walked from New York to Philadelphia and back, sleeping in barns and living on pilfered apples. Circling continually back to New York, he slept in the Police Lodging Houses he would later help eradicate, and lived in the Five Points Slums he would write about and photograph. He spent

several years in abject deprivation before finding a career path that would make him prosperous and famous. It was the kind of American story that was the backbone of much of America's cultural assumptions about economics and upward mobility.

In his autobiography, *The Making of an American* (1901), Riis recalled that his big break as a reporter came when he was running to file a story and knocked over his *Tribune* editor. Expecting to be fired the next day, Riis found that he had been promoted to full time police reporter, a job "that needs a man who will run to get his copy in," according to the editor. [Riis, *Making*, 127] From his position as a famous writer and photographer, Riis recalled the moment as if it were a Horatio Alger story. Riis cast doubt upon the inevitability of prosperity in America, telling the reader that if he had run a little faster, or looked where he was going, he would not have knocked down that editor and would have lost his temporary placement with the next cut back at the *Tribune*. Without that random accident, Riis might never have escaped the cycle of itinerant employment.

Jacob Riis was not an artist in the conventional sense. He is a photojournalist who developed a reliance on factual information as a tool for influencing public opinion and action. David Shi refers to Riis

as epitomizing “the fact-worshipping strand of reformist realism,”
 [Shi, 188]

This focus on factual realism was one of the important cultural changes in post war America. Melville, Lippard and Warner had taken for granted the need for the artist to “mellow the lights and deepen and enrich the shadows of the picture.” [Hawthorne, *Seven Gables*, 1] The voices that shaped post-bellum American culture saw no such need to heighten reality. Some part of their focus on facts grows out of the experience of the war itself.

Alan Trachtenberg points out that within weeks of the Union’s early disastrous defeat at Bull Run, pedestrians in New York were able to view photos of the war at Mathew Brady’s studio on Broadway. [Trachtenberg, *Reading*, 71] In these photographs, Trachtenberg points out, “We see the war not as heroic action in a grand style but as rotting corpses, shattered trees and rocks, weary soldiers in mud-covered uniforms or lying wounded in field hospitals.” [Trachtenberg, *Reading* 74] In other words, the war was not presented in the way of Hawthorne’s Romance, but in a plainer style that America came to describe as *realistic*. Writers like Susan Warner used Romantic conventions to blur the lines of class, gender, and geography that ran

through American culture. Post war America seemed more interested in a harsh light clearly focused on those divisions.

Of course the Civil War alone cannot be held solely responsible for these shifting conceptions. The sheer size of the laboring class forced Gilded Age Americans to account for class differences in a new way. In 1850 Thoreau could gently chide the wandering Irish laborer for causing his own plight. By the 1870's the number of itinerant laborers, like Riis, wandering from place to place to look for work was too large to view so benignly.

Paul Ringenbach has pointed out that after the Panic of 1873 "more vagrants were visible than ever before." [Ringenbach xiv] Newspapers began to carry stories of violent tramps accosting women and children and one reformer referred to this population of homeless laborers as a "great standing army." [Ringenbach, 20] It is easy to see such men as ready to go to war against middle class values. Their inability to find permanent work, to prosper, makes them a living challenge to America's view of itself. Their choice to deal with unemployment by abandoning Victorian ideals of hearth and home placed them in opposition to the domestic ideology that still held sway over much of American culture.

In New York in 1877 there were over one million arrests for vagrancy. One Westchester County official proposed a scheme in which vagrants would be placed in tanks that were filling with water. The subject would be able to survive only by adapting an appropriate work ethic and continually pumping the water out. This method would cure the subject of laziness, or he would drown. [Ringenbach, 98]

In the opening pages of *How The Other Half Lives*, Jacob Riis points to the “bullet proof shutters, the stacks of hand grenades, and the Gattling guns of the Sub-Treasury” as visible proof that New York City is preparing for an economic civil war, rather than reforming the conditions that would cause one. Riis is referring to the National Guard armories that were built in most major American cities in the 1870s and 1880s. These were designed to defend the cities, not from a foreign enemy, but from the domestic disorder and violence that had marked the railroad strikes of 1877, and the Haymarket Square bombing of 1883. New York City spent \$2.5 million on construction during this period, and corporate donations to the building fund ultimately doubled the amount raised for the Statue of Liberty. [Jackson, 54; Burrows and Wallace, 1037] According to Jeremy Brecher, the armories were “an expression of the new economic and

social system in America just as surely as the cities, railroads, and factories. [Brecher, 21]

They also testify to what Keith Gandal has referred to as “a middle-class culture that had begun to doubt itself, its faith in automatic material progress, and its moral discourse.” [Gandal, 10] This was a middle class to which Jacob Riis felt he belonged. Despite his early experience of poverty and homelessness, by 1890 Riis was living in a house in an almost rural section of Brooklyn. He enjoyed gardening in the backyard and referred to his home as a buffer from the slums he still walked through everyday. While Riis would ultimately become famous for bringing detailed images of the poor to a middle class audience, he first had to bring middle class values to the slums of Mulberry Bend.

Despite his desire for reform he was a committed capitalist: in addition to various forms of manual labor and newspaper reporting, Riis worked as a salesman, frequently attempted to develop lecture series that might prove profitable, used stereo-opticon slide projections to sell advertising, and copyrighted an early title for *How the Other Half Lives* before he began work on the book. Alexander Alland reports

that Riis once sued a photographer over ownership of negatives.

[Alland, 23]

This identification with middle class values was one of the things that made his work palatable to his middle class readers. Hales points out that Riis's audience "required a thoroughly unthreatening treatment of the subject." [Hales, 185] Perhaps his greatest strength was his ability to go beyond making poverty simply less threatening to make it entertaining. As James Lane puts it, Riis learned in his earliest days as a reporter that "his most successful articles were the ones which appealed to the emotions, to fear, or guilt, or compassion." [Lane 32]

In *The Society of the Spectacle* Guy Debord argues that "The whole life" of modern societies "presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles." The photographic revolution that Riis was exploiting certainly involved the massive production of images. However Riis presciently grasped that it was not simply the availability of images that was important, but the way they created, in Debord's terms "a social relationship between people that is mediated by images." [Debord, 12] Riis recognized that the key to representing

poverty to the Middle Class lay in that social relationship mediated by his images.

One of the aspects of urban poverty that was threatening to Victorian sensibilities was its utter lack of privacy. As we have seen in the work of Warner and Cummins, the very concept of the domestic is predicated on a compartmentalization that separates the world of home from the world of work. Threatened by the overwhelmingly public qualities of advancing market industrialization, Nineteenth century bourgeoisie forced the values of family, compassion and community indoors, splitting the public and commercial from the private and personal. This was a division slum dwellers literally could not afford. They hung their laundry in public, shared privies and water supplies with neighbors, and smelled each other's garbage as they breathed from the communal airshaft.

Riis self-consciously adapted the tour guide perspective of Dickens' *American Notes*, a book he had sold door to door in 1870s. When introducing the old Fourth Ward, "the cradle of the tenements" to his readers, he assured them "we shall find New York's other half at home." He introduces domestic life while still on the street as he points out "parents watching youngsters play from windows or open

doorways.” [Riis, *Other Half*, 28] Under Riis’s guidance we can enter the apartments at will: “Suppose we look into one?” he suggests.

[Riis, *Other Half*, 38] We encounter children pitching pennies, in hallways most noteworthy for their odors:

Close? Yes! What would you have? All the fresh air that ever enters these stairs comes from the hall-door that is forever slamming, and from the windows of the dark bedrooms that in turn receive from the stairs their sole supply of the elements God meant to be free. [Riis, *Other Half*, 38]

When we enter the rooms themselves we witness the kind of intimate moment Warner and reform writers of antebellum America often placed important emphasis on: the moment of death:

Listen! That short hacking cough, that tiny helpless wail – what do they mean? They mean that the soiled bow of white you saw on the door downstairs will have another story to tell – Oh! a sadly familiar story – before the day is at an end. The child is dying with measles. With half a chance it might have lived; but it had none. The dark bedroom killed it. [Riis, *Other Half*, 38]

In this instance we are witnessing the death unmediated by the calming influence of religion – this child will not convert to evangelical Protestantism at the last moment, and we are not distracted by any “unspeakable gifts.” We have only “the cough,” “the wail,” “the soiled bow,” and “the dark bedroom.”

Riis is stripping the language of moralism from the trope of the dying child, and Keith Gandal points out how self-consciously and consistently Riis not only eliminates the moral overtones, but mocks them. In photographs such as "In the Home of an Italian rag-picker, Jersey Street" Riis produced an image that effectively included the images necessary for sentimental domesticism- the mother and child, the stove, the flour barrel, the dustpan and bucket. However in Riis's vision of the world of the slum, these elements combine to mock domesticism: there is a mattress rolled up on top of the flour barrel, and assorted buckets and dishpans on the stove, establishing that this one room is bedroom, kitchen, closet and pantry. There are packing boxes, piles of unidentifiable material and a ladder leaning against the wall. The room is as much for storage as for living, and the mother and child- so carefully reminiscent of a Renaissance Madonna, blend in with the other goods as if they are there for simple storage rather than from any successful effort at homemaking. The dustpan and bucket are negated by the utter filth- of the floors, the woman's apron, the stovetop and walls. [see page 130]



"In the Home of an Italian rag picker, Jersey Street."
Jacob Riis, *Other Half*, 45

This is by no means a singular image in Riis's oeuvre. "Police Station Lodgers, West 47th Street, early 1890s" shows homeless women cooking meals using old coffee cans on a communal potbelly stove. [see page 132] "Girl and baby on doorstep" repeats the trope of the Madonna and child, but this time the Madonna is impossibly young for such a responsibility, though her blank stare seems to indicate the normalcy of the activity. [see page 133] "Typical tenement fire-escape serving as an extension of the flat: Allen Street" shows exactly what the caption promises: clothing and other domestic items hanging from fire escapes. As the caption makes clear, the extension of the domestic outside of the four walls of the home created a problematic public/private space that conflicted with middle-class norms of housework. [see page 134]

This breakdown of the boundary between the public and the private is carried even further when Riis explores the tenement sweatshops, which eliminated the wall sentimentalists had created to keep commerce from the domestic sphere. Riis again adapts the tone of the tour guide:



"Police Station Lodgers, West 47th Street, early 1890s"
Jacob Riis, *Other Half*, 73



"Girl and Baby on doorstep."
Jacob Riis, *Other Half*, 120



“Typical tenement fire-escape serving as an extension of the flat: Allen Street.”
Jacob Riis, *Other Half*, 15

Let us follow one [garment worker] to his home and see how Sunday passes in a Ludlow Street tenement.

Up two flights of dark stairs, three, four, with new smells of cabbage, of onions, of frying fish, on every landing, whirring sewing machines behind closed doors betraying what goes on within... [Riis, *Other Half*, 100]

Whereas Dickens used the voice to emphasize the difference between the world of the poor and that of the middle class reader, Riis highlights the similarities- the reader cannot focus on the sounds of the factory without also absorbing the smells of the cooking. Dickens used the descriptions of filth and dissipation to negate the domestic qualities, but Riis shows how those qualities have been damaged- this sweatshop is still a domestic space, but one that has been robbed of the benefits the middle-class reader would associate with home.

While Riis pays attention to the economics of the sweatshop, discussing unionization and profit margins, he also draws the readers' attention to the fact that these are family economies:

the child works unchallenged from the day he is old enough to pull a thread. There is no such thing as a dinner hour; men and women eat while they work, and the day is lengthened at both ends far into the night. [Riis, *Other Half*, 98]

Riis repeats this point when discussing the cigar makers:

“Father, mother and son together, a full team, make from fifteen to

sixteen dollars a week.” [Riis, *Other Half*, 111] This family has already been eliminated conceptually: they are a factory “team” now.

His attitude towards the subject of his articles and photographs is an important part of his contribution to America’s evolving understanding of poverty. During his career Riis is closely associated with the work of reform groups that are still, in part, driven by the moralist attitudes that marked antebellum attitudes towards poverty. However, though he shares many of the values of his middle class readers, he is not interested in simply reinforcing their opinions.

Though he approached his subject as a journalist, Riis had an instinctive understanding of the limits of factual information.

According to his biographer James B. Lane, in Riis’s prose, “Mulberry Street took on the dimensions of a universal morality play.” [Lane 32]

Miles Orvell is blunter in his assessment of Riis’s reliance on fact: “the documentary mode was much less exacting in its purity than we would like to think; it allowed for a flexibility of practice in the streets.”

[Orvell, 96] Many of Riis’s photos were staged, and he was not above paying his subjects to pose for him. Certain photographs, such as “Street Arabs in night quarters” reveal children whose barely contained

smiles belie the ostensible circumstances of the photo. [See page 138]

Even when Riis did not ask his subjects to pose, it can be said that his entire project was to pose them. Riis recognized that his camera changed the scene it was photographing. Part of that change was simply the shock of his presence. Jacob Riis pioneered the flash photograph, a recent German invention. Riis describes his nighttime excursions into the tenements as “a raiding party,” that “carried terror wherever it went.” [Riis, *Making*, 173] Riis was acutely aware of the ways that the men he traveled with- reform minded friends from the Board of Health and “a policeman or two,” and the technology of flash photography- which in its earliest configuration consisted of a gun powder charge fired from a pistol- were fearful:

It is not much to say that our party carried terror wherever it went... The spectacle of half a dozen strange men invading a house in the midnight hour armed with big pistols which they shot off recklessly was hardly reassuring, however sugary our speech, and it was not to be wondered at if the tenants bolted through windows and down fire-escapes wherever we went. [Riis, *Making*, 173]



"Street Arabs in night quarters."
Jacob Riis, *Other Half*, 208

Riis wanted to capture the slums at night, and he wanted to capture a sense of intrusion, anxiety and chaos. He was willing to cause the chaos because his audience expected it. In Orvell's words:

Riis manipulated this representation of poverty to reflect a preconceived image of the poor, turning his subjects into types before the eye of the camera. (Orvell, 96)

There is an inherently democratic quality in Riis's idea- to bring the suffering of the poor to the eyes of people with the power to change the system. Yet, for all his reformist energies and calls for justice, that equality is hard to find in the specific words or images of Jacob Riis. Work, home life, leisure and dissipation are interchangeable concepts in the world he "reveals" to us. The people in his photos and essays are products of the environment he condemns, and are granted humanity somewhat begrudgingly.

This attitude is revealed by a simple glance at the titles of the essays. The people are products of their neighborhoods: "The Downtown Back Alleys" "The Bend;" their ethnicity: "Chinatown," "Jewtown," "The Italian in New York;" and their occupation: "The Sweaters of Jewtown," "The Bohemians: Tenement-house

Cigarmaking.” They lose all sense of individuality in titles like “The Common Herd” or “The Wrecks and the Waste.”

Riis uses these titles as distancing devices. His goal was to bridge the gap to the other half, but not to eliminate the gap. Consistently, he portrays the poor as exotically different and morally inferior, and he relies on ethnic stereotypes and generalities to convey snapshot impressions of his subjects:

The Italian... is welcomed as a tenant who “makes less trouble” than the contentious Irishman or the order-loving German, that is to say: is content to live in a pig-sty and submits to robbery at the hand of the rent-collector without murmur. [Riis, *Other Half*, 44]

Thrift is the watchword of Jewtown, as of its people the world over. [Riis, *Other Half*, 86]

The average Chinaman, the police will tell you, would rather gamble than eat any day... [Riis, *Other Half*, 78]

The Negro is immensely the superior of the lowest of the whites, the Italians and the Polish Jews, below whom he has been classed in the past in the tenant scale.” [Riis, *Other Half*, 116]

While his photos bring us closer to this other half they also hold us at a distance. Riis tends to obscure the faces of his subjects, or to capture them in a dull, blank stare, devoid of emotional expression. Photographs like “Police station lodgers waiting to be let out,” “Girl and baby on door step,” or “Knee-pants’ at forty -five

cents a dozen - a Ludlow street sweater's shop," are pictures of squalor, not of character. Riis's people have no interior life, no identity separate from their surroundings. As Miles Orvell has pointed out, Riis created

an artificial image of the urban poor ... a metonymic typology of urban slums, representing for us "the poor," "the miserable," "the other half." He is after the general truth of a general category, and the finer truths of individuals necessarily escape him. [Orvell, 97]

The combination of originality and convention in Riis is central to his role in the evolution of America's view of poverty. As Hans Bergman pointed out about Herman Melville, any artist is "always subject to a discourse's authority because in order to be read and understood by a contemporary audience he or she must work within its rules." [Bergmann, 11] Riis was working within a discourse that expected the poor to appear and behave within certain predetermined limits. As Peter Hales put it, "middle- and upper-class viewers required a thoroughly unthreatening treatment of the subject." [Hales, 185] Other photographers had tackled the image of poor workers, producing portraits of "hardworking, proud, and self-sufficient" men who lived in cities that were monumental and orderly. [Hales, 190]

Though Riis provides the comforting context of ethnic stereotypes, and frequently echoes the kind of moral condemnation previous generations had associated with poverty, his work is still shocking because ultimately it argues against the discourse it was working within. For all his emphasis on ethnicity and irredeemable morality, Riis is a firm believer that character is a function of environment. There is little need for us to see the interior lives of the subjects he photographs and writes about because their character is so clearly written in their surroundings, and the key to reforming poverty is to reform those surroundings.

His environmentalism links him to the work of Charles Loring Brace, but unlike Brace, Riis is not arguing for the abandonment of the urban. "The tenement has come to stay," he says. [Riis, *Other Half*, 223] and "Nothing is left but to make the best of a bad bargain." [Riis, *Other Half*, 1] While hardly a ringing endorsement of city life, Riis changes the focus of American discourse on urban problems.

Riis knew enough about the lives of the poor to know that they were not simply too lazy to work. His focus on the environment not only rejected simplistic Social Darwinist explanations of poverty, it rejected the classic American preference for farm life over city life.

Riis used his articles and photographs to comment on many of the tropes of Victorian American culture: motherhood, home life, and the virtues of work. He manipulated these symbols to highlight the lack of these cardinal virtues of American prosperity in the slums. However, for Riis the operating contrast was not city vs. country, but rich vs. poor:

The half that was on top cared little for the struggles and less for the fate of those who were underneath. [Riis, *Other Half*, 1]

Riis's focus on housing reform, parks expansion, public schools and slum clearance were practical steps which accepted the idea that cities must become more humane if America was to survive.

The Five Points slums, a short walk from City Hall, had been famous for several generations. Politicians had long since learned to harvest votes from impoverished neighborhoods to stay in power. The poor were not invisible to the landlords who collected rent from them, or the industrialists who ran factories with their labor. The middle class encountered the poor on the streets and in the streetcars. The visibility that Riis offered them was cultural, not physical. Peter Hale argues

Riis's photographs drew their persuasive power from the invocation of the lost gods of orderliness, cleanliness, love, parenthood, the family, the church... [Hale, 214]

In illustrating the poor's quest for those lost gods Riis highlighted the gulf separating the poor from mainstream America, while at the same time bridging that gulf: the poor we see in Riis' words and pictures are not an exotic other, but ourselves deprived of those gods of middle class respectability.

ii

Alexander Alland gives Jacob Riis credit for demonstrating that there was an audience that was genuinely concerned about social conditions, that there was a market for literature about the slums. In that sense, Stephen Crane was a successor to Riis. But though he was familiar with Riis and his reformist colleagues - having once had lunch with the journalist and Police Commissioner Teddy Roosevelt, Crane's work can hardly be said to have advanced Riis's view of the urban poor. Crane was too cynical to advance any cause at all.

Like Riis, Stephen Crane had some actual experience with poverty, though in his case it was of the more genteel kind. Crane's

father died when Stephen was just 7 years old, and his family began a somewhat rootless cycle through Northern New Jersey and Eastern Pennsylvania with his mother supporting her large family as a temperance lecturer. Though Stephen later described these as years of abject poverty, the actual deprivation seems to have been minimal. For example, Crane dropped out of both seminary and college. His lack of formal education was more a function of his rebelliousness than his economic status.

Crane was descended from Protestant ministers on both his father's and his mother's side. There was a strong Calvinist streak in his father's Methodism. In a collection of sermons entitled *Holiness, The Birthright of All God's Children*, Rev. Crane wrote that man's condition is "one of inexpressible evil...eternal darkness and depression." [Davis, 4-5] However the discipline implied in such prose seems to never have been part of Stephen's life. His biographer, Linda Davis, reports that when Crane accompanied his mother to a seaside festival where she was to give a temperance lecture, seven year old Stephen convinced a beer hawker to sell him a dime bucket. He

justified the violation of his parents' wishes to a friend saying, "How was I going to know what it tasted like less'n I tasted it?" [Davis 13]

The story has the earmarks of apocrypha – the colloquial "less'n" sounds more like Huck Finn than Stephen Crane- however it captures the spirit of Crane's later aesthetic. In one controversial article, Crane pointed out the hypocrisy of the very people who supported his mother's church work and temperance drives:

The bonafide Asbury Parker is a man to whom a dollar, when held close to his eye, often shuts out any impression he may have had that other people possess rights. 49

Crane's ability to step outside his class was matched by a willingness to step into the lower class. He moved to New York and survived on small sums earned as an occasional writer for newspapers, Crane went through a period of exploring the poverty of the East Side of Manhattan, which his roommate, the painter Corwin Linson, called his "tramp period." Crane would disappear for days at a time, then eventually turn up, "looking as if he had lived in a grave." [Davis, 80] He regaled his bohemian circle with stories of old friends who did not recognize him and police officers chasing him from City Hall Park.

Crane was not alone in this activity: the 1890s saw the growth of a new version of the classic "Misery and Mystery" tour of the slums

that had occupied antebellum writers like Ned Buntline and George Foster. For the earlier guides, the class distinction between author and subject provided a valuable distance that was central to the project. These writers used the links of education, class, and moral politics they shared with their readers to help keep the slum dweller in the place of an exotic other.

For writers like Jack London the object of crossing to the other side is to appear to erase the gap by stripping oneself of the accoutrements of privilege and to see the poor from their own perspective. London begins his 1903 account of his time in the London slums, *People of the Abyss*, with a lengthy account of the “costume” he buys in a used clothing shop in the East End, and the immediate difference his changed appearance makes in his social status: “Presto! In the twinkling of an eye, so to say, I had become one of them.... I now shared with them a comradeship.” [London, 15] His faith in appearances is all the more remarkable given that his sojourn into the life of a slum dweller lasts less than 24 hours.

Walter Wycoff begins his account of life as an itinerant worker, or tramp, with a similar account of his physical transformation, and like Crane, is confirmed in his view of his changed status when

acquaintances fail to recognize him. Wycoff worked as a construction worker, ditch digger, lumberjack, hotel porter and farmhand, and his account is largely sympathetic to his fellow travelers. Entitling his account *The Workers*, he focuses on the difficulty of their lives. After attempting life as hotel porter he observes:

I have usually worked from five o'clock in the morning until eleven at night at all manner of menial drudgery, and have gone to bed in the comfortable assurance that, in addition to food and shelter, I have earned twenty-six cents and a fraction. [Wycoff,103]

These accounts are part of a more radical attempt at bridging the epistemological gap that maintained the poor in their position as the "other half." This desire to erase the boundary between the halves was most systematically expressed by the Settlement House movement. Jane Addams returned to Chicago from London in 1889 to open Hull House named after Charles J. Hull, a pioneer of early Chicago. Addams and the other residents saw themselves as pioneers of a different sort. Reversing Brace's philosophy of moving the poor to the middle class farm, they brought the values and education of middle class women to the slum. Though the settlement house philosophy was noteworthy for its faith that poor and rich could learn from each other, it contained a strong element of indoctrination into

domestic ideology and bourgeois values. There were art lectures and classical music evenings, sewing classes for girls and a heroes club for boys. Addams believed that such cultural programs could break down the barriers between classes: “The things which make men alike are finer and better than the things that keep them apart.” [Addams, 112]

In some respects, Jane Addams founding of Hull House is ideologically similar to the antebellum practice of visiting the poor. Indeed organizations like the Tract Societies and the Bowery Mission continued their work in the 1890s. However, the tremendous growth in the size of the slums challenged these organizations to change their methods. As Robert Bremner points out,

In many communities there were simply not enough well-to-do ladies and gentlemen able and willing to give time day after day to difficult and arduous assignments in the slums. [Bremner, 54]

Many Societies are forced to move from volunteers to hired visitors. This can be seen as the dawning of the profession of social work. The Charity Organization Society needed full time professionals to fulfill their goal of keeping information about individuals who apply for relief in order to prevent fraud. Despite the fact that the impetus to collect information grows out of an ideology that maintains poverty

is a result of immorality, the act of gathering information undermines that ideology. According to Bremner:

The obligation to obtain factual information about the economic situation of their clients, in practice, compelled charity agents to give attention to wages, conditions of work and unemployment, no less than to intemperance, improvidence, and shiftlessness. Knowledge of the misfortunes of hundreds of different families gained through experience as friendly visitors induced many representatives of the organized charities to regard the industrial causes of poverty as more important than the personal. [Bremner, 56]

By 1892, A.B. Andrews, President of Brown University, openly rejected the ideology of inevitable American prosperity:

“a great many men are poor without the slightest economic demerit. They are people who do the best they can, and always have done so... Yet they are poor, often very poor, never free from fear of want.” [Bremner, 21]

At the same time, evangelical organizations like the YMCA and the Salvation Army began to reverse the link between morality and poverty. With their shelters, soup kitchens, education and exercise programs, they reverse the accepted connection between material well being and spiritual salvation, implicitly arguing that securing food, shelter and entertainment is a necessary prerequisite to spiritual uplift.

Though writing within this discursive climate, Stephen Crane is not interested in reversing the connection between poverty and

morality. Rather, he wants to eliminate the ideology that connects the two. The complexity of Crane's focus on the environment of the slums can be seen in the opening of his first novel, *Maggie, A Girl of the Streets*. While "Rum Alley" and "Devil's Row" seem taken right out of Riis's photographs, they are not populated by the children Riis held out such hope for. Riis had echoed Charles Loring Brace's argument that the boys of the slums lived by an honor code, and Horatio Alger had built this image into a convention that viewed slum children as American entrepreneurs-in-waiting. Crane gives us immediate and casual violence.

Jimmie fights the children of Devil's Row, then turns on a member of his own Rum Alley gang before being threatened into submission by his father. Maggie literally drags baby Tommy home, where Jimmie is "tossed into a corner where he limply lay, cursing and weeping." When mother and father begin fighting, the neighbors illustrate how normal the behavior is by asking Maggie, "Is yer fader beatin' yer mudder or yer mudder beatin' yer fader?" [Crane, *Maggie*, 9-11]

Donald Pizer summed up Crane's rejection of domestic ideology very clearly:

Crane's fundamental point in these chapters is that the home is not a sanctuary from the struggle and turmoil of the world but is rather where warfare is even more intense and where the animal qualities encouraged by a life of battle – strength, fear, and cunning – predominate. [Pizer, *Realism*, 123]

However, Crane's rejection of that ideology is not complete – he recognizes its power, finding the source of that power in the widespread acceptance of its norms and tropes. Many critics have pointed out the mock-epic quality to Jimmie's fight in the opening chapter. He fights “for the honor of Rum Alley” against “true assassins.” He is described as “the little champion,” whose opponents are “barbaric,” “blasphemous,” and “full of savagery.” [Crane, 3-4] Joseph Katz points out the irony of this language, contrasting the “high” literary language with the “low” action of “modern slum existence.” [Crane, 5]

Michael Bell complicated this irony by pointing out that it would be lost on Jimmie and his opponents. Throughout the novel, Bell suggested, “the thoughts and feelings to which heightened diction and syntax give expression are the character's own.” So that “The mock-heroic elevation of the novel's opening reflects the way the dirty little denizens of Devil's Row and Rum Alley themselves conceive of their struggle.” [Bell, 138] This juxtaposition of high diction and low action

is what makes the scene entertaining in the first place. In being entertained, we are complicit with members of the slum community. After introducing the battle, Crane skillfully widens the frame of his perspective to make clear that this fight is offering entertainment to much of the East Side:

From a window of an apartment house that upreared its form from amid squat, ignorant, stables, there leaned a curious woman. Some laborers, unloading a scow at a dock at the river, paused for a moment and regarded the fight. The engineer of a passive tugboat hung lazily to a railing and watched. Over on the Island, a worm of yellow convicts came from the shadow of a gray ominous building and crawled slowly along the river's bank. [Crane, 4]

Crane's prose is similar to Riis's in its reliance on the spectacle of slum life, however Crane eliminates the tour guide. Dickens used the tour guide voice to distance readers from the chaos of slum life, to control their vision and protect them from too much misery and mystery. Riis used the role to bring the middle-class in closer conceptual contact with the poor by showing that despite their deprivation, the figures in his articles and photographs aspired to the same domestic and moral ideals as middle-class audience members. In *Maggie*, the reader is in the position of spectator similar to the curious woman leaning out the window. Though the moral filter is not entirely absent from the view of the slums, Crane offers, it is not the

mediating influence it was in Dickens or even Riis. The distance between the Johnsons and the reader has not disappeared – we note that their doorway is “gruesome,” that the children are “urchins,” and the parents are “disheveled,” [Crane 7-8] but all these are much closer to physical descriptions than moral judgements.

In this sense, aesthetic ideology can be said to have trumped biography – Crane was far more a tourist than Dickens or Riis. Dickens’s view of the Five Points was informed by his own experience of poverty as a child, while Riis had lived and worked among the poor for many years before publishing their views. *Maggie* and Crane’s sketches of New York came out of Crane’s brief, voluntary visits to the East Side neighborhood. Ironically, it is from his perspective as a member of the middle class that Crane eliminated the moral filter of that class. The weakness Crane ascribed to the power of moral judgement can be seen in two sketches he wrote shortly after *Maggie*: “The Men in the Storm,” and “An Experiment in Misery.”

Crane chose the day of an 1894 blizzard to wait outside in the snow with a group of homeless men, waiting for a soup kitchen to open. When he returned and his roommate, Linson, complained that he should have dressed more warmly, Crane’s reply echoed his

youthful investigation of the taste of beer: "How would I know how these poor devils felt if I was warm myself?" [Davis, 80] A few weeks later, Crane was able to get a paid assignment writing about Bowery flop houses for the *New York Press*. Crane and an associate dressed themselves as tramps and spent three nights in Bowery lodging houses. Linda Davis notes that Crane continued to appear among friends dressed as a Bowery resident long after the "Experiment" ended. For Crane these forays into the slums represented more than research into local color, they were acts of solidarity with the subjects of his writing. As such they were performances. Crane was acutely aware of making himself part of the spectacle of poverty. While stressing some of the same characteristics of that spectacle that had been important in Jacob Riis's work, Crane challenges the ideology of morality and prosperity to an even greater degree than Riis had.

Both sketches make clear that there is virtually no physical separation between the halves. The men in the storm gather amidst the full hustle and bustle of the city, surrounded by the faces of pedestrians, the hurrying horse carts and the roar of the streetcars. They are lit by "the immense windows of the shops...aglow with lights." [Crane, *Portable*, 147] While the movement and energy of

the streets contrasts with the patient lethargy of the men, both are driven by economic imperatives. The same market that sends the prosperous customers scurrying along the street forces the men to stand still, waiting.

As the men organize themselves, they become part of the spectacle of the city, “wonderful to see.” [Crane, *Portable*, 150] Soon they are observed by a “stout and very well clothed” man at a shop window. [Crane, *Portable*, 152] While the wall of glass, the contrasts of light and dark, warm and cold, rags and fine clothing, all accentuate the separation between the man and the men, Crane challenges the conventional ideology of “the other half” by reversing the roles of observer and observed. Initially the man steps to the window to watch the mob, stroking his mustache with “supreme complacence.” However, this mob is not content to be watched: they are themselves the spectators and turn the prosperous dry goods salesman into entertainment:

Many of the men turned then, and a shout went up. They call to him in all strange keys. They addressed him in every manner, from familiar and cordial greetings to carefully worded advice concerning changes in his personal appearance. The man presently fled, and the mob chuckled ferociously... [Crane, *Portable*, 152]

While these men are at the mercy of the charitable house that makes them wait in the cold before opening its doors, they are not entirely powerless. They chase away the man who would treat them as a subject of study, and when they curse their condition they do it with “a sort of American freedom.” [Crane, *Portable*, 151] When the doors open and the men pass out of the storm, they have been changed neither materially or morally. However, neither have they been cowed or reduced to exotic “other” status. Ellen Montgomery rarely had to take action when troubled by poverty- she simply waited for the next in a series of rescuers. In Riis’s photographs the poor appear to passively accept their fate. Crane’s men have the “pluck” of Alger’s newsboys but do not use it to ingratiate themselves with their bourgeoisie observer. They assert an independent voice and identity

The same pattern can be seen in “An Experiment in Misery.” In its original newspaper version of 1894, there is an introductory conversation that assumes a separation between the Middle class observer and the poor, but which also highlights the changing way that separation is being constructed. The two men stand “regarding a tramp” in the same position as spectator that the dry goods salesman attempted in “Storm.” [Crane, *Portable*, 154] Their attitude is entirely

sympathetic. "I wonder how he feels,' said one.... 'It is idle to speculate from this distance,'" replies the older man, "with an air of authoritative wisdom." [Crane, *Portable*, 154-5]

This simple opening represents a radical departure from the conventional discourse of observing poverty in America. While it might be said that Dickens, Child, Foster, Buntline, Lippard, Brace, and Riis had long "wondered" about the poor, they had not taken the stance of genuine ignorance. Rather, previous commentators had taken for granted the curiosity of the middle class, and established their own position as knowing guides, ready to clear away the mysteries of the city slum before actually entering into and describing it.

In Crane's sketch, however, the elder observer invites his companion to examine the tramp more closely, but without the comforting road map of preconceived expectations. This sketch describes an experiment in exploring the lives of the poor, but it is also an experiment in discourse: a departure from a discourse of ideology into one of spectacle. Crane highlights the performance aspect of this spectacle when he describes his youthful reporter "rigged...out in an aged suit and a brown derby hat," acquired at "the studio of an artist friend."

Crane spent three nights in a Bowery flophouse in the company of his friend William Carroll, but reports on a single youth staying on a single night. While the conventions of nineteenth-century newspapers regarding factual accuracy were wholly different from contemporary standards, it is fair to say Crane is more interested in the aesthetic unity usually associated with fiction than with reportage per se. Alan Trachtenberg discussed Crane's city sketches in the context of journalistic conventions that focused primarily on "the mystification of urban space." Crane's "Experiment in Misery" changed the terms of that mystification.

His young man, upon donning his beggar's suit, is almost immediately transformed into a spectacle:

By the time he had reached City Hall Park he was so completely plastered with yells of "bum" and "hobo," and with various unholy epithets that small boys had applied to him at intervals, that he was in a state of the most profound dejection. [Crane, *Portable*, 154-55]

As with the men in the storm, this young man is never really separated into some other half: the halves mingle together in Crane's urban space. He sits in the park absorbed by the "flowing life of the great street," the "rivers of people," the cable cars, the squealing elevated trains. [Crane, *Portable*, 155]

He enters a saloon and engages in conversation that leads him to a place to sleep amidst the wanderers. The men he encounters seem to take to their role as spectacle easily: a nearly naked man is seen “parading” along a corridor. [Crane, *Portable*, 158] The men in the flophouse “took splendid poses” and “exhibited” their deformities. [Crane, *Portable*, 161] In conversation they “gesture extremely” during a “dexterous exchange of phrases.” [Crane, *Portable*, 162-63]

The power in Crane’s sketch lies in the transformation with spectacle has on the young man. When he returns to City Hall Park the next morning he travels with the staggering, drunken “assassin” he encountered the night before – but now they are “two wanderers.” [Crane, *Portable*, 165] The sympathy he started with has become a genuine empathy marked by a separation from his own past of economic privilege. He feels “his infinite distance from all that he valued,” and confessed himself an outcast.” In this ending, the boundary to the other half is marked not by economics, morality, character or opportunity, but by the ability to observe closely, without preconceived ideology, and to respond emotionally.

It is those qualities, of perception and empathy that are missing in Maggie’s world: in that case, it is only the reader, not the narrator,

Crane hopes to transform. In *Maggie* Crane has taken a familiar melodrama and defamiliarized it by removing much of the moral ideology that conventionally accompanied it. This complicated the reader's ability to pass judgement on the characters, even as they pass judgement on each other.

Maggie is innocent despite her surroundings – she is the flower that “blossomed in the mud puddle.” This introductory description of the adult Maggie may well have been influenced by Riis's reference to “womanhood pure and undefiled. That it should blossom in such an atmosphere is one of the unfathomable mysteries.” [Riis, *Other Half* 122] However the trope was hardly original with Riis- it is implicit in Brace's comment, “Few girls can grow up to maturity in such dens and be virtuous,” and forms the backbone of stories like Cummins's *The Lamplighter*. [Brace, 57] In Maggie's case, the image is ironic. There is never any doubt that she will be ruined by Pete: the reader expects it not only because it is part of the fictive convention Crane is exploiting, but because it is generally taken as the factual formula for life in the slums.

Crane begins to manipulate that formula almost immediately- Maggie gives in to Pete far more easily than the convention dictates-

there is none of the elaborate wooing required of Montraville in *Charlotte Temple* or the nefarious dishonesty of Byrnewood and Lorimer in *The Quaker City*. In fact, Maggie pursues Pete- furtively watching his eyes, his legs, his fancy clothing and confident mannerisms. [Crane, *Portable*, 21] Before Pete has taken note of her, Maggie observed Pete, and declared him, “the beau ideal of a man.” Her interest in him is tangled up with the discourse on love Maggie has adapted from pop culture. When she thinks of Pete, Maggie conjures up images of “far away lands” where “the little hills sing together in the morning. Under the trees of her dream gardens there always walked a lover.” [Crane, *Portable*, 23] While these phrases represent the limits of her understanding of romance, her pathetic attempts to spruce up the Johnson apartment with curtains represent the limits of her domestic imagination. There is no middle class Alice Humphries or Mrs. Sullivan to instruct her in the domestic arts.

Pete’s seduction of Maggie is overtly sexual: “Say Mag, I’m stuck on yer shape,” are the first words he addresses to her. [Crane, *Portable*, 23] Certainly Pete lies to her, but the lies seem more casual than calculating, and even Maggie has a hard time articulating what he has promised to do for her. There is no evidence that their plans ever

included marriage. Underlying all their encounters is a barely hidden economic exchange. Maggie sees Pete as elegant and “high-class” When she accompanies him to vaudeville shows, she notices the “splendor of the costume and lost herself in calculation of the silks and laces.” These signs of her naiveté reinforce her unsophisticated awe of the theater, but they also contrast the melodramatic plots, “a sweetheart who waited for a young man who was lost at sea” with the financial calculation going on for Maggie. [Crane, *Portable*, 28]

“She began to note, with more interest, the well-dressed women she met on the avenues, and “she began to see the bloom upon her cheeks as valuable.” While Maggie begins to see her self as a commodity, the reader begins to see that she is striking a bad bargain. She sees the stage hero’s “erratic march from poverty in the first act, to wealth and triumph in the final one.” We see that Pete is taking Maggie to inexpensive theaters and the free Sundays at the zoo and the Metropolitan Museum. [Crane, *Portable*, 35]

When Maggie wonders “if the culture and refinement .. on the stage could be acquired by a girl who lived in a tenement house and worked in a shirt factory,” she is tapping into a complex American ideology. [Crane, *Portable*, 35] Ellen Montgomery never wondered

such a thing. She showed no desire for refinement, but always worked towards simple domestic value. At the same time, *The Wide, Wide World* never forced the reader to wonder whether such splendor was possible for Ellen – instead it replaced empirical analysis of economic opportunity with ideological faith. With no Alice Humphries or Mrs. Sullivan to guide her, Maggie will not know enough to avoid the crass excess of “sophistication,” and the descriptions of slum life serve to make the reader wonder if – despite the well worn conventions – any girl in this story could rise out of poverty and ignorance.

When Pete abandons Maggie, her fate is only vaguely tied to the loss of virginity. Though there is much hypocritical hand wringing over the assertion that she has “Gone to the devil,” it is her loss of a home that immediately becomes the focus of attention. [Crane, *Portable*, 41] Impurity here is a socio-economic condition rather than a moral one. In order to avoid further humiliation within the tenement, Mrs. Johnson and Jimmie throw Maggie out. Her punishment is physical and economic rather than moral or spiritual.

At Charlotte Temple’s graveside, Montraville is left to suffer the pangs of remorse as Charlotte Temple’s father refuses revenge. The reader gets no sense that Pete’s heart will “feel such true sorrow” as

haunted Montraville. [Rowson, 117] He will suffer humiliation and the loss of money after being used by “the woman of brilliance and audacity,” but is unlikely to connect his own suffering with his actions toward Maggie. The punishing force is not a just and benevolent god, but the same market competition and sexual commodification that destroyed Maggie: Pete has simply struck a less successful bargain this time.

The idea of god is not entirely absent from *Maggie*. Maggie’s mother consistently mouths the phrases associated with Christian and domestic ideology. However, these lines function as part of a comic parody of such ideas, and as a serious critique of their emptiness. When Mrs. Johnson banishes Maggie from her home, it is with shock at this stain upon her domestic purity: “Wid a home like dis and a mudder like me, she went to deh bad.” [Crane, *Portable*, 51] She justifies her decision with religious allusions, “It wasn’t no prodigal daughter,” and conventional piety emptied of all meaning, “May Gawd forgive her.” [Crane, *Portable*, 52-53]

While the religious language has been emptied of meaning, it offers a link to a discourse that does hold power over the Johnson family. In what could be called a discourse of spectacle, Crane uses

the vocabulary of domestic morality in such a way as to illustrate the extent to which social expectations and preconceived roles influence the Johnson family response to Maggie's life and death. As Donald Pizer has put it:

The Johnsons' moral vision is dominated by moral roles which they believe are expected of them. These roles bring social approbation, and they are also satisfying because the playing of them before an audience encourages a gratifying emotionalism or self-justification. [Pizer, *Realism*, 125]

Throughout *Maggie*, the spectator has been a part of the Johnson family dynamic. From the curious woman who leaned from a window to watch Jimmie's throwing stones, to the neighbors who listened to Mr. and Mrs. Johnson's fight, to the children who "entered and ogled" the fallen Maggie, to, finally, the "dozen women who entered and lamented with her" when Mrs. Johnson puts on her show of grief, the important events in the novel take place in a context of spectacle. [Crane, *Portable*, 61, 73]

What Crane makes clear is that slum dwellers are part of the city spectacle as both consumers and commodities - they enjoy the spectacle and are part of it. Knowledge of their place in the spectacle affects their performance in it. Mrs. Johnson aware of her audience as she first condemns and then forgives her daughter. Jimmie had feared

the humiliation of throwing Maggie out of the house, but Mrs. Johnson accepts the role of wronged mother readily and turns it to her advantage: “she used the story with telling effect upon the police justices.” [Crane, *Portable*, 53] The closing scene of the novel shows Mrs. Johnson taking on her role of mourner. Crane stops referring to Mrs. Johnson by name, or as “Mother,” but gives her the titles “the weeping woman,” or “the mourner.” While one neighbor, “the woman in black,” plays a significant role in coaxing Mrs. Johnson towards her final statement of forgiveness, the other neighbors are “spectators.” All of the neighbors act like a chorus, or a “choir at a funeral.” even the “inevitable” sun enters as if on cue. [Crane, *Portable*, 73]

Far from being a realistic treatment of the slum’s social environment, *Maggie* is ultimately a novel that critiques the discourse that had grown up around that environment. In fact, Crane seems to question whether a “realistic” portrayal is even possible within the context of such a discourse. Maggie can only see Pete through the lens provided by melodramas. Despite the fact that she is the living antithesis of Protestant domestic morality, Mrs. Johnson can only see Maggie through the language and vocabulary of that morality. Even Jimmie, who struggles briefly with the notion that “some of the

women of his acquaintance had brothers,” [Crane, *Portable*, 40] ultimately can only face Maggie’s predicament by playing the role of the injured party and fighting Pete. As Michael Bell has put it, “The terms of experience have already been set in place before the fact.”

“Reality,” in such a context, is little more than the discordant sum of the de-authorized conceptions or inventions of it that keep colliding with one another. [Bell, 139]

Crane’s association with the environmental determinism that drove Riis and others to attack the slum is based in part on his famous inscription in Hamlin Garland’s copy of *Maggie* in which he claims his purpose was “to show that environment is a tremendous thing in this world and frequently shapes lives regardless.” [Crane, *Portable*, 1] Crane had met Garland when he covered Garland’s lecture on William Dean Howells in Asbury Park, New Jersey. Later, Garland and Howells helped arrange the writing assignment that would become “An Experiment in Misery.” That he did not entirely accept Howells’ ideas on realism, or the Progressive notion of environmental determinism, can be seen in a letter he wrote to Miss Catherine Harris concerning republication of *Maggie* in 1896. In that letter he seems to reverse his opinion of the environmental impact of the slums, arguing that “the root of Bowery life is a sort of cowardice.” [Crane, *Portable*, 2]

Commenting on mission relocation programs, like that of Charles Loring Brace's Children's Aid Society, he appears to applaud their work:

if you will have Mr. Rockefeller give me a hundred streetcars and some money I will load all the babes off to some pink world where the cows can lick their noses and they will never see their families any more. [Crane, *Portable*, 2]

The language of fantasy in which he couches his support undercuts any notion that Crane is a moralist who favors sending children to a Jeffersonian utopia. An avid outdoorsman who would later spend a good deal of time in the West, Crane recognizes the back to the farm movement as an unrealistic fantasy. Crane astutely recognizes the disconnection between the dominant discourse of poverty and the reality of life in both the slums and on small farms. However, Crane has no desire to replace that discourse with one that might be more effective. He is ultimately a tourist in the world of poverty, he enjoys noticing the weaknesses of the discourse that surrounds his work, but shows little commitment to changing it.

iii

Even as he is mocking the moral convention he grew up with, Crane recreates the moralist's portrait of urban poverty as one of dissipation and early death. In fact, many of the thousands of people who migrated to America's large cities in the nineteenth-century were trying to escape rural poverty and enjoy the dynamic spectacle of urban America. Just as many of the young women who went to work in the mill towns of the 1840s had been drawn by both economics and the promise of a more interesting and independent life, Caroline Meeber of Theodore Dreiser's first novel, *Sister Carrie*, is held by the promise of a modern, pleasure-filled urban spectacle.

Dreiser himself came from small-town Middle America. He was born in Terre Haute, Indiana, the 11th of 12 children, and his family life was similar to the dull, constricted one Carrie escaped. According to Ellen Moers,

His father, who in the 1840s had come to America from Germany skilled in the woolen trade, was already sick and cranky, laded with bitterness and debts. While Dreiser was growing up his father dwindled into a night watchman and often could not work at all. [Moers, xiii]

Dreiser's novel is important to the study of poverty in part because he writes from this background. Dreiser had seen two of his

siblings move to New York before him. His older sister, Emma, had – like Carrie – run off with an employee of a Chicago saloon and years later was still living in straitened circumstances, attempting to raise children with little help from her chronically underemployed husband. However, Dreiser had also seen his brother Paul achieve fame and fortune in his seemingly laborless career as a songwriter. Paul's life was filled with the pleasures of fancy saloons and fine restaurants available only to the urban upper classes.

Dreiser himself moved to Chicago in 1887. Like Carrie, he was awed by the city's size and energy, describing it as “A veritable miracle of pleasing sensations and fascinating scenes.” Carrie Meeber is in a passenger car in the opening of *Sister Carrie*, but Dreiser makes clear through her immediate encounter with the sales “drummer” Drouet that she is herself a commodity. Drouet's flirtation with Carrie has all the marks of a sales pitch. The description of the “masher” Dreiser borrowed from George Ade compounds the connection between sexual pleasure and business by asking us to imagine a man like Drouet approaching a woman in a department store while waiting for the cash boy to come back and complete a sale.

Though Carrie is only dimly aware of the “business” she is getting involved in, her responses to Drouet establish her as well suited to the spectacular world of urban America. She studies Drouet’s flashy clothing, first to discern that he is “worth glancing at,” and then to compare his polish to her own “plain dress.” [Dreiser, 4] From the moment she meets Drouet, Carrie is aware of her own near poverty and the fact that “there was something promising in all the material prospect he set forth. [Dreiser, 5] All their talk centers on shops, theaters, and great buildings. Carrie’s mind veers between the “magnificence” he describes and her fear of the “possibility of not securing employment.” [Dreiser, 5] Almost immediately, Carrie “realized that she was of interest to him,” and from then on Carrie’s life in Chicago is bound to that “interest” from men. [Dreiser, 5]

Having introduced Chicago to both Carrie and the reader as a world of “lamps...lighted chambers...theater...balls... parties,” Dreiser shifts our view to another side of urban American. [Dreiser, 7] The Hansons’ flat is in a rapidly growing but unremarkable working class neighborhood. The Hansons would be a model family from a domestic-sentimental point of view: they are thrifty, hard working, married, and concerned primarily with Carrie’s morality. However, Carrie

immediately “felt the drag of a lean and narrow life.” [Dreiser, 9] She is already aware of her surroundings enough to know that Drouet cannot visit her in the Hansons’ flat – he is from a different world.

The Hansons represent the “other half” for Dreiser not because of their relative poverty, but because of their invisibility. They live for a “steady” and “conservative round of toil.” and disapprove of Carrie’s desire to see the city even from their own doorway. [Dreiser, 10] Carrie sees her sister’s life “hardening into narrower conceptions of pleasure and duty.” [Dreiser, 11] The Hansons represent a rejection of the domestic ideal. Dreiser characterizes their life in terms of work, drudgery, and boredom. The entire household is built around a business model. They are saving to buy property as an investment and they deny themselves any pleasure to further their investment goals.

Carrie’s presence in their home is itself an investment. Sven Hanson plans to use her \$4 room and board to make payments on his properties. When she loses her job at the shoe factory he quickly decides that she must be sent home to Columbia City. He treats the decision in a businesslike manner, as an investment that has not worked out to his advantage. Carrie is treating the arrangement in a

similarly business-like manner. Though she feels some sympathy for her sister's drudgery, she makes little effort to assist her. She "was not to be reduced to the common level of observation." [Dreiser, 23] She is determined to stay in "the great, mysterious city" and negotiates a lower rent rate from her sister in order to afford it. When it becomes clear that Hanson will not let her stay if she is unemployed, she accepts Drouet's better offer.

Carrie is not entirely without moral feelings. "She began to feel ashamed" after taking Drouet's money [Dreiser, 50], and reflects on the "queerness" of going to live with him. [Dreiser, 56] Just as with Hanson's concern that having Carrie standing at the front door watching the street would not look right, Carrie's moral misgivings have more to do with the appearance of immorality than any intrinsic notion of right and wrong. Morality in *Sister Carrie* is not a separate order of thought. In domestic, sentimental thought, morality is above and beyond capitalism with the power to trump it. For Dreiser, however, in the words of Amy Kaplan, morality is simply one of "the competing visions of social reality." [Kaplan, 13]

Dreiser did not deny morality or domesticity so much as he discounted them; they are not eliminated but are "reencoded as a

marketable value.” [Kaplan, 144] In this case, Carrie’s “twinge of conscience” [Dreiser, 58] cannot compete with “the shine and rustle of new things.” [Dreiser, 54] This view of morality is consistent throughout the novel- when Carrie finds out that she is not really married to Hurstwood, she comes to see it as an opportunity to move on. When Hurstwood reflects on his theft of money from Fitzgerald and Moy, it is with an eye to the practical implications: it turns out to have been a poor business decision.

The change in the relative value of moral precepts and consumer goods can be seen in Carrie’s trips to the department store. In the versions of the marketplace offered by Susan Warner, the purchase of commodities is closely tied to self-image and self-esteem, but this connection is veiled by a sentimental ideology of use value. Ellen’s mother tells her, “I wish to have the comfort of thinking, when I am away, that I have left you with everything necessary to the keeping up of good habits.” [Warner, 31] The quality of the goods themselves is prescribed: they should be of high utilitarian value, but otherwise lacking in adornment.

These ideals are turned on their heads in *Sister Carrie*. Dreiser referred to the department store’s inception – as if to let the readers

know that Carrie's experience was of a new and different order.

[Dreiser,16] In fact, department stores had evolved over the course of the several decades since Ellen Montgomery had been too intimidated to buy cloth. By the 1890s large cities boasted of stores that could comfortably hold 10,000 shoppers at a time, with 150,000 people passing through in a day. Sales techniques included convenient, attractive displays and fixed prices that were set a penny or two below the ordinary dollar amount - all of which were designed to promote impulse buying.

In Carrie's first attempt to get a job, she applies at a department store. Though unable to shop, she experiences the store as a potential consumer, one without the Montgomery's ability or desire to discriminate: "There was nothing she could not have used - nothing which she did not want to own." She perceives not only the trinkets, dress goods, stationary and jewelry are on display, but so are the "fine ladies" who frequent the store, and the "handsome" shopgirls who wait on them. Her comparison to these other women offers "a keen analysis of her own position" and makes "clear to all who and what she was:" "an outcast." Her conclusion is the opposite of Ellen Montgomery's. Warner's hero achieves a sense of self through the

avoidance of finery and spectacle. Carrie lost any sense of herself and “longed for dress and beauty with a whole heart.” [Dreiser, 17]

Dreiser subtly underscores the defining nature of this experience by periodically referring to Carrie as a “shopgirl.” Though she failed to find work in the department store, it defines her.

Poor women were invisibly present in these commercial emporiums as sweatshop laborers. Stores like Macy’s kept large crews of primarily female laborers in the back of the store, producing the goods that were for sale in the front. Carrie’s first job is reminiscent of such a back room: she is employed at a shoe factory at the rate of \$4.50 a week. The room was “dark” and “low-ceilinged.” The work was repetitive, hot and uncomfortable. Worst of all it was boring. “All during her shift Carrie thought of the city outside with its imposing show, crowds, and fine buildings.” [Dreiser, 31]

By giving the reader a glimpse of the dreary life within the factory, and through his focus on Carrie’s longing to be part of that spectacle represented by the front of the store, Dreiser established the world of *Sister Carrie* as one focused around consumption rather than production. This urban culture is the polar opposite of the Jeffersonian ideal. The yeoman agricultural economy centers on

farming as a mode of production, and is based on a stable level of consumption, providing for only those needs that can be met through subsistence farming. As Rachel Bowlby has pointed out:

The second half of the nineteenth century witnessed a radical shift in the concerns of industry: from production to selling and from the satisfaction of stable needs to the invention of new desires. [Bowlby, 2]

In *Carrie Meeber*, Dreiser offered a character perfectly suited to such an economy. Characteristics of materialism and selfishness that are seen as weaknesses in the antebellum novel – think of Isabel Clinton pitifully clinging to Gerty Flint, unable to save herself from the burning ferry in *The Lamplighter* – are Carrie’s great strength. “She longed and longed and longed,” with “an insatiable love of variable pleasures.” so she fits perfectly into a consumer culture. [Dreiser, 87]

She instinctively recognized that she herself was a commodity. She moves into Drouet’s apartment at a moment when she no longer enjoys the support of the Hansons and abandons Drouet for Hurstwood when she recognized him as “superior” – “his strength was great, his position high, his clothing rich.” [Dreiser, 96] Though she asks Drouet to marry her, “she could not feel any binding influence keeping her for him as against all others.” [Dreiser, 92]

The falsehood of her arrangement with Drouet helps illuminate the reality of Hurstwood's marriage. Our introduction to the Hurstwood family does not come through a sentimental portrait of family atmosphere or emotional dynamics. We first get a description of the Hurstwood residence that contains the kind of information one might find in a real estate listing – the type of construction, the size of the yard, and the number of rooms. This is in keeping with the character of the house: "Hurstwood's residence could scarcely be said to be infused with the home spirit." [Dreiser, 63]

It is not just the working class Hansons for whom home life has become an economic arrangement: Hurstwood is "a very acceptable individual of our great American upper class," yet his home is also an economic arrangement. [Dreiser, 34] We learn of his children's status and pursuit of material pleasures, and of his wife's longing to move up in "that little conventional round of society." [Dreiser, 63] The similarity between this "round of society" and Minnie Hanson's "conservative round of toil," [Dreiser, 10] emphasizes that households have been stripped of sentimental notions of hearth and home and that these have been replaced by market economics. Just as the Hansons want Carrie around to help pay off their real estate ventures,

Mrs. Hurstwood ties her approval of her husband to her hopes for his “small real estate adventures.” [Dreiser, 64]

Hurstwood’s home is an extension of his work at Fitzgerald and Moy’s. He keeps “a sideboard laden with glistening decanters and other utilities” which are the tools of his trade. He maintains the appearance of a happy family life as part of his job: “He could not complicate his home life, because it might affect his relations with his employers.” When he hears of men involved in scandal he responds according to economic pragmatism, not morality “It was all right to do it – all men do those things – but why wasn’t he careful?” [[Dreiser, 66-67]

This comment foreshadows his affair with Carrie, but it also gives a clue to a central tenet of Dreiser’s view of economics. As a “precaution” Hurstwood has put his real estate in his wife’s name. Mrs. Hurstwood is “secretly somewhat pleased” for this because it means “She is in a position to become refractory with considerable advantage.” [Dreiser, 84] Though Hurstwood considers his marriage an economic arrangement – one that adds to his comfort and status without interfering too much with his pleasure – he does not fully realize the competitive nature of the arrangement. When he goes to

Philadelphia without Mrs. Hurstwood, he thinks he can dismiss the trip with “general remarks,” but his wife recognizes that he is stretching the boundaries of his independence, and reacts by expanding her own economic prerogatives: “She drove out more, dressed better, and attended theaters freely to make up for it.” [Dreiser, 68]

In the face of such assertions of independence, Hurstwood sees he is “losing track of things at home, but he fails to act until he is “surrounded more and more by a world upon which he had no hold, and of which he had a lessening understanding.” [Dreiser, 153] As a result he is unprepared for the power his wife wields when their mutual drift towards independence shifts into an open battle for control. She moves immediately beyond mere argument to “wrest all control from him.” Mrs. Hurstwood knows both her own strength and his weakness. “I want you to know that lordly airs have come to an end,” she tells him, and “he felt evidence, law, the remembrance of all his property which she held in her name, to be shining in her glance.” [Dreiser, 159-160]

Despite his new knowledge that she is in charge, he attempts to hang onto a privileged position that was never more than the appearance of privilege. In fact, all of Hurstwood’s advantages are

based on mere appearance. His qualifications as a manager are based on the fact that he

looked the part...he had a good stout constitution, and active manner, and a solid, substantial air, which was composed of his fine clothes, his clean linen, his jewels, and above all, his sense of his importance. [Dreiser, 33]

Hurstwood gives only the appearance of managing Fitzgerald and Moy's. His position was "a kind of stewardship which was imposing, but lacked financial control." [Dreiser, 33]

Rachel Bowlby points out that "self esteem is always material in Dreiser." [Bowlby, 59] However, Dreiser was aware of the limits and risks of a society in which individual prosperity is so randomly decided. When Walter Benn Michaels observes that "the distinction between what one is and what one wants tends to disappear" in Dreiser, he is focussing on the strength of appearance within an economy driven by consumer desire. [Michaels, 41] Dreiser was interested in the weakness inherent in a reliance on spectacle. When Bowlby says, of Carrie's rise, "She gets her lucky breaks, but with no more control than any woman fractured in a fortunate fall," she is implicitly observing that Hurstwood's collapse is as random as Carrie's rise. [Bowlby, 52] In the words of Philip Fisher:

Because Hurstwood sells only his tone and services as an intermediary between figures in a circle, once severed from the social machine he is, as Dreiser says of him in New York, "nothing." [Fisher, 163]

The fear that financial security is illusory was not unique to Dreiser. As June Howard has said, the theme of financial insecurity is part of the power of the novel because it is an insecurity shared by the reader:

Hurstwood is and always was the doomed victim of forces beyond his comprehension and control. The disturbing question "Could it happen to me?" can never be abolished. [Howard, 102]

Published in 1900, *Sister Carrie* is partially set during the financial panic of 1893-94, an event that was still fresh in the minds of many Americans. During the winter of 1894 – when Hurstwood loses his interest in the Warren Street saloon and is forced to move downtown – there were three million unemployed nationwide. Those fortunate enough to have jobs were earning 30% less than they had the previous year, [Lens, 187] For working Americans of the class that Hurstwood is sliding towards, the panic was a particularly difficult period in a market system that was chronically unreliable. According to the 1900 census, one quarter of Americans were unemployed at some point during that year, and wages were still 10% below their

peak in 1893. As Dreiser made abundantly clear in the details of Hurstwood and Carrie's attempts to pay for rent, heat, and food, her \$12 a week salary is barely above the \$10 a week the New York City Board of Labor estimated was a bare minimum for survival in Manhattan. [Lens, 187-195]

In New York, Hurstwood and Carrie establish a household that combines elements of Hurstwood's marriage and Carrie's stay with the Hansons. Carrie becomes bored by the "very dull round" of their life: "What did she have? Nothing but this narrow little flat?" [Dreiser, 242] As had Mrs. Hurstwood, Carrie comes to distrust Hurstwood, though her fears involve finances rather than affairs. Hurstwood soon allows their relationship to drift from one driven by passion to one held together by fragile economic bonds. "You want to pay me today," Carrie tells him, by way of asking for the household expenses. [Dreiser, 260] When Hurstwood drops the amount he gives her every week from \$12 to \$5, Carrie quietly stops sleeping with him.

The privation of trying to live on so little drives Carrie into professional acting, where she quickly gets her wages back up to \$12. On the surface, Carrie has assumed the traditional male role of breadwinner, and Hurstwood assumes the female role of housewife.

However there is more to these changes than simple gender reversal. Having lost his job and his connection to the economic world, Hurstwood is losing his sense of himself. As Robert Schulman has put it:

His sense of self-esteem is inseparable from his position and the material manifestations of his self and his success: his impeccable clothes, his soft leather shoes, his office, and his glittering rings. [Schulman, 567]

In New York, with “signs of affluence and luxury on every hand,” [Dreiser, 215] “Hurstwood was nothing.” [Dreiser, 214] In his business dealings on Warren Street he is “A feeble imitation” of the well-connected manager he was in Chicago. [Dreiser, 252] He considers and rejects positions in hardware, groceries, hotels and insurance because they are outside his line of work. He refuses to become a bartender because it is too humiliating for a former manager, yet he cannot get a job as a wholesale whiskey salesman because he is too old. He is no longer a sharp dresser, and Carrie is embarrassed to have her friends see him. Unable to trade on his popularity, he avoids places where he might meet people he knows. He fails as a poker player because he can neither bluff nor face down another’s bluff. Finally, most of his job ideas are lies told to placate Carrie.

When he finally takes a job, it is as a strikebreaker, a job that-like manager of a saloon and Bowery bum, is also an identity. It is not something you do, so much as something you are: a “scab.” When he applies for the position, he tells the manager, “I am nothing,” [Dreiser, 300] and in so doing he names the very qualification that is most important. Hurstwood can get this job as a motorman for the Brooklyn trolley car lines because he is *not* a motorman. This is an irony Dreiser had first noted when he covered the Toledo Railroad strike of 1894 for the *Toledo Blade*. Dreiser applied for a job under conditions similar to those Hurstwood faces. He had been turned down not because he lied and claimed to have experience, but because he told the truth about his union sympathies. [Dreiser, 433]

Dreiser portrayed the strikers as having a grasp of politics similar to the men in Crane’s “City Sketches.” Both strikers and scabs discuss economics, and Dreiser depicts the scabs as largely sympathetic to the union. “I don’t blame these fellers for striking,” says one man, while all seem to agree that the companies are engaging in unfair practices. [Dreiser, 301]

In the magazine article that became the source for Hurstwood's experiences with charity, Dreiser had noted that among a group of men waiting for a handout,

you will hear every topic of the times discussed... The possibilities of a match between prize-ring favorites, the day's evidence in the latest murder trial, the chance of war in Africa, the latest improvements in automobiles, the prosperity or depression of some other portion of the world, or the mistakes of the Government, from Washington to the campaign in Manila." [Dreiser, 422]

When Hurstwood is on line for a soup kitchen, one of the "gaunt men" he is waiting with advocates a radical change that would have been familiar to Dreiser's readers: "This here Single Tax is the thing....There ain't going to be no order till it comes." [Dreiser, 360] The Single Tax theory was one of the radical ideas of Henry George whose *Progress and Poverty* (1879) has been called "the most influential American economic treatise of the Nineteenth Century." [Jackson, 461] With Jeffersonian simplicity, George advocated the simple subsistence of the yeoman farmer: where "the Richest man is forced to daily work... You will find an absence of wealth...[but] you will not find destitution." [George, 7] Destitute poverty, George believed, is the product of the economics of urban life, "where the

population is densest, wealth greatest ... we find the deepest poverty, and the sharpest struggle for existence.” [George, 6]

George called for the nationalization of all productive land and a tax to redistribute wealth. With these radical ideas, George lost a closely contested New York mayoral election in 1886. His supporters freely appropriated the imagery of the Founding Fathers, proclaiming that their near victory “the Bunker Hill” of the labor movement, and using “THE SPIRIT OF '76 STILL LIVES” as a campaign slogan.

[Burrows, 1105-1106]

In all of *Sister Carrie*, these few comments by destitute mendicants are the only remarks that hint at an American discourse that goes beyond the signification of getting and spending. Alan Trachtenberg argues that the Gilded Age was a period of “struggles over the meaning of the word ‘America,’ over the political and cultural authority to define the term and thus to say what reality was and ought to be.” The term “America,” Trachtenberg continued, “now seemed the unstable element, the issue in contention.” [Trachtenberg, 73] Dreiser is hinting at the contentiousness Trachtenberg has identified. However, in the world of *Sister Carrie*, this discourse takes

place only among the poor- the more well-to-do are consumed with their efforts at consumption.

While Hurstwood loses his sense of self and slides down the economic scale, Carrie's value is rising as her own web of associations gives her a more marketable identity. It is noteworthy that her initial success in the theater comes from nothing more than appearance. Her beauty lands her a featured photograph in the Casino's advertising, and the expression on her face lifts her up out of the chorus. She is simply standing on stage frowning in a way that is accidentally funny. The audience's reaction transforms her into a valuable commodity: because of the appreciation of the "portly gentlemen in the front rows,...She was capital." [Dreiser, 326]

The word's double meaning becomes clear when Carrie allows her identity to be used as an investment- first by fashionable hotels that market the information that she lives there, and ultimately by the shows she appears in, which are soon using life-sized photos of her to advertise their productions. "Your name is worth something," she is told. [Dreiser, 329] As Hana Wirth-Nesher has put it, "Carrie expands to become the city itself metonymically," She not only both produces

and consumes the spectacle, she becomes the spectacle. [Wirth-Nesher, 82]

Having seen both the rural poverty Carrie was escaping, and the carnival of saloons, theater and spectacle his brother introduced him to, Dreiser is breaking with the tradition of portraying the city as a “sore on the body politic” to show its attractions and pleasures. However, Dreiser is not suggesting that the urban experience can be represented solely through success such as Carrie’s. One of the stops Hurstwood makes in his tour of the charities of New York is the breadline and Fleischmann’s Model Vienna Bakery. Dreiser offered a succinct description of the breadline’s operations:

A few minutes before twelve, a great box of bread was pushed out, and exactly on the hour a portly, round-faced German took position by it, calling “Ready.” The whole line at once moved forward, each taking his loaf in turn and going his separate way. [Dreiser, 360]

It was a ritual that had already drawn a good deal of attention even before Dreiser included it in *Sister Carrie*. Fleischmann’s had begun handing out loaves every night in response to the Panic of 1873. This was the breadline Stephen Crane had observed in preparation for “The Men in the Storm.” Both Ellen Moers and Joseph Katz argue persuasively that Dreiser was familiar with Crane’s piece

before writing "Curious Shifts of the Poor," for *Demorest's Magazine* in 1899. Moer points out that when Dreiser republished his article in the 1924 collection *The Color of a Great City*, he retitled it "The Men in the Storm." [Dreiser, cf 415]

In her study of the dawn of modern urbanism, Hana Wirth-Nesher points out the distinction between the urge to look at the wealthy and fashionable people and the more dubious desire to gaze at the poor:

to notice the city's chic passerby is not only legitimate, it is desirable; to notice the poor is morally suspect and turns the onlookers into "watchers and peepers," the "curious figures" who keep their distance from the Bowery derelicts but observe them nonetheless. [Wirth-Nesher, 83]

It is important not to take this distinction too far, however.

Dreiser makes clear that there are plenty of people who are interested in seeing the poor. When "the captain" arrives to organize the beggars of Madison Square, a crowd of onlookers forms and they are not constrained about their gaze: "A few spectators came near, drawn by the seemingly conferring group, then more and more, and quickly there was a pushing, gaping crowd." [Dreiser, 344]

The contrast between this crowd of apparently middle class spectators and the quiet, orderly line of mendicants points up an

important change in Dreiser's portrait of wealth and poverty. Urban poverty had been associated with chaos and disorder since the earliest days of the Republic. For all their sympathy, Riis and Crane had continued working within that paradigm: they portray chaos as the natural byproduct of poverty, with the noise, dirt, and violence of the slum streets mirrored by the slum homes.

In *Sister Carrie*, Dreiser reversed that pattern. Though neither Chicago nor New York are the overwhelmingly dissipated and disorderly places associated with the mystery and misery paradigm, the bourgeois world is depicted as a carnival of lights and people and pleasures. Though he revels in it at the beginning of the novel, Hurstwood eventually sees this city "as one sees a city with a wall about it. Men were posted at the gates. You could not get in."

[Dreiser, 241]

However, the glamorous and attractive urban carnival continues inside those imaginary walls. The city Carrie experienced when she got her first job in Chicago: "the lights, the crowd, the amusement! This was a great, pleasing metropolis." remains unaffected by Hurstwood's decline. [Dreiser, 21] By coordinating Carrie's rise and Hurstwood's fall, Dreiser illustrated a wide variety of social classes. This contrast of

misery and luxury is not linked by any causality or morality. Carrie's rise occurs despite Hurstwood's fall. The two use each other, but there is no moral condemnation attached to Carrie's more successful use of the opportunity Hurstwood offers her.

Within the ideology of the domestic sentimental, there would have been a moral condemnation of Hurstwood's association with drinking, gambling and extramarital sex. In the hands of Lippard or Warner, Hurstwood's economic failure would have been linked to dissipation and immorality. There is a reciprocal lack of morality in Carrie's rise. While she may not be satisfied at the end of the novel, her longing is not caused by any guilt over her behavior with Drouet or Hurstwood, nor is it a sign of a soul worried over its eternal fate. While Carrie may always long for something better, she enjoys what she has.

Dreiser had experienced the gloom of small town poverty and had seen his sister's romantic hopes end in desperation. However, he had also seen his brother, the popular songwriter Paul Dresser, make what appeared to be a fortune off simple show tunes. Dreiser had accompanied his brother to saloons like Fitzgerald and Moy's , places where the songwriter was well known and admired. He had listened to

his brother trade stories and share drinks with Broadway celebrities. Like Drouet, Dreiser could appreciate "A good dinner, the company of a young woman, and an evening at the theatre." [Dreiser, 364] He may have wanted to surpass his brother's achievement and become a serious artist - as Ames encouraged Carrie to do - but he saw no need to deny the existence of frivolous pleasures.

The city is no longer simply a place of moral snares that ruin men's lives, but lives are ruined nonetheless. For those on the outside of Hurstwood's imaginary walls, there is a place in one of the Sister of Mercy's lunches, where men move in "solemn order" through the mission house in groups of 25. [Dreiser, 358] There is one of Fleischmann's loaves of bread, given out "exactly on the hour" of midnight. Or there is a place in the captain's line. Ellen Moers describes the captain as "an imaginative summation of the nineties obsession with the war against poverty." [Moers, 190] She observes that his vaguely military demeanor is reminiscent of Coxey's Army.

The collapse of 1893 spawned a number of attempts to organize the unemployed. The most famous of these was led by an Ohio quarry owner named Jacob Coxey, who led several thousand men on a march from Ohio to Washington, D.C. demanding a national public

works program to stimulate employment. This Army was met in Washington by National Guard forces, and Coxey was arrested for simply walking on the White House lawn. The publicity surrounding his march focused on the often-repeated threat that the poor would organize to overthrow the social order.

In Dreiser's depiction, the army of the unemployed is more orderly than the social order. They are patient, quiet and respectful. When one man attempts to cut the line before one of the Sister of Mercy's lunches, he is silently rebuffed and order is restored. There is none of the competition we have seen between Hurstwood and his wife, or Hurstwood and Carrie. To a public used to stories of urban poverty that followed the pattern of what Alan Trachtenberg has described as an "exploration of forbidden and menacing spaces," this orderly world was a radical new vision of poverty. Furthermore, the behavior of the poor seems entirely rational, especially in the context of an economic order which allows Carrie to stay in a hotel room worth \$150 a week for \$3 simply because people believe she can afford \$150. "Without money ... she enjoyed the luxuries money could buy."
[Dreiser, 334]

Hurstwood approaches his own suicide as a comparatively rational outgrowth of his declining status. "I'm no good now. I was all right. I had money. I'm going to quit this." The sequence of thoughts that leads to Hurstwood's decision to commit suicide is entirely rational within the value system of Dreiser's view of capitalism. As Walter Benn Michaels has argued, the logic of Dreiser's novel results in a "literal acceptance of the economy" that produced the conditions that lead to Hurstwood's suicide. Standing in the theater district amidst "bright windows... gay companies in luxurious restaurants ... coaches and crowded cable cars," Hurstwood's conclusion, "What's the use?" makes sense. It is a grim rejection of the ideology of economic opportunity in that the reader is forced to accept the reality of Hurstwood's lack of a future.

Even at that moment, Hurstwood is part of the spectacle: "People turned to look after him, so uncouth was his shambling figure." [Dreiser, 362] But though the poor as a class have become part of the social scene, individual characters must still become invisible. Hurstwood goes off to turn on the gas, Maggie goes to the river to drown. In Crane's view we are left with the empty theater of

sentimental morality: "Oh, yes, I'll fergive her! I'll fergive her!" [Crane, 74] Dreiser has drained his world of even this degree of moralism.

Hurstwood's suicide is not quite the end of the book. We revisit each of the important characters, all luckier than Hurstwood. Drouet is still chasing away the gloom of life with "A good dinner, the company of a young woman, and an evening at the theater." [Dreiser, 364] Mrs. Hurstwood is bound for Europe having achieved her social goals through the marriage of her daughter to a wealthy man "whose financial state had borne her personal inspection." [Dreiser, 365] Carrie sits in her rocking chair, still longing for "such happiness as you may never feel." [Dreiser, 369] There is no scene of Carrie learning of her former lover's death. Hurstwood's anonymous body is taken to Potter's Field for burial.

Back in January of 1888, Jacob Riis had traveled to Potter's Field, on Hart Island to teach himself photography. His work had offered America a new image of its poor, but by 1900, he had given up photography. [Alland, 43] His images remained, but they remained silent and anonymous - it was his own voice he was interested in. The figures in his work are not characters; they are defined by their

destitution rather than their selfhood. His purposes were utilitarian and one group of "street arabs" is as good as another. Once he had gotten the attention of men like Roosevelt, photography had served its purpose.

Crane gives his poor a good deal more individuality, and Dreiser offers the most fully drawn portrait of an impoverished character. Yet both Maggie and Hurstwood face the same fate, and they are ultimately as silent as any of Riis's figures. At the dawn of a new century, America was able to acknowledge its poor, but still insisted that, once noticed, they fade from view.

In the 1930s, the shock of the Great Depression would cause poverty to become a central concern of American culture. Writers like Henry Roth and John Steinbeck would combine the detailed treatment of social conditions that marked realism with the complex views of character and language developed by modernists to produce new views of the poor that allowed them to become an integral part of the American scene.

Chapter III

Americanizing Poverty: Roth, Lange, Steinbeck and the Re-emergence of the Yeomen Ideal

Poverty was impossible to ignore in the 1930s. The impact of the stock market crash of 1929 and the economic collapse known as the Great Depression was so enormous it is difficult to fathom, let alone summarize. As a result, the economic calamity that T.H. Watkins labeled “nothing less than the single worst recession in the economic history of the United States,” has come to be treated as a separate era, unique in its culture and economics from the prosperity it followed and the war it preceded. It is not. Neither economically nor culturally can the importance of the Great Depression be separated from its context. [Watkins, 41]

The image of poverty in America changed drastically during the 1930s . The change is part of an ongoing evolution, not a sudden

revolutionary change in consciousness. Just as the realist treatment of poverty grew from an awareness that the Sentimentalist tropes did not adequately function in the changed circumstances of industrial America, the literature of the Depression responded to new socioeconomic realities with new tropes and a new iconography of poverty. These changes had important implications for the cultural image of women, the family, urban industrial America and for the way America viewed its history.

The Great Depression lends itself to a study of this type because it is traditionally viewed as having a specific starting point. In 6 days, beginning on October 29, 1929 - "Black Tuesday" - the stock market lost most of the gains of the 1920's boom. This collapse in stock prices was the dramatic centerpiece of an economic contraction that saw America's gross domestic product fall from 35 billion to 23.6 billion in one year, on its way down to 3.9 billion in 1932, a contraction of almost 90%. During that period, economic tragedy worked its way into every aspect of American life as 26,355 businesses closed in 1930 alone. [Watkins, 40] By the end of 1932, almost 15 million Americans were unemployed. [Bernstein, 257]

Part of the drama inherent in this collapse is the contrast provided by the image of the boom years of the 1920s, when Calvin Coolidge's dictum that "The chief business of the American people is business" seemed appropriate, and the impossible wealth of Jay Gatsby seemed simply possible.

However, the economy of 1920s America was not as simple as Coolidge and Fitzgerald made it seem. As Irving Bernstein pointed out, "The twenties were indeed golden, but only for a privileged segment of the American population." [Bernstein, 47] He cited a persistent unemployment rate of 11-13% for the decade while pointing out that such statistics do not take into account the more than one million children between the ages of 10 and 15 who were working during those years. [Bernstein, 65] As they had since the dawn of American industrialism, children worked in all phases of the economy- agriculture, manufacturing, and retail trades.

The labor battles of the Gilded Age had not abated either. Watkins began his discussion of the Depression with an account of the Ford Motor Company's decision to discontinue the economic Model T for the more luxurious Model A, and the resultant layoff of 60,000 autoworkers. This layoff came in 1927, the height of the boom. One

job announcement at Ford in January, 1929 brought 32,000 applications and crowd control efforts included fire hoses and riot police. [Watkins, 6] This was months before the crash, and only a few weeks before Herbert Hoover predicted that “we shall soon with the help of God be in sight of the day when poverty will be banished from the nation.” [Watkins, 12]

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Though the 1920s was labeled “The Jazz Age” by one of its more prominent novelists, in fact, American literature reflected the socioeconomic complexities of the 1920s. Poverty did not disappear from the culture, even if the boom fooled politicians into thinking it was disappearing from the economy. In 1928, Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand* offered a portrait of a well-educated, aristocratic woman undone by her sexuality and fallen into a world of “alienation and exhaustion.” [Andrews, 257] Larsen’s Helga Crane finds no “escape from the oppression, the degradation, that her life had become.” [Larsen in Andrews, 360] The same year Claude McKay published *Home to Harlem*, in which Jake Brown moves from job to job,

gambling, drinking and womanizing with never more than a few days wages to keep him going. These novels do not break new ground in that their plots rely on the well-worn tropes of the fallen woman and the debauched vagrant, however the relative sympathy with which the characters are treated reminds us of the separation of morality and economics Dreiser championed in *Sister Carrie*.

These authors are noteworthy in that they introduce economic deprivation as a theme in African American literature. Deprivation and the struggle to survive it had been a subject for Black writers since the earliest slave narratives. Frederick Douglass's clear straightforward accounting of the "allowance" provided to slaves on the Lloyd plantation was a catalogue of privation:

The men and women slaves received, as their monthly allowance of food eight pounds of pork, or its equivalent in fish, and one bushel of corn meal. Their yearly clothing consisted of two coarse linen shirts, one pair of linen trousers, like the shirts, one jacket, one pair of trousers for winter made of coarse Negro cloth, one pair of stockings, and one pair of shoes; the whole of which could not have cost more than seven dollars. [Douglass, 21]

The catalogue came in the context of the annual distribution of this allowance, making clear that the deprivation was the product of racism rather than economic forces. Douglass reinforced this point in his description of New Bedford, where

Everything looked clean, new, and beautiful. I saw few or no dilapidated houses, with poverty-stricken inmates; no half-naked children, such as I had been accustomed to see in Hillsborough, Easton, St. Michaels, and Baltimore. I was for once made glad by a view of extreme wealth without being saddened by seeing extreme poverty. [Douglass, 94]

This is certainly not the portrait of the North supplied by Dickens or Melville.

This focus on racism as the cause of suffering and deprivation is consistent in African-American literature. In Frances E. Harper's *Iola Leroy* (1892) slavery is seen as a heritage of strength in adversity, while the contemporary privations of sharecropping are seen as a vestige of the lack of education under slavery. In Charles Chestnutt's "The Wife of His Youth" (1899) the impoverished old woman is presented as "a bit of the old plantation life" rather than as a sign the contemporary destitution sharecroppers moving north would have found in the Chicago of Dreiser or the New York of Riis. [Gates, 548]

In his 1934 volume of short stories, *The Ways of White Folks*, Langston Hughes made the tension between racism and poverty explicit. In "Poor Little Black Fellow," Arnie Pemberton is an orphaned black child being raised by a wealthy white family. Arnie is kept constrained in a world of wealth and privilege. His first encounter with

poverty comes when he meets Vivi, a Rumanian dancer in Paris. When Arnie tries to tell his lover how hard it is to be black in America, she tells him that race is not important in Europe. "Here it is only hard to be poor." [Hughes, 153] Though McKay and Larsen had begun to explore this tension by suggesting that in America it was hard to be both black and poor, much of African American literature continued to focus on racism. Poverty was European.

Richard Wright's "Bright Morning Star" introduced a communist ideology that focused on class relations rather than racism. Johnny-Boy is a young Communist Party organizer who argues with his mother over whether to trust the white members of the Party:

"Ma, Ah done tol yuh a hundred times. Ah cant see white n Ah cant see black," he said. A sees rich men n Ah sees po men." [Wright, 234]

The concept of poverty as a product of economic forces in addition to racism is thus introduced. Wright made clear its relative unimportance, however, by having both Johnny-Boy and his mother lynched by white racists at the end of the story. While these men are ostensibly anti-communist, their chief fear appears to be the attempt to form "a black republic." [Wright, 256]

Throughout the first third of the Twentieth-Century, poverty continued to be most closely associated with the immigrant. Abraham Cahan and others continued to publish tenement tales long after they had ceased offering anything new to American discourse, and in the words of David Fine, “had become a product of proven marketability.” [Fine, 96] Many of these novels reverted to the model of moral and economic uplift rejected by Crane and Dreiser.

In Anzia Yeziarska’s *Bread Givers* (1925) escape from the slums is part of the process of becoming an American. Sara’s father, Rabbi Smolinsky, clings to the religion and customs of European Jewry and cannot escape beggary in New York. When Sara rebels, it is to become more American - she rejects her father’s marriage arrangements and gets an education in a “town of quiet streets, shaded with green trees.” Here she sees “the real Americans.” [Yeziarska, 210] When she returns to New York, it is as a schoolteacher, an emissary from that small town world determined to convert her students to America and save her father from his self-destructive loyalty to the old ways. Here, too, poverty is European.

Michael Gold’s *Jews Without Money*, published in 1930, but completed in 1928, is as much a product of the 1920s as it is of the

Depression. As Michael Folsom has pointed out, though the text is referred to as a novel, it is actually an autobiography whose details Gold culled from an earlier, unpublished, novel. Gold's work – parts of which had previously appeared in *The New Masses*, is a curious amalgam of “vignettes, anecdotes, reflections, sketches.” [Folsom, 3] While Richard Tuerk has attempted to clarify this confusion of fact and fiction by referring to *Jews Without Money* as “the autobiography of an invented character,” the distinction between fact and fiction is less important in light of the fact that Gold touches most of the tropes a reader of tenement fiction would expect. [Tuerk, 67] Gold's ghetto is filthy, and a boy growing up in it is introduced to prostitution, violence, racial mixing, and political corruption.

Though *Jews Without Money* offers no surprises in its content, its attitude towards the tropes of tenement life was a marked change. Gold did not adapt the moralistic view of early reform writers, but neither was he portraying poverty as morally neutral. As a committed Marxist he is more interested in building his narrative up to a final affirmation of the communist future, “Oh worker's Revolution, you brought hope to me,” than in condemning the deprivations of poverty. [Gold 309] In fact, when Gold encounters the filth and degradation of

the urban slum, he revels in it. He shows children swimming in a “sun-spangled open sewer” that is the East River, keeping the emphasis on the joy of swimming while holding back none of the filth. These children respond to the “dead swollen dogs,” and offal in the river by making a game of pushing it towards one another. [Gold, 39]

Gold transferred some of the adventurousness of Tom Sawyer from Twain’s idealized small-town, antebellum America to urban street urchins. Gold’s boys have the pluck of Horatio Alger’s newsboys without their concern for middle-class success and values. They neither condemn nor pity the prostitutes in the neighborhood; instead, they enjoy hazing them - chanting “Fifty cents a night!” until the women are either embarrassed or enraged. [Gold, 17]

His rejection of the previous attitudes towards the slum is the key to understanding Gold’s contribution to the portrait of urban poverty. In Gold’s world there is not only no middle class morality, there is no middle class, and therefore no prospect of improvement. There is no avoiding the ugliness of poverty: “It’s impossible to live in a tenement without being mixed up with the tragedies and cockroaches of one’s neighbors.” [Gold, 30] When he insists “I will write a truthful book of poverty; I will mention bedbugs.” It is not

simply the presence of the bedbugs that is important. There are plenty of vermin in Riis, Crane, Dreiser and later writers such as Anzia Yezierska. [Gold, 71] In Gold it is the inevitability of those bedbugs: “Bedbugs are what people mean when they say poverty,” he tells us. [Gold, 71] There is no escape from the filth and discomfort of the slums in *Jews Without Money* until the promised worker’s revolution.

In insisting on the grotesque details of poverty, Gold also insisted on their Americanization. Gold’s characters have not fallen out of American prosperity, like Hurstwood, nor are they walled out of it by their poverty or dissipation like Maggie. Even in their slum they are fully American: “My parents hated all this filth. But it was America, one had to accept it.” [Gold, 30] Gold’s visit to Bronx Park reminds his father of the forests of the Old World: “I’m so happy in a forest! You American children don’t know what it means!” [Gold, 155]

America is not the wilderness waiting to be tamed in Gold’s view. America is a land where children sleep on newspapers and wait for the morning: “Tomorrow morning I will go out in the streets and see the real America fun.” [Gold, 105] America is the land of gangsters, religious strife, and poverty. It is known as such in

Roumania: when Gold's father left the old country, it was expected that "he will eat the bread of sorrow and shame in America." [Gold, 99]

To segue from *Jews Without Money* to Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep* is ironic because Roth so plainly rejected any connection to Gold's novel. In fact, Roth goes so far as to deny his novel has social implications at all, telling David Bronsen

My own feeling was that what I had written was far too private for me to have given much thought to specific social problems. My personal involvement had absorbed my entire consciousness, leaving no room to focus on anything else. [Bronsen]

Certainly, *Call It Sleep* is not simply a conventional tenement tale. It approaches urban life through the discourse of European modernism, containing as much Joyce, Lawrence, and Freud as Crane or Riis. The subject matter is the sensibility of the young David Schearl, and the details of his slum neighborhood are only important as they affect that sensibility. This reverses one of the important conventions of realist discourse: David Schearl is put upon by the world around him, but is not a product of that world. Environment is not character for Roth, rather the perception of the environment is

fully shaped and informed by the character that perceives it. As Hana Wirth-Nesher has pointed out, the novel tells of the development of that perception:

It is about an immigrant child's quest for a personal and cultural identity apart from his parents. [Wirth-Nesher, afterword, in Roth, 447-448]

As such the novel is, in Wirth-Nesher's terms, one with multiple cultural grounding. "Roth writes for an implied reader who is well versed in English Literature and the Western Christian tradition."
[Wirth-Nesher, afterword, Roth, 447]

It was this grounding in European modernism that attracted the notice and disdain of *The New Masses*, which published the most pointedly harsh review of Roth's novel:

It is a pity that so many young writers drawn from the proletariat can make no better use of their working class experience than as material for introspective and febrile novels. [Lyons, 16-17]

According to Roth biographer Bonnie Lyons, the effect of this brief review was evident in the novel's reception by other critics - the novel has been both praised and criticized in political terms ever since. For example, Walter Rideout contributed to its re-emergence in the 1950s by describing it as "the most distinguished single proletarian novel" in American literature. [Lyons, 64] Though hardly a runaway

best seller, *Call It Sleep* went through two printings and sold a respectable 4,000 copies. Roth later explained that sales were not better because the novel was not social enough:

This was 1934, and people were very much interested in novels or studies having to do with society; everyone was now searching and groping for some new way of attacking this problem or some new solution for our ills. This is what people wanted to know – and *Call It Sleep* was anything but that. [Lyons, 165]

The debate over the novel's relative modernism vs. its position as a tenement tale disguised the fact that Roth has succeeded in fusing the two discourses. *Call It Sleep* is, in Bakhtin's term, "heteroglossic," containing the "languages" of both modernism and realism. Though *Call It Sleep* is primarily interested in David Schearl's dawning consciousness, and deals with that consciousness in terms familiar to readers of Joyce and Freud, it doesn't shy from the conventions of the tenement tale.

In 1934 America was struggling with a number of profound changes. The 1920 census had been the first to find the majority of Americans living in cities. That urban population had swelled through immigration, but it would become increasingly American-born in the 1930s, with immigration quotas instituted in a series of restrictive laws reducing the total number of immigrants by almost 90%, while

those from Southern and Eastern Europe dropped by 97%. [Bailey, 782] The 1930 census showed that urban majority, (as well as the rural minority) to be suffering through the collapse of the urban industrial order.

Such changes combined to call into question some of America's image of itself. The Jeffersonian ideal seemed less relevant in a nation of 123 million mostly city dwellers. The image of America as a nation of immigrants, finally engraved onto the Statue of Liberty in 1903, seemed equally outdated. These combined with the Depression's assault on the ideology of permanent prosperity to provide an opportunity for redefining the national image.

Roth's novel encodes much of the tension of cultural definition within its text. In a Prologue which sets the context for the later focus on David's consciousness, we are taken back to "May of the year 1907, the year that was destined to bring the greatest number of immigrants to the shores of the United States." [Roth, *Call It Sleep*, 9] The novel's opening sentence combines a reference to Peter Stuyvesant with a reference to "the stench and throb of the tenements," rhetorically bridging the gap between New York as a small Dutch village and as a teeming metropolis. Hana Wirth-Nesher has

pointed out references to “The Golden Land” in both the epigraph and in Genya’s greeting to Albert, “And this is the Golden Land.”

Leo Rosten suggests that the Yiddish phrase Genya is using, *goldene medine* is used both to praise the opportunities of America and sarcastically complain of its limitations. [Rosten, 128] Roth connects both these meanings to Emma Lazarus’s “Golden Door” in the poem “The New Colossus,” mounted on a plaque at the base of the Statue of Liberty, which hovers above them “her features were charred with shadow, her depth exhausted, her masses ironed to one single plane.” This haggard image of Liberty reinforces Genya’s immediate understanding that “here in the new land is the same old poverty.” [Roth, *Call It Sleep*, 12]

While we are told that there is something “unusual” and untypical about the Schearl’s family reunion, it echoes a similar reunion in Abraham Cahan’s *Yekl*. [Roth, *Call It Sleep*, 10-11] The conventional joy of a reunion is subverted in both cases by an Americanized husband who is visibly unhappy with renewing his family burdens. Cahan’s comically stylish playboy, Yekl, is replaced by the dour paranoia of Albert, but in both cases the assumptions of “liberty

and the pursuit of happiness” are undermined before the families can leave Ellis Island.

In fact, many of the conventions of the tenement tale are apparent in *Call It Sleep*. Alfred Kazin was correct to point out that this is “the city world not of *Sister Carrie*, but of Joyce’s *Ulysses*,” because we see the city “not in an external documentary but as forced, instant by instant, out of David’s perceptions.” [Kazin, Introduction, *Call It Sleep*, xiii] However the city that David perceives would be familiar to readers of *Sister Carrie*, or *Maggie*, or Abraham Cahan, or Ania Yezierska. It contains, in the words of Wirth-Nesher. “the grit of the slum streets, the charred metal of the Statue of Liberty, the dialect of the immigrant poor, the foods, the smells, and the noises of the Lower East Side.” [Wirth-Nesher, *New Essays*, 6] Roth himself described his translation of the tenement tale into the aesthetics of modernism, telling Wirth-Nesher that reading Joyce showed him “that I could talk about urban squalor and develop it into a work of art.” [Wirth-Nesher, *New Essays*, 5]

As the Schearls make their way from Ellis Island to Manhattan Island, Albert Schearl’s defining characteristic is his paranoid anger at his wife. He is angry with her for not recognizing him, convinced that

the guards are mocking him, and infuriated at the attention drawn by David's blue hat. The distrust, fear, and competition young David sees upon meeting his father infuse the perceptions he will develop throughout the novel, and shape virtually every relationship in the world he is about to enter.

Wirth-Nesher and others have observed the complex ways in which Roth handled language in the novel. The contrast between the elegant prose of the Schearls' home language of Yiddish, and the broken English they use on the street textually separates their home life, with its echoes of the old world, from their public life in the Golden Land. These languages separate spheres of David's world in precisely the ways early reformers and sentimentalist writers would have approved. It is as if the breakdown that Riis observed - as home life spread to the streets and fire escapes while street dirt and noise filtered into the home - has been checked by the inability of the two worlds to speak to one another.

This clash of languages was not unique to the Lower East Side. In "Discourse in the Novel" (1981), Bakhtin argued that every historical moment is similarly heteroglossic, and "each generation at each social level has its own language." [Bakhtin, 290] What is

noteworthy about the mix of languages in Roth is that they not only separate individuals from each other, but mark divisions within the character themselves. Every character must somehow live in the world of articulate Yiddish and fractured English.

However, Roth makes it abundantly clear that fear, the threat of violence, and competition for material advantage have permeated all both worlds. It is as if the market forces that were the focus of Hurstwood's marriage have become the center of all relationships.

When David is lost, it is language – specifically his inability to pronounce the name of his street - which prevents him from finding his way home:

“Do you mean this isn't Potter Street?”
 “Id ain'd Boddeh Stitt!”
 “Bodder! Bodder! Are you sure?”
 “Yeah!” His voice trailed off.
 “Bodder, Bother, Botter, try and think!”
 “It's Boddeh Stritt!”
 “And this isn't it?” [Roth, *Call It Sleep*, 100]

David reads betrayal into each failed attempt to help him. “The man who had directed him; the old woman who had left him here; the policeman; all had tricked him.” “Trust nothing.” is the conclusion David comes to. [Roth, *Call It Sleep*, 102] It is an idea he learned from his father. When David fails to bring home the Yiddish newspaper *De*

Tageblatt, Albert accuses him of stealing the money, “Paid yourself for your errand have you?” [Roth, *Call It Sleep*, 79] It is an accusation he repeats when David is unable to stop the robbery of the milk truck- “Paid yourself again?” [Roth, *Call It Sleep*, 279] It is important to note that these sentences represent transcribed Yiddish. These accusations do not stem from miscommunication in that sense, they represent the imposition of distrust onto all the languages of the novel.

In this context, Albert’s frequent reference to David as “what will pray for me after my death,” is less a reference to tradition than evidence of the grounding of the family relationship in mutual obligation. As in many naturalist novels, the family in *Call It Sleep* is an economic unit. Albert’s view is articulated in his comments on Luter’s plan to marry – “It isn’t children he’s looking for, it’s a little money. He wants to open a shop of his own.” [Roth, *Call It Sleep*, 76] Albert’s anger with his own family obligations stems from his fear that he has been cheated in his marriage. This fear, hinted at in the Prologue is fully apparent in his reaction to discovering David with a rosary, which he sees as proof of David’s illegitimacy. [Roth, *Call It Sleep*, 402] In fact, Albert sees his whole life as an economic arrangement that he is

getting cheated on: “I sell my days for a little silver – a little paper – sixteen smirched leaves a week – I’ll never buy them back with gold.”

[Roth, *Call It Sleep*, 266]

Similarly, Genya has lost her hopes for romantic love and admits that marriage to Albert was motivated by economic necessity:

“Can’t you see for yourself? There were nine in my family.... They had hoped I would follow you soon. There was no money at home. The store was failing.” [Roth, *Call It Sleep*, 392]

On the street the sense of competition for status, safety, or material advantage is less articulately expressed, but is as pervasive as it is in the Schearl home. Every encounter David has with other children focuses on a quest for food, material advantage, or status. His play with Yussie and Annie is a constant switching between threats and begging:

“Stay heah! I’ll kill yuh, yuh go inside!... I’ll tell yuh a story. I’ll let yuh play fiuhman. Yuh can have a hat. Yuh can climb on de foinichuh...” [Roth, *Call It Sleep*, 54]

David’s relationships with other neighborhood children never rise to the level of friendship – joy and intimacy are foreign in this world. Instead we get a shifting series of alliances built around momentary material advantages. David is befriended when Izzy and Maxie think he is going to get nuts from the Chinese laundry - “so he’ll give. So we’ll

ged.” [Roth, *Call It Sleep*, 175] – and by Schloime when he gets a penny from Rabbi Pankower – “I know w’ea dere’s orange balls – eight fuh a cent.” [Roth, *Call It Sleep*, 235]

The grubby quality of these relationships is highlighted by the broken English they are expressed in, but Albert’s sense of betrayal when Luter’s friendship ends is as base – even if it is expressed more eloquently: “But the first man I’ve ever trusted in this cursed land to treat me like a foe!” [Roth, *Call It Sleep*, 126] Like all of Albert’s relationships, his friendship with Luter ultimately founders on his paranoia, a function of his fear of being cheated. His fight with Luter is an expression of Albert’s perception of his own tenuous status. When Albert injures his hand he explains it as a humiliating defeat – he could have beaten a “score of Luters” but his hand got crushed in the printing press. “That’s the foreman’s privilege. His hands are free.” [Roth, *Call It Sleep*, 135]

This atmosphere of violent competition permeates even the language of God. Roth’s portrait of cheder and Hebrew instruction shows a system based on competition for rewards and punishments. The competition among the students for favor in the eyes of Reb Pankower is based on stealing, gambling, and lying as they trade

lollipop sticks sharpened into pointers in the hope that bribing the Rabbi will help them avoid the cuffs to the ears he doles out as incentive for learning “God’s tongue.” That tongue has been reduced to gibberish. Even when David breaks into the cheder to try to learn the end of the story of Isaiah, he is allowed to recite only the sounds of the “strange and secret tongue,” and the “breathless, chaotic stream” of syllables turns David’s religious fervor to suppressed laughter. [Roth, *Call It Sleep*, 213]

For all the mimetic realism with which he treats these varieties of speech, Roth’s version of the immigrant ghetto is his own invention. As Alfred Kazin said of the street vernacular, “Maybe street kids once talked this way, maybe not.” [Kazin, “The Art of *Call It Sleep*,”] Roth described his version of the Lower East Side as a ‘montage of milieus,’ telling David Bronsen “I took the violent environment of Harlem – where we lived from 1914 to 1928 – and projected it back onto the East Side.” [Bronsen] In fact, the book describes several neighborhoods, including Brownsville, and some of the neighborhoods Albert’s work takes him. Everywhere characters speak a language suffused with violence, competition, and a chaotic approach to meaning.

In the final pages even this limited meaning is overwhelmed by chaos. The Rabbi misunderstands David's attempt to create a new autonomous self by rewriting the story of his birth. Albert twists the Rabbi's story to fit his own paranoia, and Berta and Nathan accidentally reveal David's fascination with Christianity. The ability to communicate is mocked when David burns himself and lies barely conscious in a sea of various English dialects. The polyglossia of New York's ghetto is expressed as mere sounds, a patois of voices as incomprehensible as God's tongue has been to Rabbi Pankower's students.

Hana Wirth-Nesher has written persuasively regarding "the cacophony and multilingualism" of *Call It Sleep*. [Wirth-Nesher, *City Codes*, 136] Leslie Fiedler pointed out the realism involved in this choice: a neighborhood of various immigrant groups would speak in "various dialects of fractured English" that would be "mutually incomprehensible" to the residents. [Fiedler, 21] Ruth Wisse added to this analysis of the language of *Call It Sleep* by observing that this deconstruction of language had important sociological and psychological implications, as the inability to communicate helped drive

“a permanent wedge between the children of the streets and the carriers of their heritage.” [Wisse, 68]

This generational tension is a common feature of the tenement tale. Note, for example, the distance between generations in *Maggie* and *Bread Givers*, or the similar tension between “yankees” and “greenhorns” in *Yekl*. Bakhtin observed that “the language of a novel is the system of its ‘languages’.” [Bakhtin, 262] Roth expresses this generational trope associated with the tenement tale through the language of modernism, which focuses on individual consciousness. We see and hear the world of the slum through the eyes and ears of David, who must find a voice of his own. As Ruth Wisse put it,

In contrast to generations of children who become adults by acquiring useful information, skills, and sustaining rituals from their parents, family and community, David Schearl learns to function autonomously by stripping away layers of false hope and false mythology. [Wisse, 72]

The assimilation story that is associated with the tenement tale is thus rewritten as a modernist novel of consciousness.

Just as David must incorporate various voices into his own self, his parents must rewrite their past in order to integrate that experience into their new world. Hana Wirth-Nesher, in her work on characterization in urban novels, discussed the effect of the city’s

diversity on a character's ability to hold onto a "totalizing" concept of the self. She pointed out that immigrant characters often respond by idealizing the "home" country left behind. Genya provides an excellent example:

the expectation of America as a "golden land" is displaced for David's mother by the reduction of the Old World to a picture of cornflowers hanging on a kitchen wall. [Wirth-Nesher, *City Codes*, 141]

Psychologically, the picture of the cornflowers becomes a symbol of the old world, and the muddled passions that marked the Schearl's immigration. It is notably separate from the descriptions of life in Europe that follow the conventions of realism, such as Genya's description of her marriage to Albert. The corn not only reminds Genya of her love for the *goyisha* that throws her over, but also offers an image of timeless calm and beauty to sooth her troubled heritage.

As in *Jews Without Money* the only image of nature in this world of urban squalor and immigrant cacophony is associated with the old world. Nature and farming were to be America's gift to the immigrant, not the sacrifice asked of them. However the cornflowers are symbolic only for David's mother. They point to a break in the development of her autonomous self. Her marriage to Albert and move to America represent the point of compromise: she will no

longer pursue the developing sense of individuality represented by the cornflowers. That compromise does not impede David's development. The cornflowers are just a picture on the wall to him. For David, as a new American, autonomy can still be pursued.

Marcus Klein has pointed out that the start of the Great Depression coincided with a cultural shift that made immigrant literature American literature. The cultural definition of America was changing to fit historical shifts, "an America which had had definitions in myth and idea – variable definitions but nevertheless antique and accepted ones – all but disappeared." Such mythic definitions, as we have seen, have always varied. The result was a culture of chaos "within which everyone was a foreigner." [Klein, x]

After almost 80 years of uninterrupted immigration, the nation had been transformed. It was not only industrial and urban, but, in Klein's words, "America was essentially polyglot." [Klein, 37] The collapse of the economy in 1929 added an economic layer to the cultural shift. Now, the promise of prosperity seemed to have been cancelled. With poverty so widespread, the poor were no longer foreigners.

In neither *Call It Sleep* nor *Jews Without Money* is there any notion of escape from poverty or from the filth of the city. Everyone works hard, but even the rhetoric of saving, investment, and prosperity has disappeared. There is not even a contrasting picture of a decent neighborhood or a wealthy character to highlight the sordidness of the ghetto. "The ghetto was suddenly the opposite of itself. It became an American archetype." [Klein, 36]

David's experience of the ghetto ends with the tension of its heteroglossia unresolved. After running from his father's wrath, David is nearly killed by a jolt of electricity from the trolley car tracks. He lays, barely awake, on the cobblestones with the myriad voices above him cutting into the montage of images running through his brain. While the images strip away "*the husks of being*," he ultimately finds his voice: "*Exalted he lifted his head and screamed!*" With this voice, he finds himself: "A spiked star of pain of consciousness burst within him." [Roth, *Call It Sleep*, 429, 431]

In this ending, Roth carries out what Barbara Foley, in her work *Radical Representations*, defined as the modernist fictional autobiography:

In the modernist fictional autobiography, the artist-hero reduces the world to the self; egoism becomes a means of

controlling an alienated and mystifying social reality, and the text's aura of actuality functions to mark and privilege the protagonist's sensibility. [Foley, 294]

In this case the "aura of actuality" is conveyed in the cacophony of voices and chaos is partially overcome by David's developing consciousness and sensibility. Roth's often noted debt to James Joyce is especially apparent here. Like Stephen Daedalus, David Schearl has set aside politics, family, and religion in an assertion of primacy for the individual's self-hood as the organizing principal of modern discourse.

However, despite his embrace of modernism, Roth has not completely set aside the discourse of realism. The poetic self-discovery David reaches is not quite the end of the novel. In the final chapter, the conventions of the tenement tale reassert themselves. David is carried back to his apartment. Too weak to assert his imaginative self over events, he once again simply records the action.

Neighbors crowd into the apartment to gawk at the family tragedy in a scene reminiscent of the end of Crane's *Maggie*. However, in this case the sympathetic neighbors' identification with Genya's plight – "Poor Mrs. Schearl... Our bleeding faithful mother's heart they think nothing of wringing." is a genuine (if unwelcome)

statement of maternal solidarity, rather than the parody of maternity we saw in *Maggie*. [Roth, *Call It Sleep*, 437] Even among the confusion of languages there is no condescension: the policeman and the intern speak as brokenly as the neighbors. In America, everyone requires a translator.

Barbara Foley suggested that the proletarian fictional autobiography sets up a discourse in opposition to modernism:

In the proletarian fictional autobiography, authenticity serves primarily to reinforce the point that the represented world is *independent* of the text's maker. Whatever wisdom the narrator/author/ character acquires is a consequence not of his/her capacity imaginatively to assimilate world to self, but of his/her ability to grasp the world in its objectivity as a precondition to revolutionary activity. [Foley, 294]

In the final chapter the symbolic function of the rail as an avenue to self-discovery gives way to a realistic version of the same scene. The rail is a common industrial danger, and David is not purged, he is burned. The burn to his foot reminds us of the Oedipal motif of the book and reasserts the family, as the suggestion that the Schearl's take David to Holy Name Hospital reasserts religion and the politics of diversity. The crowded, noisy and confusing scene at the Schearl's apartment brings us back to the conventions of realism.

David retreats into sleep, into his “capacity imaginatively to assimilate world to self,” but also – in the catalogue of beards and roller skates, bells and cobblestones, skirts, trousers and shoes, to “grasp the world in its objectivity.” This is not a precondition to revolutionary activity – it is a revolution. Roth combines the discourse of modernism with that of social realism to create a character that asserts his consciousness as something separate from the slums, while simultaneously recognizing the limitations slum life places upon him. Just as each character carries multiple languages, the novel is a blend of discourses and represents a new image of the poor. Poverty may constrain David Schearl’s economic opportunities, but it does not cripple his character.

ii

Roth may not have appreciated his own accomplishment. Stung by politically motivated reviews and only mediocre sales, he sank into a writer’s block of legendary proportions. The story of his aborted second novel – in which he attempted a portrayal of a Midwestern, “American” proletariat, rather than continue working with his

autobiographical strengths - has been frequently analyzed. [see Lyons, Roth, *Shifting Landscapes*, Bronsen, Dickstein, etc.] Roth ultimately overcame his writer's block by turning back to his own roots in his multi-volume epic, *Mercy of a Rude Stream* (1994-1996), which tells the story of the youth and adolescence of a David Schearl-like character. However it took Roth almost 60 years to find his way back to that story.

In the mid-1930s, Roth was not alone in turning to the American heartland. Dozens of other writers and artists were reexamining America during these years. In his discussion of visual arts in the 1930's, Matthew Baigell noted that the economic collapse created a new cultural dynamic:

the imperatives of place, politics, social change, and history replaced individual consciousness as sources of artistic motivation. Once again, art was to become a vehicle for recording things more permanent and concrete than moments of personal experience, insight, and feeling. [Baigell, 18]

For some writers this meant responding to the Depression with ever-louder calls for the end of capitalism. However as David Peeler has pointed out,

accompanying such criticisms was an ever-growing inclination to discover and celebrate some thing that could lead humans through the calamity, and that would guide them past the destitution almost automatically. [Peeler, 2-3]

In fact, the collapse of the American economy was so large and stretched into so many corners of American life, Richard Pells said “The Depression was frequently seen as something more than an economic problem. Institutions had ceased to function. Men lived in a continuing feeling of fatigue, despair, and failure.” [Pells, 97] The response, as Peeler, Pells, Cooney, and others, have outlined, encouraged two major trends in American culture. In a reappraisal of Twenties modernism, America moved away from a notion of art and literature as purely self-expression. In Pells’ words, the Twenties had produced “Pure fiction and poetry [that] were seen as ends in themselves, beyond the need for any extra literary justification – beyond the need even to communicate with an uninitiated public.” [Pells, 37]

According to Wendy Smith’s history of the Group Theatre, the rejection of these values was sometimes swift and immediate. Within weeks of the crash, Harold Clurman, Lee Strasberg, and Cheryl Crawford held meetings to work on a new aesthetic. According to Smith, the group “weighed the boisterous individualism of the Twenties and found it lacking: it asserted that any art worthy of the

name must have a living connection with the world around it.” [Smith,

9] As Richard Pells put the same idea,

The depression itself encouraged the conviction that human problems would never be solved by the individual alone – indeed that an emphasis on personal liberation and self-expression might be positively harmful in the context of a national disaster. [Pells, 114-5]

According to Pells, this rejection of individuality was accompanied by

“a renewed reverence for America.” [Pells, 199]

Terry Cooney observed that the move towards contemplation of a broader national portrait was linked to the perception that the

Depression had struck a blow at the ideology of individual success:

If the experience of economic depression raised questions about family relationships and individual success, it led at the same time to a broader contemplation of the nation’s development and of American identity. If intellectuals of the thirties entertained ideas about the radical reconstruction of society, they worried as well about liberties and legacies that might be lost. [Cooney, xiii]

With the election of Franklin Roosevelt, the search for an ideology that could lead the country through the crisis became an official government policy.

In his inaugural address, in addition to warning against “fear itself,” Roosevelt blamed the crisis on “money changers” guilty of “selfish wrongdoing” in the pursuit of “mere monetary profit.” He

called for the application of more “noble” “social values.” In language reminiscent of Susan Warner’s focus on sentimental value, Roosevelt called for a recognition of “our interdependence on each other,” and a “recognition of the old and permanently important manifestations of the American spirit of the pioneer.” “The people of the United States have not failed,” he concluded. [Roosevelt]

Less than two weeks later, in his first “Fireside Chat,” even the references to “money changers” had been eliminated in favor of a description of a banking system based on “cooperation.” “Your bank” needs “the cooperation of the public” in order to “keep the wheels of industry and agriculture turning,” Roosevelt explained. “Together,” he predicted, “We cannot fail.” [Roosevelt, *Fireside Chats*, 1-8]

It would be easy to overstate the importance of the rhetoric of a newly elected President: pleas for cooperation are among the tropes of the genre. This particular rhetoric bears close examination however, because, as Terry Cooney noted, “Roosevelt was not speaking to the public through some intermediate audience at a convention.” His fireside chats, were carried directly into more than 12 million homes through the new medium of radio. [Cooney, 39]

The desire for direct contact with the people ran both ways. As he was setting up the economic relief structures that would be at the heart of The New Deal, Harry Hopkins wanted an unmediated view of the conditions and attitudes of the country. He organized a group of reporters, drawing from the professions of social work and journalism, and sent them out into the country to gather information. Setting up a system that would make the reports confidential, Hopkins made clear that he hoped to get unvarnished reality.

“I don’t want statistics from you. I don’t want the social-worker angle. I just want your own reactions, as an ordinary citizen. Go and talk with preachers and teachers, businessmen, workers, farmers. Go talk with the unemployed, those who are on relief and those who aren’t; and when you talk with them don’t ever forget that but for the grace of God, you, I, and any of our friends might be in their shoes. Tell me what you see and hear. All of it. Don’t ever pull your punches.” [Bauman, 1]

The reports to Hopkins are part of a trend towards finding a “true” America. As early as 1931, journalist Adela St. Rogers borrowed a wardrobe from MGM and set out with 10 cents to write about unemployed women for the Los Angeles Times. Harvey Swados listed over twenty titles from books designed to discover America to itself, including Louis Adamic’s *My America*, Erskine Caldwell’s *Some American People*, and the WPA collection *These Are Our Lives*. This is

the tour guide trope writ large, revealing to reader's what Erskine Caldwell insisted was "unknown and unseen." [Swados, 136]

William Stott labeled this trend "the documentary motive" [Stott, 4] and described it as "America's awakening to itself as a culture." [Stott, 103] Terry Cooney located one part of this shift in the work of cultural anthropologist Constance Rourke. [Cooney, 108] America had previously valued itself in terms of expansion, Manifest Destiny and economic growth. With this identity seemingly in ruins, an ideology that valued folk culture, what Stott called "the actual, unimagined experience of individuals," provided a sense of direction and hope.

However, an important point of Stott's discussion of the documentary aesthetic was his rejection of the concept of unvarnished truth. Stott argued that it took "enormous imaginative labor" to get at reality. [Stott, 220] The importance of this imaginative labor could be seen in the documentary's choice of subject matter. As part of the effort to create "visions of a more cohesive, more romantic, or more purposeful past," Terry Cooney pointed out, artists and writers re-examined rural America. [Cooney, 24]

Industrializing America had long been focused on the virtues of its disappearing farmers. The idealized and sentimental views of Susan Warner had been updated by some of the small town portraits in Horatio Alger, and reverence for rural America had been the centerpiece of Charles Loring Brace's work with slum children. In the 1920s, Henry Ford had constructed a life-sized tribute to small town America, "Greenfield Village," in order to "help America take a step towards the saner and sweeter idea of life," in the past. [Watkins, 10] While Ford's creation of an idealized past was clearly a personal response to the industrialization he had helped bring about, it is part of a broader trend. As Marcus Klein has described such views, "the past of the tradition did not contain time at all, but was antagonistic to change." [Klein, 8] Rarely had American culture offered a portrait of rural life that was not subject to such idealization. As a result there were few portraits of rural poverty.

In fact, American agriculture had been in economic crisis for decades. While Americas cities were swelling with immigrants from overseas, they were also absorbing emigrant farmers forced to leave the land to make a living. According to Watkins, some 71,000 farms failed between 1910 and 1930. While the country in general was

experiencing an economic boom, farmers were struggling to survive. The abandonment of rural lifestyles is especially vast among African-Americans, as a million move to Northern cities between 1915 and 1928. Racism rather than economics certainly fueled much of this movement, but Richard Wright described the lives of black farmers in gaunt economic terms:

we who raise cotton to clothe the nation do not have handkerchiefs to wipe the sweat from our brows, do not have mattresses to sleep on; we need shirts, dresses, sheets, drawers, table cloths. When our cotton returns to us – after having been spun and woven and dyed and wrapped in cellophane – its cost is beyond our reach. [Wright, 56]

Harlem Renaissance writers like Nella Larsen and Claude McKay contrasted the possibilities for sophistication and comfort in Northern cities with the poverty and oppression of the South's agricultural economy, Wright would personalize this portrait in his autobiography, *Black Boy* (1945). As we have seen, much of this fiction centered on the racism of the South, however, rural African Americans, and farmers generally, faced serious economic strains. The depression accelerated the eroding position of the small farmer. Between 1929 and 1933, 60,000 farmers lost their land to mortgage foreclosures. According to John Bauman and Thomas Cooke, one fourth of

Mississippi's farms were auctioned off in a single day in 1932.

[Bauman, 3]

America's persistent ideology of inevitable prosperity required that poverty be explained in terms of individual failure. Though this moralist view of economics had been challenged by the realists of the late 19th century, it remained an important tool for America's self image. It offered an opportunity to limit the image of poverty to a small corner of American culture, and to explain it away without disrupting the overall ideology inherent in that culture. As Terry Cooney summed up this phenomenon:

Judging joblessness and need as moral failings helped to maintain particular value constructions and to avoid doubts about the economic system. [Cooney, 2]

By the mid 1930s it was no longer possible to maintain this value construction. A series of drought years had destroyed agriculture across much of America's southern plains. This was the area that held onto a lifestyle most closely associated with the Jeffersonian ideal of the yeoman family farm. The hardest hit state, Oklahoma, represented America's last attempt to codify that ideal in the Homestead Act. As James Gregory has put it:

The struggles of the Dust Bowl migrants seemed to suggest a pathetic failure of the American Dream, a failure of all the

promises of opportunity that formed its vital core, a failure which if true confirmed Americans' worst fears about the meaning of their Depression-era experience. [Gregory, xiv]

The struggle to reconcile America's iconic image of the farmer with the economic catastrophe that was befalling him is at the center of much of the cultural work of the 1930s. In some cases, the ideology that marked the poor as an inferior "other" could still be seen. In the work of Erskine Caldwell, for example, the poor are frequently seen as the "deformed, starved and diseased" of America. In *Some American People*, he describes them as living like animals "who strip leaves off trees, dig roots out of the earth and snare whatever animals they can," then makes his largely urban, educated readership complicit in the description by claiming "These are the men, women, and children that many urban residents deny exist." [Caldwell in Swados, 133]

William Stott argued that Caldwell was doing more to reveal his own preconceptions than "the texture of reality." [Stott, 128] In analyzing Caldwell's collaboration with photographer Margaret Bourke-White, Stott pointed out that pictures that appear to be candid portraits of suffering actually result from Bourke-White's practice of patiently waiting until her subject adapted the properly forlorn

expression. Similarly, captions that appear to represent the words of the photographs' subjects were actually written by Caldwell and express his own idea of what the people must have been thinking. Stott criticized these practices while appreciating that they are extensions of the entire culture's inability to look clearly at poverty:

Caldwell himself did the tenants violence in his text, disparaged their lives and possessions – but he did so because he knew his readers would and knew that to convince them other wise would take enormous imaginative labor on his part and theirs and undermine his polemical purpose. [Stott, 220]

Stott recognized that the practice of imposing an ideological lens onto reality was inevitable, and was far more accepting of the practice when he found the particular lens less offensive. For example, he praised the work of Dorothea Lange and Paul Taylor, saying their

dry, almost truculent, tone is both more credible and more seemly than the abject despair Caldwell and Bourke-White forced on their subjects. It is a shield against despair; it shows a people still in command, prideful, unvanquished:

Bakhtin discussed the necessity of working within the framework of an existing discourse. It is impossible, he noted, for meaning to exist outside such pre-existing ideas.

The linguistic significance of a given utterance is understood against the background of language, while its actual meaning is understood against the background of other concrete utterances on the same theme, a background made up of contradictory opinions, points of view and value judgements –

that is, precisely that background that, as we see, complicates the path of any word towards its object. [Bakhtin, 281]

Bakhtin pointed out that the “contradictory opinions, points of view, and value judgements” that make up this “heteroglossia” are not created equal. Some are “organically connected with a past that is felt to be hierarchically higher.” These “authoritative ideas and opinions gain their authority by virtue of having been accepted as true and valid in the past.” They represent, for Bakhtin, the “prior discourse” that all new discourse must contend with. [Bakhtin, 342]

Caldwell and Bourke-White’s work *You Have Seen Their Faces* represents a heteroglossic attempt to view America. The author’s focus a wide variety of discursive strategies on a small sample of American society, thereby raising that group to paramount importance. For Jacob Riis photography was primarily used to illustrate his text. Though in many ways his photographs have become more important conduits for his ideas than his journalism, they were meant to be subservient to the text. For Caldwell and Bourke-White, as well as for Lange and Taylor in their volume *An American Exodus*, there was no intention of separating photography and prose. Theirs is an inherently “heteroglossic” text. They blend stark, emotionally charged photographs with descriptions of rural poverty written in the

dialect of the rural south, historical explanation, economic analysis, narrative case study, and explication of photographic technique.

While some of their material angered critics – Walker Evans accused Bourke-White of photographing her own conceptions of poverty, for example – Alan Trachtenberg praised the “fictionality” of the work. Their goal, according to Trachtenberg, was not a record of “objective fact” but a work that would “bring viewers directly into the scene instead of leaving them outside, untouched.” [Trachtenberg, foreword, Caldwell, Bourke-White, vii]

In order to do that *You Have Seen Their Faces* refused to challenge some of its reader’s preconceptions of poverty. Their characters speak in quaintly non-grammatical English:

“My husband done took himself away last year, and the chickens whipped me out of all my corn.” [Caldwell, Bourke White, caption, JOHN’S MISSISSIPPI]

“It never felt much like Sunday until I picked my guitar some.” [Caldwell, Bourke White, caption, MARSHAL, ARKANSAS]

They are dirty and ragged [see page 243] and religious to the point of hysteria. [see page 244] They are ignorant and casually



"Sometimes I tell My Husband we couldn't be worse
off if we tried." HAPPY HOLLOW, GEORGIA.

Caldwell, Bourke White

You Have Seen Thier Faces

© Jonathan B. White



"We've got a first-class God." COLLEGE GROVE TENNESSEE.

Caldwell, Bourke White,
You Have Seen Their Faces

© Jonathan B. White

violent: There was nothing like a lynching to put the fear of God into Negroes.” [Caldwell, Bourke White, 32]

It is also true, however, that they are hard working, proud and family oriented [see page 246] Perhaps most importantly, they are both black and white. Racism within the groups notwithstanding, Caldwell and Bourke-White showed approximately equal levels of poverty, community, pride and degradation in both black and white subjects.

The combination of discourses in *Faces* is evident on almost every page. It builds on the moralistic view of poverty by adjusting the voice of the tour guide. In this case, the poor are not wholly mysterious (you have seen their faces) but this new work promises to take its middle-class, urban, educated readership beyond the surface. At the same time *Faces* borrows elements of the ideology of the yeoman farmer’s hardworking independence and refusal to be absorbed into the twentieth-century economy of consumerism.



"We manage to get along." HAMILTON ALABAMA
Caldwell, Bourke-White
You Have Seen Their Faces
© Jonathan B. White

This view of the South had been given intellectual weight in the early thirties as a group of poets and writers designated as The New Agrarians argued that the states of the former confederacy represented the last, best spirit of America:

for it was the South, not the industrial Northeast, that still retained a manner of living in which grace, leisure, spiritual, and aesthetic experience were possible. [*I'll Take My Stand*, viii]

The image of the Southern gentleman combined with the extreme suffering brought about by agriculture's economic crisis to create an atmosphere in which the displaced southern farmers were viewed as the iconic victims of the Depression, victimized by both the collapse of an industrial order they had bravely resisted, and a force of nature beyond their control. While this image was in direct contrast to the bestial desperation portrayed by Caldwell in *Tobacco Road* and the compromised aristocracy of Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County, it fed a growing idealization of America's imagined rural past.

This is the image that Paul Taylor and Dorothea Lange build in their work. *An American Exodus*, published in 1939, but based on work for the FSA that began in 1935, is heteroglossic in ways that are similar to *We Have Seen Their Faces*. Taylor and Lange introduce the

book as resting “upon a tripod of photographs, captions, and text.”

[Lange, 6] However, they offered a more unified portrait of the dust bowl’s victims than Caldwell and Burke-White because they were completely comfortable with the emerging portrait of the impoverished farmer as representative American.

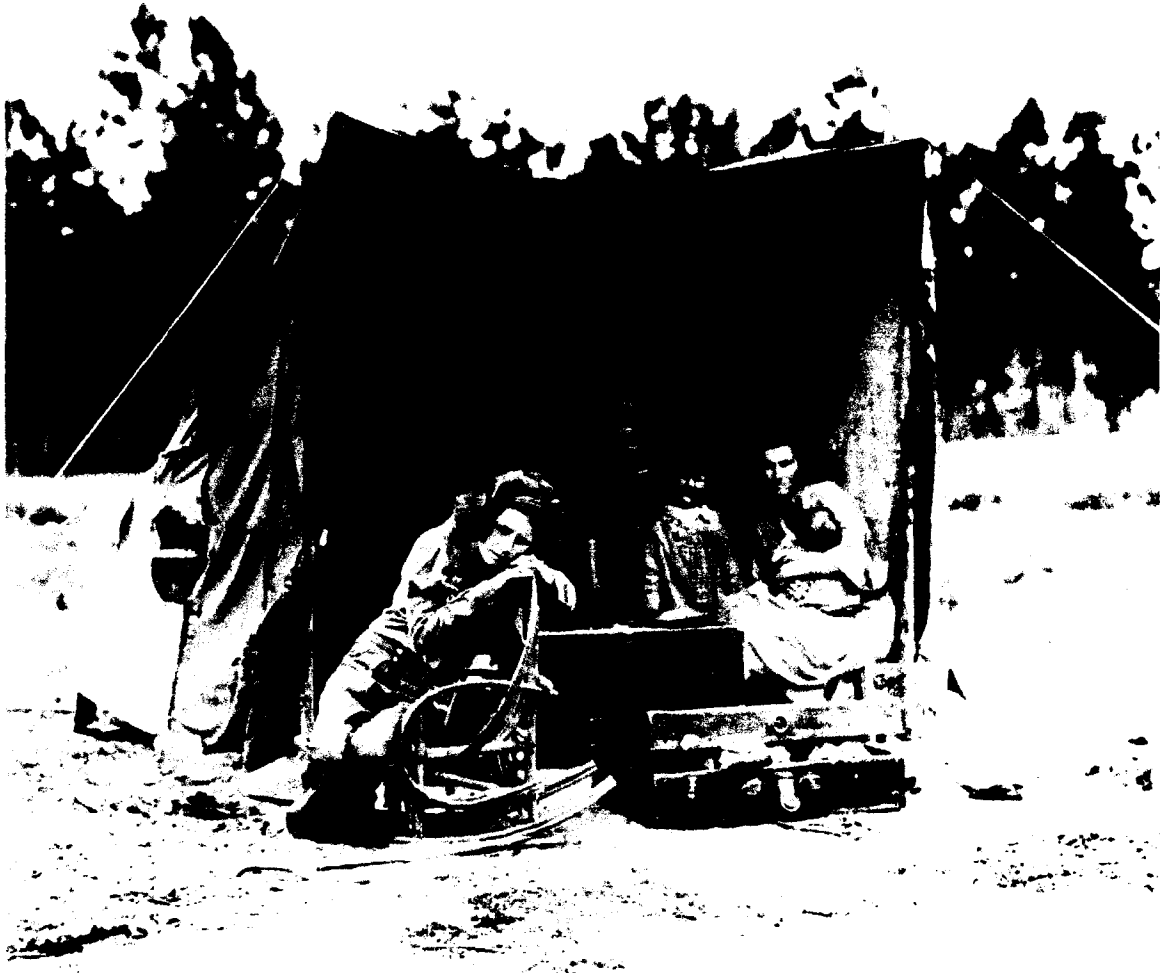
Lange and Taylor began working together in 1935, shortly after Lange first stepped out of her successful portrait studio in San Francisco to photograph the cities burgeoning homeless population. Taylor was a labor economist who had been working among California’s migrant farm workers for years, gathering personal narratives and photographs to document the need for government intervention. They began working together for the Farm Security Administration (FSA), supplementing Taylor’s research with Lange’s photographs. Their reports supported Taylor’s proposal that the FSA establish a series of model migrant camps to replace the squalid squatter encampments. Recently renamed Hoovervilles, these temporary gatherings of homeless farm workers had plagued California’s agricultural regions for more than a decade.

Carol Shloss observed that Lange’s lack of field experience did not hinder her ability to work with Taylor’s ideas because she quickly

began “to assume attitudes and photographic goals consonant with Taylor’s economic analysis and recommendations.” [Shloss, 206] The affect of this can be seen in Lange’s most famous photograph, which has come to be known by the title “Migrant Mother.” Lange and Taylor investigated the suffering of farm workers near Nipoma California, where twelve hundred migrants had gathered to harvest the pea crop in the spring of 1935. The fact that only 600 would get jobs was rendered moot when heavy rains destroyed the crop, rendering all 1200 unemployed. Lange took six photographs of Florence Thompson and her children in a dilapidated canvas lean-to. With each shot, Lange narrowed the frame of the picture, slowly shutting out the muddy fields, the tent, the cooking utensils, and zeroing in on Thompson’s strong, weather-beaten face. [see pages 250 and 251]

As Charles Shindo pointed out, the effect of the close up was to render Ms. Thompson (whose identity Lange did not bother to record) less an individual and more an idea.

The essence Lange captured that day was not the specific documentation of a unique situation, that of a failed pea crop and the effects it had on the Thompson family; rather she captured a powerful image of victimization, an image of the challenges imposed on motherhood in depressed times... [Shindo, 51]



"Migrant agricultural worker's family. Seven hungry children. Mother aged thirty two. Father is native Californian. Nipomo, California."

courtesy of The Dorothea Lange Collection,
Oakland Museum of California



"Migrant Mother"
courtesy of The Dorothea Lange Collection,
Oakland Museum of California

Pare Lorenz found this quality to be the key to Lange's success as a photographer:

“she has selected with an unerring eye. You do not find in her portrait gallery the bindle-stiffs, the drifters, the tramps, the unfortunate, aimless dregs of a country.” [Stott, 58]

David Peeler argued that many of the photographers of the period attempted to use their work to bolster preconceived ideas:

The documentary photographers set out to find “reality,” and a good portion of the “reality” that they captured managed to validate their own political positions. [Peeler, 96]

What is important here is not that FSA photographers supported the work of the New Deal, but that they contributed to a new image of the poor. As Terry Cooney put it,

The photographic reports, then, created a version of reality that was far from neutral. There was scant room in this reality for sponging relief recipients lacking initiative and character, or for maliciousness and deceit.... the tenants and especially the migrants generally offered to the reader shared a presumably characteristic American affinity for hard work and self-reliance, though their prospects had been stunted by the entrapments of their condition. [Cooney, 181]

The failure of these farmers to succeed not only did not disqualify them as Americans, as it would have in an earlier period, it is used to authenticate them as Americans.

For *An American Exodus*, Lange and Taylor focused on the plight of the Dust Bowl refugees moving to California in the mid-thirties. Taylor estimated that 300,000 emigrants entered California between 1935 and 1939. [Lange and Taylor, 144] While James Gregory has shown that this represents only a modest increase over the previous decade, the plight of these farmers became synonymous with Depression suffering in the second half of the decade, in part through the work of Lange and Taylor.

An American Exodus arranged its “tripod of text captions, and photographs in a method similar to that Lange used to capture her image of Ms. Thompson. All three modes of portrayal move in from a wide angle, opening up with a discussion of agriculture in the South, narrowing the focus to cotton cultivation, then to tenant farmers in the areas affected by the Dust Bowl, and , finally, those displaced farmers who were moving west. This gives the work a kind of narrative focus. The direction and ideology are foreshadowed by the cover photograph and caption “Covered Wagon 1939 Style,” while the book culminates with the encapsulated first person narrative of Ma Burnham.

Displaced from both her land and her family, she tells her story matter-of-factly: “If you see my grandsons in California tell ‘em you met up with Ma Burnham of Conroy, Arkansas.” [Lange and Taylor, 150] The picture accompanying her story shows a woman of calm dignity, simply dressed meeting the camera’s eye with modest self-assurance. We see both simple curtains, and unpainted boards of the wall behind her. The text and photo combine to form a portrait of deprivation without degradation. [see page 255]

Throughout, Taylor’s text offers “sturdy communities of working families.” [Lange and Taylor, 85] He tells us of “a surprising morale in the midst of misery, and a will to work. These people are not hand picked failures.” [Lange and Taylor, 148] The vast majority of Lange’s photos show people working, traveling west to find work, or resting from work. No one is drunk or dissolute or even strange looking.



"Ma Burnham"

Dorothea Lange

American Exodus. 151

© The Dorothea Lange Collection,
Oakland Museum of California, City of Oakland,
gift of Paul S. Taylor

Lange and Taylor's work did not sell well. In his afterword to the 1999 edition, Henry Mayer explained that one reason for the poor sales was the book's publication after Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*. Sam Stouridge, in the Introduction to the same edition, pointed out that some reviewers saw *Exodus* as "Steinbeck in pictures." [Lange, cxii] Stating the connection in that way is unfair, because Lange and Taylor's work predates Steinbeck's interest in migrant workers.

Though his novel was published for a mainstream audience before *An American Exodus*, Lange and Taylor's volume was based on years of reports they had completed for the FSA. Steinbeck became familiar with their work as part of his preparation for *The Grapes of Wrath* and their influence can be seen in that text's image of the poor.

Steinbeck's third novel, *Tortilla Flat* (1935) was the first book of his to deal with the lives of the poor. However, *Tortilla Flat* is an escapist fantasy, a retelling of Arthurian legend set in the Mexican ghetto of Monterey. In many ways it relies on the moralist view of poverty of the Nineteenth Century, though Steinbeck ironically identifies with their irresponsibility and freedom. Danny and his

friends, the paisanos, are dissolute, lazy, debauched drunkards who think of little more than how to get their next gallon of wine. They reject America's ideology of success and form a loose, amoral community with no use for conventional ideas about family or domesticity. As a result, they must be set outside the mainstream of American culture, living in a ghetto of their own making.

The twist that Steinbeck adds to this portrayal is that *Tortilla Flat* portrays these behaviors in a positive light. In a parody of Thoreau's retreat from the commercialism of Boston, the paisanos are seen as happy in their separation from American culture. As Sylvia Cook has put it, their poverty is "not merely endurable, but even attractive and healthy." [Cook, 127]

Steinbeck claimed the paisanos were based on real people, "people I know and like," and that the stories that make up the adventures of Danny and his friends were "true stories." [Steinbeck, *Tortilla Flat*, xiii-xiv] Steinbeck was familiar with the working people of the area around Salinas, California, having spent summers working on ranches and in the sugar beet mill where his father was a manager. During the years prior to the success of *Tortilla Flat* he had occasionally worked as a carpenter's helper, a laborer, an assistant

ship's steward, and a warehouse worker. However he also received an allowance from his father, who reluctantly supported his writing ambitions after Steinbeck left Stanford. While supported by his father, Steinbeck "relished the bohemian image of himself," and spent time wandering among the cannery workers in Monterey, gathering material for *Tortilla Flat* and later novels. Clearly, however, he was an outside observer of poverty. [Parini, 87]

It was not until his marriage to Carol and the success of *Tortilla Flat* that Steinbeck attempted to get inside the world of poverty. Jay Parini emphasized the effect of Carol's political views on Steinbeck's career:

Given that the main public impression of John Steinbeck remains that of a man of conscience, an engaged writer who wanted to correct injustices, it is extremely interesting that so few signs of this development appear before Carol steps into the picture. [Parini, 89]

It is through Carol and her friend Sis Reamer that Steinbeck was introduced to famous muckraker Lincoln Steffens and his wife, the labor activist Ella Winters. However, even within this circle of liberal activists, Steinbeck "remained emotionally uninvolved." [Benson, *True Adventures*, 296] However, after Steinbeck met two fugitive labor organizers forced into hiding by their involvement in the cotton strike

of 1933, he began work on the novel that would become *In Dubious Battle*.

This second account of the lives of poor workers in California could hardly be more different from *Tortilla Flat*, in part because in this case Steinbeck utilized some of the tropes of realism. As Sylvia Cook pointed out, the poor of *Tortilla Flat* never clean Danny's house, but the result is pleasantly dusky, but

when the "bums " of *In Dubious Battle* go without washing, they smell bad, their untended camp looks bedraggled and littered their latrines become unsanitary, and no advantages whatsoever attend their laxness. [Cook, 128]

According to Louis Owens, Steinbeck was careful not to make the strikers admirable. They are at times "cowardly, envious, lazy and cruel," while the wealthy farm owners are "ruthless, cruel and greedy. [Owens, *Re-Vision*, 92] Steinbeck made it clear that he was not taking sides. For him the strike was simply a plot device. In a letter to his agent, he denied any real interest in the strike as a socio-economic event:

I'm not interested in the strike as a means of raising men's wages, and I'm not interested in ranting about justice and oppression, mere outcroppings which indicate the condition. [Owens, *Revision*, 92]

Steinbeck claimed he was attempting to study the nature of group man in an objective manner, non-teleologically. He uses the character of Doc Burton, named after the actual physician who supervised hygiene for the cotton strikers in 1933, to voice theories of the tension between the individual and the group. Despite his intentions, his book was seen as championing the cause of farm workers.

Though his workers were dirty and selfish, his organizers manipulative and dishonest, and his plot converted what strikers considered a great victory into a violent and chaotic defeat, *In Dubious Battle* was generally received as a realistic and sympathetic account of the struggle of farm workers in California. It was as a result of this novel that George West of *The San Francisco News* asked Steinbeck to write about migrant laborers and liberal politician Helen Gahagan Douglas asked him to support an investigation of farm worker living conditions that for a time went by the name "The Steinbeck Commission." [Steinbeck, *Working Days*, 149]

It is ironic that Steinbeck emerged as an authentic spokesperson for the poor based on *In Dubious Battle* given that Steinbeck made certain that the characters in his novel differed in important ways from

the actual farm workers that were his model. though his actual research into the lives of migrants was just beginning, Steinbeck had been witness to the deprivation of agricultural workers for years. Simply living near Salinas had introduced him to the image of families living in tents by the side of the road. Through his interviews with the fugitives, Steinbeck became more familiar with the poor as a community. Jackson Benson has exhaustively catalogued the details from the historical events of mid-30's California that Steinbeck used in *In Dubious Battle*. The violence used against farmworkers, the partnership of Mac and Jim, the layout of the striker's camp, the name of the supervising Doctor, and the picketing techniques of the strikers all bear close resemblance to the corresponding facts of the Cotton strike of 1933.

However Benson, Abby Werlock and Louis Owens have also detailed the differences between Steinbeck's novel and the strike that inspired it. The changes Steinbeck made are not random changes chosen for narrative flow or to clarify character. They fall into patterns that change the ideology of the account of the strike in ways that bring it closer to an image of American farmers that Steinbeck's readers, and American culture generally, would be comfortable with.

For example, Steinbeck changed the role of women in his story. The neophyte Jim replaces the strike leader Caroline Decker, an experienced “fiery, eloquent” woman. [Werlock, 48] Jackson Benson pointed out that a significant number of women were involved in the strike, often taking leadership roles in picketing and other forms of protest. For Abby Werlock, the removal of women was consistent with Steinbeck’s overall aims:

Steinbeck was using the image of woman in his novel to underscore and amplify mythical allusions and perhaps even to subvert some of them. It would therefore have been inappropriate to include women among the plotting, violent, and fanatic men. [Werlock, 48]

The only prominent female character in *In Dubious Battle* is Lisa, who gives birth in the beginning of the novel. She is a quiet, unassuming presence who spends much of the novel nursing her baby. Her only opinions have to do with her hopes of someday living in a small house and owning a cow: “I like to have butter an’ cheese,” she tells Jim. [Steinbeck, *In Dubious Battle*, 182] At a time when unemployment among men was disrupting the family structure and women were often stepping into the role of primary provider, Steinbeck changed the history of the strike to make his female

character an emblem of the domesticity the farm workers were denied but, like all true Americans, long for.

In his contemporary study of California agriculture, *Factories in the Field*, Carey McWilliams made it clear that the migrant farm workers of California were ethnically and racially diverse. In fact, the white migrants from the southern dust bowl region were a distinct minority. According to McWilliams, 93.2% of celery workers were Mexican or Mexican-American. [McWilliams, 240] During a strike near Steinbeck's home of Salinas that took place while he was writing *In Dubious Battle*, 700 Filipino strikers were arrested and held in a stockade that California law referred to as a "concentration camp." [McWilliams, 236] Louis Owens summed up this disparity by saying that "It is difficult to believe that Steinbeck was not aware of the key role" that went to women and non-white farm workers.

Steinbeck's fictional picture serves to reinforce the ideology of the dominant social stratum in the country in the 1930's, a stratum composed primarily of white males. [Owens, "Writing in Costume," 90]

Steinbeck used these changes to avoid clashing with the gender and racial prejudices of his readers. However, Steinbeck's characters differ from that "dominant social stratum" in that they are poor,

unemployed, and involved in radical union activity. By attaching a new discourse – in which farm workers fight starvation and appear to be losing – to an existing, authoritative discourse – one which privileges white families dominated by men who work the land – Steinbeck was legitimizing an ugly view of persistent poverty by lending it some of the authority of that prior discourse.

Despite complaints from some radicals that his portrait was unfair and unrealistic, Steinbeck's success with *In Dubious Battle* raised his profile among liberals concerned with the plight of farm workers. In August of 1936 he was commissioned by *The San Francisco News* to write a series of articles on migrant farm workers. This series, later published as a pamphlet, helped prepare Steinbeck to write *The Grapes of Wrath* three years later.

Jackson Benson has argued about *Grapes*: "For many Americans born since the thirties, it symbolizes The Great Depression." [Benson, *True Adventures*, 334] This linking of fiction and fact is part of the legacy of the novel. Robert DeMott has observed that throughout its history, "*The Grapes of Wrath* has been less judged as a novel than as a sociological event, a celebrated political cause, or a factual case study." [DeMott, Foreword, Steinbeck, *Working Days*] It is important

to recognize that some of the symbolic power of *Grapes* stems from its acceptance as socio-political fact, which is based in part on its origins as non-fiction.

After agreeing to write for *The San Francisco News* Steinbeck contacted Eric Thompson, an ex-preacher who was Director of the Migrant Camp Program for the FSA and they traveled south, visiting both squatter's camps and the government model camp at Arvin. Several model "sanitary" camps had been opened as a result of Lange and Taylor's reports to the FSA the previous year.

In a letter written at the time, Steinbeck showed some of his joy at the simple pleasures of poverty that had dominated *Tortilla Flat*:

we sat in the ditches with the migrant workers, lived and ate with them. We heard a thousand miseries and a thousand jokes. We ate fried dough and sowbelly, worked with the sick and the hungry, listened to complaints and little triumphs. [Benson, "The Background" 57]

Using these experiences, statistical information provided by Thompson, and reports prepared by Tom Collins, director of the sanitary camp at Arvin, Steinbeck described the plight of farm workers quite different in character from the angry, bedraggled strikers of *In Dubious Battle*.

The articles revive the “tour guide” voice so familiar to the early “mystery and misery” exposés of the urban slums. “Let us see what kind of people they are,” Steinbeck suggests before describing a “typical” family. [Steinbeck, *Harvest Gypsies*, 991] “Let us see what a typical [squatter camp] is like,” before leading us into the hovel of such a family. While such rhetorical flourishes are familiar, the use they are put to by Steinbeck is different from that of Dickens or Riis. Steinbeck is offering us a privileged view, not of something foreign and mysterious, but of the revered and familiar. Steinbeck repeatedly stresses the iconic American qualities of the migrants:

They are small farmers who have lost their farms, or farm hands who have lived with the family in the old American way. They are men who have worked hard on their own farms and have felt the pride of possessing and living in close touch with the land. [Steinbeck, *Harvest Gypsies*, 993]

They are resourceful and intelligent Americans... [Steinbeck, *Harvest Gypsies*, 993]

They are descendants of men who crossed into the middle west, who won their lands by fighting, who cultivated the prairies and stayed with them until they went back to desert...they are not migrants by nature [Steinbeck, *Harvest Gypsies*, 993]

These are American people. [Steinbeck, *Harvest Gypsies*, 994]

In short, they are Jefferson’s yeoman farmers, rendered almost unrecognizable by poverty.

Though Lange and Taylor had not yet published *An American Exodus*, Steinbeck paved the way for their conclusion: “These people are not hand-picked failures.” [Lange and Taylor, 148] However, throughout their work for the FSA, and for *An American Exodus*, Lange and Taylor made it clear that their subjects were diverse: “American whites, ...Chinese, Japanese, Koreans, Negroes, Hindustanis, Mexicans, Filipinos.” [Lange and Taylor, 148] By contrast, Steinbeck’s “gypsies” are more homogenous:

The names of the new migrants indicate that they are of English, German, and Scandinavian descent. There are Munns, Holbrooks, Hansens, Schmidts. [Steinbeck, *Harvest Gypsies*, 994]

Steinbeck presents his focus on white migrants as a foreshadowing of the future of California agriculture:

Foreign labor is on the wane in California, and the future farm workers are to be white and American. This fact must be recognized and a rearrangement of the attitude toward and treatment of migrant labor must be achieved. [Steinbeck, *Harvest Gypsies*, 1019]

This “rearrangement of attitude” is the project of *The Grapes of Wrath*. Carol Shloss described Steinbeck’s writing as “popular interpretations of the policy papers Taylor had written.” [Shloss, 213] After abandoning his first two attempts to write a novel about migrants, Steinbeck traveled through Washington DC and examined

the files of the FSA, including the 1935 reports of Lange and Taylor. These reports, which Henry Meyer considered rough drafts for *An American Exodus*, were used to convince the FSA to set up the sanitary camps. When Steinbeck returned to California, he got back in touch with Tom Collins, who had helped to organize and manage two of the camps that resulted from Lange and Taylor's work. He again visited camps with Collins, and again borrowed some of Collins's reports to the FSA to use as raw material.

Jackson Benson pointed out that many specific details from *Grapes* began as aspects of Collins's reports. For example,

Grammar's "ancient creaking bleat" in the first part of the book, "Pu raise Gawd fur Vittory! Pu-raise God fur Vittory!" when she hears of Tom Joad's return home from prison, is taken, spelling and all, from Collins' report of the favorite expression of a woman that he employed as his housekeeper. [Benson, "To Tom," 187]

For Tom Collins's housekeeper, that "bleat" may represent the way religion continues to give some sense of meaning to the farm workers, despite the economic disruptions. However, Steinbeck uses the incident to highlight how the chaos of the economic collapse has infiltrated the language of the farm families. The particularly heavy mispronunciations combine with the incongruence of the "vittory" to

further develop a theme Steinbeck has already established: language has begun to lose its ability to convey meaning. Like Melville, Steinbeck explores the relationship between the language of community and the language of economics, and captures the breakdown in that relationship.

When he gets back to his family's homestead, Tom Joad finds it deserted, haunted by Muley Graves, that "damn ol' graveyard ghos." [Steinbeck, *Grapes*, 69] Muley, Tom, and the ex-preacher Casy are forced to hide in the fields while the sheriff checks to see that the farmhouse is kept empty. The crops are growing, the cat and dog are patrolling the property, but this trope of American domesticity has been emptied. The three men, who will sleep in a gully behind the house, seem aware of the deconstruction their ideology is undergoing. Muley Graves suggests that there is no difference between fighting and hiding: "it all just amounts to what you tell yourself." [Steinbeck, *Grapes* 79] Casy picks up on the lack of meaning, though, unlike Muley, he has not given up the search: "We got to get thinkin' about doin' stuff that means somepin' [Steinbeck, *Grapes*, 80]

When Tom is reunited with his family, Ma takes up the search for meaning in a world where signs cannot be trusted, searching Tom's

eyes for “the answer that is always concealed in language.”

[Steinbeck, *Grapes* 103] It is an attitude about language shared by others- “Ever time Pa seen writin’ somebody took somepin away from ‘im.” [Steinbeck, *Grapes* 74] In this context, Grandma’s outburst introduces the emptiness of traditional religious beliefs, which has been centered on the character of Casy, the preacher who “can’t say no grace like I use’ ta.” [Steinbeck, *Grapes*, 110]

This collapse of meaning stems from the loss of the land. Muley Graves voices the feeling that by tractoring families off their farms, the industrialization of agriculture has stripped the act of farming any sense of social and historical signification. Though mortgages can be foreclosed, Muley knows that ownership will not transfer that easily: “There’s the place down by the barn where Pa got gored to death by a bull. An’ his blood is right in that groun’, right now....What they take when they tractored the folks off the lan’? ... they got Pa dyin’ in the groun’” [Steinbeck, *Grapes*, 69-71] Through Muley’s ravings, Steinbeck is reminding readers of the Sentimentalist view of property, that true ownership is built through an emotional connection to the land, and is oblivious to market relations.

Tom is slow to grasp the importance of these changes. Newly released from prison, his idea of freedom is “just puttin’ one foot in front a the other.” [Steinbeck, *Grapes*, 236] Tom seems reluctant to leave prison, where a man has “a few conveniences an’ he eats regular.” [Steinbeck, *Grapes*, 36] His awareness of this simple guarantee is connected to the portrait of the hired tractor hand who is asked to explain his willingness to tractor families off the land: “Get your three dollars a day, feed your kids, You got no call to worry about any kids but your own.” [Steinbeck, *Grapes*, 51] Steinbeck contrasts this clear summary of the condition of the worker in an industrial economy with a similarly clear statement of the ethos of the family farm: “If a man owns a little property, that property is him, its part of him and its like him.” [Steinbeck, *Grapes*, 50]

Louis Owens’s criticism of *In Dubious Battle* – that by ignoring women and non-white strikers, Steinbeck has “ignored the true polyglossia of the phenomena” - bears examination in reference to *The Grapes of Wrath*. Like *In Dubious Battle*, *Grapes* ignores the diversity in its focus on the Joad family. Though Steinbeck used the intercalary chapters to expand the focus of his story to include thousands of men and women displaced by the Depression, these

general chapters mirror the details of the Joad story, so that the focus remains on the "Okie" experience. By focusing the attention on one family, Steinbeck changed the image of the migrants.

In reality, thousands of African-Americans displaced by the crisis in agriculture fled to Northern cities rather than to California. More to the point, less than half of the migrants who did move to California were farmers. According to James Gregory, only 43% of the Southerners who migrated to California in the 1930s were previously engaged in agriculture. Almost a third were professionals or skilled laborers. As a result the majority did not come from the rural farming sectors, but from small cities and towns of the region. [Gregory, 15] Unemployment in Oklahoma was over 20% for most of the decade and this crisis affected every part of the economy. Steinbeck forced that complexity out of the picture to create a portrait of an iconic American farm family.

Meanwhile his text is inherently polyglossic. Steinbeck built on the experiments of modernism to bring a variety of voices to his text. Whereas Dos Passos used the languages of consciousness, journalism, and realist prose to diffuse his narrative into an examination of a wide variety of American experiences, Steinbeck has used a similar

technique to very different effect. His intercalary chapters, which he referred to as “generals,” utilize nature writing, political rhetoric, economic analysis, prose poetry, photo-realist description, and anecdote. He incorporates the voices of farm workers, bankers, sheriffs, used car salesmen, waitresses, and government bureaucrats. This variety of voices is not used to describe a variety of experiences, or even to flesh out a number of points of view. Rather all these various languages are put to the service of developing and echoing the singular experience of the Joad family.

The Joad family is the Jeffersonian ideal corrupted by twentieth-century economics. The yeoman farmer has been driven from his land, and is unable to be self-sufficient. The Joads fit the requirements Crèvecoeur sets out in “What is an American?” except that they are poor, homeless, dirty and frightened. They are no longer “rewarded by ample subsistence” as Crèvecoeur would have it, but have passed back into that “involuntary idleness, servile dependence, penury, and useless labor,” that America was to have rescued them from.

[Crèvecoeur, 50]

They are, however, not defeated. They do not sink into immorality as do Devil-Bug and Maggie, nor do they succumb to sloth

as did Hurstwood and Nan Grant. The Joads continue because they hold onto the values that previously led to success. The persistence, hard work, generosity and love of nature, the “good habits” that Ellen Montgomery lived by are still important to the Joads, they simply will not lead to success. [Warner, 31] In a world in which even the family farms are run like factories, the fears Jefferson had about great cities are true of rural areas as well. The Joads must search for a new place, where “folks eat the stuff they raise an’ live in the houses they build.” [Steinbeck, *Grapes*, 572]

The place is not a geographical location: as Owens has pointed out, California provides only “the illusion of eden.” [Owens, *Re-Vision*, 129] It is a new form of cooperation and community, most closely associated in the novel with the government camps Steinbeck had studied so closely during his research. As previously noted, Steinbeck’s portrayal of the FSA camp at Weedpatch is noteworthy for its factual accuracy. The description of the layout, the committee structure of self-government, the policy regarding religious revivals, the description of the manager, even the ongoing problems with toilet paper, are all based on Steinbeck’s knowledge of the camp at Arvin and the reports about it written by Tom Collins. As Jackson Benson

put it, "almost every major scene or incident that appears in the camp section of the novel ... has its roots in one or more descriptions in the reports." [Benson, "The Background," 60]

Steinbeck used these chapters to explain the relationship between the Bank of America and the large growers, the prevalence of vigilante violence against farm workers, and the accusation that labor organizers are "reds." He continued to view these factual matters through an ideological lens that offered the farm workers as models for a new kind of democratic community. Increasingly that ideology is associated with Ma Joad because that community will center on domestic values. When Casy selflessly allows his own arrest, Ma becomes the philosophical center of the novel.

The government camp allows migrant farmers like the Joads to re-establish a domestic space. Having shown farmhouses without farm families, Steinbeck now offers a portrait of domesticity without a home. Much of the chapters set in the government camp are centered on cooking, cleaning and personal hygiene. These are no longer private endeavors, since, in addition to the fact that the family has no walls, domesticity is now seen as central to community building.

When Tom sees the young mother nursing her baby, he is not only invited to breakfast, he gets help finding a job. Timothy and Wilkie Wallace bring Tom to their employer even though hiring him will cut down on the work available for themselves. "What you cuttin' your own throat for?" Tom asks them. Timothy's answer is an assertion that community values are more important than consumerist competition: "I dunno. Got no sense I guess. We figgered to get us each a hat. Can't do it I guess." [Steinbeck, *Grapes*, 401]

Back at their tent, Ma is accepting help from Jim Rawley by offering him coffee. The women of the Ladies Committee somewhat comically solve the toilet paper problem through cooperation. Just as when they linked fortunes with the Wilsons to get through the desert, Ma is recognizing that the boundaries of the domestic space are not the walls of the kitchen because "People needs to help." [Steinbeck, *Grapes*, 192]

The vision of the government camp as a domestic space expands from the female centered acts of cooking and cleaning to the Saturday night dance. In the intercalary chapter that precedes the dance we get a panorama of folk culture: story telling, movies, music, dance, and hell-fire preaching are seen as valid cultural expressions.

When the “Entertainment committee” protects the dance it becomes clear that culture is not the product of individual genius, but grows out of the domestic community. [Steinbeck, *Grapes*, 460]

Nellie McKay argued that Steinbeck was offering a “dramatic revision of the frontier patriarchal myth of individual, white-male success through unlimited access to America’s abundant and inexhaustible expanses of land.” [McKay, 51] She made clear that this revision rests on a stereotypical view of women as nurturing mothers. It rests on the trope of sentimental domesticity as well: Ma and the Ladies Committee can establish a protected space where generosity and community can hold off the forces of competition without resorting to the humiliation of charity. “We won’t have no charity,” the committee declares. [Steinbeck, *Grapes*, 431] This committee meeting, which has focused on community issues like charity and bureaucratic issues like toilet paper quotas, ends as a discussion of domestic responsibility: “You ain’t got the right to let your girls go hungry in this camp.” [Steinbeck, *Grapes* 431]

However, Ma is not limited to the stereotypical role that McKay designated as “Happy-Wife-and-Motherdom.” She has taken out a tire iron and threatened to beat her husband when the domestic space of

the family was threatened: "I'll shame you Pa, I won't take no whuppin', crying' an a beggin'. I'll light into you." [Steinbeck, *Grapes*, 230] She defends the ideal of sentimental domesticity even when she has to destroy that ideal's view of women. Recognizing that she carries the domestic within her, she is able to lead the family out of the government camp. It has become too separate from the market. There are no jobs there, and, she reminds Pa, "We can't eat no toilets." [Steinbeck, *Grapes*, 479]

It is during this second period of homelessness that Tom confronts the transcendent nature of freedom when he meets up again with Casy. Tom has previously told Casy that he is mentally still in prison:

I'm just puttin' one foot in front a the other. I done it at Mac for four years, jus marchin' in cell an' out cell an' in mess an' out mess. Jesus Christ, I thought it'd be something' different when I come out! Couldn't think a nothin' in there, else you go stir happy, an' now can't think a nothin'. [Steinbeck, *Grapes*, 236]

Casy's emerging idea of a bigger picture does not yet affect Tom's thinking. If migrant workers in 30's America were marginalized, Tom has internalized that marginalization.

When Tom meets Casy again during the peach strike, Casy is able to express his new idea of freedom. Casy has been to prison in

order to save another man and emerges from this act with a renewed sense of language's potential to communicate meaning. Though he still "talks all the time," it is no longer the lone voice of the preacher. In prison, he says, he learned the importance of talking in concert with others:

One fella started yellin' an nothin' happened...Then another fella yelled. Well, sir, they we all got yellin'. And we all to on the same tone, an' I tell ya, it jus' seemed like that tank bulged an' five and swelled up. By God! Then somepin happened!
[Steinbeck, *Grapes*, 522]

The gathering of men discussing their future is starkly contrasted with the armed camp Tom is living in - Tom has had to sneak past guards and through ditches to go for a walk. In this context, Casy's prison stories call into question the nature of freedom. Similarly, Casy's story of prison solidarity contrasts with the constricted individualism that has guided Tom's actions since his release from prison.

Carol Shloss pointed out that Steinbeck questions the limits economic deprivation places upon freedom throughout the book:

The Grapes of Wrath is about a world that turns the ordinary into the fugitive; it is about an historical period that, in Steinbeck's eyes, inverted the very idea of imprisonment, so that Tom Joad's freedom is no release at all. [Shloss, 223]

This purposeful blurring of the lines between freedom and imprisonment was not original to Steinbeck. Moralists and reformers had long contemplated the ironic freedom they found in order and responsibility and the imprisonment implied in a life tied to dissolution and debauchery. The concept of “wage slavery” is similarly built on the ironic imprisonment that results from the “freedom” workers have to sell their labors.

During the progressive era, socialists expanded that ironic twist to cover a greater swath of American culture than just its factories. In 1913, perpetual Presidential candidate Eugene Debs summed up this ironic concept of freedom in a speech to dock workers:

While there is a lower class, I am in it. While there is a criminal element, I am of it, and while there is a soul in prison, I am not free. [Debs]

It is this lesson that Tom has learned from Casy’s death. Having crawled through the ditch and past the guards to his shack at the peach farm, and then into a small “rabbit hole” of a hiding place, he emerges almost quoting Debs:

Whenever they’s a fight so hungry people can eat, I’ll be there. Whenever they’s a cop beatin’ up a guy, I’ll be there.” [Steinbeck, *Grapes*, 572]

Once again, the changes Steinbeck made when drawing from actual events are important. Steinbeck has taken Debs's sentiments and, in Jackson Benson's words, "Americanized [them] by having Tom speak in Emersonian terms." [Benson, *True Adventures*, 342] The lesson Tom gets from Casy is more transcendentalist than socialist: "Maybe like Casy says, a fella ain't got a soul of his own, but on'y a piece of a big one." [Steinbeck, *Grapes*, 572] These lines not only Americanize Debs, they Americanize Tom. Here is an outlaw, an impoverished murderer and fugitive echoing the dominant spiritual idea of the American Renaissance, declaring himself part of "That Oversoul, within which every man's particular being is contained and made one with all others." [Emerson, 237]

After Tom leaves, the family, as if inspired by his collectivist rhetoric, begins to transcend its own limitations. First they join with another family as they share the boxcar with the Wainwrights. After the stillbirth of Rose of Sharon's child, the boundaries between these families disappear as they struggle to survive in a flood of biblical proportions. When Rose of Sharon offers the starving man her breast in the final scene, the mystery of her smile points us back to the mysteries of Casy's spirituality, a connection beyond words.

Though there was some controversy regarding the sexuality inherent in this closing image, it was also a familiar trope for readers. The nursing mother recalled various Madonna images, but Americans of the 1930s were familiar with the image of nursing mothers from documentary photographers. William Howarth has pointed out that pictures of women nursing babies were popular with FSA photographers. They heightened the emotional appeal of a photograph by associating intimate domestic duties with homelessness. In fact, when Steinbeck's articles from *The San Francisco News* were published as a pamphlet, "Their Blood Is Strong," the cover photo by Dorothea Lange showed a young mother nursing a child in a tent. The shock of Steinbeck's closing image is not the shock of sex, but rather the shock that comes from challenging the boundaries of a discourse. Steinbeck is associating the most sacred image of domesticity, previously the ideology of the middle class, with a husbandless, childless and homeless woman.

Bakhtin makes it clear that it remains difficult to challenge an authoritative discourse:

Language is not a neutral medium that passes freely and easily into the private property of the speaker's intentions; it is populated – overpopulated – with the intentions of others.

Expropriating it, forcing it to submit to one's own intentions and accents, is a difficult and complicated process. [Bakhtin, 294]

Lange, Taylor and Steinbeck expropriated elements of the dominant discourse surrounding farmers and rural life since Crèvecoeur and Jefferson. By doing so they were able to offer a portrait of an American who is a tiller of the soil, independent, sentimentally domestic, hardworking, optimistic, and poor, thus removing some of the stigma of poverty.

Henry Roth utilized the modernist focus on the self to create a portrait that was too intimate to be truly "other." Changes in the demography of America – a truly diverse nation of urban immigrants by 1931 – reinforced David Schearl's familiarity, so that his poverty no longer made him an outsider. As the depression deepened, this trend towards familiarizing the immigrant gave way to a tendency to highlight the fact that iconic Americans, white, Protestant, farm families, were also poor.

Publication of *The Grapes of Wrath* was a cultural event. It sold over 400,000 copies, won the Pulitzer prize, and was made into a major motion picture in less than a year. Nunnally Jackson's

screenplay for the John Ford movie was largely true to the film, though it made at least one significant change. According to Steinbeck, women can survive calamity because their lives flow “like a stream.” [Steinbeck, *Grapes*, 577] In Johnson’s screenplay, it is not only women who can go on, all the poor can survive because, Ma tells us, “We’re the People.” The Joads are not less American for being poor: they are now the model of authentic Americans.

Early tenement tales link prosperity to Americanization. African American authors linked escape from Southern Racism with prosperity. Roth created an intimacy that allowed poor ghetto dwellers to be American, Steinbeck converted poverty into an authenticating device. Having accepted that poor urban immigrants can be Americans, Americans are ready to accept that white farm families can be poor.

Conclusion

Had Thomas Jefferson read *The Grapes of Wrath*, he may well have been shocked. A novel that was not morally didactic, and that included the sexuality and casual lawlessness of the Joads, might have been difficult for Jefferson. The novel's heroic treatment of unpropertied, uneducated migrants may have shocked him as well: ne'er-do-wells that could not even vote may have seemed a poor choice for representative Americans to a mind forged in the eighteenth-century - even that of the author of the Declaration of Independence. On the other hand, Jefferson might well have appreciated the focus on farming. The condemnation of machinery and the chicanery of banks were familiar to him.

While there is a limit to what can be learned from such a speculative exercise, the point is that Steinbeck's work was not a radical break from an American tradition of viewing poverty. While Jefferson's vision of a new revolution every generation has never been realized, there has been a steady evolution in how American culture views the poor. Our ideology of inevitable prosperity and the actual existence of poverty have proven equally stubborn. The tension between the two has resulted in a view of poverty that is continually evolving. American culture regularly rediscovers poverty and re-analyzes that discovery.

The assumption that upstanding republican characters will prosper remained popular throughout the nineteenth-century, despite radically altered socio-economic conditions. As farming became less viable, female laborers entered the mill towns of New England. Ethnic diversity became a challenging social issue, and tensions between increasingly separated classes became commonplace. The rhetoric of upward mobility continued, but was at least temporarily belied by the Panic of 1837.

Within this socio-economic context the domestic sentimental novels, notably Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World* (1850), can be seen as a strategy for ameliorating fears of poverty: domestic happiness and security is made available through a voluntary embrace of poverty which comes without actual deprivation. In contrast, George Lippard's *The Quaker City* (1845) critiqued the emerging class structure, but continued to view economics through a moral lens, blaming the wealthy for the moral and social ills of the city, Lippard also reinforced the ideology of American prosperity with his own vision of a true America that is free of poverty.

Melville's response to sentimental domesticity was more critical than American culture was able to absorb. Whereas Lippard had built his critique upon a sensationalized discourse of morality, Melville's stories and novels were straightforward in their rejection of such a discourse. The images of poverty in *Redburn* (1849), *Pierre* (1852), "Bartleby the Scrivener" (1853), and "Poor Man's Pudding and Rich Man's Crumbs" (1854) document Melville's growing alienation from America's congratulatory rhetoric. He offered a more complex vision that marks failure and poverty as part of the American experience.

Melville's commercial failure was linked not only to his insistence on portraying poverty, but on his inability to make that portrait popular. Following the crash of 1873, the market for such portraits had changed. Factory work and low-wage labor had become the norm for working class America, while fifty years of uninterrupted migration had transformed America's cities into polygot metropolises. The work of Jacob Riis built on Lippard's and Melville's "discovery" of poverty even as it constructed a depiction of poverty as a superficial spectacle of the "the other half." Riis combined the discourse of progressive reform with a reliance on the ethnic stereotyping his readers' found comforting and the cutting edge technology of flash photography to create a portrait of the slum resident that was both progressive and popular.

Stephen Crane capitalized on this popular fascination and offered a view of the slums from the perspective of its inhabitants. In part because he was himself a "tourist" among the poor, his portrait remained superficial and focused as much on the discourse of poverty as on the actual conditions of the poor. Many of the elements seen in earlier views of poverty - linking urbanity, morality and ethnicity - continue to operate even as he portrayed the poor as a distinct class

shaped by social and economic conditions rather than as a collection of fallen individuals.

Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* placed the poor into relationship with the rest of society. The barriers that were highlighted in *Crane* and *Riis* are torn away as we see Carrie and Hurstwood pass through class barriers. These stories of upward and downward mobility echo the situation of *Pierre* and *Redburn*, however, they are imagined within a Realist aesthetic: Hurstwood and Carrie become details in a portrait of class, not individuals suffering Romantic tragedies. Balancing the plot trajectories of these two characters allowed Dreiser to closely examine marriage, sexuality, labor relations and consumerism, and in doing so removed morality as a defining characteristic of poverty.

The Depression of the 1930s was an extension and deepening of the economic troubles that plagued certain regions and industries long before the stock market crashed. Agriculture had been in financial decline for a generation or more, while labor battles going back several decades had left urban factory workers no more secure or independent. The twenties are often remembered as boom years, but for much of America's middle and laboring classes they were a time of economic stress and hardship. The stock market crash defined the

period by making that insecurity and deprivation universal, finally giving the poor a place at the table of American culture.

In *Call It Sleep*, (1934) Henry Roth re-imagined urban life and ethnicity, ignoring the still popular tradition of connecting morality and prosperity. In Roth's work, every aspect of life in the ghetto has been absorbed into the competitive market. Every relationship is defined by a pattern of mutual obligation and a jockeying for material, social, or psychological advantage. David Scheerl operates within this brutal market, but is not entirely defined by it. Roth's ghetto is described with the detail and passion associated with the realist discourse, but in this case the urban slum will not define his characters. Roth incorporated much of the discourse of modernism, asserting the power of the individual personality, and the intimate psychology of language. By placing a modernist hero within a realist social setting, Roth recast the place of the poor within the American experience, subtly rejecting images of Jeffersonian idealism and establishing the urban-immigrant experience as the forge of American character.

With all of America in the grips of economic calamity, that Jeffersonian ideal reasserted itself in a search for a positive reminder of America's historical strengths. The Joad family, of John Steinbeck's

The Grapes of Wrath (1939), became a new kind of American hero, and established the poor as representative Americans. The Joads struggle with uncertainty and deprivation through no fault of their own, and despite their hard work, thrift, and morality, they only drift further into poverty. They will not be rescued as Ellen Montgomery was, nor will they disappear as Hurstwood did. Steinbeck reasserts a link between economics and morality, but reminiscent of Lippard, he clearly placed the poor in a position of moral superiority. The home, the farm, and the family were once again the anchors of America's portrait of itself, important this time in their weakness rather than their strength.

In her best-selling book *Nickel and Dimed* (2001), Barbara Ehrenreich recounts her experience as a low-wage worker. In an attempt to explore the shortcomings of mid-1990s welfare reform laws, Ehrenreich, a Ph.D. with eleven books to her credit, worked as a waitress, a cleaning woman, a hotel maid, a health aide and a sales clerk. During this time she discovered that such laborers are overworked and underpaid, that their housing, hygiene and healthcare are substandard, and that their morality is considered suspect,

especially as regards alcohol and drug use. While these details are familiar from the study of poverty in other time periods considered here, Ehrenreich also shows ways in which the lives of America's poor have changed: the disappearance of factory jobs, the emergence of suburban poverty, and the preponderance of women among the working poor are all very different from earlier historical periods.

Neither the similarities nor the differences should be surprising, because *Nickel and Dimed* represents yet another attempt to portray America's poor. Barbara Ehrenreich, and others, must re-discover the poor not because they have disappeared, but because America's ideological insistence on the inevitability of prosperity under democratic capitalism remains as strong as ever. The factual existence of poverty is just as persistent. Therefore the tension between the two, and the need to re-imagine and re-analyze that tension is always with us.

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