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A Migration of Tastes: New York City and American Naturalism, 1890-1925

Tyler James Weseman
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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Tyler James Weseman entitled "A Migration of Tastes: New York City and American Naturalism, 1890-1925." I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.

Mary Papke, Major Professor

We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:

Dawn Coleman, Michael Keene

Accepted for the Council:

Carolyn R. Hodges

Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

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A Migration of Tastes: New York City and American Naturalism, 1890-1925

A thesis
Presented for the
Master of Arts
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Tyler James Weseman
December 2008

Abstract

Changes in the literary evaluation/reception of American Naturalism are related to changes in both literary criticism and American publishing. Naturalism responded to vigorous cultural issues of the time, but its chief focus was on the role of biology, class, and environment in the development of the individual. As a result, the response to Naturalism by American criticism was as much a response to these issues as it was to the literature itself, and the tenor of the responses near the turn of the century often reflected the differing values of criticism originating either in New York or Boston. By looking at the changing response of the American literary establishment over the course of the years 1885 through 1925, I believe that it should be possible to come to some conclusions about the motivations, goals, prejudices, and judgments of the professional critics of the time, and put this within the narrative of the shift from genteel Bostonian values to those of New York, America's new cultural and industrial powerhouse. Others have looked at Naturalist works and authors as part of a new literary movement and philosophy of fiction, but I believe that no one has offered a close look at what the reaction to this movement (and its implicit values) was and how these shifts reflect geographical changes in the world of publishing and of America's cultural elites.

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Introduction

Naturalism has endured a tumultuous relationship with American critics since it was first imported from France in the late nineteenth century. In the years before the turn of the century, many American novelists were producing copious amounts of sentimental fiction, and the American reading public was more than happy to read it. A list of popular novels released in the year 1900 includes hard-hitting fare such as Kate Wiggins' *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm*, John Fox, Jr.'s *The Little Shepherd of Kingdom Come*, and Maurice Thompson's *Alice of Old Vincennes*.¹ Novels featuring virtuous heroines, honorable heroes, drawing room drama, and happy endings ruled the marketplace.

Still, critics had been debating the merits of a literature that offered a less saccharine view of modern life for more than twenty years. Since the American publication of Emile Zola's *L'Assommoir* in 1879, American critics had been divided over the question of whether or not novels should portray the seedier side of life. A few leading New York critics, most notably William Dean Howells and Henry James, championed the cause of realism in literature and were some of the first to support Zola and his "*Naturalisme*." However, the majority of critics, especially those who wrote for the prestigious Boston literary journals, believed these novels to be dangerous: full of immorality, ugly characters, and even a hint of sexuality. An 1879 review in *Harper's Weekly* stands out as a typical early example of the American reaction to Naturalism:

Of Emile Zola's *L'Assommoir* the less said the better. A revelation of some of the most revolting phases of low Parisian life, its atmosphere is loaded with moral contagion. Its impure pictures may be life-like, but so would be the reproduction of a cancerous sore, or of a scrofulous ulcer.²

¹ Salzman, Jack. *Theodore Dreiser: the Critical Reception*. New York: David Lewis, 1972, p. xvii.

² *Harper's Magazine*, July, 1879, p. 309.

Many of these critics would be considered to be part of the “genteel tradition,” a critical outlook that prized the writing, class position, and worldview of the antebellum Bostonian Brahmins. This term, coined by critic George Santayana, described a conservative outlook that emphasized conventionality in social, religious, moral, and literary standards.³ Naturalism scholar Donald Pizer has claimed that in genteel criticism “The purpose of literature, most publishers and reviewers held, was to appeal to man's ‘higher nature,’ and to inspire him through the depiction of man's capacity to achieve the ethical life to seek such a life for himself.”⁴ The Naturalist novels of Zola, and eventually those of American writers like Frank Norris and Theodore Dreiser, embodied a worldview that was a departure from the conservative views held by many critics. In Zola’s case, this involved describing many of the evils of society in order to raise awareness of them and cure them. Despite Zola’s declaration of a “scientific” (and ultimately reformist) purpose for his graphic portrayals of criminal life, his art was initially denounced by many critics. The outcry was led by those critics who held to traditional critical standards, most notably those from Boston, the center of the American literary world since the nation’s founding. The growth of New York as a center of culture and publishing and the “realism wars” of the Gilded Age would shift the critical gaze to the growing metropolis two hundred miles to the south.

Central to the evolution of the American literary enterprise was the shifting of the nation’s literary center. Boston, which many had considered the nation’s intellectual center since the founding of the republic, was in a marked state of literary decline at the turn of the century. For well over one hundred years, it was undisputedly the city that produced the most major

³ Santayana, George. *The Genteel Tradition: Nine Essays by George Santayana*. Lincoln: U of Nebraska Press, 1998.

American novelists, poets, and literary organs. Yet, as the 1880's began, Boston had become less secure in its position. Boston writers were no longer seen to be at the pinnacle of American literature: fireside poets Oliver Wendell Holmes and James Russell Lowell received only nominal respect from their literary successors; Longfellow was already declining in critical estimation, and other New England writers such Thoreau and Hawthorne had not yet acquired their respective places in the American canon. The *Atlantic Monthly* was still considered the pre-eminent voice in American criticism, but editor William Dean Howells left the publication to work in New York in 1881. As a result of these and other factors, even the most dedicated adherents to the Boston literary tradition saw it as a "shadow of its former self" in the last decades of the nineteenth century.⁵ At the same time, New York was becoming the center of the United States' literary marketplace. This new Gotham was becoming the home to an increasing number of publishers, authors, and critics. Not surprisingly, as the New York literary scene continued to grow both in size and stature, the tone and basis of the criticism produced there changed.

If Boston had been the center of the US literary world due to its history as a center of culture, New York became the new center due to its status as a center of international commerce. In the years before the turn of the century, New York was the shining example of the modern metropolis -- flush with new architecture, new industry, new technology, and new ideas. Yet this same city, which was home to many of the greatest achievements of the age, was also home to large concentrations of immigrants, poverty, slums, and vice. These surroundings caused many writers and critics to attempt to create (or at least to appreciate) works that reflected the changes

⁴ Pizer, Donald. "Dreiser's Critical Reputation." *Dreiser Web Source*. 11 Jan. 2005. U of Pennsylvania. 12 Jan. 2008 <<http://www.library.upenn.edu/collections/rbm/dreiser/tdcr.html>>.

in American life. A few writers conducted research into their subjects by becoming them: Stephen Crane and Theodore Dreiser both spent time in slums and flophouses (sometimes unintentionally) doing research on the downtrodden for works they would later publish. A few New York critics, most notably William Dean Howells and Henry James, made a concerted effort to promote those writers who attempted to portray life realistically in an America that was changing (both physically and spiritually) at an ever-increasing pace. Instead of finding value an aesthetic that promoted an idealized vision of American life, Howells, James, *Scribner's* editor Richard Watson Gilder, H. H. Boyesen, Thomas Sergeant Perry, and a few others constituted the spearhead of a critical outlook which prized realism in fiction. Eventually some of these advocates came to support a more extreme version of realism in American fiction: Naturalism.

In the chapters that follow, I hope to examine the critical response to Naturalism in literature by focusing on the reaction to that movement from critics and journals in these two cities. In doing so, I will examine the changing response to Naturalism between the years 1880 and 1925 by looking at how the criticism out of New York came to surpass that coming out of Boston in importance. Initially, the standards of Boston's genteel tradition were applied to the ugly scenes found in Naturalistic novels, with predictable results. That is to say, many reviewers found them to be disgusting and immoral. As more critics applied the chief standard of Howells' realism – is the work “true” to life? – the critical consensus changed, and Naturalism became one of the genres that defined a growing, unique American literature. As is often the case in literature, the novelty and innovation of a new movement (Modernism) shifted critical attention away from the remaining Naturalists. Fortunately, the critics of today have found that these

⁵ Stokes, Claudia. *Writers in Retrospect: The Rise of American Literary History, 1875-1910*. Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2006, p. 142.

works have more to offer us than the determinist philosophy found therein. For students of literature, history, and cultural studies the works of Naturalism shed light on the changing nature of American publication, city life, and public morality. Through the twin lenses of the criticism that came out of New York and Boston, I hope to chart the rise, fall, and reclamation of this genre. I am not making the claim Naturalism alone brought American letters into the twentieth century, but the reviews of Naturalist works can illuminate the ways in which the philosophical basis of American criticism shifted away from one based principally on a judgment of characters' ethics to one based on success in conveying the experience of others. In addition, it should become clear that these changes reflected shifts both in the goals of American writers and in the demographics of the nation, phenomena which had their origins on the streets of America's rapidly expanding urban centers.

Before attempting to look at what others thought of the genre of Naturalism, it is necessary to describe what earlier critics had been reacting to. Zola's carefully crafted conception of Naturalism in literature was the original, but defining what Naturalism was in American literature is something of a difficult task. At times it can seem to describe a philosophy, a brand of realism, or a "scientific" approach to the literary art. Let's take a quick look at a few of the definitions offered by authors throughout the years.

As a young man, Emile Zola set out to write novels that would serve a specific purpose. His desire to create a "scientific" novel reflected the widespread desire to apply the scientific method to everyday life. As he formulated these ideas in the 1860's, Darwin's evolutionary theory was widely discussed in both high and low culture, the laws of nature were being revealed

through systematic observation and experimentation, and people of the world's industrialized nations were coming to believe that science could solve nearly all of society's problems.

In this atmosphere young Emile Zola planned a twenty-novel cycle that would chart the course of a single French family over the course of many years. It is unusual for an author to spend the bulk of his career writing about one group of characters, but Zola used the members of this family as literary sociological case studies, producing detailed, "scientific" observations of his imaginary people. The sprawling story of an extended family during France's Second Empire (1851-1871), the individual novels that make up *Les Rougon-Macquart* detail the lives of members of two halves of that family – the legitimate Rougons and the criminal Macquarts. Thus, the well-bred Rougons are involved with politics (*Son Excellence Eugène Rougon*) and medicine (*Le Docteur Pascal*) while the common Macquarts are party to alcoholism (*L'Assommoir*), prostitution (*Nana*), and homicide (*La Bête Humaine*).⁶ As part of his Naturalist project, Zola attempted to link heredity and environment with common human behavior. This approach, where the author uses detailed observation to recreate the lives of modern people and then uses these "realistic" stories and themes to diagnose the structural problems in contemporary society would be adopted by later writers to different degrees. Zola's topics, theories, and characters were very controversial at the time of their publication, and he felt the need to defend his literary practices. He would soon do so in extended fashion.

In 1880, nine years and nine novels into *Les Rougon-Macquart*, Zola published a manifesto which attempted to describe his philosophy of the novel and at the same time provoke his opponents in Europe's literary forums. *Le Roman Experimental*, or "The Experimental Novel," described Zola's theory of "Naturalism," the objective of which was the exact and

scientific description of social reality. Zola wished to use his Naturalism in the same way emerging social sciences such as psychology, sociology, and anthropology used case studies: the clinical methods of empirical science would be used to diagnose the problems of society. By portraying the daily struggles of the working classes, Zola hoped to show his reading public how difficult it was (perhaps impossible) to overcome the challenges of heredity, class, and poverty in French society. In an entry regarding Naturalism in the *Glossary of Literary Theory*, Henderson and Brown attempt to explain Zola's method: "if a writer wishes to depict life as it really is, he or she must be rigorously deterministic in the representation of the characters' thoughts and actions in order to show forth the causal factors that have made the characters inevitably what they are."⁷ The goal of the Rougon-MacQuart project was to demonstrate how each side of the same family existed under very different conditions over the course of multiple generations. Still, it is debatable as to whether or not Zola was completely serious about hewing to a strictly "scientific" or empirical method: much of Zola's writing contains strong Romantic elements, such as characters that carry curses and his affinity for huge, near-mythical tales of suffering and heroism. Despite these tendencies, Zola was determined to make his name in literature by becoming one of the figures who defined the terms of the international battle regarding Naturalism's place in literature.

While Zola's definition of Naturalism never strays far from the ideal of creating a scientific portrait of human lives, others defined Naturalism more as a mode of representation. Most Naturalist writers, including Zola himself, were far from "scientific" in the presentation of their characters. Norris, especially, incorporated romantic and mystic subplots into his

⁶ "Emile Zola." *Books and Writers*. 2004. 3 Nov. 2007 <<http://www.kirjasto.sci.fi/ezola.htm>>.

“Naturalist” novels, most notably in The Octopus. Indeed, in his 1896 essay “Zola as a Romantic Writer,” Norris attempted to define Realism, Romanticism, and Naturalism, as well as explain how Zola’s writing could include romantic drama and yet still claim to be “Naturalistic.”

Norris began by defining Realism as the literature of the humdrum, a genre that focused on “the smaller details of everyday life, things that are likely to happen between lunch and supper.”⁸ In other words, Realism was concerned with accurately communicating the mundane occurrences and minor burdens of the average person’s existence. Romanticism, on the other hand, was involved with looking beyond the limitations of the “humdrum;” it comprised a search to make some kind of meaning out of the tragedies and triumphs of unique and fantastic heroes. According to Norris, Romance examined “the unplumbed depths of the human heart, and the mystery of sex, and the problems of life, and the unsearched penetralia of the soul of man.”⁹ Naturalism did both: it looked for the answers to questions about the human condition as well as the future of modern society in the lives of those who struggled to survive in the era of early industrial capitalism:

That Zola's [writing] is not purely romantic as was Hugo's, lies chiefly in the choice of milieu. These great terrible dramas no longer happen among the personnel of a feudal and Renaissance nobility, those who are in the forefront of the marching world, but among the lower -- almost the lowest -- classes; those who are falling by the roadway. This is not romanticism -- this drama of the people working itself out in blood and ordure. It is not realism. It is a school by itself, unique, somber, powerful beyond words. It is Naturalism.¹⁰

⁷ Henderson, Greig E., and Christopher Brown. "Naturalism." *Glossary of Literary Theory*. 31 Mar. 1997. U of Toronto. 3 Nov. 2007 <<http://www.library.utoronto.ca/utel/glossary/Naturalism.html>>.

⁸ Norris, Frank. "Zola as a Romantic Writer," *San Francisco Wave*, 15 (June 27, 1896), p. 1.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

That is, although the plots of Zola's novels could contain Romantic elements, his focus on the lowest classes of society nonetheless demonstrated that the struggles of common people had just as much right to be represented in fiction as the genteel "drawing room" dramas popular at the time, more so, in fact, if one is interested in understanding the bare existences of those who were struggling with the transition to an industrial/consumer economy in the last years of the nineteenth century.

There has been a good deal of debate as to what, then, defines the philosophy and/or practice of American Naturalist writing. Is it simply a branch of Howellsian Realism? Or is it a separate, more philosophically and politically radical genre? One answer that, for all of its flaws, has persisted in the dialogue to the present day was first put forward in the early thirties. Siding with the realists, critic George J. Becker wrote of Naturalism, "(it is) no more than an emphatic and explicit philosophical position taken by some Realists..., [that position being one of] a pessimistic, materialistic determinism."¹¹ Basically, this understanding of Naturalism stresses the way in which the characters of these novels are *determined* by their heredity and environment. Despite their hopes of creating their own future, characters like McTeague, Trina, and Clyde Griffiths will always be bound by their ancestry, their upbringings, and their surroundings to behave in certain ways. For example, in his novels *An American Tragedy* and *Jennie Gerhardt*, Dreiser seemed to put more emphasis on the influence of environment, while Norris seemed to place more on heredity and human nature in his work, especially *McTeague* and *Vandover and the Brute*. In either case, the *pessimistic* aspect of Becker's description seems to be accurate: Norris' characters cannot overcome their basic animal desires, and most of

¹¹ Pizer, Donald. *Realism and Naturalism in Nineteenth-Century American Literature*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1966.

Dreiser's characters cannot improve their lot in society regardless of how hard they struggle. The protagonists struggle against their society's class systems, the courts, the business world, their inner desires, and usually the law – and they are almost always defeated by these huge, irresistible forces.

There is no God or Fate to blame their struggles on either. This is a *materialistic* determinism, wherein the world is viewed without any account for supernatural influence. Characters in Naturalist novels do not degenerate because they have been forsaken by a higher power; they degenerate because they cannot overcome their genetic predispositions or because they are in a disadvantaged position in a society created by and for humans.

Becker's very basic (and much-contested) description of Naturalism has continued to be part of discussions of the genre since the phrase was coined, but later critics attempted to further refine and explicate the qualities that made a realistic novel "Naturalistic." One of the leaders in this effort has been Donald Pizer, and as a result of his four-decades-long investigation into the genre he is considered to be one of the definitive authorities on the subject today. Over the course of his many publications, Pizer has created a narrative of Naturalism that allows it to operate outside of Becker's limited definition.

One common complaint made by critics has been that Naturalist novels barely have any characters at all, only empty vessels that are animated by the unseen forces of environment, heredity, or instinct. Pizer rejected the claims that Naturalism both dehumanized its subjects and depicted only the ugly, oppressive reality of the struggle for material survival. Instead, he claimed that Naturalist authors depicted the individual will's struggle to negotiate the larger forces -- both internal and external -- that shape and control "modern" men and women.

Pizer further refined his definitions by distinguishing two ways that Naturalist works

differ from those produced by Realist authors. First, the subject matter is quite different. In his monthly “Editor’s Study” column for *Harper’s* magazine, leading Realist author and critic William Dean Howells claimed that the American experience should lead authors to write about the so-called “smiling aspects of life.”¹² In contrast, Naturalist writers dealt with unlovely and unpleasant experiences that reduce characters to “low” or corrupting behavior. The most obvious example in American Naturalism is Hurstwood in *Sister Carrie*, whose decline leads him to steal, beg, and eventually commit suicide. Moreover, Naturalist characters are most often drawn from the working or lower middle classes and are often poor, naïve, and uneducated, the most famous being Carrie Meeber, Dreiser’s “half-equipped little knight.”¹³ The settings are also quite different – you will not see the drama of high society or big business enacted here. Instead, the scenes are of common people existing unheroically (and often wretchedly) as in the case of Rebecca Harding Davis’ *Life in the Iron Mills*. Yet, in these individuals live the passionate qualities found in the greatest dramatic characters, fervent passions that often lead to desperate moments and spectacular (or not-so-spectacular) deaths. The celebrated Death Valley scenes in Norris’ *McTeague* turn a simple dentist into a tragic, doomed antihero. Seemingly, even those who exist on the lowest levels of society are capable of complex emotions and dramatic actions.

Still, in Pizer’s view, there is always a deterministic bent to Naturalism. Despite a belief in their own agency, Naturalist characters struggle against the twin forces of class status and biological handicaps, and often they cannot escape these controlling influences. Even though they often are brought low, characters such as Jennie Gerhardt or Lily Bart struggle to maintain

¹² Howells, William Dean. "Dostoyevsky and the More Smiling Aspects of Life." *Harper's* 73 (1886): 641-42.

¹³ Dreiser, Theodore. *Sister Carrie*. New York: Doubleday, 1907, p. 3.

their individuality and their very lives against their upbringing or their position on society, and these small dramas are made heroic in scope by virtue of their being set against a society of hypocrites, conformists, and sexual predators. As stated earlier, the goal of the Naturalist writer was to represent the complicated balance of internal and external influences that constituted one's identity in early industrial America. This project gained momentum as changes in American life became more pervasive and increased in scope.

As the final two decades of the nineteenth century progressed, critical attitudes and standards changed in response to a variety of stimuli: science's increasing legitimacy, the benefits (and hard realities) of industrial capitalism, shifts in the balance of power between rural and urban areas, the ever-increasing span of time between America's idealized past and its present, and a variety of others. However, as the last twenty years of the nineteenth century commenced, American critics were judging novels with the same criteria that they had been applying for decades. The genteel tradition was seemingly alive and well in American literary criticism; if the subject matter of a work was objectionable to delicate readers, any achievements in storytelling or technique made by the author could (and would) be completely discounted. It would take a concerted movement by a few of this nation's leading authors to drag the majority of reviewers and professors away from a critical viewpoint that seemed to be stuck decades in the past. The efforts William Dean Howells and Henry James made to promote Realism and Naturalism during these two decades would change the geography of the American critical landscape, as well its aesthetic and philosophical preferences. These two urbane New Yorkers would be the vanguard of a critical perspective that prized the ability to communicate the human experience in print, even if those experiences were unpleasant to readers of delicate tastes. One

of the major battles these two fought was an effort to justify, both aesthetically and philosophically, the importance of the first Naturalist, Emile Zola, to the nation's literati. Considering Zola's personality and practices, this would be a difficult task. Fortunately, neither Howells nor James was afraid to argue his viewpoint in forums public or private.

Much of the literary criticism in England and America during the Victorian era reflected societal conventions of the time: the characters portrayed in novels should be people that a gentleman could bring home to his wife and table. By looking at the complaints most commonly lodged against Zola, it is possible inductively to sort out some of the rules governing the production of fiction as understood by defenders of Victorian culture and critics who followed the "genteel tradition." A few of the most universal were laid out by Zola and Norris scholar Ernest Marchand:¹⁴

- Fiction must deal with pleasant subjects.
- The chief characters must be good people, and respectable.
- The chief figures may be poor if they go to church, are industrious, and are respectful to their betters.
- Low or vulgar people met by the central, virtuous characters must be redeemed by some conspicuous virtue.
- While some truths cannot be told, the author can bemoan the fate of those less fortunate than the average middle-class reader in an indirect way.
- Unhappy endings are not acceptable.

It was in this critical atmosphere that Zola's works were first reviewed. Zola offered these critics stories full of crime, murder, prostitution, and madness. Thus, it should not be surprising that the initial reaction of American critics would be one of repulsion and rejection.

It would not be unfair to characterize American writers and critics as the junior partners of their European counterparts as the American literary world entered the last quarter of the nineteenth century. There were few early American authors who had achieved lasting renown in either America or Europe, and nineteenth-century writers such as Melville, Hawthorne, and Dickinson had not yet secured their respective positions in the trans-Atlantic canon. Many journals and “little magazines” sprang up in America over the course of the nineteenth century, but none had the critical clout and worldwide circulation of established European journals like *The Athenaeum* or the *Revue des Deux Mondes*. The leading American journals of the day, which included New York-based publications *The Nation* and *Harper’s* as well as Boston’s *The Atlantic Monthly*, had wide circulations on the West side of the Atlantic but were not widely regarded in the literary capitals of the Old World.

Regardless of their relative stature, critics from both hemispheres were unified in their condemnation of Zola’s work at the beginning of the 1880’s. The tone of the reviews published in these prestigious American journals reflected the venom seen in the major English and Continental publications. For example, a reviewer in *Harper’s Magazine* wrote the following about the 1879 English translation of *L’Assommoir*:

A revelation of some of the most revolting phases of low Parisian life, its atmosphere is loaded with moral contagion. Its impure pictures may be life-like, but so would be the reproduction of a cancerous sore, or of a scrofulous ulcer. We would as soon introduce the smallpox into our homes as permit this unclean volume to come into contact with the pure-minded maidens and ingenuous youth who form their chiefest ornaments.¹⁵

¹⁴ Marchand, Ernest. *Frank Norris: A Study*. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1942, p. 211.

¹⁵ “L’Assommoir.” *Harper’s Magazine*, July, 1879, p. 309.

A translation of *Nana* arrived on American shores the following year and attracted a similar reaction from *The North American Review*. In an extended article entitled “Prolifigacy in Fiction,” the critic saw no redemptive qualities in the study of Nana’s life and, further, railed against the influence of foreign authors, naming them “purveyors of infection.”¹⁶ In a telling indication of the state of American literary standards, the critic contrasted the undesirable influence of French novels with the ennobling influence of the English novel, which “has been a powerful agency of reform and purification.”¹⁷ In this case, England’s authors were considered the ideal and do not seem to be at all “foreign.”

As mentioned earlier, Zola published an extended expository essay about the theory of Naturalism, *Le Roman Experimental*, in 1881. In this work he defended his treatment of “obscene” topics such as prostitution, vice, and crime by claiming these works had a humanitarian purpose. Zola historian Herbert Edwards offers a brief summary of Zola’s argument: “[Zola] asserted that just as medical science experiments in order to make itself master of disease and thus benefits humanity, the experimental novelist concerns himself with the problems of man as a social being in order that he may re-establish equilibrium and health in the social order.”¹⁸ However, even after considering Zola’s theoretical justifications, most American critics could not bring themselves to approve of the unpleasant themes and characters present in his work. The reviewer in the September 1881 *Atlantic Monthly* managed simultaneously to convey disdain and squeamishness when writing the following: “Whenever a French novelist claims to have a purpose with a large P, it is safe to assume that he intends to be

¹⁶ “Prolifigacy in Fiction.” *The North American Review* July, 1880, p. 79-89.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Edwards, Herbert. “Zola and the American Critics.” *American Literature*, Vol. 4, No. 2. (May, 1932), pp. 115.

particularly indecent.”¹⁹ Zola’s next few works would be attacked by Bostonians and New Yorkers alike, as *The North American Review*, *The Nation*, and *The Literary World* joined the *Atlantic Monthly* in condemning the Frenchman’s authorial practices well into 1882.²⁰ American author Henry James put forth an opposing viewpoint, perhaps because James (who eventually became an English citizen) saw and understood a great deal more about the literary societies of England and France than did most American critics. James first met Zola at Daudet’s Parisian dwelling in 1876, in the aftermath of the abrupt cessation of *La Republique des Lettres*’ serialization of *L’Assommoir*. In a letter to William Dean Howells, James expressed sympathy for Zola’s authorial difficulties but did not express a previous knowledge or any active interest in the author’s work.²¹ However, the publication of three novels and *La Roman Experimental* raised Zola in James’ esteem, and by 1884, he and Howells had embarked on a project to promote the works of the French Naturalists. In the first half of that year, both James and Howells wrote pieces sympathetic to the Daudet/Goncourt/Zola movement. James took up the issue of the relationship between art and morality in the January issue of the conservative *Atlantic Monthly*. Of literature’s moral duty, he asserted that “the only duty of a novel was to be well-written; that merit included every other of which it was capable,” thus rejecting the belief that art must be “pleasing” to be successful.²² In May’s *Atlantic Monthly*, Howells followed this up with a sympathetic portrait of the Naturalist group at Daudet’s house. Of their project, Howells wrote that “the profound and delicious enjoyment that invades you in the presence of certain pages and certain phrases does not come simply from what those phrases say; it comes with an absolute accordance of the expression with the idea – from a sensation of harmony, of

¹⁹ *Atlantic Monthly*, September, 1881, p. 432.

²⁰ Edwards, Herbert. “Zola and the American Critics.” *American Literature*, Vol. 4, No. 2. (May, 1932), pp. 116

secret beauty, that generally escapes the judgment of the profane crowd.”²³ Endorsements from Howells and James, two of the brightest stars in the American literary universe, must certainly have affected the American perception of the Naturalist writers and their project. Although any changes in opinion inspired by these articles did not register for some time, the rationale they offered would form the basis of later support for Naturalism.

Most critics received 1886’s *La Joie de Vivre* with the same moralistic tone that they had shown to Zola’s earlier works. The author of that novel’s review in *The Critic* recognizes Zola’s theory of the novel set down in *Le Roman Experimental*, yet still put forth a (by then) common attack on Zola’s work derived from the English conception of the novel:

The favorite plot of the novelist nowadays -- is it anything more than a process of disintegration? Disintegration is, of course, a natural process. Dissolution never ceases in nature; but these are not pleasant processes to follow. Though useful to the student of disease, they are surely not advantageous to the invalid searching for health; and most of us, in our moments of novel reading are to be classed in the category of invalids.²⁴

Most critics from newspapers and literary reviews were united in upholding genteel standards taken from English criticism, and it took two more years before another American publicly approved of the writings of Zola.

In an August, 1886, address before Bronson Alcott’s Concord School of Philosophy, Professor J.W. Davidson placed Zola in a group with Socrates, Jesus, and Goethe. As his comments make clear, Professor Davidson believed that Zola was simply the latest example of men who are willing to speak truth to power (and the public) regardless of consequences:

²¹ Ibid., p 115.

²² “The Flaubert Group.” *Atlantic Monthly*, January 1884, p. 46.

Zola is much decried at present for an over-devotion to truth, which he persists in telling in its entirety, yea, even when he uses irony. Let us then not join in the cry, remembering that Socrates, in his day, was put to death for atheism and for corrupting the youth of Athens, that Aristotle had to flee for similar reasons, that Jesus was crucified for blasphemy. . . . That howl is mostly hushed, nowadays, and so will the present howl against Zola soon be.²⁵

This pronouncement was bound to bring a response from the traditionalists, and Davidson defended Zola by elaborating on Zola's conception of the novel. Objections were then raised: Zola's works were not art but merely tabloid reporting of the seedy side of human affairs; this could not hope to have any positive effect on the reader. Davidson responded by saying that,

[Zola's novels,] on the contrary, while reporting the same facts, present them to us in their connection, show us their causes in existing social or other institutions, and their effects upon men's lives and characters, and so at once suggest a remedy and rouse us to apply it. No one who has read Zola's novels understandingly will ever think of denying this. . . . One of the chief merits of Zola is that he presents vice in all its prosaic, dull, heartless, disgusting nakedness. No man has made vice so unlovely, so sickening as Zola has done.²⁶

The contrast between this kind of recognition by American intellectuals and the reaction to Zola's works in England can hardly be overstated. Davidson's address in the summer of 1886 took place more than a year before the National Vigilance Association hauled publisher Henry Vizetelly into court on indecency charges. Zola continued to be denounced in the English press

²³ *Atlantic Monthly*, May 1884, p. 726.

²⁴ *The Critic*, III (April 4, 1885), 157-58.

through the end of the decade, as the January 1889 *Contemporary Review* quoted Tennyson as saying that the name of Zola was “synonymous with sewage.”²⁷ Yet some Americans, while still not completely appreciative of Zola’s unpleasantness and sensuality, were at least able to recognize, and at times even approve of his craft and mission.

The American publication of *La Terre* in 1888 demonstrated how much Howells’ endorsement of Zola’s aims had changed the critical atmosphere on the western side of the Atlantic. *La Terre* was the story of one peasant family’s dispute over inherited land: it contained more brutality and sex than any of Zola’s previous novels. Before 1884, it would have been roundly rejected by the American cognoscenti, but after four years of Howells’ patronage, the reaction was much more favorable. In the first half of the eighties, *The Critic* had attacked Zola’s works on moral grounds and termed his works the products of a tainted mind whose methods “are those which lead to the madhouse.”²⁸ The editors now took Howells’ position:

It is possible to perceive in Zola a desire, not to wallow in sensuality for its own sake, but to rouse the student to a sense of what sensuality, constant degradation, intolerable and irremediable poverty and hopeless physical suffering will lead the peasant class to, born as they are without higher instincts and bred as they are without noble teaching to ward off natural consequences. As a story we cannot conceive of anybody's finding it interesting; it is dull, slow, unpleasant, and bestial; but as a study, one reads between the lines and is filled with pity, and a wholesome sense of warning.²⁹

It is not difficult to see confirmation of Howells’ formulation of Zola’s works in this or many

²⁵ Quoted by *The Literary World*, XVII (August 7, 1886) , p. 264.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Decker, Clarence R. “Zola’s Literary Reputation in England.” *PMLA*, Vol. 49, No. 4. (Dec., 1934), pp. 1148.

²⁸ *The Critic*, XI (March 11, 1882), 72-73.

²⁹ *The Critic*, IX (May 26, 1888), p. 255-256.

other reviews of *La Terre*, as reviewers generally conceded that Zola's desire to portray vice unflatteringly mitigated the fact that it was portrayed at all. *The Critic*, however, made the connection between their position and Howells' explicit and, in doing so, highlighted the fact that Howells' adoption of Zola had been a topic of critical interest in America for some time: "Mr. Howells's statement that *La Terre* represented a phase of life which had a legitimate place in fiction, has aroused almost as much discussion as the book itself. Mr. Howells is right in saying that the phase of life is one it behooves us not to ignore."³⁰ The "Dean of American Letters" had succeeded in opening the eyes of American criticism to a different standard of literary merit, and these modern standards began to be recognized – albeit slowly – as meritorious.

The change in opinion regarding Zola was not immediate, but was it not negligible, either. Beginning in 1892, translations of Zola's novels appeared annually to the close of the century and were accepted, if not enthusiastically, at least with fewer reservations and less venom than had been the case in the eighties. The English critical community had more slowly come to accept Zola's justifications for his work, much slower than their American counterparts. In 1893 an event occurred that demonstrated the disparity between the private opinions of English critics and their published denunciations of Zola and his "*Naturalisme*." Zola was invited to England for a formal reception at the London Guildhall, which was attended by many established journalists and was regarded by many as evidence of rapprochement between Zola and the English government and critical establishment. In a letter to *The Critic* published October 7, 1893, critic Arthur Waugh (father to author Evelyn Waugh) admitted that English tastes had been changing over the course of the preceding years, and it had been necessary for

³⁰ Ibid.

Zola's supporters to wait until they had a wider consensus before extending their invitation, "to render the warmth and spontaneity of M. Zola's welcome a true and genuine thing."³¹ Noting the break between traditional attitudes and the new valuation of Zola's works, Waugh continued, "It must be within the recollection of most readers that but a few years have elapsed since an English publisher was tried and imprisoned for the publication of M. Zola's works! And today we are all ready with our eulogy upon his 'brilliant and triumphant' career! The whirligig of time indeed brings its revenges. It is only of late that English taste has been able to distinguish between the frank and the prurient."³² The critical establishment was not unified in this new conception of Zola's work, as the translations released over the course of the nineties were still categorized as filth by many reviewers. But by the end of the century, due in part to Zola's courage in defying the French government through his infamous letter *J'Accuse* during the Dreyfus Affair, the author had passed into the tradition of letters on both sides of the Atlantic. In his essay "Zola and the American Critics," author Herbert Edwards summed up Zola's effect on American criticism (which can be applied to English criticism, if to a lesser degree): "In 1884, James had faced the prejudices of most American critics, and had stood forth, together with Howells, as the champion of an extremely unpopular man. In their effort to bring about a more intelligent understanding of, and a greater tolerance for, Zola's novels in America. It may well be supposed that they contributed a by no means negligible share toward the development of more tolerant, more liberal, more intelligent critical standards in the United States."³³

³¹ *The Critic*, XX (October 7, 1893), p. 231.

³² *Ibid.*

Naturalism and American Critics, 1890-1903

The positive attention paid to Zola's works in journals and newspapers would not leave American letters untouched. Both through the explicit justification of his theories in *Le Roman Experimental* and the example of his novelistic output, Zola inspired a set of American authors sympathetic to his goals. During the 1890s, authors such as Jack London, Stephen Crane, and Frank Norris took up Zola's mission and techniques, portraying the individual as a product of heredity and environment and using the struggles of the characters created by these forces to critique the town, nation, and economic system that produced them. While London, Crane, and others included Naturalist elements in their novels, Norris's work best exemplifies pure Naturalism in American literature at the turn of the century. In observing the critical reaction to the works of these authors, it is possible to see how the New York and Boston critics began to differ in their critical standards, especially as the so-called "Realism Wars" played out in their respective journals and magazines. Furthermore, we can begin to see how this conflict resulted in a revised set of critical standards derived from contemporary philosophical and sociological trends which, in turn, led to New York City becoming the center of American criticism in the twentieth century.

Before we can investigate the reaction to Naturalism, it would be sensible to take another quick look at the battle over realism, Naturalism's parent and precursor. This conflict took place over the course of the final third of the nineteenth century, whereas American Naturalism only made an appearance in its final decade. Consequently, it is essential to understand the arguments made both for and against realism as the philosophies and conditions behind them would define

³³ Edwards, Herbert. "Zola and the American Critics." *American Literature*, Vol. 4, No. 2. (May, 1932), pp. 129.

the critical discourse present when Naturalist works made their appearance in American literature.

The industrial revolution that took place at the end of the 19th century changed the United States in remarkable ways. Many Americans left rural homes for opportunities in urban cities. The development of new machinery and equipment enabled the U.S. economy to become more focused on factory production; as a result fewer Americans had to rely chiefly on farming and agriculture to support their families. At the same time, immigrants from all over the world crowded into urban enclaves in order to take advantage of new labor opportunities. Advances in printing and communications, including the telegraph, telephone, and cheaper printing technologies, allowed for a national mass media, of which the nation's cities were the nerve centers. In two of these traditional centers of culture, an old aesthetic disagreement became a referendum regarding the responsibility of all American writers. Authors and critics of the time were sharply divided over the issue of how fictional characters should be portrayed in relation to the rapidly shifting external world. While there were many different opinions on how characters should be portrayed, it is not difficult to recognize a fundamental difference. On one side of the debate were the Romantics, who believed that authors should strive to portray the *ideals* of human experience in their work. On the other were the realists, who believed it was the duty of the author to offer "nothing less than the truthful treatment of [experience]" in their work.³⁴ Using plot and character development, a writer revealed his or her philosophy about how much control the individual had over his or her destiny. In their fiction and essays Romantics such as

Ralph Waldo Emerson honored the ability of the individual to overcome adversity and celebrated the idea that one could transcend the physical world and become a “seer” of nature’s mysteries. A generation later, authors such as Mark Twain, Henry James, and W.D. Howells looked to the European realists of the mid-nineteenth century (a group that included Flaubert, Balzac, and others), who believed that humanity's freedom of choice was limited by the power of outside forces. Their characters’ psychological complexity and an ambiguous relationship with mainstream morality also differentiated these writers from their predecessors. In the final decade of the century Naturalist authors Stephen Crane and Frank Norris would take this philosophy to its logical conclusion: that the lives of individuals are largely controlled by huge, impersonal, external forces.

Genre	American Author	Perceived the individual as...	
Romantics	Ralph Waldo Emerson	a god	
Realists	Henry James William Dean Howells Mark Twain	simply a person	
Naturalists	Stephen Crane Frank Norris	a helpless object	(McQuade 1153)

These critical arguments contained overtones of class consciousness and allegiance. It seemed that those writers who were privileged enough to live and work independently espoused the Romantic view, while those who came from the working classes chose to portray life less optimistically. This was especially noticeable as many reviewers were products of a literary establishment that was defined by its relationship to its decidedly class-oriented European

³⁴ Carter, Everett. *Howells and the Age of Realism*. Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1954, p 36.

counterpart. In addition, the fact that some of these reviewers were able to make their living reviewing literature put them in a class position above most of the subjects of Naturalism, and many of them held positions in powerful institutions: universities, churches, or the press. In keeping with American tradition, romantic novels focused “upon the extraordinary, the mysterious, the imaginary,”³⁵ as iconic American authors Washington Irving and Nathaniel Hawthorne had done. Since they aspired to the ideal, romantic writings were less likely to show the less savory aspects of life or unpleasant characters -- prostitutes, gamblers, and the like -- that the reviewers would not admit into their own homes. Not surprisingly, the majority of critics preferred the portrayal of life offered by the romantics. Critics who held this position were worried, in particular, about the effect of realist novels on young female readers, who made up the majority of the novel-reading public in the nineteenth century. Critic Charles Dudley Warner, who succeeded Howells at *Harper's*, laid out a few of the arguments against realism in his “Editor's Study” column between 1892 and 1900. Warner believed that young women should rise towards idealism, not sag towards realism. Both art and women were degraded by the realists' “servile imitation of nature.” In his opinion, only transcendent idealization in both could save readers from “a realistic vulgarity and commonplace.”³⁶ Maurice Thompson, author of the romantic novel Alice of Old Vincennes, shared Warner's disdain for the realists and their subjects; in his opinion the realist's tales of the gutter were the height of “literary decadence,” and their works worshipped “the vulgar, the commonplace, and the insignificant.”³⁷ Seemingly, any depiction of the world “as it was” failed to uplift the reader, which was seen as one of the primary functions of the novel by thinkers who held these views.

³⁵ *Atlantic Monthly*, Volume 92, No. 554 (December 1903), p. 843.

³⁶ Warner, Charles Dudley. “Editor's Study.” *Harper's Magazine*, August 1892, p. 482-3.

As noted in the introduction, a small but growing number of critics and authors came to support the project of the realists in the final decades of the nineteenth century. While these writers were successful enough to be able to pursue criticism and writing professionally, many of them came from decidedly less privileged backgrounds than did those in the opposing camp. Howells, Garland, Mencken, Dreiser, and Crane all came from non-patrician backgrounds, and, in general, these less-than-privileged existences would color their critical affiliations in the realist conflict. The obvious exception was Henry James, who was a scion of one of the wealthiest and most intellectual families in America, but James chose to support realism as part of his philosophical goal of communicating human experience through fiction. Since the central tenet of realism was that the author should attempt to portray the realities of everyday experience, the genre was seen as democratic, in a sense. Instead of focusing on the stories of wealthy or extraordinary people, the realist novel often depicted the everyday struggles of average Americans and their attempts to negotiate class affiliations and limitations. The supporters of realism appreciated this authorial choice, as many “common” Americans had never been the focus of literary texts. It is not difficult to imagine that these writers, many of whom had experience living in economic situation closer to that of the majority of Americans, would appreciate a “truthful treatment”³⁸ of these lives. Howells and James also saw realism as an antidote to the emasculating romances and prim Victorian culture so prized by critics of elevated social standing. If America was a rough, growing industrial powerhouse, the realists theorized, its art should attempt to portray the details of that reality truthfully, as slums and crime were as real as the brownstones and Broadway’s theaters.

³⁷ Thompson, Maurice, quoted in *The Critic*, VI, 20 (July 10, 1886).

³⁸ William Dean Howells, “Editor’s Study.” *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, November 1889, p. 966.

The merits of Romanticism and Realism were debated over the course of about forty years, and each side had a slew of advocates. What is pertinent to this discussion, however, are the cities in which critics on both sides of the debate were based. In the latter half of the nineteenth century, New York and Boston were the foremost centers of literary criticism in America. Though it is, of course, impossible to shoehorn the philosophies of critics into neatly defined geographical boxes, it is useful to note a few of the defining characteristics of each city, as the demographics and history of these metropolises had some effect in determining the philosophies and temperaments of the writers who were educated, lived, and worked there.

Both Boston and New York had been centers of commerce and culture since the founding of the American republic. Due to a variety of factors (including its early founding and connections to colonial history), Boston developed a class of wealthy merchants who tended to pass their wealth down through familial lines. Families such as the Cabots and Lowells resided in the city from the date of its founding and came to dominate the region's shipping and banking industries, creating a de facto aristocracy. Other businesses followed many of these same hereditary transferences of wealth and power due to the success of these industries and the desire of certain elites to establish new dynasties of their own. In addition, many young, dynamic merchants moved into the new and profitable field of textile manufacturing after the war of 1812, and the transfer of these resourceful men from the sea to the mills may have enhanced the tradition-bound culture of the mercantile element.³⁹ The establishment of these familial commercial empires in America's early years enabled the creation of an elite class of citizens in Boston, who came to be known as the "Boston Brahmins." These "Brahmins" constituted

Boston “society,” and their extensive educations and conservative leanings would color the culture of the city well into the twentieth century.

In addition, Boston was home to the first university in the Americas, Harvard College. Founded in 1636, Harvard was a bastion of tradition, and by the 1800s already had a long history of educating the scions of the Brahmin class, as well as many of the nation’s earliest literary figures. Graduates included Cotton Mather, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Ralph Waldo Emerson, as well as many others who went on to become teachers, writers, ministers, and literature professors across New England and the Mid-Atlantic. As the nineteenth century came to a close, some of Harvard’s faculty felt that American audiences were losing their appreciation for the gentleman authors who had once been dominant in American letters. A notable figure among these academics was Professor Barrett Wendell, who was responsible for the creation of Harvard’s History and Literature concentration. English Literature programs were then in their infancy, and historian Claudia Stokes describes Wendell’s program and its emphasis on faculty direction as Wendell’s attempt “to preserve birth and provenance as tokens of literary value.”⁴⁰ Wendell created a curriculum that reflected his desire to preserve an appreciation for the literary productions of the college (as an institution) and its patrician forebears. In his eyes, as well as for many of his colleagues, what we now term the New England Renaissance of the mid-nineteenth century was the high point of literature in America, and all that came after it signified a decline in the quality of American literature. Those critics who prized European manners and a strict morality perpetuated what their successors would call the genteel tradition, and many of

³⁹ Frederic Cople Jaher. “Nineteenth-Century Elites in Boston and New York.” *Journal of Social History*, Vol. 6, No. 1. (Autumn, 1972), 32-77.

⁴⁰ Stokes, Claudia. *Writers in Retrospect: The Rise of American Literary History, 1875-1910*. Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2006.

them made their living in Harvard classrooms and through Boston's literary publications.

New York had its own old-money elite class, of course, but this class did not play as much of a part in defining the culture of the city as did its counterpart in Boston. One of the reasons for this was a simple one: numbers. New York was the busiest port city in America, as well as one of the fastest growing. New York harbor was literally the gateway to the land of opportunity for European immigrants, and the city itself was the ultimate expression of a new urban America that drew people from all across the nation. Because of this, there was a constant flow of new workers (both native and immigrant) and entrepreneurs into the city, all looking to find a place in the city's economy. This "melting pot" of people turned New York into a mix of the wealthy, middle class, and the desperately poor, and also made it a national center rather than a regional one. As a result of these trends and the city's leading position in industry and commerce, New York City became the city that came to define modern America: people came from all over the nation and used their skills to innovate in the fields of business, technology, construction, art, and publication. While there were a number of universities that made their home in New York City (including Columbia and NYU), New York's literary tastes were fashioned in the newspaper, the publishing house, and the free market rather than in the classroom.

By the year 1890, the periodical business was in the middle of a period of fundamental change, and New York City was its epicenter. The leading magazines of the time, which included the *Century*, the *Atlantic*, the *North American Review*, and *Harper's Magazine* were all functioning as they had for years. Whether they were published in Boston or New York, these publications were dominated by Bostonians and, therefore, Bostonian standards of literature. As had been the case since the beginning of magazine publication in America, the cost of the

magazine was borne by the readers: these magazines were, then, popular chiefly among the literate upper classes of New England, since their “relatively high price and limited geographical range gave them the select audience they desired.”⁴¹ In this final decade of the century, however, a new group of magazines (including *McClure’s* and others) began publication and quickly gained circulations that dwarfed those of the bastions of the old guard. What was new about these new magazines was that the publishers made “the attention of the audience”⁴² their source of income. Since these magazines depended on advertising for their primary source of income instead of the traditional practice of depending upon repeat subscriptions, these advertisers were forced to market their product to a wider and more diverse audience. The publishers and editors of these new magazines were eager to give this new audience the window into American life that they wanted, and this led, for better or for worse, to the commercialization of American magazines. These changes were part of a larger trend of products and ideas that were meant for consumption by the general public – including the middle and lower classes – and the wide distribution of goods that were once limited in availability would become another marker of the new industrial America.

I will be focusing mostly on those magazines which would seem to fall into the “old guard,” low circulation category. Even as the new commercial publications increased in circulation, the traditional journals played more and more of a part in defining the debate due to their willingness to defend the traditionally-based criticism. That is, while the *North American Review* and the *Atlantic Monthly* continued to defend the traditional criteria used in judging the merits of literature in America, it would be publications like *Harper’s Magazine*, *Scribner’s*, and

⁴¹ Wilson, Christopher P. *The Labor of Words: Literary Professionalism in the Progressive Era*. Athens: U of GA press, 1987. p. 43

McClure's that would rally behind the new standards of realism and populism and take American criticism into the twentieth century.

The positive attention paid to Zola's works in major American literary organs paved the way for other critics and authors who rebelled against the restraints of gentility. Through the explicit justification of his theories offered in *Le Roman Experimental* and his prodigious fictional output, Zola inspired a group of American authors sympathetic to his goals. During the 1890s, authors such as Jack London, Stephen Crane, and Frank Norris took up Zola's mission and techniques – portraying humans as products of heredity and environment, and using the struggles of the characters created by these factors to critique the circumstances that produced them. Whether the literary magazines were based in New York or Boston, these new Naturalist works were likely to be judged by reviewers who still prized New England ideals and examples. With the exception of Howells, most of them would initially oppose these new authors.

Crane wrote the first of these American Naturalist novels, *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*, published in 1893. While he would touch upon his ideas regarding the relationship of humanity to nature in his short story "The Open Boat," Crane would not write another exclusively Naturalist novel. Crane may have been the first American author to write a Naturalist novel, but Frank Norris best exemplified pure Naturalism in American literature at the turn of the twentieth century, as he not only explicated its principles but put them to use in his own fiction. In observing the critical reaction to the works of these two authors, it is possible to see how the so-called "Realism War" progressed once the American novelist pushed beyond Howells' "smiling

⁴² Ohmann, Richard. *The Politics of Letters*. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1987, p 31.

aspects” and into the realms of the poor and the predetermined. It is also interesting to see how critics reacted to American Naturalists as opposed to a French one. So, let us take a look at the reaction to these early Naturalist texts and begin to investigate how changes in the production of literature, a debate over its role in culture, and generational turnover combined to shift the center of gravity in American letters from Boston to New York.

Stephen Crane was the first of a new generation of young American novelists to attract the attention of Howells and the realists. Although he was one of the fastest rising stars in American literature until his death in 1901, in 1893 he could not find a publisher for his first novel due to its subject matter and frankness.

Maggie: a Girl of the Streets shocked readers with a disturbing, yet realistic, picture of life in the Lower East Side tenements of New York City. Maggie is a creature of the New York tenements who is disowned by her family and dies a prostitute. Her environment determines her fate, and Crane’s Rum Alley is a nightmare world of child abuse, vice, and alcoholism. Crane shopped his novel around to multiple publishers in New York and elsewhere in 1893, but found no takers. In that year – and at the age of twenty-one -- Crane published his novel at his own expense under the pseudonym Johnston Smith. Due to its limited release, the novel received scant attention before 1895 and the publication of Crane’s Civil War novel *The Red Badge of Courage*. One of the few reviews it did receive, however, was from fellow realist author Hamlin Garland.

Garland, writing in *The Arena*, immediately noted Crane’s youth but did not dwell on it. Garland, who had previously delivered lectures on Howells’ place in literature, lavished praise upon *Maggie* and the way in which it portrayed her life: “[Maggie] deals with poverty and crime and vice also, but it does so not out of curiosity, not out of salaciousness, but because of a

distinct art impulse, the desire to utter in truthful phrase a certain rebellious cry. It is the voice of the slums.”⁴³ This call for a realistic depiction of life, even if it was the life of a tenement dweller, was central to the further development of Naturalism in America. Garland went on to note that Crane was a New York native and that he had personal experience of such scenes. This experience allowed Crane to create, in Garland’s words, “the most truthful and unhackneyed study of the slums I have yet read.”⁴⁴ Henry James argued that fiction could be used to communicate the author’s experiences to the reader, and this is what Garland felt that *Maggie* did, although he chided Crane for showing only the worst of the slums. Garland and a few others were advocates for Crane’s novel, but it did not get a widespread hearing until 1895.

Maggie would not receive the near-unanimous support it enjoyed after its first printing the second time around. Howells was the loudest voice raised in support of the novel – not unusual, considering its content. Although the realism war was slipping away from the idealists, they had not yet completely given the field over to the forces of realism and Naturalism. A review published in the *New York Tribune* on May 31, 1896, claimed that Crane’s novel was too dark for the average reader and stated that “Mr. Crane entirely lacks the ability which has enabled some other men to deal with the sordid, disgusting, and vicious themes in a way that made them at least entertaining.”⁴⁵ Apparently squalor could be tolerated if it were amusing in some way. Interestingly, fellow Naturalist Frank Norris also reviewed *Maggie* while still a writer at *The Wave* in San Francisco. In his review, Norris condemned Crane’s novel for its unrelenting pessimism and wrote that he felt as though Crane wrote the novel from a position so far removed from his subjects that he lacked sympathy for their plight. Norris unwittingly

⁴³ Garland, Hamlin. *Arena*, June 1893.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

echoed some of his own future critics when he wrote, “Mr. Crane does not seem to know his people. You are tempted to wonder if he has ever studied them as closely as he might have done.”⁴⁶ None of these reviews was going to make or break Crane’s reputation in American letters; *The Red Badge of Courage* and his poetry would stand as enduring contributions. Still, it is interesting to see how Norris -- who eventually promoted Naturalistic themes in his own fiction – criticizes Crane for not being as true to life as possible. Norris’ first novel would definitely not be a reflection of reality, but he would later take hours of observation on the streets of San Francisco and create one of Naturalism’s character masterpieces.

It should not be surprising that the first to notice the up-and-coming Norris was William Dean Howells. Howells had created his own brand of genteel realism, wherein he focused on accurate depictions of the lives of the middle class, the “smiling aspects”⁴⁷ of American life, and most definitely not the denizens of the slums. Despite some philosophical differences, the Dean of American Letters used his position as editor at both the *Atlantic Monthly* and *Harper’s* to promote rising young realist authors. It should not be surprising that Howells would approve of Norris’ early fiction as the younger man had studied the work of the elder during his student days at Berkeley and analyzed a number of Howells’ works during his time at *The Wave*.⁴⁸ Norris’ first published novel-length work, *Moran of the Lady Letty*, drew Howells’ attention even though it was merely an adventure story serialized in newspapers. Howells’ review in the December 17, 1898, issue of *Literature* was one of only five reviews in major periodicals, the only one that was not anonymous, and the only positive one. The reviewer from *The Independent* found Norris’

⁴⁵ “Recent Fiction,” *New York Tribune*, May 31, 1896.

⁴⁶ Norris, Frank. “Stephen Crane’s Stories of Life in the Slums: *Maggie* and *George’s Mother*.” *The Wave*, July 1896.

⁴⁷ Howells, William Dean. “Dostoyevsky and the More Smiling Aspects of Life.” *Harper’s* 73 (1886), p. 641-42.

novel to be “amateurish in tone” and the prose as “dyed with the accepted colors well known to Bret Harte, Stevenson, and Joaquin Miller....”⁴⁹ In contrast, Howells used his review in the British publication *Literature* to praise the work for its “fresh and courageous invention,”⁵⁰ and upon *Moran*’s publication in novel form he compared it favorably with another recent first novel, Will Payne’s *The Money Captain*.⁵¹ This special attention from Howells encouraged Norris to explore the limits of realism further, and the Dean’s assistance would certainly aid the young author in his future endeavors.

Though *Moran* was filled with violence and coarseness, Norris was not harangued for these unpleasantries in the journals as the novel also contained notable romantic elements. This was, after all, an adventure yarn which featured a rich, respectable gentleman hero, not an emotionally detached study of common people and their struggles. Ironically, once Norris depicted violence in the mundane realm of America’s main streets, those responsible for passing judgment would take notice, and the majority of their judgments would not be favorable.

When Norris offered *McTeague* up for the perusal of nation’s literary critics, he knowingly put himself in the middle of the realism conflict, which was nearing its fourth decade of existence. *Maggie* was six years in the past, and American critics had seemingly repulsed Zola’s attacks on decency, as traditional romances still made up the vast majority of published works. Writing in *The Bookman*, contemporary critic Nancy Huston Banks declared victory, and claimed that realism had been “swept out of sight five or six years ago by the sudden on-rush of works of ideality and romance, which arose like a fresh, sweet wind to clear the literary

⁴⁸ Crisler, Jesse S. “Howells and Norris: A Backward Glance Taken.” *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, Vol. 52, No. 2. (Sep., 1997), p. 234.

⁴⁹ *The Independent*, October 1898, p. 1129.

⁵⁰ *Literature*, Dec 17, 1898, p. 577-78.

⁵¹ Bixler, Paul H. “Frank Norris’ Literary Reputation.” *American Literature*, Vol. 6, No. 2. (May, 1934), p. 112.

atmosphere.”⁵² While Zola had been accepted by a minority of critics, most still viewed the Frenchman’s work as coarse, immoral, and intolerably foreign. Howells, ever the staunch advocate of realism, had not published a novel of his own in years, but still used his editorial positions to champion the cause of realism. He was opposed in this by the majority of his colleagues, and they did not hesitate to regurgitate many of the common arguments that had been made against realism for years.

McTeague, published in March of 1899, deals explicitly with the lives of common people and the behavioral problems caused by “low” breeding. Filled with sex, violence, and murder, *McTeague* drew many of the criticisms commonly applied to Zola’s novels a decade earlier. Concerned about the effect that such a tale would have on the delicate reading public, the reviewers for *The Outlook* and *The Review of Reviews* urged Norris to look to more tasteful subjects. In their reviews the authors stated that it was “to be hoped that Mr. Norris’ next plot will fall in more pleasant places” and that “Mr. Norris will find subjects worthy of his power.”⁵³ It is quite possible that these reviewers’ critical preferences were shaped by New England training, as their reviews espoused the genteel philosophy promoted by Wendell and other scholars at Harvard. As a result, these critics’ concern for the audience’s delicate sensibilities overrode any considerations of a work’s social merit or rhetorical craftsmanship. In the eyes of critics such as these, Norris was “searching out the degraded side of humanity,” and in their opinion it was a “misfortune that he should have devoted so much skill and virility to the description of a life so essentially without spiritual significance, and so repulsive in its habit and quality.”⁵⁴

In addition to *McTeague*’s focus on the working class, Norris’ novel depicted an event that was so shocking, so horrific, that reviewers couldn’t bring themselves to describe it in

⁵² Nancy Huston Banks, “Two Recent Revivals in Realism,” *The Bookman*, June 1899, p. 356.

⁵³ *The Outlook*, March 18, 1899 p. 646-7.

print.⁵⁵ During the course of Trina's courtship, McTeague takes the entire Sieppe clan to a theater. The party views a series of vaudeville acts, and Trina's younger brother August (Owgooste) manages to wet himself during the course of the show. The incident, which is scarcely mentioned in the text, was an affront to good taste that would not be countenanced by those who deemed themselves the guardians of public sensibility. The reviewer from *The Outlook* (likely churchman Lyman Abbott) may very well have been addressing this when he wrote, "In two instances at least,...[Norris] descends to descriptions that have no place in print; to comment upon or even suggest them is vulgar to the last degree."⁵⁶ The *Outlook* reviewer is a bit hyperbolic, a rhetorical tactic common to many critics who held to genteel standards in their evaluation of literature. Others belittled Norris' novel with a variety of strong insults. The book was "...a monotony of brutality from beginning to end"; it was, in fact "about the most unpleasant story that anybody has ever ventured to write"; indeed, it had no "moral, esthetical, or artistic reason for being."⁵⁷

While *McTeague* may have attempted to represent the lives of those that most cultured citizens would not wish to dine with, it was hard for critics with a broader outlook to argue that Norris and his work had no artistic merit. In one case, two factions within the same publication were in sharp disagreement over McTeague's merits and problems. These disagreements were aired in the public domain, as the editors of Boston's *The Literary World* came into direct conflict with contributor John D. Barry over his *McTeague* review.

⁵⁴ *The Review of Reviews*, June 1899, p. 749.

⁵⁵ From Bixler, p 203: "This entirely innocuous passage was removed by the publisher after the first copies had been sent out, and has not subsequently been restored till the appearance, in December 1941, of the limited edition issued by the Colt Press, San Francisco. The curious may also find the omitted passage in Walker's *Frank Norris*, p. 221-22."

⁵⁶ *The Outlook*, March 18, 1899, p. 646.

Barry held an unusual position in the American literary landscape. He was employed by *The Literary World*, a Boston publication, as their correspondent in New York City. Though he wrote for one of the standard-bearers of the New England literati, he was something like a foreign correspondent, reporting from the front lines of literary production. An author in his own right, Barry had published novels in Chicago, another large, commercial metropolis that was helping to create a new, national media culture. Never afraid to be decisive in his judgments (see his treatment of Wharton, for example), Barry did not hesitate to be one of the first to offer strong praise for Norris' Naturalist creation. In his "New York Letter" to *The Literary World*, published March 18, 1899, Barry opened with a bold proclamation: *McTeague* "seems to me worthy to rank among the few great novels produced in this country." The first third of the review simply overflows with praise of the novel. Barry claimed to be "astonished by [the novel's] profound insight into character...shrewd humor...brilliant massing of significant detail, and...dramatic force."⁵⁸ Employed by one of Boston's literary standards, Barry certainly must have participated in discussions over the role of realism in the American novel, yet he insisted that "for those who do not go to fiction merely to be entertained or diverted, and who believe that fiction may profitably be made an expression of life, *McTeague* will be a revelation." Barry recognized that the defenders of gentility and taste would have problems with the novel's themes, so he attempted to refute the standard genteel arguments before they could be raised. In his opinion, even if Norris' novel was about people on the fringe of the criminal element, this shouldn't matter to critics who claimed to judge literature on its artistic merits. Study of the less savory elements of society was worthwhile because "People on the verge of the criminal classes,

⁵⁷ *Public Opinion*, March 16, 1899, p. 347; Nancy Huston Banks, "Two Recent Revivals in Realism," *The Bookman*, June 1899, p. 356.

as well as the criminal classes themselves, offer excellent material for serious study in fiction.” Finally, Barry made it clear that he was on the side of the realists in their struggle when he declared that Norris should be included in the “first rank” of American writers, which was apparently composed of W.D. Howells, Stephen Crane, and one Mary Wilkins. Apparently Barry had at least a working knowledge of Norris’ work before the review’s publication, as he spent a good portion of his column discussing *Moran of the Lady Letty*, the composition of *McTeague*, and the author’s employment at *The Wave* in San Francisco. Barry’s report was, then, some of the first carefully considered praise of an American Naturalist novel to make it to print in a respected literary journal. Furthermore, it is pertinent to this discussion in that it was written from the perspective of literary New York, even if that critic was writing for one of Boston’s literary publications. Barry’s review was, in fact, too full of praise for *The Literary World* to associate itself with. The publication’s editorial staff wasted no time in making *their* opinion known, offering a rebuttal to Barry’s piece in the next issue.

The editorial board’s discussion of *McTeague* led off the April 1, 1899, issue of *The Literary World*. Their review is notable for a few reasons. First of all, the editors did not come out and demolish *McTeague* wholesale, which is interesting considering that the board consisted of a churchman, the Reverend Edward Abbott, and his sister, Madeline Vaughn Abbott. In fact, the first half of the review consists mostly of acclaim for Norris’ attention to detail and life-like construction of the central characters. To their eyes, Norris showed “rare skill” in sketching out the lives of Trina and McTeague, and did so with a “relentless truth.” The Abbots even went so far as to write that “No stronger picture could be given of the evil that lies rooted in the love of money.”

⁵⁸ Barry, John D. “New York Letter.” *The Literary World*, March 18, 1899, p. 88-89.

Despite these accomplishments, the Abbots could not bring themselves to endorse the novel due to their distinct views regarding what could properly be explored in the American novel. The discerning reader can detect a sort of paternal sensibility in the editors' words common to a great deal of the Boston criticism; they were the gatekeepers of culture and were concerned for the fragile minds and morals of the populace. Referring perhaps to Trina's near-sexual relationship with gold, Owgooste's theater accident, or McTeague's murderous drunken rages, the editors accused Norris of "grossness for the sake of grossness" and went on to declare that a work like *McTeague* could never be true to "the highest standards" of literature. In their opinion, if the book was to be read by anyone, it should only be by those of "vigorous mind...and strong stomach," a group which apparently did not include the young women who made up the majority of the novel-reading public in the 1890s. Satisfied that the critics of the future would uphold their judgment, the board concluded that "the world will not be proud of [*McTeague*] in that distant tomorrow which irrevocably sets the true value on books of today."⁵⁹ The Abbotts were correct, but only to a limited extent. Some critics never reconciled themselves to the distasteful people and situations common in Naturalist texts. William Dean Howells, however, took every opportunity to push for greater acceptance of such texts. In Norris Howells found a writer who held to a similar philosophy of the novel, and the "Dean of American Letters" used his talents and his position as a prominent editor to advance their ideas further into the national literary consciousness.

The relationship between Howells and Norris is an interesting one, as the younger author had long admired Howells but never completely agreed with his interpretation of realism. Norris

⁵⁹ "McTeague." *The Literary World*, April 1, 1899, p 99-100.

had been familiar with Howells since his college days at Berkeley and Harvard, even writing about him in one of his student themes.⁶⁰ During his tenure at San Francisco's *The Wave*, Norris considered Howells to be part of a group of elite American authors and gave him complementary treatment in his column for over two years. In particular, Norris appreciated Howells' willingness to deal with topics that most other authors seemed unwilling to tackle. For instance, in a letter written to the San Francisco *Examiner* regarding the subject of the Great American Novel, Norris praised Howells for "conceiv[ing] of some... great crying evils of Americanism..., the problems of politics, of divorce, . . . of marriage, and of social caste," and for being "relentlessly and remorselessly true to American life,"⁶¹ philosophies that would inform Norris' own fiction. These two authors were attempting to create a different vision of what secular literature could do in what was an increasingly literate society; rather than simply entertain, perhaps the novel could be used to inform the public and move them to action. The two authors began a correspondence shortly after the publication of *McTeague*, and they eventually met upon the occasion of Norris' move to New York City in March of 1898. Their correspondence continued well after their initial contact, and Howells' support for Norris would continue both in print and New York City's literary society.

Thus, Howells' positive response to *Moran* should not come as a surprise. Howells' review was not an unbiased response to a young novelist's first work; instead, his praise of Norris's novel was surely a move to bring a young realist author some measure of attention in the international press. The Dean, who had long been predicting a realist turn in American fiction (and practicing it in his own), firmly believed that an author would emerge who could

⁶⁰ Crisler, Jesse S. "Howells and Norris: A Backward Glance Taken." *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, Vol. 52, No. 2. (Sep., 1997), p. 236.

provide a reflection of the actualities of American life and push this nation's fiction past the sentimentality and provincialism that continued to be dominant in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. As a result, Howells declared *McTeague* to be "A Case in Point" for all that he had prophesied. Howells' review, which appeared in the British periodical *Literature* on March 24, 1899, made *McTeague* an exemplar of the new realism. In his opinion it posed questions that the critics of the new century would be forced to answer:

Whether we shall abandon the old-fashioned American ideal of a novel as something which may be read by all ages and sexes, for the European notion of it as something fit only for age and experience, and for men rather than women; whether we shall keep to the bonds of the provincial proprieties, or shall include within the imperial territory of our fiction the passions and the motives of the savage world which underlies our civilization....⁶²

Although printed in an English publication, these questions illuminate the conflicts central to the discussion of realism in American fiction. Howells' conception of the novel obviously trends closer to the "European notion," and it should be noted that both this review and Barry's seem to apply these standards rather than the "old-fashioned American ideal" so central to Boston's paternal outlook.

After drawing parallels with Zola, Howells praised Norris's "vivid insight," his "simple and subtle expression," his ability to draw fully realized secondary characters, and his skill in managing such elaborate detail while still moving the plot forward. Howells did have two minor quibbles with Norris's novel: he did not believe that the Grannis/Baker storyline was worth the

⁶¹ Frank Norris: Collected Letters, ed. Jesse S. Crisler. San Francisco: Book Club of California, 1986, p. 38.

⁶² William Dean Howells, "A Case in Point." *Literature*, March 24, 1899, p. 88-89.

time spent telling it, but at the same time he felt that Norris' "picture of life is not true, because it leaves beauty out. Life is squalid and cruel and vile and hateful, but it is noble and tender and pure and lovely too." Even Howells was disturbed by some of the extreme situations present in *McTeague*, but not enough to shake him from enthusiastically backing his "case in point." Yet, Howells closed his review with a reminder that, even though Norris' novel was a worthy piece of literature, the general reading public may not be ready for such brutal realism: "[*McTeague*] is a little inhuman, and it is distinctly not for the wall of living-rooms, where the ladies of the family sit and the children go in and out. This may not be a penalty, but it is the inevitable consequence of expansion in fiction." It is apparent, then, that Norris had support for his work in some high places but not in most widely distributed periodicals. Even without widespread critical support, *McTeague* sold well, eventually selling over sixty-seven thousand copies.

Now firmly established as an editor at the Doubleday publishing company due to his magazine and authorial experience, Norris quickly released two more novels in 1899 and 1900, *Blix* and *A Man's Woman*. These two novels were much lighter and romantic than *McTeague*, and also attracted a slightly more gracious reception, but even these works suffered abuse at the pens of zealous defenders of propriety. Lyman Abbott, editor of *The Outlook*, is an excellent example of those who could not countenance the affronts to decency: "The author of *McTeague* again in his new novel finds it necessary to his ideas of realism to present the most repellent and brutal narratives of human suffering."⁶³ These novels demonstrated Norris' penchant for mixing realism and romance: although the novels still contained realistic elements - such as the operation scene found in *A Man's Woman* - they were considerably less "brutal" than

⁶³ *The Outlook*, March 3, 1900, p. 486.

McTeague. They did little to further Norris' reputation, however, as they did not sell as many copies or achieve the notoriety that *McTeague* had. If Norris had never published another novel, it is not likely that he would have ever attained the status as one of the nation's leading authors. Fortunately, his inkwell had not yet run dry.

By 1901, Norris had published a few essays which attempted to define a theory of Naturalism and, in doing so, to defend it as a legitimate artistic philosophy. The most cogent and notable of these early pieces was his "Zola as a Romantic Writer," published in 1896 during his stint at *The Wave*. In this early essay Norris claimed the following,

That Zola's work is not purely romantic as was Hugo's lies chiefly in the choice of Milieu. These great terrible dramas no longer happen among the personnel of a feudal and Renaissance nobility, those who are in the fore-front of the marching world, but among the lower – almost the lowest -- classes; those who have been thrust or wrenched from the ranks, who are falling by the roadway. This is not romanticism – this drama of the people, working itself out in blood and ordure. It is not realism. It is a school by itself, unique, somber, powerful beyond words. It is Naturalism.⁶⁴

In making this argument, Norris noted that the subject matter of the Naturalist novel was as important as the philosophy that guided it. Indeed, the novelists' description of those living in the "lower orders" of life was as important, if not more so, than Zola's concept of "scientific" observation or Howells' desire to convey the trials and tribulations of the middle class in minute detail. This argument could be easily dismissed by those who held to genteel standards: who would want to read about the "blood and ordure" of the "lowest" classes? After publishing three novels, working as an editor, and participating in the realism discussion in earlier writings,

Norris was ready to offer a justification of Naturalism that was more nuanced than “Zola as a Romantic Writer.” This new essay would meditate more upon matters of truth and accuracy – the keys to the debate over realism -- than the plight of the lower classes. Norris attempted to spell out a definition of Naturalism that would legitimize it in the eyes of European and American critics. The battle between the traditional Romanticists and the Howellsian Realists had been raging with seemingly little resolution as to how American literature should proceed in the twentieth century. Norris, the new generation’s primary advocate of Naturalism, saw his genre as a possible meeting point between these two diametrically opposed factions.

In his August 3, 1901, “Weekly Letter” for the *Chicago American Art and Literary Review*, Norris began by distinguishing between Accuracy and Truth in the novel. In his chapter on “Norris’ Definition of Naturalism,” Donald Pizer succinctly describes Norris’ distinction: “Accuracy is fidelity to particular detail; Truth is fidelity to the generalization applicable to a large body of experience.”⁶⁵ Conservative critics in the New England mold seemed to believe that accurate depictions of unsavory lives were unpleasant, regardless of the philosophy behind them. In addition, critics noted that some novels provided accurate depictions of certain segments of life that did not possess that elusive sense of absolute truth.

Norris attempted to find a solution to these problems by asking questions that captured the controversy at the source of the debate:

Is it permissible to say that Accuracy is realism and Truth romanticism? I am not so sure, but I feel that we come close to a solution here. The divisions seem natural and intended. It is not difficult to be accurate, but it is monstrously difficult to be True; at best the

⁶⁴ Norris, Frank. “Zola as a Romantic Writer.” *The Wave*, XV, June 27, 1896; rpt. in *Literary Criticism*, p. 71.

romanticists can only aim at it, while on the other hand, mere accuracy as an easily obtainable result is for that reason less worthy.

Norris continued:

Does Truth after all “lie in the middle?” And what school, then, is midway between the Realists and Romanticists, taking the best from each? Is it not the school of Naturalism, which strives hard for accuracy and truth?⁶⁶

In Norris’ view, Naturalism combined the best qualities of realism and romanticism – accurate, detailed depictions of American life along with the philosophical profundity through which one could examine the meaning of those lives in a larger sense. Again, Pizer sums up Norris’ definition well: Naturalism was “...a fictional mode which illustrated some fundamental truth of life within a detailed presentation of the sensational and low.”⁶⁷ This is an interesting choice of phrasing, as there seems to be little focus on predetermination or large societal forces in this definition. The focus on material (the low) and method (finding truth in it) allowed for later American Naturalist authors to hold a variety of philosophies and yet still be considered Naturalists. It is difficult to say if this philosophical justification fundamentally altered the opinions of those staunchly against realism and Naturalism, but the act of creating a unique, American approach to the novel which took the best aspects of two dominant literary paradigms and found a way to synthesize them into something powerful certainly influenced later authors who took this path between extremes of traditional American escapism and Howellsian realism.

Norris’ two remaining novels of note (not including the posthumous *Vandover and the*

⁶⁵ Pizer, Donald. *Realism and Naturalism in Nineteenth-Century American Literature*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois Press, 1966, p. 34.

⁶⁶ “Frank Norris’ Weekly Letter,” *Chicago American Literary Review*, August 3, 1901, p. 75.

⁶⁷ Pizer, Donald. *Realism and Naturalism in Nineteenth-Century American Literature*, Carbondale: Southern Illinois Press, 1966, p. 35.

Brute) were both received with open arms by early twentieth-century reviewers across the nation. One cause of this may be Norris' move away from completely brute Naturalism to a style that incorporated slightly more escapism and melodrama, which most likely appeased those critics who expected some romantic content and despised unpleasant situations. Another may be that Norris had spent considerable energy attempting to legitimize Naturalism in the eyes of the American literati. Yet another may be that reviewers afforded more respect to a novelist attempting to tackle an American subject on a grand scale: Norris planned a trilogy detailing the comprehensive story of a wheat crop -- from field to market to stock exchange. In any case, both *The Octopus* and *The Pit* elicited positive response, by and large. Further, the release of *The Octopus* saw Norris reviewed in publications which had previously shunned mention of his work, including Boston's *Atlantic Monthly* and *The Dial*, as well as New York's *The Nation*.⁶⁸

Howells, writing about *The Octopus* from "The Editor's Easy Chair" at *Harper's*, was again a staunch supporter of Norris' work, labeling Norris "a poet among the California wheat-fields."⁶⁹ As he had been one of Zola's primary advocates and was likely well aware that Norris was, to some extent, a student of Zola's writing, Howells nevertheless attempted to separate Norris from the Frenchman's influence. Norris, wrote Howells, "owes to the great romantic realist nothing but the conception of treating a modern theme epically." Anticipating one objection that had been hurled at Zola's works for over twenty years, that the characters were simply types and not fully realized individuals, Howells pronounced them "not the less personalities because of their typical function." The Dean, ever the advocate for pure realism in literature, felt that the new novel was not without defects -- primarily that Norris was prone to

⁶⁸ Marchand, Ernest. *Frank Norris: A Study*. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1942, p. 216.

⁶⁹ Howells, William Dean. "The Editor's Easy Chair," *Harpers Monthly Magazine*, October 1901, 824-5.

including romantic sub-plots that took away from the stark realism of much of the rest of the novel. Still, despite Norris' non-adherence to the realist creed, Howells declared that *The Octopus* was "a great book, simple, somber, large, and of a final authority as the record of a tragic passage of American, of human events, which, if we did not stand in their every-day presence, we would shudder at as the presage of unexampled tyrannies." By now it should not come as a surprise that Howells, writing in defense of his protégé's Naturalism, would find much to appreciate in Norris' novel. What made *The Octopus* different from Norris' previous offerings was that some conservative critics were also forced to admit that Norris was a powerful stylist who had created a work deserving of wider notice.

A reviewer writing for *The Independent* offers an excellent example of this phenomenon. This reviewer offered up some of the common attacks against Naturalism that Norris had endured since the publication of *McTeague*, most notably the genre's focus on determinism:

The final impression of the reader is that the individual human will has no sway or freedom, but is beaten down by inanimate force....It is our favorite contention that the aim of art is to enlarge the human will, not to contract it. In this enlargement lie both the joy and the morality of true literature.⁷⁰

Once again, the claim that the novel should uplift the (impressionable) reader is used to attack Norris' subject matter rather than the writing itself. In the nineteenth century most critics would have been content to dismiss the novel for this fault and to ignore any other merits. In the twentieth century, however, even conservative critics could no longer dismiss Norris' Naturalism completely. *The Independent's* reviewer echoed Howells in claiming that *The Octopus* "contains scenes of real beauty, and elements of power that only need to put off hysterical license to rival

anything written in recent years.”⁷¹ While not a wholesale endorsement of Norris or his philosophy, those who held to the traditional Bostonian genteel criticism were thus forced to admit that Naturalism had a place in American literature. Surely, if Norris’ novel could “rival anything written in recent years,” it could not be dismissed simply because the reviewers didn’t agree with its subject or philosophy. This reviewer’s shift away from focusing on the novel’s philosophical content and instead concentrating criticism on its characterization, prose, and structure was not an isolated incident. In fact, even those who reviewed this work for the foremost Bostonian literary journals were moved to acknowledge *The Octopus*’ strengths in spite of objectionable scenes and characters.

For example, in his review of *The Octopus* for the *Atlantic Monthly*, critic Henry Walcott Boynton chose to confront Norris’ supposedly offensive descriptions of the female body. Published in the May, 1902, issue of the *Atlantic*, Boynton’s review took issue with the voluptuous women featured in Norris’ novel. He thought the lovely Hilma Tree was “subtly colored after the manner of (Italian author and decadent) D’Annunzio’s creatures,” and scenes where Norris had the mystic Vanamee describe his lost lover Angele through memories of her scent were “the sort of romantic vulgarity of which the realist of the French school is capable.”⁷² Yet despite his qualms regarding Norris’ portrayal of women, Boynton also echoed some of Howells’ comments on the novel. Like Howells, Boynton felt that the characters were excellent portrayals of “indigenous” Americans and that they were the primary strength of the novel. Unlike Howells and many others, Boynton chose to ignore the social and business issues brought up by Norris in favor of strictly appreciating the humanity of his characters: “What is the value

⁷⁰ Review of *The Octopus*, *The Independent*, May 16, 1901.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

to creative fiction of world-movements and commercial problems when compared with such breathing human nature as this?"⁷³ Boynton approved of *The Octopus* primarily on the grounds that it contained characters who, unlike McTeague and Trina, could come together as humans and not merely as brute sexual creatures. It would be impossible to say that Boynton was won over to the Naturalist cause, but at the very least he (and many other critics who shared his tastes) had to admit that Norris had created a novel that possessed a good deal of merit. However, the same romantic sections that attracted praise from the squeamish set drew criticism from those on the other side of the realism war.

Critic and author Frederic Taber Cooper had been fighting the good fight alongside the realists for the greater part of a decade and had been one of the most attentive observers of Norris' career since *McTeague's* publication. Writing in the May, 1901, edition of *The Bookman*, Cooper found it maddening that the author who had done such an excellent job recreating the daily life of the citizens of Polk Street was now "deliberately choosing every now and then...to look at life through rose-coloured glasses, instead of adhering fearlessly to the crude colours and the harsh outlines."⁷⁴ Cooper, on the whole, did not feel that *The Octopus* equaled Norris' earlier works, even going so far as to make the hyperbolic claim that *A Man's Woman* did a better job of holding true to life. Obviously, it is impossible for any one author to please every single reader and critic, but it is interesting that Cooper failed to notice that almost all of Norris' work contains elements of romanticism and that the novel he singled out for its fidelity to experience is less realistic, on the whole, than *The Octopus*.

As noted earlier, one of the reasons that many critics were seemingly receptive to *The*

⁷² Henry Walcott Boynton. Review of *The Octopus*, *Atlantic Monthly*, May 1902, p 708-9.

⁷³ Ibid.

Octopus was that it was the first book in the projected grand “Trilogy of the Wheat.” In a time when both critics and novelists (who were often one and the same) were attempting to define a new role for American literature, the appeal of a work that attempted to portray the contemporary struggle between agrarian culture and industrial capitalism was not inconsiderable. Of course, one’s opinion in regards to class struggle often reflected their class position, and not all reviewers were thrilled to have the struggles of “rogue” farmers depicted in print. *The Dial’s* William Morton Payne felt that Norris was too much on their side and against the interests of the railroads, stating that “If only [Norris] had given the devil his due, [Payne] might be willing to admit the diabolical character of the corporation.”⁷⁵ Norris had given business more than its due; in fact, he almost destroyed the farmers’ position in regards to collective action with Shelgrim’s speech. Those critics who hungered for more of the business world and the characters that made it their home would not have to wait long before seeing both in Norris’ next novel. Unfortunately, Norris would never know what anyone in public life thought of it.

Norris died on October 23, 1903, of a ruptured appendix at the height of his fame. At the time of his death, the second part of the Trilogy of the Wheat was being published serially in *The Saturday Evening Post*, then one of the nation’s most read popular magazines. This novel, *The Pit*, met with almost universal acclaim for a variety of reasons. First of all, the characters and settings in the novel would have been more familiar and appealing to the majority of readers. Whereas *The Octopus* portrayed the conflict between railroads and farmers in the rough areas of the American West, *The Pit* took the reader into the Chicago futures markets where wheat and other crops were bought and sold. More urban readers could identify with the settings and

⁷⁴ “Frank Norris’s ‘*The Octopus*,’” *The Bookman*, May, 1901, 245-47.

⁷⁵ “Review of *The Octopus*,” *The Dial*, September 1, 1901, p. 136.

characters, especially the hero, Jadwin, the ruthless businessman who sells his soul for money and power and is then brought low by fate. Secondly, the novel engages in even more “romantic” characters and situations.

The combination of Norris’ early demise and the lighter content of *The Pit* made the novel a hit with critics across the nation, but the melodrama and focus on well-off commodities traders made it seemingly the least naturalistic of his Naturalist works. After its initial positive reception, *The Pit* declined in the estimation of critics, including a reviewer from *Harper’s Weekly* who found the Jadwins “vulgar” and their lives “unessential,”⁷⁶ as well as the reviewer from *The Independent*, who saw the book as “not far from a glorification of the basest passions in the American character.”⁷⁷ Perhaps *The Pit* would have been redeemed by the planned final book of the trilogy, *The Wolf*, but it is impossible to know how the three novels would have connected due to Norris’ untimely death.

In the span of only five years, Norris did Naturalism a great many services. The most notable of these were his efforts to put forth a comprehensive theory of the Naturalist novel and the publication of Naturalist works which captured the imagination of a substantial portion of America’s reading public. Through his relationship with Howells, his publishing connections, and his pen, Norris helped to further the cause of those writers and critics who felt that American literature was ready to move past the limits put upon it by the traditional idealist criticism which had its roots in the Boston area. Norris, Howells, and other critics who shared a vision of what the novel of the new century could become were the voices of progress in an atmosphere where authors were still writing novels for the drawing room rather than attempting to portray life

⁷⁶ “*The Pit*,” *Harper’s Weekly*, March 14, 1903, p. 307-8.

⁷⁷ “*The Pit*,” *The Independent*, February 5, 1903, p. 331-2.

accurately but also *truthfully*. Though the realism wars were still in full swing at the turn of the century (and the romantics were most definitely winning in the realm of sales), Norris had done much to force members of the international critical system to at least acknowledge the fact that this genre could not be completely discounted simply due to its often unpleasant content.

With New York growing in influence as a publishing center, artistic mecca, and industrial powerhouse, it was not inconceivable that this metropolis was becoming the United States' new capital in many ways – including an increasing role as the definer of national tastes. Still, due to the deaths of Stephen Crane in 1900 and Norris in 1903, there were few novelists (in New York or anywhere else) willing to attempt the daunting task of creating works that came anywhere near to living up to Norris' lofty goals for the American novel. Fortunately, Norris had played a large part in launching the career of another young novelist who defined his own work as Naturalist – Theodore Dreiser. The long battle over the merit of Dreiser's works would occupy much of the first quarter of the twentieth century, and the changes in the critical reception of these novels and stories vividly illustrates how much the critical standards of the New York literati held sway at that time when compared to the critical environment of the 1890's.

Naturalism and American Critics, 1900-1925

Frank Norris's contributions to Naturalism's cause were not limited to his published literary output. In his short career he contributed to San Francisco's *The Wave* as both a writer and editor, published several novels, and even attempted to define a new Naturalism unique to American literature. Once he moved to New York City in February of 1898, he was able to convert others to his views via personal conversations and correspondences with those he met at the many readings, dinners, and benefits common to high literary culture in New York City.

Norris' literary philosophy and style inspired a number of authors, including one of the many newspapermen who reported on the realities of life in New York City. Theodore Dreiser had moved to the modern metropolis just before the turn of the century after working as a reporter in St. Louis, Chicago, Toledo, Cleveland, and Pittsburgh. The son of German immigrants, Dreiser had been exposed to the less-than-genteel aspects of American life during his younger years as the Dreiser family experienced extended bouts of crippling poverty while living in Indiana. Dreiser's father Johann had been the owner of a wool mill, but a fire destroyed the mill and left him with a debilitating injury. He never recovered from this slide into debt either physically or mentally, and Theodore was forced to leave home at age fifteen in order to support himself. Young Theodore believed that reporting for a newspaper was one way that he could move from the toil-filled world of small-town Indiana to the world of wealth and power found in the new cities.

Dreiser's early experiences with the publishing world were central to his conception of authorship. Over the last half of the nineteenth century, print culture, with newspapers at the head, had made deep inroads into American popular culture. The explosive rise of mass-circulation magazines and newspapers in the nineteenth century created an unprecedented mass

audience for authors writing at the beginning of the twentieth. There were four times the number of publishing firms in 1910 than there had been in 1860, and a large number of them were concentrated in New York, Chicago, and other large urban areas. There was heated competition for the new audience's attention, and many cities had multiple newspapers. In 1840 there were a total of 138 daily newspapers spread across the continent, with a circulation of under 2 million readers. By the turn of the century, there were 2600 dailies vying for the consumer's nickel with a total circulation over 24 million.⁷⁸

One factor in the public's rapid adoption of the newspaper in their daily lives was the simple fact that many of the new urban dwellers had no familial networks or relationships and needed a way to get the news of the town. In the case of major cities with large immigrant populations, such as Chicago or Pittsburgh, these newspapers gave the reader a way to understand their strange new environment by reporting not only on political and financial news but also the daily murders, accidents, and minor successes of the lower classes. Gunther Barth, in his book *City People: The Rise of Modern City Culture in Nineteenth Century America*, summarizes the new role of the urban newspaper:

By identifying and explaining the role of diversity as the way of life in the American modern city, the metropolitan press helped to make diversity comprehensible and acceptable. Its news and stories covered, in flagrant violation of former newspaper practices and social convention, everything that happened in the modern city. The mass audiences craved this new journalistic fare. Their experience of living with capricious chance and constant changes conditioned them to embrace the assumption that anything

⁷⁸ Barth, Gunter. *City People: The Rise of Modern City Culture in Nineteenth Century America*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980, p. 16.

could happen in their lives. That attitude made the newspaper reports plausible, justified them, and gave them significance as object lessons on how to cope with the vicissitudes of life.⁷⁹

Dreiser entered this exciting, booming profession basically as one of these immigrants, fresh off the plains of the Midwest, and the sensational scenes he witnessed as a member of the new urban press would shape both his worldview and writing style.

Dreiser would later narrate his time as a newspaperman as a process of disillusionment with the “timid journalistic conventions and commercial interests which censored real news,”⁸⁰ but in actuality he was a model of how to use the skills of the trade to create vivid, interesting descriptions of urban people and their lives. Most of his early newspaper work put Dreiser in promotional roles which turned his reporting into advertisements for the newspaper, which in turn promoted Dreiser in the marketplace if the advertisements were successful.

Whereas many reporters followed the standard practice of sticking to the five W's (who, what, where, when, and why) Dreiser was most earnestly concerned with stating exactly what he saw, felt, and believed. In his autobiographical work *A Book About Myself*, Dreiser claimed that his experience covering the lurid stories of the streets "provide(d) just the necessary contrast to prove that life is haphazard and casual and cruel; to some lavish, to others niggardly."⁸¹ which would become one of the central themes of his work. In contrast to the authors of sentimental novels that promoted the drawing-room ideals of pure womanhood and gentlemanly conduct, Dreiser took the experience he accumulated in Chicago, Pittsburgh, and New York and used it to create characters who dealt with the economic and moral realities of American life at the turn of the century.

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 26.

⁸⁰ Kaplan, Amy. *The Social Construction of American Realism*. Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 1988, p 111.

After years of newspaper and magazine work, Dreiser was able to make the leap to the literary world, although the transition was likely more difficult than he had originally envisioned. Dreiser's willingness to portray characters for whom life had been lavish (despite a lack of morals) or niggardly (even if they were good people) enabled him to choose a subject for his first novel that most other authors of the time would not have approached. *Sister Carrie*, the story of a young Wisconsin girl's move to Chicago, her seduction, and her subsequent rise to fame on the New York stage ran contrary to the genteel morality that had been promoted by Boston's critics in earlier years.

The initial challenge to Dreiser's work would come in his initial efforts to get a novel published. He initially attempted to get *Sister Carrie* published by the prestigious New York firm of Harper and Brothers, where good friend Henry Mills Alden held a position as an editor. Dreiser submitted the manuscript to Alden at the beginning of April, 1900, and received a rejection letter by the end of the month. This letter contained some praise for the young author: "This is a superior piece of reportorial realism--of high class newspaper work," the Harper's adviser said; "It is graphic, the local color is excellent, the portrayal of a certain below-the-surface life in the Chicago of twenty years ago faithful to fact." In spite of these qualities, Harpers chose not to publish the novel, claiming that Dreiser's touch was "neither firm enough nor sufficiently delicate to depict without offense to the reader the continued illicit relations of the heroine.... Their very realism weakens and hinders the development of the plot."⁸² Harper's could publish any number of other novels that would not offend its readers, and so Dreiser had to figure out how to get his unpublishable novel published.

⁸¹ Dreiser, Theodore. *A Book about Myself*. New York: Boni and Liverwright, 1922, p. 211.

If one can believe Dreiser's own notes, his wife Sara and friend Arthur Henry assisted the young author in revising the novel in order to make it less abrasive to readers. They attempted to do this by removing some of the frank sexuality involved in Carrie's "fall" and the pessimistic tone. Still, there was much for a publisher to object to, and Dreiser's second attempt to get *Sister Carrie* published would make this quite clear. Later in his career Dreiser would depict the story of his conflict with the Doubleday publishing company as a monumental battle against censorship and 19th century literary mores. At the time, however, Dreiser was simply attempting to get his publishers to live up to their end of a contract.

With multiple published novels and years of experience as a writer and editor for *The Wave* to his credit, Norris was able to secure a position as an editor at the Doubleday publishing company soon after his arrival in New York. Dreiser submitted the manuscript for his first novel, *Sister Carrie*, to Doubleday, where Norris recommended it to the firm's junior partner, Walter Hines Page. Norris was deeply struck by the appearance of a novel that offered a new vision of Naturalism, going so far as to write to Dreiser that *Sister Carrie* "was the best novel I have read in M. S. since I have been reading for the firm," and that "it pleased me as well as any novel I have read in any form, published or otherwise."⁸³ Hines verbally extended a contract to Dreiser based upon Norris' emphatic recommendation. Despite Norris' praise and optimism for this new work of Naturalism others in the company would see to it that *Sister Carrie* would have a difficult time gaining a hearing in the public sphere.

Frank Doubleday, head of Doubleday publishing, had been on vacation in Europe during the period of *Sister Carrie*'s initial acceptance and Dreiser's acceptance of the verbal contract.

⁸² West III, James L. "The Composition and Publication of *Sister Carrie*." 11 Jan. 2005. U of Pennsylvania. 11 Feb 2008 <<http://www.library.upenn.edu/collections/rbm/dreiser/scpubhist.html>>.

Upon his return and notification of *Sister Carrie*'s acceptance by Norris and Hines, Doubleday became outraged that his employees had moved to publish a novel that he personally found unfit for public consumption. While the Doubleday company was a part of the larger New York publishing culture, it was still very much invested in the conservative values held by the majority of Boston's critics. Frank Doubleday considered the book "immoral" because of its depiction of a "fallen" woman as a success story. According to the legends that Dreiser and others later built up around this dispute, it was actually a prudish Mrs. Doubleday who demanded that the novel be squashed, although the company always denied this. Doubleday tried very hard to renege upon the verbal agreement, but Dreiser refused to take the book to another publisher. As a result, the novel was published under circumstances that neither Dreiser nor Doubleday found satisfying.

Whether or not the publication of *Sister Carrie* was philosophically motivated became a moot point in the following years. Dreiser scholar Thomas P. Riggio claims that "Dreiser developed the incident into a legendary story of censorship and "puritanical" repression, and the book became a symbol of literary freedom for an entire generation."⁸⁴ In truth, Doubleday followed through on their contractual obligation to publish the novel, as their lawyers believed that it could have ruined the company's name to have it known publicly that the firm had reneged on a contract. Thus, Dreiser and Doubleday signed an "agreement to publish" on August 20, 1900, but the firm did nothing to promote the book or its author when *Sister Carrie* was published that November. Almost no major publications reviewed the first edition of *Sister Carrie*, but many newspapers did. The reviews that did appear were not "overwhelmingly

⁸³ Ibid.

denunciatory,” contrary to Dreiser’s (and later staunch supporter Burton Rascoe’s) version of events. While the reviews were not overwhelmingly positive, critics who lived in large cities outside of New England like Denver, Omaha, and Detroit were unlikely to attack the novel solely on the grounds of genteel morality.

This is not to say that there were no objections to the novel on these grounds, for some of the earliest negative reviews raised serious moral concerns. The reviewer for the Omaha *Daily Bee*, for instance, echoed many of Zola’s reviewers who feared that readers’ minds could be polluted by contact with the impolite people who populated the novel. The reviewer quickly outlined the story and commented on the novel only at the end of the short piece: “While [*Sister Carrie*] describes unmistakably one side or phase of city life and tells a story that is undoubtedly often repeated in real life in every city, it is not a book to be put into the hands of every reader indiscriminately.”⁸⁵ The reviewer for the Detroit *Free Press* did not deny that Dreiser’s work has a certain power but questioned whether American readers needed to be exposed to the ugly realism present in *Sister Carrie*. Noting that Dreiser had successfully detailed the conditions that could lead an innocent girl from the farm to the “cheap theater,” the reviewer wrote that “*Sister Carrie* is neither a pleasant nor an edifying book, but it is written out of real life. The problem in the reader’s mind is: was it worth the doing?”⁸⁶

The reviewer for the Denver *Republican* would have answered with a resounding “NO!” His review, though short, directly communicates his feelings regarding the situations and treatment of urban life found in *Sister Carrie*. The reviewer wrote,

Vice is triumphant and virtue finds the potter’s field in “*Sister Carrie*,” by Theodore

⁸⁴ Riggio, Thomas P. "Biography of Theodore Dreiser." *Dreiser Web Source*. 3 Jan. 2006. U of Pennsylvania. 12 Feb. 2008 <<http://www.library.upenn.edu/collections/rbm/dreiser/tdbio.html>>.

Dreiser. The author calls his work a novel of city life, but he might have been more descriptive had he called it a novel of the worst side of city life....The chief merit of the book is its photographic descriptions of character. Scenes and incidents are freely localized. The book is unhealthy in tone, however, and its literary quality is not high enough to cover the faults of its theme.⁸⁷

In the case of the *Republican*, it is unlikely that any merits that *Sister Carrie* possessed would have covered the “faults of its theme.” These reviews, though originating from a variety of locales, reflect the moral tone of the old Boston school of literary criticism. If the majority of *Sister Carrie’s* early reviews had been similar to these, Dreiser and his biographers could have made the claim that “the protest against *Sister Carrie* was so vehement that publishers voluntarily withdrew it....”⁸⁸ Unfortunately for Dreiser’s legend of critical repression, a good number of the initial reviews offered a different opinion of Dreiser’s novel, one that used criteria much more similar to that of Howells and Norris than that of Nancy Huston Banks.

It is interesting to note that the first wave of reviews, dating from *Sister Carrie’s* very first published review, could have been written by Howells himself. That is to say, these critics judged the novel on its characterization and its relationship to contemporary American life. One possible explanation for this is that the reviewers were newspapermen themselves and appreciated the “straight story,” the plain realism and detail that Dreiser’s novel contained in abundance. Another may be that the Realism Wars had been waged in public forums for over fifteen years, and that Norris, Howells, and their supporters had made arguments regarding the relationship of literature to life which many literary people outside of New England had accepted

⁸⁵“Sister Carrie,” *Omaha Daily Bee*, December 22, 1900.

⁸⁶“Sister Carrie,” *Detroit Free Press*, November 24, 1900.

as valid. In any case, a good number of the reviewers from Connecticut to San Francisco praised Dreiser's work as an excellent new novel, if not for all the same reasons.

The very first published review, appearing in the Louisville *Times*, was obviously written by a critic who had full knowledge of the realism battle. The *Times*' critic lays out the strengths of realism in plain terms and is definitely sympathetic to the mission of realism as explicated by the realists. This can be seen in the review's opening paragraph:

Out in the highways and hedges of life you find a phase of realism that has not found its way into many books. It is sometimes morbid and sometimes forbidding. At its best it is grim and shadowy. It reeks of life's sordid endeavor; of the lowly home and the hopelessly restricted existence. Its loves, its joys, its sorrows, are narrow. There is little sunshine. It is plain realism.⁸⁹

This critic goes on to claim that Dreiser should have the "credit that must be accorded to a man who has written faithfully and impressively," and praises *Sister Carrie* for its "minute detail and vivid realism." Those critics who held to the genteel aesthetic would never have approved of the novel, no matter the amount of "truth" it contained due to the affairs and crimes of both Carrie and Hurstwood. The *Times* critic undoubtedly supported the goals of the realists, as he declared that Dreiser's attention to characterization and detail, "makes [him] a factor in that sort of fiction which must be read and we must have," and noted that *Sister Carrie* was a "remarkable book, strong, virile, written with the clear determination of a man who has a story to tell and who tells it."

Although these strong words were not written in the pages of the *Atlantic Monthly* or

⁸⁷ "Sister Carrie," *Denver Republican*, January 20, 1901.

⁸⁸ Cleaton, Irene and Allen. *Book and Battles*. Boston: unknown, 1937.

Harper's, it is interesting to note that the debate over realism was taking place in the newspapers outside of the major cities of the East. Although magazines like *Harper's* and the *Atlantic* were internationally distributed periodicals, their audience was still mostly limited to the well-educated and well-off citizens who could afford yearly subscriptions. Newspapers, in contrast, could be bought for pennies, and since their writers had to appeal to readers of all classes, the criticism was often more populist in tone – and thus friendly to realists and Naturalists. Positive reviews for the first publication of Sister Carrie appeared in the newspapers of nine American cities, with Chicago newspapers supplying three strong appreciative reviews to the huge Chicago media market.⁹⁰ Of course, the novel was a story of Chicago, which may have made it more appealing to these critics. Positive reviews also appeared in the newspapers of St. Louis, Indianapolis, and Seattle, in which, like New York, urban environments and institutions were rapidly expanding at the close of the nineteenth century.

Although Dreiser made some small inroads into the consciousness of urban American readers, the Doubleday version of *Sister Carrie* attracted little attention in the European journals, which were undeniably more prestigious than any single American newspaper. Frank Norris continued to lobby for the novel on Dreiser's behalf, and it is likely that he is the one who sent a copy of *Sister Carrie* to London publisher William Heinemann in early 1901. Heinemann had begun publishing the works of new American writers as part of a new series entitled "The Dollar Library: A Monthly Series of American Fiction" at the beginning of the year, created to showcase the new school of American authors. Heinemann felt that young authors like Stephen Crane and Harold Frederic, both former newspapermen, needed an outlet for publication in

⁸⁹ "Sister Carrie." *Louisville Times*, November 20, 1900.

⁹⁰ Salzman, Jack. *Theodore Dreiser: the Critical Reception*. New York: David Lewis, 1972, p. 15-17.

Europe. Dreiser and his novel suited Heinemann perfectly, and the publisher quickly entered into negotiations with Doubleday in for *Sister Carrie*'s publishing rights. These were concluded by May 6, with the only stipulation being that Dreiser was required to condense the first two hundred pages of the novel into eighty. This was not done due to any perceived deficiencies in the novel's style but, rather, to make it conform in length to the other novels in the series. Dreiser complied, and *Sister Carrie* was published in England on July 31, 1901, cut to 357 pages from its original 533.

The Heinemann edition of *Sister Carrie* received glowing reviews from a number of British publications, including the *Scotsman*, the *Manchester Guardian*, the *London Express*, and the *London Daily Chronicle*.⁹¹ Many of these reviews noted the skillful portrayal of Hurstwood's decline, and Dreiser was compared favorably with his Naturalist predecessor Stephen Crane. These reviews may have played a part in helping *Sister Carrie* achieve some notice in England, but it was a pair of reviews in two of the leading English literary journals which drew international attention to Dreiser's novel. The first was in the *Academy* and was quite positive; the reviewer praised *Sister Carrie* as a "calm, reasoned, realistic study of American life in Chicago and New York, absolutely free from the slightest trace of sentimentality or prettiness, and dominated everywhere by a serious and strenuous desire for truth."⁹² Dreiser was not without fault and was accused of writing with a "painful lack of dignity,"⁹³ but the novel was praised as noteworthy for the unique perspective it offered into the American psyche. The *Academy* was the first journal of international repute that paid *Sister Carrie* any attention, but it was Theodore Watts-Dunton's review in the *Athenaeum* that single-

⁹¹ Ibid., p. 18-22.

handedly established Dreiser's international reputation.

The *Athenaeum*, published in London, was one of the leading European literary journals at the turn of the century. The fact that their staff took the time to review Sister Carrie was something of a victory in itself, but it was the content of the review that established Dreiser internationally as an author who deserved wider notice. Watts-Dunton wasted no time establishing Dreiser's value in contemporary literature, stating at the very beginning of the review, "This is the sixth of the volumes that have appeared in Mr. Heinemann's "Dollar Library"; and it is the most important."⁹⁴ The review was almost wholly positive, taking issue only with Dreiser's style: "Of the manner of the book it is not easy to speak favourably; it is strikingly unworthy of the matter thereof."⁹⁵ It was the subject matter that impressed Watts-Dunton, even if the manner of its expression was less than perfect: "The book is, firstly, the full, exhaustive story of the 'half-equipped little knight's' life and adventures; secondly, it is a broad, vivid picture of men and manners in middle-class New York and Chicago; and, thirdly, it is a thorough and really masterly study of the moral, physical, and social deterioration of one Hurstwood, a lover of the heroine."⁹⁶ It was unprecedented for British and European reviewers to have a seemingly photographic representation of the lives of common people in the rough, vigorous, growing American cities. While factories and slums had been commonplace in England since the late eighteenth century, representation of industrial America was still in its adolescent stages. Businessmen, engineers, and scientists were the new American heroes, but the new middle class and the exploited masses had rarely been made the subject of American

⁹² "Fiction: *Sister Carrie*." *Academy*, August 24, 1901, p. 153.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ Watts-Dunton, Theodore. "*Sister Carrie*." *Athenaeum*, September 7, 1901.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

fiction. With a few exceptions, the archaic standards of the genteel tradition had prevented writers on the western side of the Atlantic from publishing anything that truly depicted the lives of America's common people.

The sentiment that made this review, and the novel, well known in literary circles comes near the end of the piece: “(*Sister Carrie*) is further of interest by reason that it strikes a key-note and is typical, both in the faults of its manner and in the great wealth and diversity of its matter, of the great country which gave it birth.”⁹⁷ It was a great, flawed novel for a tough, growing nation. It is interesting to see here the reversal in critical tastes. Whereas fifteen years earlier Americans like Howells were promoting Zola's Naturalism over the outcry of English critics, now the contemporary English critical establishment was championing an American Naturalist. English critics moved to the vanguard of the Naturalism debate rather than dragging their feet and remaining stuck in their nation's century-plus overreaction to libertinism. Howells's influence may also have been a factor, as he was regularly writing for the London journal *Literature* during this time.

Dreiser received little compensation from either of these publications of *Sister Carrie*, receiving only a paltry \$68.40 in royalties for the 456 copies of the Doubleday edition that were sold in the United States.⁹⁸ Dreiser's father died in the waning days of December, 1900, and Dreiser immediately began writing his next novel, *Jennie Gerhardt*. Likely based on the story of Dreiser's sister, his father's rejection of her, and her introduction to the cruel realities of city life, Dreiser was able to produce forty chapters in a matter of a few months. However, the battle over *Sister Carrie*, the death of his father, and marital problems combined to produce a bout of

⁹⁷ Ibid.

writer's block that basically ended Dreiser's career as a novelist until 1910. Dreiser's brother Paul sponsored Dreiser's trip to an upstate New York sanitarium, and Theodore found his way back into the publishing business by 1904. Although *Sister Carrie* would be reprinted in 1907, Dreiser was not an active participant in the discussion of Naturalism for most of the first decade of the twentieth century.

Howells's 1902 book *Literature and Life* contained an essay on "American Literary Centres." In this essay the Dean placed Boston and New York at the top of that list but noted that there was yet no single point on the map which could claim the title of America's home of literature. Howells admitted Boston was still a major player in 1902, writing that "we have now no such a literary centre as Boston was."⁹⁹ When Boston was a cultural center in the late nineteenth century, it was a place where "literature had vastly more honor, and even more popular recognition, than journalism." To its credit it was home to the "*Atlantic Monthly*, still the most literary, and in many things still the first of our magazines."¹⁰⁰ In addition, "after the chief publishing house in New York, the greatest American publishing house is in Boston, with by far the largest list of the best American books."¹⁰¹ Yet, even Boston was becoming more like New York and the other new urban centers of America; more readers and critics were interested in fictionalized portrayals of average life than in idealized depictions of gentlemen's adventures. Howells noted that "Boston itself has perhaps outgrown the literary consciousness which formerly distinguished it from all our other large towns. In a place of nearly a million people (I count in the outlying places) newspapers must be more than books; and that alone says

⁹⁸ West III, James L. "The Composition and Publication of *Sister Carrie*." 11 Jan. 2005. U of Pennsylvania. 11 Feb 2008 <<http://www.library.upenn.edu/collections/rbm/dreiser/scpubhist.html>>.

⁹⁹ Howells, William D. *Literature and Life*. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1902, p. 176.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 181.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 181.

everything.”¹⁰² In short, it was much more difficult for the learned elite to maintain control over the quality of publications, especially once the news became more important to the average citizen than a Brahmin’s musings on the good things in life.

Not only were populations and readers changing, the authors themselves were moving to New York, the center of the new, growing America. At a time when leading authors were often also leading critics, this impact cannot be overstated. Howells continued his discussion of New York’s ascension to its current position as the United States’ literary center by listing a number of “poets, fictionists, historians, essayists, critics, dramatists, satirists, magazinists, and journalists of literary stamp” in order to convince “wavering reason against itself that here beyond all question is the great literary centre of these States. There is an Authors' Club, which alone includes a hundred and fifty authors, and, if you come to editors, there is simply no end.”¹⁰³ While the authors of New England still had Boston as their capital, many writers from the West, South, and parts elsewhere often flocked to New York in order to ply their wares and try their fortunes. If one were to define a nation’s literary center as the place with the largest proportion of working authors, critics, publishers, and printed publications, it seems that Howells was justified in making this claim. Not only did a large, varied group of literary figures live in New York, but they were constantly being published by the city’s publishing community, which was international in its connections and scope. Howells was not oblivious to this,¹⁰⁴ but he did not feel that New York had yet become dominant enough to earn the title of the nation’s literary capital. There were many writers of quality working in Chicago, San Francisco, and elsewhere, but the atmosphere and publishing opportunities to be found in New York made the city a unique draw for those looking to break into professional writing. Howells concluded his analysis of the condition by stating, “It may be

¹⁰² Ibid., p.182

¹⁰³ Ibid., p. 182.

that New York is going to be our literary centre, as London is the literary centre of England, by gathering into itself all our writing talent, but it has by no means done this yet.”¹⁰⁵ Even if New York was ascendant in the literary and publishing spheres, it was not yet dominant. As the first decade of the twentieth century turned into the second, the typewriters of those living in New York would do more and more to set the tone of the nation’s critical discourse.

As noted in the previous chapter, Howells and Norris continued to lobby for a greater acceptance of Naturalism from their positions in London and New York, respectively. Norris achieved a measure of respect due to his arguments for Naturalism and his attempt to work on a grand scale in his *Trilogy of the Wheat*, published in part just before his unfortunate passing in 1903. He used what standing he had in the literary world to promote Naturalism in America and Europe, and his success (both in reputation and in sales) could certainly have made the publishers of New York more amenable to publishing novels containing similar themes. After Norris’ death, Howells, Watts-Dunton, and a few others continued to make the argument that the consumers of novels could take the shock of encountering the less-than-savory characters populating the Naturalist landscape and possibly even learn something about the realities of the modern American experience in the bargain. As Crane and Norris had both died young and at the height of their fame, supporters of Naturalism (in New York and elsewhere) were without an author who would step forward and continue the fight against the sentimentality of the time. In Dreiser and his (eventually) legendary struggle against Doubleday and Puritanism, they found what had been lacking.

It took Dreiser nearly three years to recover from his writer’s block and nervous

¹⁰⁴ “Magazines are published here and circulated hence throughout the land by millions; and books by the ton are the daily output of our publishers, who are the largest in the country.”

breakdown, after which he recovered sufficiently to seek employment in editorial jobs with the *New York Daily News*, the publishers Street and Smith, and the magazine *Broadway*.¹⁰⁶ In 1904 he wrote an account of his crisis that remained in manuscript until it was published as *An Amateur Laborer* in 1983. By 1907, he had used his newspaper and authorial experience to work his way up to editor-in-chief of the prestigious *Delineator*, an organ of the Butterick Company, which specialized in women's fashions. In the meantime *Sister Carrie* was enjoying an underground reputation, particularly after the New York publishing firm of B.W. Dodge Company reissued it in 1907. In fact, the Dodge reprint did a good deal to further acceptance of both Dreiser and Naturalism, and reviews of that 1907 release demonstrate how thoroughly critics across America had adopted the critical standards promoted in the previous decade by Howells, Norris, and others.

The Dodge reprint of *Sister Carrie* still did not attract the attention of the *Atlantic Monthly*, but it did receive a great deal more notice from dedicated literary publications than the Doubleday edition had. The majority of these reviews were favorable, and most repeated the story of the novel's publication and supposed suppression. Whether it was due to improved advertising, the positive English reviews, the novel's underground reputation, or a true shift in critical tastes, established publications such as *Current Literature*, the *North American Review*, and the *New York Times* chose to bring the novel to the attention of their readers, raising the novel's profile both domestically and internationally.

The influential *Bookman* printed not one but two reviews of *Sister Carrie* in the May, 1907 issue. Both were quite positive, especially when referring to Hurstwood's decline as well as

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 182.

the portrait of Carrie's psychology.¹⁰⁷ Not surprisingly, the *Bookman* was a New York literary journal established in the midst of the Realism Wars, and critic/author Frederic Taber Cooper was sympathetic to the realist cause enough to translate a biography of Balzac in 1914.¹⁰⁸ Cooper used his review to lobby against the perception that Naturalist novels were somehow wicked and unpalatable to the reading public: "[*Sister Carrie* is] A strong book, yes. An unpleasant book, also if fearlessness and sincerity are unpleasant. But surely in no conceivable sense an immoral book."¹⁰⁹ Like Zola, Dreiser created works that featured "low" characters, but both authors eschewed moral condemnation of these "people" in favor of heartfelt pity and an attempt to understand their lives. Dreiser was certainly no preacher, but Cooper found that the young author was attempting to teach the reading public important lessons about modern life in a capitalist society. It was possible for good people to be led astray by their passions, and it was also possible for the unworthy to climb to the heights of fame and power. In the very act of writing about these types, Dreiser implicitly made the argument that they were worthy of treatment in fiction. Cooper closed his review with some strong words and a plea to the reading public, writing that "there was more tonic value in *Sister Carrie* than in a whole shelf full of sermons" and that "It ought to have a widespread hearing."¹¹⁰

Although Harrison Rhodes, the *Bookman's* second reviewer, was less enthusiastic about Dreiser's use of language and local color, he enthusiastically praised the author's meticulous depiction of Hurstwood's decline and Carrie's ascent. Calling these scenes "gloomy poetry" and

¹⁰⁶ West III, James L. "The Composition and Publication of *Sister Carrie*." 11 Jan. 2005. U of Pennsylvania. 11 Feb 2008 <<http://www.library.upenn.edu/collections/rbm/dreiser/scpubhist.html>>.

¹⁰⁷ Frederic Taber Cooper. "The Fetich of Form." *Bookman* 25 (May 1907), p. 287 and Harrison Rhodes. "Mr. Dreiser's 'Sister Carrie.'" *Bookman* 25 (May 1907), 298-99.

¹⁰⁸ Keim, Albert, and Louis Lumet. *Honore De Balzac*. Trans. Frederick T. Cooper. New York: Frederick A. Stokes, 1914.

¹⁰⁹ Frederic Taber Cooper. "The Fetich of Form." *Bookman* 25 (May 1907), p. 287.

“a considerable achievement,”¹¹¹ Rhodes struck a note that would be echoed in other New York reviews over the summer of 1907, as *Sister Carrie* was reviewed positively and complimented for many of the same reasons in the *Forum*, the *North American Review*, and the *New York Times Saturday Review*.¹¹² Many of the newspaper reviews from New York and elsewhere repeated the comparisons to Balzac and Zola, the praise for the depiction of Hurstwood, and the claim that those who wanted to understand life in an American city needed to read *Sister Carrie*.

But what of Boston? What did the guardians of traditional morality and literary standards write about this novel of the streets of Chicago and New York? The answer is: very little. In what could be seen as a snub (or simply a reflection of Dreiser’s status as a fledgling writer) *Sister Carrie*’s reprint was not reviewed in the *Atlantic Monthly* or in any of Boston’s other national literary publications. The novel again received numerous reviews in the nation’s newspapers, with twenty-four separate reviews appearing between May and November of 1907.¹¹³ Three of Boston’s newspapers were among those that chose to print editorial opinions regarding Dreiser’s “new” work, and in these reviews we can see that Norris’s and Howells’ pro-realist views had gained acceptance in all quarters of America.

Two of the three reviews appeared promptly on June 5th, 1907, shortly after *Sister Carrie*’s re-release. Appearing in Boston’s *Advertiser* and *Transcript*, the first pair of reviews could have been written by Zola’s defenders in the 1890s. The critic for the *Advertiser* located the novel’s “merit” in Dreiser’s portrait of Carrie. Dreiser was praised for chronicling Carrie’s

¹¹⁰ Ibid., p. 287.

¹¹¹ Harrison Rhodes. “Mr. Dreiser’s ‘Sister Carrie.’” *Bookman* 25 (May 1907), p. 298.

¹¹² Frederic Taber Cooper. “The Fallacy of Tendencies in Fiction.” *Forum*, 34 (July 1907), 117-118. Coates, John Horner. “Sister Carrie.” *North American Review*, 186 (October 1907) 289. “Sister Carrie.” *New York Times Saturday Review*, May 25, 1907, p. 332.

¹¹³ Salzman, Jack. *Theodore Dreiser: the Critical Reception*. New York: David Lewis, 1972. p. 29-55.

“fall” and subsequent rise “with the air of a mathematician solving some problem,”¹¹⁴ in much the same way that Zola attempted to describe the motivations of his criminal characters. This approach, which was quite the opposite of the often-contrived sentimental novel, could “excuse certain aspects otherwise vulgar.”¹¹⁵ The idea that Dreiser truly attempted to fulfill the promise of “The Experimental Novel” seems to appeal to these critics, whose predecessors rejected that experiment wholesale. The *Transcript’s* critic takes a similar tack, complimenting Dreiser on his “impassive aloofness, with dispassionate capacity to see the truth and to tell it without bias of sex and moral standard.”¹¹⁶ Dreiser’s ability to take what could have been a sordid subject and make it worth the reader’s attention is noted, due in large part to Dreiser’s “large and easy grasp of his subject, his breadth, [his] minute analysis, his gifts of construction and characterization, [and] his power to let a nature work itself out and leave it.”¹¹⁷ An abbreviated third review appeared in the *Boston Journal* on the fourth of July of the same summer. This reviewer was also impressed with Carrie’s construction, dubbing her an “interesting psychological study,” and went on to praise Dreiser for his “fresh and vivid” portrayal of an “irresponsible and unmoral” country girl.¹¹⁸ The *Journal’s* critic was not oblivious to the nature of his audience or of the book he was recommending, and made certain to note that *Sister Carrie* was “not a pleasant story, but the author’s handling of it lifts it from the sordid.”¹¹⁹ This was a judgment that few literary Bostonians would have made fifteen years earlier, to say the least.

The review that held closest to the genteel pattern of the previous decades may not have been written in Boston proper, but it was definitely a product of that city’s aesthetic. Hartford,

¹¹⁴ “The Career of *Sister Carrie*.” *Boston Advertiser*, June 5, 1907.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁶ “*Sister Carrie*.” *Boston Transcript*, June 5, 1907.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁸ “*Sister Carrie*.” *Boston Journal*, July 4, 1907.

Connecticut lies 100 miles from Boston, but the critic for Hartford's *Courant* wrote as if he were the head of the *Atlantic Monthly* in Zola's era. Where contemporary Bostonian reviewers approved of Dreiser's scientific demeanor and "enlightened" views of human nature, the *Courant's* writer found him to be "without a sense of humour or of poetry" and *Sister Carrie* "story of sordid licentiousness and pitiful degradation."¹²⁰ This critic (whose name is lost to us) went on to demonstrate how pious the literary could still be by claiming that the only highlight of the entire novel was a sentimental scene in which a Salvation Army captain begs for money for the indigent, one of the few examples of real altruism in the book. The common comparison of Dreiser's work to that of Balzac and Zola is addressed but only to note that the young American is most definitely not of the same caliber of his two now-respectable French predecessors. The *Courant's* writer was not the only one who criticized *Sister Carrie* solely on moral grounds, but this objection was shared only by two other printed reviews,¹²¹ which suggests that this perspective was becoming outmoded. The fortunes of Dreiser would improve as the genteel tradition and Boston's dominance of the national literary discourse became associated with the past and those who held to the views of Howells, James, and Norris became the ones driving America's literary debates from their offices in New York, London, and elsewhere.

Dreiser met one of these young critics in 1908 while editorial director of the *Delineator* and two other Butterick publications. Dreiser was now comfortable in his well-paid editorial position, having left the risky world of authorship behind, and H. L. Mencken was an up-and-coming writer and critic, well-known in his native Baltimore but eager to enter the thriving literary scene in New York. The two immediately hit it off. Dreiser was attracted to Mencken's

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ "Sister Carrie." Hartford *Courant*, July 8, 1907.

confidence, wit, and sharp intellect; Mencken knew of the drama surrounding *Sister Carrie*'s publication and admired Dreiser's honesty and earlier struggles against Puritanism and the Doubledays. The two immediately began working together. Dreiser found work for Mencken in his magazines and used his connections with editors in the city to secure the young writer a position as a book reviewer at *The Smart Set*, an edgy literary journal just coming into its own at the end of the decade. Mencken was one of the few who had read *Sister Carrie* when it was originally released, and he urged Dreiser to re-establish himself as an author. Mencken's urgings were given credence when a new Grosset and Dunlap printing of *Sister Carrie* sold five thousand copies in 1908, demonstrating to Dreiser that there was an audience for hard realism, one that could make writing Naturalist fiction profitable. Dreiser was forced to try his hand at authorship again after an office scandal involving eighteen-year-old Thelma Cudlipp got him fired from his editorial position at Butterick in 1910. Dreiser's and Mencken's collaboration would spur the older man to achieve new heights of recognition and would also bring Mencken national prominence.

With Mencken's encouragement, Dreiser took the forty chapters of *The Transgressor*, the novel he never completed after *Sister Carrie*'s 1900 publication, and used them to complete *Jennie Gerhardt* in the first months of 1911. Dreiser's new novel was published on October 19, 1911 by Harper and Bros. (who had rejected *Sister Carrie* eleven years earlier), and it is quite possible that this novel's publication was the high point of critical regard for both Naturalism and Dreiser. Although there was a smattering of negative reviews, the response to *Jennie Gerhardt* was overwhelmingly positive. Dreiser was now widely regarded (due in part to his

¹²¹ "Sister Carrie." *Akron Journal*, November 30, 1907. "Sister Carrie." *Paris Modes*, September, 1907.

own self-mythologizing) as a victim of Philistinism who had had a second chance to make his voice heard in contemporary literature. Although Dreiser was successful in his attempt to rejoin the ranks of working American authors, it was Mencken who would bring him to prominence in the second decade of the twentieth century.

Dreiser's reputation for writing truth in fiction combined with the story of *Sister Carrie's* "repression" combined to generate significant interest in *Jennie Gerhardt's* release. It was reviewed over eighty times between October 1911 and May 1912, with nine of those reviews appearing in literary publications of record. Mencken's was the first to appear in a magazine specifically dedicated to literature, *The Smart Set*, and it generated widespread discussion about the novel in the press on both sides of the Atlantic. Entitled "A Novel of the First Rank," the review did not attempt to restrain admiration for Dreiser's new work, calling *Jennie Gerhardt* "the best American novel I have ever read, with the lonesome but Himalayan exception of 'Huckleberry Finn,'"¹²² putting it above classics such as *The Scarlet Letter*, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *McTeague*, and *The Rise of Silas Lapham*.

Of course, by putting books by Howells and Norris in his list of great American novels, Mencken demonstrated that the realist creed of the 1890s was his as well, and he was unequivocal in applauding Dreiser for his novel's lack of sentimentality. Mencken believed that American literature had to follow Dreiser's lead if it was to achieve the maturity, the fidelity to life and the tragic sense of the European realists. "*Jennie Gerhardt*," he wrote, embodied "the doctrine that life is meaningless, a tragedy without a moral, a joke without a point." It was the lack of morality and of heroes and heroism that Mencken prized; he desired a novel wherein the realities of American daily life could be brought to light and examined. Mencken believed that

Dreiser had, at last, fulfilled Howells's call for a novel that was true to life, a call which had gone unanswered for more than twenty years. He closed his review by writing, "[*Jennie Gerhardt*] is a novel that depicts the life we Americans are living with extreme accuracy and criticizes that life with extraordinary insight. It is a novel, I am convinced, of the very first consideration."¹²³ By taking a strong position and being one of the first reviews to appear, Mencken's review set the tone for the discussion of the novel in other forums.

A number of critics would directly answer Mencken's declaration and use Howells's criteria to evaluate *Jennie Gerhardt*, which should again be seen as evidence that many American critics were adhering to the realist aesthetic propagated by the New York writers and critics. At least two reviewers responded to Mencken in their texts,¹²⁴ and many others addressed the question of whether Dreiser's novel qualified as "great," demonstrating how quickly and how widely the *Smart Set* article had been disseminated and absorbed into the nation's literary dialogue. But how did the rest of America's critics respond to *Jennie Gerhardt*?

It had been four years since the 1907 Dodge reprint of *Sister Carrie*, and *Jennie Gerhardt* received praise and censure in similar proportion. That is to say, a large percentage of the reviews were positive and extolled Dreiser's success in translating an American life into print, while a small portion continued to take a moralist position, claiming that the story of a fallen woman was unworthy of the public. The few who took that position all resided in the world of newspapers.¹²⁵ While these writers were often more in tune with their readership, these reviews suggest that they were not as savvy as those writing in the journals in regards to the

¹²² Mencken, H.L. "A Novel of the First Rank." *Smart Set* 35 (November 1911), p. 153.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, p. 155.

¹²⁴ Dell, Floyd. "A Great Novel." *Chicago Evening Post Literary Review*, November 3, 1911. Winter, Calvin. "Theodore Dreiser's 'Jennie Gerhardt.'" *Bookman*, 34 (December 1911), 432-434.

place of realism in the American novel. This is not to say that the literary journals were united in adoration of Dreiser; critics in a variety of publications found fault with Dreiser's decidedly less-than-poetic use of language. This was more of a matter of aesthetic critique than moral outrage but was an issue even for Dreiser's supporters. In spite of various objections to his subject matter and Dreiser's treatment of it *Jennie Gerhardt* was dubbed "great" by a number of reviewers, although no one besides Mencken would go so far as to proclaim it the finest American novel other than *Huckleberry Finn*.

Many of the same literary journals that had reviewed *Sister Carrie* examined *Jennie Gerhardt* as well, most notably the *Bookman* and the *New York Times Book Review*. What clearly demonstrates how far the New York realists had come in defining the terms of literary merit, however, was the increasing number of literary publications that not only reviewed Dreiser's novel but proclaimed it a shining example of modern American authorship. Dreiser's ability to depict life as it was, rather than as it ought to be, was lauded by a number of critics. In addition to the previously mentioned journals, *Jennie Gerhardt* was well-received by the *Independent*, the *Craftsman*, *Life* magazine, the *Nation*, and the *Dial*, the last two of which were long-standing publications of record.

In its original form, the *Dial* was a literary and philosophical journal founded by Margaret Fuller and edited by Ralph Waldo Emerson in the 1840's. A new run of the *Dial* was reconstituted in Chicago as a political and cultural review by Francis Fisher Browne in 1880. It contained book reviews, articles about current trends in the sciences and humanities, and long

¹²⁵ "Jennie Gerhardt." Detroit *Free Press*, November 4, 1911. "Jennie Gerhardt is Sordid Realism." Philadelphia *Press*, December 2, 1911. "Jennie Gerhardt." Baltimore *Evening News*, December 5, 1911.

lists of current book titles.¹²⁶ In addition, the publication was known for its liberal political leanings, which makes its support of the equally liberal Dreiser unsurprising. The reviewer for the *Dial* led off the review of *Jennie Gerhardt* by pronouncing it “one of the more significant books of the year” and went on to claim that it was “infused with the same sort of quiet and deep human sympathy” that was found in *Sister Carrie*.¹²⁷ In yet another repudiation of old-style genteel criticism in America, the reviewer went on to note that Jennie, “offers one of those special instances which seem to defy the application of all the general principles of conventional morality” and judgments of Jennie’s choices could not be “nearly as clear as the moralist would like to make [them].”¹²⁸ Once again Dreiser had created characters whose experiences were sufficiently true to life that it was difficult to put them in traditional categories such as “fallen woman” or “deceitful seducer.” Of course, it is impossible to know how Boston’s literary elites judged the novel as no reviews of *Jennie Gerhardt* appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly* or the *Outlook*. To be fair, no review appeared in *Harper’s*, *McClure’s*, or *The Literary World*, a few of the most prominent of the New York literary publications, but the influence of that city’s critics can be found in those reviews that mirrored Howells’s and Mencken’s. New York’s literary tastes were becoming, to an extent, America’s tastes.

With the support of Mencken and critics on both sides of the Atlantic, *Jennie Gerhardt* went on to become moderately successful, selling enough copies for Dreiser to continue writing full-time. Having become a successful author with influential backers such as H.G. Wells, Hugh

¹²⁶ Haskell, Diana. "Dial Magazine." *Encyclopedia of Chicago*. 2005. Chicago Historical Society. 11 June 2008 <<http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/378.html>>.

¹²⁷ “Recent Fiction.” *Dial*, 52 (February 16, 1912), p. 131.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 132.

Seymour Walpole, and Mencken,¹²⁹ Dreiser published a wealth of material in the second decade of the twentieth century. Including *Jennie Gerhardt*, he produced eight volumes of fiction and memoir, almost all of which were successful critically and financially, despite a variety of perceived faults.

Eventually, the *Atlantic Monthly* could no longer ignore Dreiser's rising output and unique point of view, and finally reviewed Dreiser's *The Financier* nearly six months after its release in October, 1912. Even the *Atlantic*, at that time still the most respected literary publication in America and vanguard of Boston's literary culture, could not deny that Dreiser and his Naturalism were a vital part of American literature. The *Atlantic* dubbed *The Financier* "an imposing book, both in intention and execution. If it resembles a biography more than a work of art, that, doubtless, is an aspect of the matter with which the author deliberately reckoned with before he began."¹³⁰ Dreiser was also compared favorably to Norris, whose notoriety had markedly increased since his death eight years prior. Although Dreiser and Norris were "far apart in temperament and method," both were alike in their resolution to "do a big thing in a big way."¹³¹ The *Atlantic's* reviewer was not completely won over to Naturalism, however. In his opinion, Dreiser's novels featured an untenable philosophy in which life was an "insoluble problem" and indicted Dreiser for "that dark Will (God?) which places man in a universe where 'his feet are in the trap of circumstance, his eyes are on an illusion.'"¹³² The reviewer cedes the possibility that Dreiser's philosophy may be correct, but cannot agree with it. In his opinion, critics and authors have "demanded a different basis" for literature that could be

¹²⁹ "Theodore Dreiser." *MSN Encarta Online Encyclopedia*. 2008. 11 June 2008 <<http://encarta.msn.com/encnet/refpages/RefArticle.aspx?refid=761553856>>.

¹³⁰ "Recent Reflections of a Novel Reader." *Atlantic Monthly*, III (May 1913), p. 689.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 690.

¹³² *Ibid.*, p. 691.

considered “one of the enduring things,”¹³³ and one can deduce from the magazine’s earlier positions that that basis would be some kind of Christian theology. Of course, Christian moralists in this era would not approve of Dreiser’s work for reasons not much different than those who did so on explicitly genteel grounds, as the former most definitely informed the latter. In his closing remarks regarding *The Financier*, the *Atlantic*’s reviewer made the prediction that Dreiser’s later works would possess a more positive outlook than the cold, impersonal perspective of his early work. The critic ends his remarks with a question: “who can say what insight and tenderness, what softness of atmosphere and richness of feeling, a dozen years may not add to the already very notable performances of Mr. Dreiser?”¹³⁴ Unfortunately for the reviewer Dreiser’s tone would not soften, for thirteen years later he would release his most acclaimed novel, *An American Tragedy*.

Dreiser, emboldened by his literary success and his new stature as one of America’s most recognized novelists, left his wife and moved to Greenwich Village in 1914. Mencken, Dreiser’s champion in the press, pleaded with the author to avoid the influence of the “red ink boys,” the bohemians and radicals who were based in that most liberated quarter of the City. Dreiser did not and instead engaged in what he called “varietism,” the practice of being in relationships with multiple women, until his death. In addition, he stopped holding back in his novels’ treatment of sexuality, bringing more controversy upon himself and his work. Mencken disagreed with this direction and thus a rift opened in the two men’s friendship, one that would never completely heal. In 1916, The New York Society for the Suppression of Vice got Dreiser’s autobiographical novel *The “Genius”* banned in that state, and the novel was not

¹³³ Ibid., p. 691.

¹³⁴ Ibid., p. 691.

published until Boni and Liverwright purchased the plates and released it in 1923. Even in the midst of all of this controversy, Dreiser's short fiction and memoirs continued to receive, in large part, positive reviews. However, Dreiser would not publish another novel until 1925, and both he and the American literary universe would continue to change in the intervening ten years.

As the third decade of the twentieth century began, the realism debate was all but over. In the wake of World War I, the Modernism of Eliot, Stein, and Hemingway was now defined the literary avant-garde, as it included both novel uses of prose in English as well as characters with great psychological depth. Realism and Naturalism were still being discussed but more as relics of the past rather than as vital forces in literature. James, Howells, and Norris were dead, and Dreiser had not published a novel in nearly ten years. Especially in light of the ways he pushed the boundaries of taste during those ten years -- Dreiser had published a play titled The Hand of the Potter, in which the central character was a child molester – the Indiana native was still a topic of debate insofar as he was the last representative of an earlier movement. As such, he had been reviewed in nearly all of the major literary publications of the time: the *Atlantic*, *Harper's Weekly*, the *Bookman*, the *New Republic*, the *New York Times Book Review*, the *Smart Set*, the *Nation*, and others. New York was now not only the publishing capital of America but perhaps the world. Publications such as the *Saturday Evening Post* had a circulation of over a million readers per week,¹³⁵ and publishers were selling novels by the hundreds of thousands. Musicians, artists, writers, and sculptors flocked to the city where their fellow artists (and buyers) were, and scores of professional critics found employment in passing judgment on their works. In regards to Dreiser (who had moved to California in 1919 to pursue screenwriting and yet another affair), these judgments varied wildly. What is interesting to note, however, is how the last of the

¹³⁵ "Timeline: a History of Magazines." *Magforum.Com*. June 2008. University of Westminster. 13 June 2008 <<http://www.magforum.com/time.htm>>.

critics to adhere to the old moralist position turned to many of the same arguments that Howells and Norris had made twenty years earlier when discussing Dreiser's newest and greatest achievement.

In 1925 critics were divided into two camps with respect to Dreiser: the New Humanists, led by Stewart Sherman, who felt that Dreiser's "barbaric" characters and plots could not be considered "great literature"; and the supporters of Dreiser's Naturalism, led by Mencken, who believed that Dreiser's vast output and unique perspective made him one of the great living American novelists. The debate between these camps went on until 1925 when the publication of two books changed the tone of the debate: a collection of positive Dreiser criticism was published by Burton Rascoe early in the year entitled simply *Theodore Dreiser*, and in December, Dreiser's first new novel in a decade, *An American Tragedy* appeared.

An American Tragedy was met with almost universal acclaim. By 1925 Dreiser's status as a figure in American writing could not be denied, due to his uncompromising adherence to realism and his catalogue of work. Critics from the major newspapers and literary organs of the day, including some who had previously been detractors, were nearly unanimous in their praise. Most notable of these converts was Stuart Sherman. With a front-page review for the *New York Herald Tribune Books*, the man who had led the attack on Dreiser's "barbaric" perspective now was first in acclaiming *An American Tragedy* as a masterpiece of American realism. Sherman wrote, "He appears to me now for the first time in his fiction to be seeking sincerely and pretty successfully to tell the truth, all the relevant truth and nothing but the truth -- and with such proportion and emphasis that every interest involved shall feel itself adequately represented."¹³⁶ In Sherman's view, Dreiser had finally created a narrative that was both realistic and tragic without the preachy tone found in *Jennie Gerhardt* and *Sister Carrie*. In writing *An American*

Tragedy Dreiser had at last become the detached reporter who merely reported truthfully on the dangers of the modern American Dream. Echoing reviews of Zola at the turn of the century, Sherman calls *An American Tragedy* “massively impressive” and a work of “unexceptionable moral effect.”¹³⁷ Even though many readers would not have wanted to dine with the murderous Clyde Griffiths, the example of his fall and execution were not to be ignored.

To have a writer’s leading critic turn around and praise that writer’s work was exceptional in itself, but when one of the leading institutions of American criticism made an about-face after years of either ignoring that author’s works or, on occasion, censuring them was even more so. That institution was the *Atlantic Monthly*, and its review of *An American Tragedy* demonstrated that even Boston’s most prestigious journal had left the genteel critical ethos behind in favor of admiration for accurate depictions of real life promoted by James, Howells, and Norris a generation before. The review by R. N. Linscott opened by claiming that Dreiser “has included a more detailed, absorbing, realistic account of a murder trial than has hitherto found its way into fiction.”¹³⁸ Twenty years earlier the description of such a murder and its banal, deadly consequences would have most likely been abhorrent to any critic employed by the *Atlantic*. Linscott goes on to praise Dreiser for “making his protagonist a typical American youth, and his opponent the complex and unconquerable forces of heredity and environment,” taking that material and translating that “story of a weak and commonplace boy into an American epic comparable in power and understanding to *Jude the Obscure* or *The Brothers Karamazov*.”¹³⁹ Obviously, Dostoyevsky and Hardy were elite company for an American novelist, especially one who had a history of printing what tradition-based critics saw as

¹³⁶ Sherman, Stuart. “Mr. Dreiser in Tragic Realism.” New York *Herald Tribune Books*, January 3, 1926, p. 1-3.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

unpolished, brutal prose and immoral themes. In one final unambiguous example of a Boston publication assuming the critical perspective of the New York critics, Linscott described Dreiser's narrative as "simple and straightforward, a competent piece of honest reporting that interposes no verbal window between the reader and the scene described."¹⁴⁰ This sounds as if Linscott subscribed to Howells' claim that the goal of literature should be "the truthful treatment of material," a mantra he was identified with for over thirty years. Five years after the Dean's death his goal was appreciated by critics across the nation, as *An American Tragedy* was celebrated for its fidelity to truth by a group of critics that included important contemporary voices Burton Rascoe, Clarence Darrow, Donald Davidson, Joseph Wood Krutch, Heywood Broun, John Cowper Powys, and Carl Van Doren.¹⁴¹

Of course, Dreiser's use (or abuse) of language was still the target of criticism, as Dreiser was not above using hackneyed terms such as "not a little" and "no less" ad nauseam. With *An American Tragedy*, these shortcomings could be overlooked, and were, by reviewers such as V. L. O. Chittick of the *Sunday Oregonian*. Chittick began his review by savaging Dreiser's "knotted and twisted rhetoric" but continued on to write, "This book deserves the profound interest it undoubtedly will arouse because of the importance of its content and the soundness of its structure."¹⁴² While Dreiser's prose could be easily attacked at the sentence level, most agreed that the narrative he constructed was the work of a true craftsman.

There was dissent, of course. Ernest Brennecke, Jr.'s review in *Commonweal* praises the manner in which the story affects the reader, but he could not resist hammering Dreiser for his

¹³⁸ Linscott, R.N. "The Atlantic's Bookshelf." *Atlantic Monthly* 137 (March 1926).

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 137.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 137.

¹⁴¹ Salzman, Jack. *Theodore Dreiser: the Critical Reception*. New York: David Lewis, 1972. p. 441-541.

¹⁴² Chittick, V. L. O. "The Work of Ten Years." *Sunday Oregonian*, January 24, 1926.

stylistic inadequacies. Brennecke's attack begins simply: "There can be no possible pardon for a writer who can permit himself to spew forth violations of the most elementary grammatical decency such as 'he was still convinced that he had no skill with or charm where girls were concerned.'"¹⁴³ Echoing Sherman's earlier New Humanist criticism, Brennecke wrote that "The work seems to present just another mass of evidence in favor of the old critical contention that a bad style inevitably accompanies or indicates a vital and serious shortcoming in the author's view of the world."¹⁴⁴

With the spare prose of writers like Hemingway and T.S. Eliot the fashion of the day, Dreiser's awkward constructions were simply intolerable to some. Even so, the positive reviews outnumbered the negative. Fame and wealth now his, Dreiser settled into life as a literary celebrity and did not publish another novel while still alive. Two of his novels were published posthumously, but by the mid-1940's, Dreiser seemed a figure of a different century, which, to some extent, he was.

In any case, the reviews of Naturalist works we have looked at in this paper gives the discerning reader a lens through which to view the changing landscape of American literature in the Gilded Age and Progressive Era. While it would be an overstatement to claim that the shift from traditional criticism to one that favored Howellsian realism was one of the pivotal literary developments of the twentieth century, it would be quite reasonable to note that these changes were still noteworthy as they reflected alterations in the way that literature was produced and consumed in the twentieth century-- changes which had their origins in the newspapers, publishing houses, and (most importantly) the streets of New York City. In observing the

¹⁴³ Brennecke, Ernest. "An American Tragedy." *Commonweal*, 3 (April 28, 1926), p. 696.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 697.

changes in Naturalism's reception, we can begin to understand how the rise of large-scale industrial capitalism and a nationwide mass media began to influence the elite, socially-stratified world of American literature in New England. As tastes shifted towards a more "democratic" literature, the views of Norris, Crane, and Dreiser fit the nation's mood more than the literature of Boston's upper echelons. Modernism and Post-Modernism would take American criticism in a variety of theoretical directions later in the twentieth century, but the critics and writers who supported Realism and Naturalism were certain of two things: American literature needed to be honest about the realities of life in a rapidly changing world, and the place to examine the new American existence was in the capital of modernity, New York City.

Conclusion

Although Dreiser, Norris, and Howells fought for a greater acceptance of realism in American literature, realism and Naturalism were never dominant movements in American letters. While critics and authors debated the place of realism in literature, the average reader was still happily purchasing sentimental novels, light magazines, and newspapers. Even if they were not dominant, these two literary movements were trailblazers in regards to the manner in which American authors could approach the subject of economic inequality as well as enabling the frank discussions of American life outside of the borders of the drawing room. As we have seen, realism and Naturalism became more acceptable to the critics in the United States as the literary marketplace became less the realm of elite authors and more of a place where cultural observers could highlight social and economic issues. This was a result of multiple factors that fundamentally changed the population distribution of the United States, its economy, and the people who were responsible for creating its fiction.

Between 1860 and 1900, America's economy shifted away from dependence on agriculture to manufacturing, which enabled the growth of cities with large manufacturing bases. American exports grew, and the GNP tripled between in that time.¹⁴⁵ Cities like New York, Chicago, and Philadelphia were booming, with both immigrants and rural Americans migrating to these urban centers to become manufacturers' new labor force. While Boston was certainly still a vibrant city economically, maintaining a booming shipping industry and a well-established mercantile tradition, New York was the most visible example of the new urban center in America. It was not until the 1920's that a majority of America's population was located in its

¹⁴⁵ "U.S. Gross National Product, Total and Per Capita, 1869-1900 (In 1958 Prices)." *Focus: Understanding Economics in U.S. History*. 11 June 2008 <http://ushistory.ncee.net/visuals/lesson21_visuals.pdf>.

cities,¹⁴⁶ and until that point the effects of rapid urbanization -- tenement living, factory labor, and concentrated extremes of poverty and wealth -- were unfamiliar to a large percentage of the populace. The increasing ease with which people and their goods could be transported (from Europe, Iowa, or parts elsewhere) made these hubs destinations for both businessmen and laborers. As a result, New York City's population grew from 1.1 million to 3.4 million between 1860 and 1900, which was unprecedented for any American city at that time.¹⁴⁷

By the end of the century, New York had become central to America's rapidly growing economy as it was the center of the nation's manufacturing, foreign trade, banking, book and magazine publishing, and theatrical production. As the largest American metropolis, New York's population was comprised of people of all classes, from the wealthiest of America's citizens to those (often immigrants) who spent their days struggling to survive in the slums. The divide between those who were profiting from the new economy and those who were being exploited by it increased dramatically as the old century came to a close. Exposing this exploitation became the mission of number of activist authors after the turn of the century, most notably Upton Sinclair and Ida Tarbell, who took on the meatpacking and oil industries in large-circulation magazines. But, as we have seen over the course of this study, a small number of critics and authors had been doing this in the realm of literature for years.

William Dean Howells had long been an advocate for realism in literature, as well as for moving away from a literary sensibility dominated by authors and critics who attempted to create fictional worlds that paralleled their own cultured, aristocratic experiences. As America changed from

¹⁴⁶ "United States - the Rural-Urban Transition." *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*. 2008. Encyclopedia Britannica. 8 June 2008 <<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/616563/United-States/77977/The-rural-urban-transition>>.

¹⁴⁷ Gibson, Campbell. "Population of the 100 Largest Cities and Other Urban Places in the United States: 1790 to 1990." *U.S. Census Bureau*. June 1998. U.S. Census Bureau. 1 July 2008 <<http://www.census.gov/population/www/documentation/twps0027/twps0027.html>>.

an agricultural nation into an international manufacturing capital, the publishing industry became more market-driven as well. Howells had seen these changes occur over the course of fifty years from his vantage point as a world traveler and one of America's foremost taste-makers.

Harper's publishing threw a grand 75th birthday party for the "Dean of American Letters" in 1912 that was attended by a variety of dignitaries, literary and otherwise, including Henry James, Winston Churchill, and William Howard Taft.¹⁴⁸ Howells gave a speech on the subject of critical realism and the changes it had wrought since the Civil War. Literature had become a different beast than it had been in the previous century. In the new America, "Literature, which was once the cloister, the school, has become more and more the forum and incidentally the market-place. In becoming the forum," he declared, "it is actuated by a clearer motive than before." As American culture became more literate, the influence of authors became greater. As such, Howells felt that they had a greater responsibility to promote equality and justice. In Howells' opinion, American writers of the mid-nineteenth century (when Boston was still America's literary capital),

belonged to an idealistic period when men dreamed of human perfectibility through one mighty reform. Their dream was that if the slaves were freed, there could hardly be sorrow on the earth which our good-will could not easily assuage. Now long ago the slaves were freed, but through the rift of the poet's broken dream the faces of underwaged women and overworked children stare at us; and it does not seem as if it were a sufficient change that now these faces are white and not black."¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁸ Carter, Everett. "William Dean Howells' Theory of Critical Realism." *ELH*, Vol. 16, No. 2. (Jun., 1949), pp. 151-166.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 166.

In other words, the economics of the nation had changed in such a way that it was unconscionable to ignore the plight of the poor in modern fiction, even if that reality fell short of America's ideals. Zola's mission, to use fiction to diagnose the ills of society, was finally given its due by both writers and critics, with New Yorkers leading the way.

It would be naïve to say that New York became the center of American literature simply because the city's literati were the first to appreciate a certain genre or group of authors. By 1925, New York City was not only where many of America's most prominent critics and authors lived and worked, but it had become the nerve center of America's communications industry. The city was home to the nation's largest book publishers, a number of the most widely distributed magazine publications (both literary and otherwise), one end of the Trans-Atlantic cable, and America's first large commercial radio stations. As has been noted, the City was a leader in industry, transportation, and international affairs – and the authors who lived there could observe and interact with a diverse mix of Americans who were enmeshed in the daily struggles of modern life. If these writers had the right connections, their writings could reach a large audience very quickly. Some of New York's critics, notably H.L. Mencken, became national voices in newspapers and magazines while the City's authors could use tales of its residents to illustrate what modern industrial life meant on the individual scale. From Stephen Crane's tale of the slums in *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* to Norris' account of Chicago grain speculators in *The Pit* to Dreiser's tales of trolley magnate Frank Cowperwood in *The Financier*, many of the most powerful tales of the new industrial America were being created (and in turn promoted) by authors who were experiencing the benefits and deprivations of life in New York City first-hand.

From our vantage point here in the twenty-first century, we have seen many different

literary genres rise and fall in critical estimation as times change, and Naturalism was no different. However, it is important to note that the rise of realism and Naturalism happened at the same time that America was undergoing fundamental changes in its geography, economy, and identity. To look at the realities of life in the new America, especially when that look ignored “the smiling aspects of life,” was an ideological choice at the turn of the century and one that could put the author at odds with the dominant literary critics and their powerful journals. As literature became less and less about ideals and moral education and gained more of a grounding in the issues of the day, more of America’s authors chose to use New York as both home base and cultural microscope. Boston had truly been a literary center in the middle of the nineteenth century, but its literature and criticism had never relinquished the views constructed during its peak in the antebellum and reconstruction eras. By definition, “genteel” critics were more likely to prefer literature that which would be pleasurable to those of higher class standing who saw literature as a forum for moral education, such as the old Bostonian families who had been established in the city since the nation’s founding. Realism and Naturalism, in contrast, were more attuned to the demands of the new mass media markets, which reported on the news of the times and had readers of all classes. As New York City became the center of American book, magazine, and newspaper publication in the last decades of the nineteenth century, the literature produced by its authors reflected the people, values, and life of that city. Howells had long desired that American criticism should grow up and leave the standards of the Boston patricians behind in favor of a more representative perspective. If New York City was the epicenter of a rapidly modernizing America, what better place could there be to produce a literature and a criticism that was illustrative of the nation’s changing identity?

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Vita

Tyler Weseman is a native of Cedar Falls, Iowa, and has been a devotee of literature and books since his little record player first read him stories in the early eighties. Always interested in lives different than those he encountered in Iowa's countryside, he decided at a young age that he wanted to learn as much as he could about history and literature in order to better understand the modern world. Inspired by a few exceptional teachers at Cedar Falls High School, most notably Great Books I and II instructor Marguerite DeMoss, Tyler decided that he wanted to make a career of investigating America's literature and history through scholarship. He was able to begin his journey upon the occasion of his acceptance to the University of Iowa in May, 1999. Unfortunately, the death of his father James in August 1999 meant that Tyler would have to do it without the man who had shaped his skepticism and work ethic.

At the University of Iowa Tyler encountered a world-class collection of writers and instructors who introduced him to a wealth of authors, both foreign and domestic. A class taught by English department head Brooks Landon in spring 2001 on the subject of Literature and Culture in the Twentieth Century introduced him to Theodore Dreiser and American Naturalism, and Tyler discovered a literary movement that contributed to many of the important debates of America's early industrial years. His experience with the Iowa faculty left a deep impression, as excellent classroom instruction went hand in hand with a commitment to scholarship in the halls of the English-Philosophy Building. After graduating in December of 2003 with a double major in both English and History, Tyler remained in Iowa City for a year, further researching the history and literature of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. A job opportunity took him to Madison, Wisconsin in 2005, and during this time Tyler took the English subject GRE and

continued to read about labor unions, industrialization, and the disappearance of America's last frontiers.

Tyler was accepted into the Master of Arts program at the University of Tennessee in early 2006, and began attending graduate classes there in fall of that year. UT's Americanist contingent, including professors Mary Papke, Dawn Coleman, and Martin Griffin, reintroduced Tyler to the current state of scholarship in American literature, and Professors Alisa Schoenbach and Don Cox reacquainted him with the connections between European and American fiction. Tyler began teaching English composition in the fall of 2007 under the tutelage of lecturer Harry Newburn and Professor Mike Keene. Professor Keene had introduced Tyler to stasis theory, a modern interpretation of classical rhetoric, and Tyler used this pragmatic, powerful approach in his composition 101 classroom in order to help his students better evaluate information and make arguments in the collegiate setting. His spring 2007 course on Transformative Technologies in American History allowed him to use an enhanced technology classroom to illustrate how the daily lives of Americans have changed over the course of the last two hundred years. Tyler completed his Master's thesis, entitled "A Migration of Tastes: New York City and American Naturalism, 1890-1925," in the summer of 2008, and will graduate as part of the class of 2008. He will begin his doctoral studies at UT in the fall of that year, and hopes to turn part of his thesis into an article. He lives in Knoxville, Tennessee with two roommates, an overworked computer, and many, many hats.