

ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: BOURGEOIS RADICALISM AND THE AMERICAN
 SOCIAL-REALIST NOVEL 1860-1910

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William Dean Howells and other social realists of the late nineteenth century have often fallen victim to late twentieth-century critics' dismissal of American novelists who seem insufficiently aware of the extent to which their convictions are complicit in the bourgeois liberal ideology they purport to condemn. In this project I attempt to give some nuance to this perspective by arguing that the "conservative" elements of social-realists' sociopolitical agendas stem from their allegiance to an older form of American bourgeois culture, republicanism, which they are attempting to reinterpret for the industrial age. After establishing the basic tenants of republicanism as articulated in America during the late eighteenth century, I examine individual novels by Rebecca Harding Davis, Howells, Abraham Cahan and Charles W. Chesnutt to illuminate the various ways in which these novels seek not merely to revive but also to adapt republican

notions of property, civic virtue, and the public sphere to the concerns and contingencies of the Gilded Age.

BOURGEOIS RADICALISM AND THE AMERICAN SOCIAL-REALIST NOVEL
1860-1910

by

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Dissertation Submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the
University of Maryland, College Park in partial fulfillment
of the requirements of for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
2011

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For Rico, sine quo non.

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Introduction: The Lingering Legacy of Republicanism

Our present bourgeois looks downward, sees the crowd mount behind him, as he has mounted, and does not like their aspiration; so recoils and fixes himself by the side of “the powers that be.” Does he frankly confess his retrograde tendencies to himself? Rarely. His past life makes him shrink from it. He almost always remains in this contradictory position: liberal by principle, selfish by habit, wishing and not wishing. If there remains any of the Frenchman within to chide him, he appeases it by the reading of some innocently grumbling paper, pacifically warlike.

Most administrations, it must be owned, have speculated on this sad progression of fear, which, in the long run, is no other than the hastening of moral death. They have thought the dead easier to deal with than the living. —Jules Michelet, *The People*

The disillusionment attendant upon matriculation into graduate school in the humanities has become a cliché: an idealistic young person who feels out of place in American culture attempts to retreat to the bosom of art and discovers that academia is not a place of refuge from consumer culture but an exacerbation of it—the same harried rush after money and advancement; the effacement of the personal in favor of the professional; all the egos and insecurities, the hierarchies and politics and bureaucracies. She looks in vain for the radicals and iconoclasts, for the people whose humanistic commitments supersede their devotion to personal security and advancement, whose independent thinking translates into alternative living. Instead, she finds that academics serve an inexplicable but fierce god called “professionalization” who demands compulsive allegiance to the construction of the curriculum vitae and anxious obsequiousness to the scarce rewards of academic labor. Although she had hoped to find herself among the dissenters, among those who valued art, critical thinking, humanistic living, and social activism and believed in the interconnectedness of all these things, she instead finds that graduate students are expected to be devoted to their careers and

personal advancement—careers that will probably be unavailable to them regardless of their efforts, given the “crisis” of the profession, and that will certainly involve very little social activism and humanistic living even if they do materialize.

At first glance my description of the situation might seem to reflect the frustration that has subsisted in various forms between generalists and professionals—humanists and scholars—since the inception of the modern university at the close of the nineteenth century, and in some sense it is, since that argument is itself one manifestation of the larger cultural debate about the value and limitations of professionalization, a debate that tends to take on additional fervor within professions whose products and services might legitimately be taken to possess larger cultural significance. But ultimately I am less concerned about the fate and functions of literature than I am about the fate of those of us whose ideals are being undermined by departments that chose to confine themselves to such a narrow construal of the sociopolitical functions of the workplace. Arguably, the belief that the purpose of literary studies is less broadly cultural than narrowly historical need not have prevented any given professor in my department from taking a personal interest in me or my fellow students. A commitment to the advancement of scholarship rather than the transformation of culture need not have prevented professors from creating a more communal environment within the department nor from forming political lobbies or organizations to protest the corporatization of the academy and the pressure being put on its employees to abandon such activities. Theoretically, it need not have prevented graduate students from doing the same; but after bracketing my clearly erroneous assumption that, whether scholars or humanists, people who had dedicated their lives to the practice of critical analysis might be expected to turn that analysis on

themselves in ways that had recognizable repercussions beyond their fields of specialization, I have become more aware of the extent to which would-be and actual professors are, in fact, simply middle-class professionals, products not only of the bourgeois liberal culture and the virtues of conformity, passivity, and self-involvement that it inevitably perpetuates but also of a particular moment within that system, one which had seen the extension of civil rights to women and minorities, witnessed the fall of communism and generated in its heirs an extreme suspicion—one in some sense always at the heart of middle-class culture—of anything that threatened to upset these achievements or to foster a suspiciously elitist nostalgia for escape from the confines of a system that postmodern culture and literary theory had dedicated itself to proving ineluctable. It was also a moment in which increasing pressure on the middle-class had apparently made academics so anxious about their personal survival that they had little time for personal investment in their students, much less for resistance to the culture that was pressing them in this way.

“Anxiety forever haunts the bourgeois,” Isaac Kramnick reminds us (13). As William Deresiewicz writes in a recent article for *The Nation*, academia has become “a microcosm of the American economy as a whole: a self-enriching aristocracy, a swelling and increasingly immiserated proletariat, and a shrinking middle class.” Deresiewicz doesn’t hesitate to blame the shrinking middle class, the tenured professoriate, for striking a “devil’s bargain” with the system, which allows it “to retain its prerogatives—its comfortable compensation packages, its workplace autonomy and its job security—in return for acquiescing to the exploitation of the bottom by the top, and indirectly, the betrayal of the future of the entire enterprise.” He closes his article by exhorting

professors to “get of their backsides and organize” in order to protect their own dignity and the future of academia. But how realistic is it to expect aggressive action out of the American middle class in response to anything other than a direct threat to its own security and financial interests, especially when it increasingly argues that the individual freedom with which liberalism attempts to invest it is a chimera—that it is just as enslaved to the system as the rest of us? As Deresiewicz points out, something seems inherently hypocritical about a group of people who enjoy the “strongest speech protections in society” arguing that they have no voice or that their hands are tied, but a recent Facebook exchange with a fellow graduate student reminded me of the pervasiveness of this conviction of powerlessness among the academic middle-class, a conviction that seems to be endemic to middle-class liberals as a whole. The professors I work with are “heavily invested in their graduated students’ well-being and career development,” my friend insisted, but unfortunately they too are victims of “systemic issues which position tenured professors as both the mentors and exploiters of graduate students”—systemic issues which one professor, he added, was obliging enough to commiserate about with him and his classmates when they first entered the program.

Although obviously an overwrought comparison, my friend’s willingness to sympathize and identify with the self-proclaimed impotence of his professor reminded me of Marx’ description of the petit bourgeoisie and proletariat’s self-defeating alignment with the bourgeois republicans during the overthrow of France’s July Monarchy in 1848, an alignment that ultimately—so Marx argued—spelled defeat for the Second Republic when republicans revealed their liberal ideology to be sold to the

service of their financial interests.¹ But as Katherine Auspitz argues in *The Radical Bourgeoisie*, the failure of the French revolution of 1848, which put an end to French hopes of uniting workers and bourgeoisie under a common political cause, failed to quell the efforts of some of the better-intentioned of the latter towards furthering social and civic advancements that “laid the foundations of the Third Republic in the 1860s and 1870s” (3). “What do progressive people do when revolutions fail (as they so often do) or when they succeed [at] most incompletely?” is that question that Auspitz thus attempts to answer (2). For those of us who live in America, a better question might be (unless we consider the counter-cultural movement of the sixties to be a failed or incomplete revolution of sorts): what do progressive people do when they want to make a difference but can’t quite muster the enthusiasm for a revolution? Or more specifically, what actions are open to progressive Americans in a culture that discourages sociopolitical activism, that attempts to confine its citizens to the late-capitalist roles of professionals and consumers? [How do would-be progressives conduct themselves within a sociopolitical system that has at best only partially realized the ideals of *liberté, égalité, fraternité* and at worse has actually betrayed them—and how do they conduct themselves when the ideals themselves are suspect, and when all these considerations seem to supervene over the clear necessity of action? Auspitz suggests that progressives’ failure to take radical political action on behalf of those who lack access to certain privileges (like, say, basic health care or a decent education) does not necessarily belie the sincerity of their commitment to behind-the-scenes social reform, and to a certain extent this is true; but this project is about attempting to understand what social *and* political options are available to citizens in a culture that works to disenfranchise them not by denying

¹Marx *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*.

them the right to vote but by convincing them that their vote comprises the sum total of their duty to the rest of humanity.

Of course, the underlying assumption of this project is that the middle class and the classes above it *do* have an obligation to those people in the classes below them, an obligation that goes beyond voting “left” in elections. Determining how much and what kind of an obligation has always been the difficult point and sometimes the excuse for not doing anything at all, so in this project I want to look at a handful of works by middle-class novelists of a historical milieu very similar to ours who were concerned with the same question and who considered the novel an appropriate forum in which to answer it. These novelists were writing during the Gilded Age, at a time when Americans were being forced to acknowledge national class disparities in ways that they never had before, disparities that bewildered a generation that had been “nurtured in the faith of Bunker Hill and Appomatox, as the beginning and end of all possible progress in human rights” (*Hazard* 323-4). Instead, “with the depression of 1873, and spreading unemployment, poverty, unrest and strikes in the following years, social contrasts reach a pitch without precedent in American life outside the slave South” (Trachtenberg 72). For perceptive members of the middle-class as well as those members of the working class who had bought into the free labor rhetoric of the Republican party before the Civil War, it was becoming increasingly difficult to believe that honest labor held out “some hope for workers of social and economic, as well as legal, equality” (Trachtenberg 76). Immigrants, African-Americans and poor people from the country were flooding into the cities and overflowing out of urban ghettos in ways that dismayed the middle class who felt their values—quintessential American values—to be under attack from both the

rapacious hordes below them and the plundering robber barons and engulfing corporations above them. William Dean Howells perhaps captured their feelings most acutely in his 1890 novel *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, which depicts a middle-aged insurance salesman with buried literary aspirations attempting to start fresh in New York City by undertaking the editorship of a fledgling literary journal whose financial backer, unbeknownst to him, is an ignorant nouveau-riche speculator who will eventually force him to choose between his job and his loyalty to an impoverished German immigrant who once tutored him in Schiller and Goethe. As Basil March and his wife ride around the streets of New York City looking for an apartment to call their new home, they accidentally take side turns that plunge them into scenes of urban squalor that trigger middle-class guilt that they are naïve enough to feel ought to be taken seriously, despite their sense of insecurity about their own futures; at one point they encounter a “decent-looking man” searching for food in a gutter, a man who happens to be French—among other things, perhaps an ironic commentary on what Walt Whitman ten years earlier had recognized as the New World’s inability to improve on the mistakes of the Old (70).

If we take Howells to be the epicenter of the realist movement—the mediating figure between the provincial Twain, the elitist James and the working-class naturalists who were almost too much for everybody—we can understand that entire enterprise to be rooted in efforts to overcome the yawning divide between high and low and to overcome it in and with the help of art, a goal Howells makes clear in one of his better-known installments of the Editor’s Study columns he wrote for *Harper’s Magazine* from January 1886 through March 1892. Lamenting the contemporary demand for “melodrama, impossible fiction, and the trapeze” he nevertheless insists on believing that neither the

“unthinking multitudes” nor the “literary elect”—terms he borrows from the Western writer whose views he is rejecting—really prefer “the romances of no-man’s land” to the works of “Tolstoi, Tourguénief, George Eliot, Thackeray, Balzac, Manzoni, Hawthorne, Henry James, Thomas Hardy, Palacio Valdés, or even Walter Scott” except as an occasional guilty pleasure to which both groups are equally capable of succumbing (95). Howells does not to subscribe to the Western writer’s opinion about the “unthinking multitude,” whom he instead “respects” for “their good sense in most practical matters; for their laborious, honest lives; for their kindness, their good-will; for that aspiration toward something better than themselves which seems to stir, however dumbly, in every human breast not abandoned to literary pride or other forms of self-righteousness” (96). Praising popular novelist Mary Murfree for the degree to which she portrays the “poor, hard, dull, narrow lives” of the Tennessee mountaineers with “exquisite sympathy,” regretting the parts in which “she seems to have drawn upon romance and tradition rather than life,” Howells insists that literature that “consents to know [men] in some conventionalized and artificial guise” is “the last refuge of the aristocratic spirit which is disappearing from politics and society and is now seeking to shelter itself in aesthetics” (96). “Democracy in literature is reverse of all this,” he claims: “it does not care to paint the marvelous and impossible for the vulgar many, or to sentimentalize and falsify the actual from the vulgar few. Men are more like than unlike one another: let us make them know one another better, that they may all be humbled and strengthened with a sense of their fraternity” (96).

The limitations of Howells’ rosy description of the working class and of the democratizing influences of American literature—and the exceptionalism of America

itself—have been thoroughly dissected over the past century, especially by those generations of critics and writers who have felt the need to distance themselves from the normalizing impulses that Howells' literature inevitably betrays, impulses typical of an intellectual community anxious to unify an increasingly chaotic society through a version of culture shaped by either science or the arts or—in Howells' case, with his indebtedness to the social science of Comte and Taine—an amalgamation of the two. Unsurprisingly, Howells' reputation was at a low during the first two decades of the twentieth century, when disassociating oneself from Victorian gentility was paramount for “an entire generation of literary journalists” (Pizer 9). However, his reputation rose in the 1930s through the 1960s, when American literary studies was consolidating its status within English departments in large part by claiming for American literature precisely that “quest for cultural synthesis”—the unifying civic-mindedness—that was at the heart of the Howellsian artistic project and that was freshly relevant for a nation attempting to re-affirm democratic values and a sense of national destiny in the wake of World War II, not to mention for an academy attempting to secure its role in promoting those values (Graff 215; Pizer 10). A reviving interest in naturalism outweighed attention to realism during the sixties and seventies as the dismissal of the New Critics and the advent of the theory boom ushered in a movement which seems to have been driven in all its phases by a deep suspicion of any discourse that exhibits insufficient awareness of the extent to which its values are complicit in industrial capitalism and its mystifying ideologies. Even Amy Kaplan's pivotal effort to redirect attention from what appears to be Howells' “essentializing” vocabulary of truth and common sense towards his more pragmatic understanding of the ways in which truth is and must be continually reconstructed within

a self-critical society ends with a reassertion of Howells' inability to integrate the urban poor into the middle-class community he constructs in *A Hazard of New Fortune*, the novel that Kaplan takes to "exhaust the project of realism to embrace social diversity" (63). Ultimately, Kaplan suggests, the threat that the French and German immigrants pose to the financial and social stability of the Marshes has to be neutralized by the former's death or demotion to the "unreal city" whose problems are allowed to recede into the novel's background as the story closes (63).

In one of the more interesting recent readings of *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, Sophia Forster suggests that Howells did not intend for this novel to offer a pat solution to the problems of the urban poor and the middle-class's responsibility for them; instead, by portraying Lindau the German tutor as effacing himself before Basil March has to experience the consequences of his avowed willingness to sacrifice his job for Lindau's sake, Howells intended to force March—and his real-life counterparts—to come to terms with the inadequacy of their delusions of heroism, with the emptiness of their belief that their commitment to character somehow exempts both them and those below them from their enslavement to the wage labor system. The reader is *supposed* to experience Lindau's self-dismissal and eventual death as a *deus ex machina* that gets March out of a scrape that neither he nor Howells sees a clear way of resolving: sacrificing his job would merely drag March and his family closer to the poverty line, whereas not sacrificing his job would jeopardize the illusion of "ethical independence" so essential to bourgeois self-esteem (Forster 231). Thus, Howells doesn't himself evade the question of responsibility so much as present March as evading the question, or present March as recognizing that he has managed to evade the question and that these evasions are

indicative of the inadequacy of the standard bourgeois answers. Yet Forster also concludes her own argument by suggesting that Howells cannot avoid proposing a tidy solution as the novel closes: in the end, March's future is secured when Dryfoos, the literary journal's *nouveau riche* financial backer, sells out to March and his partner Fulkerson in what both Mrs. March and Fulkerson suggest to be a fit of respect for March's conduct in the Lindau affair. "He seemed to take a kind of shine to you from the day you wouldn't turn off old Lindau," Fulkerson says (484). As the novel's ostensible un-masker of the bourgeois romanticization of what are typically more sordid motives, March himself strenuously resists this "poetic" interpretation, insisting—to his wife's disgust—that Dryfoos is more likely motivated by the same business concerns that got him involved in the journal to begin with (484). But what March/Howells forgets or attempts to obscure, Forster suggests, is that *Every Other Week* was never a business concern for Dryfoos to begin with—that Dryfoos started the journal not to make money but to direct the energies of his hypersensitive son away from Christian socialism and towards more worldly pursuits. By eliding the difference between Dryfoos' business and personal motives, Howells implies the capitalism in America is "ultimately benevolent," that it is still susceptible to the kinds of permeations that enable people who are committed to integrity and hard work to thrive almost in spite of themselves (Forster 233).

It is difficult to subject Howells (or any of the social realists) to an argumentative framework tinged by the residue of post-structuralism without emerging with another version of the tiresome conclusion that despite his best intentions Howells was ultimately complicit in bourgeois liberal ideology and its particular America variants; consequently,

part of my goal for this project is to liberate Howells from the constraints of this approach simply by suggesting—as Forster begins by suggesting—that Howells was aware of this complicity (as one of his characters calls it in *The Minister's Charge*) and that his goal in his most perceptive novels is to expose and explore it for the sake of resolving it—and for resolving it by keeping open to the possibility that capitalist culture *is* susceptible to permeations that allow personal freedom even as the culture places limits on that freedom. The consistency with which scholars still dismiss Howells as implicated in the structures he attempts to subvert demonstrates the pervasiveness of the American reluctance to recognize that such collusions are inevitable and not necessarily fatal given the decision to operate within the constraints of history. In his early nineties review of the history of Howellsian scholarship, Donald Pease argues (though not in these exact terms) that Silas' retreat from the business world at the end of *The Rise of Silas Lapham* ought to be read not as a retreat from the complexities of history into a nostalgic reconstruction of an agrarian past or a Romantic reassertion of the autonomous self but as an attempt to reconfigure such moves as internal to an already socially and historically embedded struggle between corrupt and virtuous citizenry (16-18). Although my reading of *Silas Lapham* differs from Pease's—I argue that this reconfiguration is better sustained in *A Hazard of New Fortunes* precisely because the latter refrains from the radical and reactionary gestures of *Silas Lapham*—I nevertheless agree with Pease that the consuming goal of Howells' realist novels of the eighties and nineties is to stay engaged with American history for as long as he can possibly imagine and supply a real counterforce to the onslaught of capitalism, even if that decision entails a substantive check to his characters' options as well as his own creative freedom. J.G.A. Pocock has

famously argued that the “paradox of American thought” has been its citizens’ reluctance to relinquish the “civic ideal of the virtuous personality, uncorrupted by specialization and committed to the social whole in all its diversity”—an ideal, he adds, that has formed “an important ingredient of the Marxian ideal of the same personality as awaiting redemption from the alienating affects of specialization”—while also refusing to “involve them[selves] in history, or in political or historical action, to a degree beyond their capacity for consent” (551). The freedom from compulsion so dear to the American heart has been (and is) bought at the price of its perpetual evasion of a commitment to the “dialectic of historical conflict,” of its avoidance of the limitations on human freedom posed by the contingencies of the material and the historical (Pocock 551). Instead of confronting these limitations or the consequences of its attempts to evade these limitations, Americans have continuously taken refuge from time in the expanse of space, lighting out for new territories whenever civilization threatens to impose its constraints on liberty, expanding their empire and conquering new lands in the name of virtue—making a virtue out of extending virtue’s domain rather than coming to terms with the importance of wresting a virtuous republic out of the here and now.

Pocock, Gordon S. Wood and other contextualist historians of the civic humanist camp have also suggested that the goal of the Founding Fathers was to create a republic that abjured the corruption and the flight from virtue inherent in British court society—its slough of aristocratic hierarchies and court patronage, as well as its susceptibility to the corruptions of urban commerce—and to replace it with a natural aristocracy based on merit and property (which was seen as a prerequisite for merit, since a man dependent on others could not be assumed to retain his independence of mind) and devoted to the civic

duties incumbent upon a patriot. “The ties holding men together would not be corrupting influence from above but willingly offered service from below, from patriotism, or, as the 18th century called it, “virtue,” Wood explains—“independence and virtue went together” (11). At the time, “men did not yet conceive of society apart from politics” (Wood 6). Unfortunately, however, the natural aristocracy that Jefferson envisioned failed to emerge, and the new nation and constitution facilitated not a redistribution of distinction based on merit but a redistribution based on wealth and commercial success—wealth which, as the nineteenth century progressed, became concentrated in the hands of large corporations and monopolies and opposed by property-less masses who “because they lacked control over property and therefore a basis of private autonomy, could have no interest in maintaining society as a private sphere”—no interest, in other words, in keeping government from assuming functions that had previously lain in the hands of private citizens, as well as few compunctions about using government to guarantee its rights against capitalist aggressors (Habermas 127). The latter class, in turn, proved less interested in the “repressive demands” of “austerity and autonomy, participation and virtue” that sustaining a republic required than in the “diversification of life by commerce and the arts” (although commerce was clearly more of the emphasis in America) (Pocock 551-2). In consequence, the nineteenth-century witnessed the substitution of liberal for republican ideology and the gradual but steady disintegration of the notion of civic virtue and the maintenance of the public sphere.

Whether we read the civic humanist ideal as the fruit of an agrarian tradition opposed to the corrupting influence of court and commerce or as tied to the rise of the early bourgeoisie and its resistance to “imperial domination,” which is how Hans Baron

interpreted it in the earliest articulation of the civic humanist thesis, the social-realist novel is a genre that emerges in response to the decline of this ideal or to various factors that can be associated with its decline. (And whether or not the civic-humanist ideal was ever more than partially realized does not prevent our recognizing its potency for those who invoked it in the early years of the American republic; and we can generally designate the period from 1775 to 1875 as the period in which the rhetoric and spirit of republicanism effectively masked the creeping encroachments of liberalism and laissez-faire capitalism² —a masking whose effectiveness both Pocock and Wood attribute primarily to the machinations of James Madison) (Moulakis). These factors include the rise of unchecked and consolidated commerce; the waning of the agrarian emphasis on property, as well as the inaccessibility of property to increasing numbers of people; an increasing reliance on the rhetoric and ideology of rights rather than the more compulsive ideology of virtue; and the disintegration of the public sphere, whose neglected functions had yet to be assumed by the social-welfare state that emerged in the early twentieth century, and the organs of the public sphere into pure commodities rather than vehicles for “rational-critical debate” or the expression and exercise of fuller notions of liberty, equality and fraternity (Habermas 164). The social-realist novelists are not dedicated merely to re-instantiating these ideals, however, although they constantly—and desperately—flirt with this possibility in those elements of their fiction that are often labeled “nostalgic” or said to exhibit “elitist” overtones. But these same passages often register a recognition that the republican ideal has proven itself, or is proving itself, insufficiently thorough, that its postulation of property ownership as a prerequisite to merit and rational independence (whether we think of property in the agrarian way or in

²See Habermas 143-144.

the more loosely bourgeois way of capital-ownership) confuses the ownership of property with something more basic, with the merit and freedom that ought to be attendant on the successful stewardship of the mind and body themselves.

In addition, social realists recognize that conceding each person's right to self-ownership and self-development—regardless of whether or not he owns actual property--does not insure that he will get what he needs to maximize this self-development. “Equal political rights are only means to an end, and as an end have no value or reality,” asserts the traveller who arrives in America from the utopian commonwealth that Howells constructs in *A Traveller from Altruria* (37). Human beings are owed positive liberty, not just freedom from domination; they are owed what property symbolizes and is sometimes thought to procure—the resources necessary to maximize civic virtue, that enable not only citizens' personal flourishing but also their ability to maximize their contributions to the well-being of their community and nation. However, what positive liberty looks like and how it is to be procured without jeopardizing the obligation to self-government incumbent upon virtuous citizens are difficult questions. Few social realists attempt to suggest sophisticated political solutions to these questions in much detail in their novels, but they all attempt not only to imagine but also to invoke a nation in which the rhetoric of rights is undergirded by some kind of larger cultural—if not political—commitment to the propagation of positive liberty, to the collective commitment to the pursuit of personal virtue in the service of the nation-state. Novelists who are members of groups that have been denied basic civil rights often promote a kind of ethics of care in order to secure basic civil liberties for minorities as well as positive liberty, since the liberal appeal to enlightened self-interest does not seem to have led to a very

sophisticated conception of what “enlightened” self-interest ought to entail and how it might be bound up in promoting the well-being of those around us and not just our own. This ethics of care is usually envisioned as an extension of the rhetoric and duties of fraternal or maternal relationships to the relationships between citizens or human beings in general. But how government ought to be involved in promoting care is a question that puzzles Howells and many Gilded Age intellectuals who are already secure in their basic liberties, since it seems clear that government is too remote to provide the kind of attention necessary for the accurate management of care but also that its intervention in certain aspects of national life is becoming increasingly necessary to check the greed of those who threaten the possibilities for positive liberty that the ideals of care suggest. The political resolution towards which Howells looked was Populism, which in the form in which it manifested itself in the 1880s and 90s demanded that government take control of “those sectors of the economy having to do with exchange, especially money and transportation,” but not “the means of production, of factories and raw materials,” thus allying government with the causes of small farmers and producers and endeavoring to enact some balance between socialist and republican ideals (Trachtenberg 176).

In this project I examine Howells in conjunction with three other social realists of the period, placing him in both diachronic and synchronic relation with those who helped generate this generic moment of which he was the center, a brief coalescence of the dialectical ferment into which the novel was thrown at the end of the nineteenth century by the particularly jarring conflict that occurred between industrial capitalism and democratic ideals; or, to put it in Pocock’s terms, by the war between corruption and virtue, the former of which was for some attributable to commerce itself and for others—

notably those with more agrarian, republican roots—to government collusion with commerce. This confrontation exhibited features that we can recognize as omnipresent in American culture but surfacing more violently at junctures when anger over the reach and sway of government (anger which in the 1800s manifested itself in Civil War and the particular wrangles and resolutions of Reconstruction) erupts alongside of a (sometimes) less conscious awareness that neither civil rights nor enfranchisement, which in the case of women and African-Americans failed to materialize at all in the nineteenth century, has proven sufficient to check the excesses of capitalism or guarantee what human beings need or have expected it to guarantee. For social realists, the only real hope that rights might prove able to perform any of these functions lay in understanding them to represent not the full flowering of sociopolitical selfhood (which Aristotle would have argued *was* human selfhood, an argument with which the social realist novelists would have been in complete agreement) but merely two of its many off-shoots, off-shoots that are not in themselves substantive enough even to provide for their own continuance.

What that full flowering entails and how exactly it is to be nurtured or shaped within the confines of a bourgeois liberal democracy that takes rights, enfranchisement and the possession of—or aspiration to—capital to be the summation of human fulfillment are questions answered differently by the four different social realists whom I examine in the chapters that follow; or rather, the answers are worked out in more detail by ideologues like Howells and Abraham Cahan than they are by polemicists like Rebecca Harding Davis or Charles W. Chesnutt, and with difference emphasizes. “The vocabulary of citizenship, like the vocabulary of humanism, is complex and multiple,” Pocock observes; we should note again, however, that within the diversity of their

attempts to reconstruct a notion of the public sphere in which citizens take an active role in determining their common destiny, none of the social realists whom I examine here conceptualize that sphere to be as thoroughly political as the Founding Fathers imagined it to be within their original idea of a government ruled directly by its most meritorious citizens (87). Representative government was inherently problematic for the republican ideal of virtue; it freed citizens from their responsibility to self-government and liberated them to the unchecked pursuit of private interest, and one of the ongoing dilemmas that unites the writers whom I examine under the designation “social realist” lies with their perception that liberal democracy is not always as empowering as it represents itself to be and that its divorce of the political from the social has weakened the ability of both to combat the encroachments of commerce. Consequently, social realists spend a great deal of their time attempting to circumvent the difficulties involved in endeavoring to resurrect and reunite various elements of the public sphere whose separation and commodification has been internalized by both culture and art, and in many cases their novels end up being the record of heroic failure rather than of qualified success.

“Life in the Iron Mills,” which I analyze in the opening sections of my chapter on Rebecca Harding Davis, comprises one of the first attempts to break with the American romance and sentimental traditions and to engage directly with the liberalism’s failure to create a space in which virtuous citizens might come together to provide a check on the corruptions of commerce and industry, which in Davis’ mind were often connected to urban aggression against the more agrarian and republican values of the South, values which she valued despite being an ardent abolitionist. Davis began writing at the moment in which the cultural power of domestic fiction (such as it was) was beginning to

wane, cultural power that Elizabeth Barnes has claimed was linked to the genre's endeavors to reconcile republican and liberal values and to envision the home and family as institutions that provided a model of and foundation for the nation as well as a space for working out the tensions between interest and disinterestedness, excess and constraint, that was integral to cultivating the habit of virtue and the virtue of sympathy in particular (1-18). But by the 1860s and the outbreak of Civil War, a conflict which Davis felt to have been enflamed by romantic ideals that were insufficiently attuned to the realities of human suffering, Davis was positioned to turn away from the model of domesticity and its fictive medium and to make an aggressive attempt to wrest sympathy away from its increasing marginalization within the home—to find an alternative way and space in which sympathy might be made to mediate between the increasingly polarized domains of bourgeois liberal culture. Davis' notion of sympathy owes as much to Christian as to republican ideals, although she very deliberately mutes what Pocock might call the millennial aspects of Christianity in order to insist on the necessity of combating injustice in the realm of the here and now; unfortunately, however, "Iron Mills" becomes an exercise in the difficulty of finding a cultural space within which sympathy might do its work. The middle-class male characters who represent the audience that Davis means to address are unable to interact with Hugh Wolfe, the mill worker whose story Davis' narrator tries to tell, except within the jail where Wolfe spends his last days and over the statue of the Korl woman that Wolfe constructs within the mill. Art—a very specific kind of art, Davis suggests; certainly not the kind that anticipates and indulges consumerism—becomes the last remaining cultural sphere within which sympathy might be able articulate itself and to enable some real cross-class

connection—“real” in the sense of engendering genuine and effective activism—although both Davis and her narrator understand the odds of that happening within a commodity culture, and whether or not the statue of the Korl Woman can or does speak through the veil behind which the narrator hides her as the story closes (a potent symbolic gesture) is left up for the audience to decide, as it was left up to Davis’ audience in real life. When Davis next attempted to publish a novel in which the compensatory fetish that the home had become is depicted as torn asunder by the selfish individualism of an entrepreneurial protagonist, her publisher—Howells’ predecessor at *The Atlantic*—stepped in and forced her to conform her work to the conventions of domestic fiction. With both art and home thus rendered ineffectual in the fight against greed and corruption, Davis subsided into the realm of sentimental fiction for the rest of her writing career.

For Howells, who had more creative freedom than Davis, the fight waged over the course of several novels and decades and involved a pragmatic willingness to consider multiple possible resolutions. For him art and the home also proved sites of resistance against the encroachments of commerce, sites whose collusion with bourgeois liberalism he struggled to understand and combat. However, Howells was usually less inclined than Davis—although not completely averse—to using art as a forum for leveraging emotions by depicting scenes of suffering; instead, over the 1880s and 90s he turned the novel into a site for a thoughtful examination of the multiples sides of the class issue and for imagining and constructing far-reaching sociopolitical solutions. In *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, which is where I begin my discussion of Howells, he undertakes the task of synthesizing the values of the new money class with those of the East Coast establishment, a task he puts in motion first of all by making his *nouveau riche*

businessman, Silas Lapham, a former farmer who reveals his deep allegiance to republican values, particularly the sanctity of property, when he is tempted to succumb to a shady business deal. Howells also attempts to secure this synthesis for future generations by uniting Silas' daughter with the young son of one of the Boston Brahmins, a maneuver whose implications have been insufficiently explored in the history of criticism on *Silas Lapham*. Presumably, this young pair will bear the standard for family-run businesses into the twentieth-century century, all the while (although this part drops out a bit at the end) maintaining concerned and paternalistic relationships with their employees; unfortunately, however, this arrangement seems to depend for its stability on the privileging (once again) of what Pocock calls *virtù* over virtue—the dedication to conquest in the name of preserving the domain of virtue rather than a dedication to establishing and maintaining local justice—since the young couple do not stay in America to work and contribute to the nation culture but leave to expand its reach into Mexico.

By the time he wrote *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, which most critics consider his best work and his “dominant” work of social realism, Howells had modified this earlier ambition of re-articulating a template for a social whole characterized by a union between town and country in the fight against industrialized commerce, recognizing that such an effort is unsustainable in a country already too diverse and too driven by private interest to be united behind such a fight by the heroic tales of novelists. Yet he refused to give up on the idea of resistance altogether, on the hope of planting virtue in the depleted soil of liberalism by way of the American novel; and in *The Minister's Charge* and subsequent works he begins linking his belief in human interdependence—in humans' inherent

sociopolitical nature—to Darwinian biology, implying that the theory of evolution is not a deterministic sinkhole that swallows up liberal pretensions to freedom but a web within which humans must recognize themselves to be situated (and this recognition is one of the key to their exercise of agency within it) in order to understand who they are and to recognize not only how their actions are effected by others but how their actions can affect others. Thus, freedom becomes less a byproduct of property ownership than of human biology, with the guarantor of freedom being not the mutual commitment to stewardship of the earth but the mutual commitment to self-cultivation. Of course, the extent of this freedom still lies in the extent to which everyone embraces their complicity instead of attempting to run from it, and herein lies the next stage of the problem for Howells, or the recurrence of the original problem: how do you get people to embrace their complicity when they are the products of a culture in which everyone does run from their biology and history—in which their growing awareness of their interdependence seems to be providing them with more of an excuse for their inertia rather than less?

For Basil March, the answer seems to consist, at most, in the exercise of a sort of private, defiant commitment to owning oneself even as one recognizes the extent to which that self is held hostage to the impoverished culture within which it is enmeshed. Small wonder, perhaps, that Howells reverted to utopian romances in the nineties, romances in which he eulogizes “the cultivation of the earth” as that which “brings man into the closest relations to the deity, through a grateful sense of a divine bounty” and which binds him to love of home and, through home, to love of country; and at this point in Howells’ development, or retrogression, I turn—still in chapter two—to Abraham Cahan’s short story “The Imported Bridegroom,” and suggest that Cahan, with his roots

in Russian realism and the European class structure—not to mention his membership in an ethno-religious group premised on the belief that God has manifested himself in history through the laws and experiences of the Jewish people—is able to pick up where Howells left off (being a long-term admirer of Howells, Cahan knew both his strengths and his weaknesses) and articulate a version of American national identity in which people who (literally) embody a variety of rich ethnic and cultural heritages come together in a shared public space that comes much closer to being an empowering *sociopolitical* space than anything else that we examine will be able to come.

In my last chapter I discuss Charles W. Chesnutt, who makes even less headway against white American culture than Howells but who helps demonstrate the extent to which republican rhetoric could be of use to those who were excluded from its original formulation. As a light-skinned black man from a middle-class background Chesnutt is caught between two races—and classes—whose identities are often aligned with one or another of those polarities that comprise the possible modes of being within bourgeois liberal culture, and his career-long struggle to negotiate between the realist novel and the romance becomes an ongoing illustration of the ways in which art itself is imprisoned within these dichotomies. His novelistic ambitions were not always tied to concerns for his race, but they became more so as his career progressed and he became increasingly invested in carving out a space within American culture and history in which African-Americans could achieve the kind of self-fulfillment that the more progressive black thinkers of period—the ones that resisted the accommodationist viewpoint of Booker T. Washington—understood to be tied to self-enrichment through active citizenship and a liberal-arts education rather than through skills training and the acquisition of capital

alone. Chesnutt recognized the value of black entrepreneurship in furthering the case for civil rights—he also understood the dynamics of property and respected its ownership in a very agrarian way, even while arguing for the inherent respectability of the intellectual and artistic property that comprised most of his black characters’ only possessions—but he also understood the ways in which commerce could undermine civil rights if not anchored in and moderated by larger concerns. In addition, he recognized the fragility of guarantees to rights administered by people who had no concern for virtue; and while he was not prepared to deny rights to those who lacked virtue and lived on either side of the color line, he nevertheless spent most of his novels attempting to bring blacks and whites together in ways that demanded that each develop a larger vision of what civic obligation entailed. His second-to-last novel, *The Marrow of Tradition*, is perhaps his most ambitious effort in this direction, since it concerns itself with large groups of people carrying out—or miscarrying—their public functions: white men whose gross misconception of their civic duty destroys a Southern town’s tranquility and African-American professionals whose reluctance to demand or assume their civic duty results in the destruction of the social ground they have gained, thus demonstrating the absolute necessity of integrating the realms of the social, political and the professional in order to assure quality of life (not just equality) for all.

The virtues of balance and moderation are key to the integration of these realms in Chesnutt’s fictive worlds as well as in those of all the social-realist novelists: bourgeois virtues turned against the excesses of bourgeois culture, which has forgotten that capital and property are supposed to form the basis for virtue, not the rationale for neglecting it. Re-asserting the necessity of personal property, re-interpreted (in the best cases) for the

new millennium, while also insisting on both the obligations to ourselves and others that property imposes upon us and the true nature of freedom of choice—the freedom to run from or embrace these obligations—comprises the grounds for the social realists’ conservative radicalism. Their agenda is also thoroughly radical in being flagrantly assertive, not just descriptive or diagnostic: Henry James’ 1907 description of the Jewish ghetto in New York owes much (no doubt) to Abraham Cahan for the shrewdness of its observations about the “genius” with which the American Jewish community had “evolved” to embrace modernity by manifesting an ability to divide and proliferate while preserving its heritage and community intact, even etching that inheritance into the structure of the city itself; yet despite the omnipresent acuteness of James’ powers of perception he is not—here or in his novels—invested in intervening in such conditions in the same way that the social realists are.³ He is a traveler, observing, or attempting to integrate the chaotic manifestations of modernity into his characters’ psyches in ways that will enable them to survive, whereas the social realists are less concerned with their protagonists’ self-articulation and preservation than with their protagonists’ obligation to preserve society, outside of which their “selves” have very little interest or meaning. If this effort sometimes seems to falter it is not because the novel is ill-equipped to handle such agendas but because the American experience proved—and still proves—resistant to attempts to articulate its “metahistory” as a “dialect of historical conflict” rather than a story of “spatial escape and return” (Pocock 551-550). Consequently, it is all the more to the credit of this particular group of novelists that they strove against these conditions to create spaces that are marked and constrained by history and by the necessity of aligning destiny with the ravages of time and inopportuneness as manifested in the lives of those

³In *The American Scene* 126-135.

whose bodies themselves place limits on the greedy expansiveness of the American dream.

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Chapter One: Rebecca Harding Davis and the Rehabilitation of Sympathy

As I have already urged, the practice of what is ethically best—what we call goodness or virtue—involves a course of conduct which, in all respects, is opposed to that which leads to success in the cosmic struggle for existence. —Thomas Henry Huxley, *Evolution and Ethics*

“Life in the Iron Mills” was an instant hit when it appeared in *The Atlantic Monthly* in April 1861, propelling thirty-year-old Rebecca Harding out of the obscurity of her parents’ Virginia—soon to be West Virginia—home to literary fame and eventually marriage. Although the outbreak of Civil War delayed her celebratory migration North until after the 1862 publication of *Margret Howth*, she eventually made her way up to Boston and Concord, where she developed an instant camaraderie with Hawthorne and the editor of *The Atlantic* and his wife, James and Annie Fields. She spoke more reservedly of Emerson and Bronson Alcott, the latter of whose oracular “paeans to the war” grated on her conscience and moral sensibilities (*Writing* 38). “I had just come up from the border where I had seen the actual war; the filthy spewings of it;” she wrote years later in her autobiography *Bits of Gossip*: “War may be an armed angel with a mission, but she has the personal habits of the slums. This would-be seer who was talking of it, and the real seer who listened, knew no more of war as it was, than I had done in my cherry tree when I dreamed of bannered legions of crusaders debouching in the misty fields” (*Writing* 39). Harding had just spent a significant number of pages attempting to turn her readers’ attention away from “paeans to the war” to a tale of “common, every-day drudgery” in a middle-America manufacturing town (*Howth* 6). The war, she wrote in the opening pages of *Margret Howth*, is driven by the “partial

truths” of “patriotism and chivalry,” which obscure the “higher hierarchies” of “mercy and love” (4). Later in *Bits of Gossip*, she pointedly contrasts Bronson Alcott’s “obstinate faith in himself”—a faith which leads him to fill “miles of paper” with his unpublishable ruminations while his wife and children struggle in poverty—with his daughter Louisa’s tireless commitment to the kind of writing that will contribute to the family upkeep (Howth 6). “She would have ground her bones to make their bread,” Davis writes admirably of Louisa’s priorities (*Writing* 42).

In her frustration with American Romanticism—and her connection of its egocentricity not only with the glorification of war but also with the Gilded Age rush to what she would later denominate sordid “money-getting”—Davis exhibits the typical Victorian preference for moral sentiment over Romantic sensibility.⁴ As Nina Baym has reminded us, American nineteenth-century writers of domestic fiction—the tradition within and out of which Davis began to write as it entered its twilight years—were influenced by the atmosphere of Enlightenment moral philosophy and the edifying works of Maria Edgeworth rather than the self-centered idealism of the male-dominated Romantic tradition (29). The sentimentalism that usually characterized domestic fiction and that was later vilified as a form of decadent romanticism at the hands of Howells and James was considered by women writers themselves to be reflective of life as it ought to be experienced: not life devoid of emotion but life devoid of self-directed emotion—self-love and self-indulgence—and characterized instead by emotions channeled into service to and appreciation for others, emotions attuned to reality as it was rightly perceived through the eyes of Christian sympathy, not through the eyes of egotism or scientific

⁴See Kaplan 9 for the distinction between Romantic sensibility and Victorian sentiment and the latter’s roots in Enlightenment thought.

detachment. As many critics have argued, sentimental fiction—whether the eighteenth-century novel of seduction or nineteenth-century domestic fiction—played an important role in negotiating the place of emotions and the body in the shaping of American national culture.⁵ For both male and female writers of the post-revolutionary and antebellum periods, sentimental novels provided a public space for exploring the possibility of “reconcil[ing] conservative republican values of duty to others with a liberal agenda of self-possession”—for negotiating between a model of the nation based on republican ideals of civic duty and virtue, a model that included the proper exercise of emotions like sympathy, and one based on liberalism’s negative conception of liberty as mere freedom from coercion (Barnes 12). As the nineteenth-century progressed, the latter prevailed as the public sphere became increasingly perceived as vulnerable to the infiltration of an underclass whose “eccentric corporeality disqualifie[d] them from public life by rendering their bodies all too visible”—whose racially and ethnically marked bodies rendered suspect their capacity for the constrained and appropriate exercise of emotion necessary for the practice of citizenship (Burgett 14). Republican ideals of participatory citizenship, built around a model of white male property owners and their families, proved impossible to sustain in an increasingly diverse nation, one in which participatory citizenship was also becoming less important than money-making. With its sociopolitical role consequently diminished, late nineteenth-century domestic fiction devolved into a children’s genre while women’s fiction evolve into something

⁵See, among others, Nina Baym, *Women’s Fiction: A Guide to Novels By and about Women in America, 1820-1870*; Jane Tompkins, *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction 1790-1860*; Julia A. Sterns, *The Plight of Feeling: Sympathy and Dissent in the Early American Novel*; Shirley Samuels (ed.), *The Culture of Sentiment: Race, Gender and Sentimentality in Nineteenth-Century America*; Bruce Burgett, *Sentimental Bodies: Sex, Gender and Citizenship in the Early Republic*; Glenn Hendler, *Public Sentiments: Structures of Feeling in Nineteenth-Century America*; Elizabeth Maddock Dillon, *The Gender of Freedom: Fictions of Liberalism and the Literary Public Sphere*; and Elizabeth Barnes, *States of Sympathy: Seduction and Democracy in the American Novel*.

akin to the “gothic romance,” as changes in the American landscape made the home seem—as Nina Baym has suggested—“increasingly less tenable as a social unit, let alone a female power base,” and “rapid social changes... engendered tensions that called for escapist literature more than moral earnestness” (297).

Situating Davis within this trajectory is a fairly straightforward project, despite the fact that critics have had some difficulty doing it. Critical consensus acknowledges that after—or midway—through the publication of *Margret Howth* Davis acquiesced to James Fields’ demands that she conform her novel to the conventions of women’s domestic fiction and never afterwards wrote a work on par with “Life in the Iron Mills,” spending the rest of her prolific publishing life churning out sentimental fiction at a time when such works had lost much of their sociopolitical relevance and were increasingly relegated to the “low” side of the growing divide between high and low art. Young Henry James Jr. wrote withering reviews of Davis’s next two novels after *Margret Howth*, *Waiting for the Verdict* and *Dallas Galbraith*, scapegoating them as examples of sentimental novelists’ deplorable tendency to falsify human experience. My own analysis of the “decadent” sentimental fiction that comprises the majority of Davis’ corpus—several examples of which I discuss at the end of this chapter—aligns itself with that of twentieth critics like Jane Tompkins who prove sympathetic to the cultural marginalization that underlay the late-nineteenth-century sentimentalist project and argue that sentimental novelists of that period were not falsifying human experience so much as responding to it from a position of powerlessness that necessitated a reactionary reading of experience, one that shares more similarities with the naturalist than the realist movement that proved its immediate successor. But my main interest lies in Davis’ first

two works, “Life in the Iron Mills” and *Margret Howth*—or, more accurately, the aborted original draft of *Margret Howth*—both of whose idiosyncratic agendas have often eluded critical explanation. In the bulk of this chapter I argue that in those two initial works Davis is confronting, rather than submitting to, the waning cultural power of domestic fiction and attempting to rescue the discourse of sympathy from what she (on some level) recognizes to be its growing tendency to reify its own impotence as a defense mechanism. Instead, she wants to reassert its efficacy—via art—over the public sphere, a task that proves difficult because Davis has very little idea of how to invest the bodies of her marginalized characters—or the rhetoric of sentimentalism—or the idea of the public sphere—with any meaning outside of that available to her within the triumphant framework of bourgeois liberalism. The most she can do is suggest that her failure to imagine the bodies of those she seeks to represent bespeaks their owners’ capacity to subject themselves—or be subjected—to the negation of the body required for assuming political rights in America, rights that are the closest thing to positive liberty that can be imagined under liberalism—and then to point out that Hugh Wolfe’s established right to civil rights, confirmed by the leaders of society who discover him in the mill, is not enough to insure that he is able to benefit from those rights: something more is needed—namely, active compassion (Burgett 14). “Make yourself what you will. It is your right,” Dr. May says to Hugh Wolfe as they stand together in the inferno of the iron mill. “I know,” Hugh says; “Will you help me?” (440).

“Life in the Iron Mills” has been read at different times as a pioneering work of literary realism and a pioneering work of literary naturalism. In her 1972 “Biographical

Introduction” to the Feminist Press reissue of “Life in the Iron Mills” Tillie Olsen claims that “there is an untraced indebtedness to [Davis] in the rise of realism” (155). More recently, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar have claimed that “some six years before the French novelist Émile Zola began publishing what were called “naturalistic” novels, a thirty-year-old Virginian had brilliantly dramatized the socioeconomic implications of environmental determinism” (1104). While neither of these descriptors necessarily excludes the other, it is important to recognize that Davis did not intend for her dramatization of the “socioeconomic implications of environmental determinism” to obscure the fact that she held her middle-class audience responsible for creating the environmental conditions that determined Hugh Wolfe’s destiny. In fact, “Life in the Iron Mills” comprises Davis’ attempt to use the deterministic rhetoric of sentimentalism to gain sympathy for her beleaguered protagonist while simultaneously attempting to prevent her audience from taking refuge in its emotional and aesthetic consolations. Like conventional sentimental reform literature of the period—*Uncle Tom’s Cabin* being the most obvious example—“Iron Mills” wants to engage its middle-class audience’s sympathy on behalf of its downtrodden characters by a dual strategy of portraying them as powerless and as possessors of personal qualities of recognizably bourgeois hue, qualities that entitled them to the freedom and opportunities that they have been denied. Arguably, the first part of this equation becomes a more difficult task when the downtrodden character is already white, despite being begrimed by a heavy coating of filth and ashes. As incontestably “other,” black bodies provided nineteenth-century writers and readers with a simple explanation for African-Americans’ exclusion from civil society as well as a ground for arguing that their blackness belied—or signaled—an

otherworldly nature that transcended whatever they might hope to achieve on this earth; in contrast, Hugh Wolfe is dully and inescapably white—and male—and lacks any particularly saintly qualities. Without impugning Hugh himself, explaining why his whiteness has not guaranteed his upward mobility involves relying very heavily on depictions of the overwhelming horrors of his oppressive conditions.

In addition, Davis refuses her audience the common sentimental consolation of believing that Hugh will someday be known and redeemed in a Christian afterlife. Instead, Davis places the possibility of heavenly justice under suspicion, forcing her readers to confront characters whose freedom has been overwritten by the iron pen of industrial capitalism and whose hope of heaven is tenuous at best, not because these characters are worse than any others but because the earthly manifestations of love and hope that are the primary evidence of the existence of God are conspicuously absent from the urban landscape. Davis' "naturalism" is—as naturalism itself arguably is—sentimentalism without the escape clause, without the compensatory conviction of a transcendent reality that invests surroundings and experiences otherwise unbearable with an illusion of hope and comfort. Davis' defrocked sentimentalism shares with naturalism the belief that those without access to the means of production are at the mercy (in this life) of socioeconomic conditions that deny them access to and understanding even of their own bodies, except as objects of consumption; rather than fetishize or aestheticize this powerlessness, however, as sentimental and some naturalistic narratives have a tendency to do, Davis insists on the freedom of her (male) middle-class characters and audience to change things, transporting the weakness typical of sentimental heroines onto

a feminized working-class character while simultaneously struggling to keep her audience from complacent complicity in that imposition.

“There never was a slough in which there were not stepping-stones, if we looked for them with common sense and a little faith in God,” Davis says piously in an 1869 essay entitled “Men’s Rights,” written to discourage suffragettes from agitating for the vote. Yet Hugh Wolfe—who is obviously not a suffragette—lives in a slough out of which there appear to be no stepping stones besides those which might have been provided by the various middle and upper class characters who “came too late” or never come at all (450). Wolfe is a day labor in an iron mill and possesses a thwarted and incipient artistic genius. When the deformed cotton-mill worker who loves him steals a check from the pocket of a gentleman touring the mills in order to give it to Hugh, Wolfe succumbs to the temptation to keep it after a prolonged internal struggle. He is caught and sentenced before he escapes town, however, and commits suicide in his jail cell. Yet Wolfe is never judged by the narrator: his acceptance of the fruits of Deborah’s theft, a theft which is itself excused by a romanticization of Deb’s passion for Hugh—“she’s a woman, you know,” the jailor says in accounting for the difference between her and Hugh’s punishments for their crimes—is acknowledged as an “error” which might prejudice readers against him, but the point of “Life in the Iron Mills” is to prevent readers from taking refuge in conventional judgments. “You see the error underlying its argument so clearly,—that to him a true life was one of full development rather than self-restraint? that he was deaf to the higher tone in a cry of voluntary suffering for truth’s sake than in the fullest flow of spontaneous harmony?” the narrator asks bitterly at the height of Hugh’s internal struggle: “I do not plead his case. I only want to show you the

mote in my brother's eye: then you can see clearly to take it out" (443). This ironic pre-emption of outside judgments, which the narrator articulates as questions that he refuses to answer except by simultaneously conceding their legitimacy and their hypocrisy—yes, there is a “mote” in Hugh's eye that her audience has neither seen nor taken out—is immediately followed by a return to recording Hugh's consciousness, to portraying the struggle going on in his mind. Hugh understands what's at stake, the narrator insists; he knows what he is doing when he takes the money and he has an answer to those who might judge him. He confronts the question of his culpability in Deborah's theft “face to face, wiping the clammy drops of sweat from his forehead” like Christ in the garden of Gethsemane (443). “A thief! Well, what was it to be a thief?” he thinks and then he responds: “God made this money—the fresh air, too—for his children's use. He never made the difference between poor and rich. The Something who looked down on him ... loved all his children alike” (443-4).

The narrator frequently transitions between melodramatic sentimental/naturalist rhetoric and such self-conscious appeals to the reader which are often presented in the form of questions. The narrative descends down several levels from the street-window where the narrator begins the story to the jail cell in which Hugh ends his life and these appeals interrupt it at every level of the descent, and they interrupt again at every level as the story climbs more weakly back to its frame narrative and conclusion. The story has three levels, structured on “three concentric rings, each inhabited by one of the three focal characters”—the narrator, Deborah, and Hugh Wolfe (Rose 16). The narrator's gender is never revealed; it is usually assumed to be female but is more probably male, since this would more accurately explain why the narrator seems to be loitering in the industrial

district as the story opens and has penetrated deeply enough into the life of the iron mills—though always remaining a spectator—to know something of Hugh’s story. It would also jibe with what seems to be Davis’ intention in this narrative: to lift the discourse of sympathy out of the sentimental context of the home and impose it on the workplace. The narrator opens with a “stifling” description of the atmosphere of a “town of iron works,” one in which the “negro-like river” is more free than “the slow stream of human life creeping past, night and morning, to the great mills”—images of mass, undifferentiated corporality at the mercy of the sluggish but inexorable devolution of life. Even the river (and the negroes themselves, the descriptor implies) will eventually flow out to a place of “odorous sunlight,” but “the future of the Welsh puddler passing just now is not so pleasant”—he will be “stowed away, after his grimy work is done, in a hole in the muddy graveyard” (430).

“Massed, vile, slimy lives, like those of the torpid lizard in yonder stagnant water-butt,” the narrator continues, piling on the imagery in grim, melodramatic fashion; yet he stops here—for the first time in the story—and turns to the reader, his “friend,” whom he derisively characterizes as an armchair psychologist, and asks—“Lost?” Answering the question only provisionally, he insists that his reader, who is also characterized as male (at one point the reader is asked to think about his wife), keep it in mind as he tells him Hugh’s story. The narrator then repeats this technique when he introduces Deborah and again when he describes Hugh in the midst of his moral crisis: the story transitions from an overwrought naturalistic description that plays on the reader’s emotions to an interruption in which the narrator anticipates his readers’ imagined criticism, burdening them with the responsibility of providing an answer, and then back to a response in which

he plunges them into a deeper level of the narrative, one which seems meant to reaffirm the humanity and dignity of the characters along with the intensity of their suffering. Readers who, like Doctor May and his wife reading the newspapers over breakfast, attempt to dismiss the trials of “that kind of people,” have their faces rubbed in them instead. They are led out from behind the window at which the narrator stands at the story’s opening and thrust into “the thickest of the fog and mud and foul effluvia”; the excuses through which they attempt to distance themselves from the situation are forestalled and they are provoked into responding and then plunged deeper into the abyss (445, 431).

The description of the abyss is more naturalistic than realistic, as many critics have observed; it is infused with the sentiment and melodrama—the decadent romanticism—that will characterize the works of Crane and Norris two generations later, although Davis’ determinism is inherited as much from Calvinistic doctrine as from the social Darwinism that would influence her successors. William Dow calls this sentimental naturalism “performative naturalism”—naturalism in which the characters’ inability to articulate a self that exists in opposition to the consumer culture is overwritten by narrators who seem bent on performing or enforcing their characters’ artificiality—and their own—rather than merely portraying it. This strategy rarely registers as deliberate: it is usually dismissed as sign of inferior artistry. What is interesting about Davis, however, is that she seems to have perceived the inadequacies of the “performative naturalism” that she inherits by way of the sentimental tradition: losing oneself in the sentiment is tantamount to legitimatizing the alienation that it both describes and inscribes. The strategically placed interruptions are designed to forestall

this possibility even as the narrative sets it in motion. Davis is clearly straining against the limitations of the rhetorical tradition she has inherited, counterpoising an almost burlesqued depiction of her characters' ills with hostile reminders that the apparent hopelessness of their lives does not negate her readers' culpability, even if these readers manage to detach themselves from the emotional weight of the narrative in which they are meant to be inundated—or even if (more likely) they lose themselves in the exploitive and self-indulgent experience of the narrative itself.

Some critics have argued that the narrator's invocation of Christian hope in the frame narrative at the beginning and end of the story—the stock remedy of sentimentalism—provides readers with the inevitable escape clause, a way to deflect responsibility onto “the promise of the Dawn” and the “Hope to come”; but Sandra M. Harris has rightfully observed that the inner rings of the story call the narrator's official stance into question through characters whose reliance on Christianity as the writer of wrongs is shown to be specious and hypercritical (431,451;). The narrator is himself portrayed—or portrays himself—as implicated in the impassivity that he condemns in his characters and hopes to cure in his readers; his recourse to Christianity at the end of the narrative has already been critiqued, by the time we get there, through the hypocritical characters Mitchell and May. Equally telling is the comparative weakness of the narrator's appeals to the reader on the way back out of the abyss, towards the comforting conclusion; he is much less keen on leading his readers out of the iron mills as he is on leading them into it. As Hugh lies dying in his jail cell, the “black nauseous stream of blood dripping slowly from the pallet to the floor”—no redemptive brightness in it—the narrator speculates that “A Voice may have spoken for it from far-off Calvary, ‘Father

forgive them, for they know not what they do!’ Who dare say?” (450). The referent of “them” is left unclear—is it Hugh, who has robbed others and taken his own life, or it is those who have sinned against him? Either way, the narrator seems unconvinced that the life to come holds any hope that can repair the wrongs of this one, as he asks her tepid question of the reader; in fact, no one *can* say. Similarly, he seems bent on pointing out that Deb’s hope of heaven is driven more by her desire to meet Hugh there than by any real investment in the life to come: “something is lost in the passage of every soul from one eternity to another,—something pure and beautiful, which might have been and was not: a hope, a talent, a love, over which the soul mourns, like Esau deprived of his birthright. What blame to the meek Quaker, if she took her lost hope to make the hills of heaven more fair?” (450) Heaven can’t make up for the losses here on earth—it cannot recoup everything—and the narrator’s closing appeal to the “flickering, nebulous crimson” of the coming Dawn resounds much more weakly—with much less pious complacency—than the endings of Howells’ novels will sound several decades later: the hope here still lies squarely with the earthly Jerusalem and the potential for social activism and cultural redemption latent in sympathetic readers, a potential that “Iron Mills” intends less to model—except in the figure of the Quaker whose arrival is deliberately delayed—than to induce. The novel refuses the sentimental solution of the happy ending (Deb’s reclamation being the minor exception, an exception we will discuss in more detail later), attempting instead to coerce readers into performing that consolation in their daily lives. The answer to the question of human suffering posed at the beginning of the story may ultimately lie with God, but Davis’ readers are still responsible to do what they can to combat its particular manifestations; the text is, in fact,

anticipating and countering the deterministic legacy of Calvinism as it will merge with social Darwinism and the self-indulgent fatalism of laissez-faire capitalism in the later half of the nineteenth century with bourgeois liberalism's insistence on the possibility and power of individual intervention in creating change, in inaugurating a more democratic social order. In "Life in the Iron Mills" the disease of money-getting is still curable and the cure lies in the hands of the individual agents whom Davis is attempting to inspire.

But what exactly is the cure? It seems important to point out that although the story relies on black and white imagery to enforce the difference between slavery and freedom it does not resolve those issues simply by incorporating Hugh into a redemptive rhetoric of whiteness, as Erik Schocket has suggested. As the story closes the narrator's library is "yet steeped in heavy shadow" and the dawn merely casts a "cool, gray light" of blessing on the head of the korl statue, a light that is meant to prefigure the hopeful dawning of other things (451). It is impossible to deny that questions of labor functioned in ante and post-bellum literature to deflect attention away from the issue of slavery and, in the North, to abrogate class differences. Indeed, Davis' own ambivalent feelings about emancipation and the politics of the war, as illuminated in her Civil War stories, suggest that there must have been some relief in writing a story in which the character's underlying whiteness, when not "muddy with grease and ashes," could underwrite her argument for his liberation and enrich the irony of his imprisonment while the mulatto girl outside swings by with a "free, firm step"; yet as Schocket himself admits, "the symbolic freedom of whiteness" is affirmed only in Hugh's death, and death—as we have just seen—is not portrayed as the great and ultimate liberator in this story (441,8; 55). If the story celebrates anything as potentially transcendent and transformative it is neither

religion nor whiteness but art and love, as these lie latent in the respective figures of Hugh and Deb or present in the objects in the narrator's library—the “half-moulded child's head; Aphrodite; a bunch of forest-leaves; music; work; homely fragments, in which lie the secrets of all eternal truth and beauty (451). The story's tragedy is the broken *figure* of the angel in the opening paragraphs, the statue of the Korl Woman that bespeaks a capacity that is never realized, a hunger for artistic expression that is never satisfied. The story is not the tragedy of Hugh Wolfe as Hugh Wolfe, individual, but the tragedy of Hugh Wolfe, representative of the human capacity for creativity, a capacity that is meant to speak for itself; similarly, the pathos with which Deb is imbued comes from her embodiment of the virtue of love, a virtue that Davis valorizes and sentimentalizes again in *Margret Howth* through the deformed mulatto Lois.

“Life in the Iron Mills” juxtaposes the values of art and love with those of money on the one hand and religion on the other, with Hugh trapped between the latter two alternatives, wandering into church with the stolen check in his pocket, neither of which has the capacity to save him. Yet the potential problem with the story's valorization of art and love—especially its valorization of art—is that it comes at the expense of the story's valorization of human life—or any life. As Amy Schrager Lang argues in one of the most trenchant readings of “Life in the Iron Mills” to date:

Prophecy, both social and religious, fails in *Life in the Iron Mills* because in the end art has been made to substitute for life after all. That is to say, prophecy fails because the narrator has made us acutely aware not only of the difference between the artifice, the story or the sculpture, and the Truth, the “reality” of Hugh Wolf's “soul-starvation,” but also of the

inevitable tendency of art to appropriate the life of its subject, the mill hand, just as the mill owner appropriates his labor (140).

“Prophecy”—the answer to the story’s opening question “What is the end?”—fails because art—the Korl woman who both speaks and doesn’t speak for the silent and finally silenced artist, the story that attempts to bridge that silence—demonstrates the necessity for asking the question but fails to provide an answer. The difference between artifice and truth that Davis attempts to open up by complicating and questioning the assurance of the sentimental storyline (i.e. the artifice) ultimately exposes that difference but provides no resolution for it. We are left, as Lang suggests, “with only a morally equivocal art to mediate between the sunlit world of [the] middle-class reader and the gloom of the mills” (142). The Korl Woman—who “hides” some “terrible problem” in her face—gives testament to Hugh Wolfe’s uniqueness and to his claim to human consideration, but she also enables the men who come to the mill to distance themselves from Hugh’s grimy reality as they concentrate their attention on figuring out the statue’s significance (439). Mitchell, the aesthete who understands the statue’s message best, is the one who turns away the most decisively, despite having the money to save Hugh in his pocket. Perhaps he *is* the narrator, hiding the statue behind a curtain at the story’s conclusion, ending his narrative on the same note of uncertainty as he began. When the story opens, the wrong that the narrator feels the need to address is the suffering of the masses, the general symptoms of “pain and cunning” that mar the bodies and faces of the “slow stream of human life creeping past, night and morning, to the great mills,” whose suffering seems to be a wrong in and of itself (430). The lives and deaths of these men demand that we ask the great questions of life, the narrator proclaims; yet as he attempts

to get past his ponderous presentation of the problem, to put a genuine face on the tragedy, his argument twists into something else—it is no longer that the poor quality of such a life is unconscionable for any living being, but that the quality of such a life is especially unconscionable for people who demonstrate the kinds of gifts and capacities that ought to earn them a spot in the privileged class. Hugh Wolfe is not the average mill-worker—he is someone exceptional, an “infant genius”—someone with “stronger powers than many men,” an outsider even among the mill hands, who feel that with his “foreign thoughts and longings he is not “one of themselves” (435,438-40). ““You have it in you to be a great sculptor, a great man”” the Doctor tells Hugh (440). Thus the effort to represent an individual working-class experience is displaced by a representation of the travails of an aspiring middle-class artist whose “morally ambiguous art”—like that of the narrator who tells his story—sidesteps the problem even as it attempts to answer it.

As Lang points out, this erasure of class issues under the auspices of art is a gendered process: art is typified here as the domain of men—albeit curiously feminized men—who bring to life female creations. While Hugh epitomizes artistic and creative talent—mind and soul—Deborah epitomizes the nurturing love of the ideal housewife; the salvation of each depends on the extent to which he or she is able to embody the gender ideals of the middle-class—gender ideals that (as Lang suggests) also help mask the story’s elision of the issue of class. The “stray gleams of mind and soul” that even young Kirby, the son of the mill owner, admits to seeing in Hugh are not the gleams of mind and soul that result in labor uprisings or typical class agitation (438, 440). Hugh’s quite plea to Doctor May is as one gentleman to another: “Will you help me?” Yet Wolfe’s gentlemanly plea is not enough to save him, despite the artistic credentials he

brings with him, whereas Deborah's capacity for love—although it does not save Hugh—at least enables her to save herself. We could argue that on some level “Life in the Iron Mills” is a record of a female artist's attempt to negotiate between the competing claims of the masculine prerogative to produce and the woman's injunction to nurture and that the decision in Deb's favor is meant to resolve Davis' own ambivalence about the value of following these competing paths, an ambivalence that will resurface in future stories. We should note, however, that love's efficacy is once again limited to the home and to the afterlife; the Quaker who comes too late to save Hugh only saves Deb by removing her from the city life and into the hills that evoke the celestial city. Like the “negro-like river” Deb eventually finds her way to the “air, and fields, and mountains—to the “broad, wooded slopes and clover-crimsoned meadows” that surround the Quaker meeting house⁶ (430, 450). But this redemption is predicated on her removal from the city and the people who are presumably abandoned to their ruin, except when a stray Quaker wanders in to save them, usually too late.

We could continue to illustrate the story's systematic effacement of working class embodiment and agency: it is noticeable, for example, that the group of men who visit the iron mill are differentiated by their personalities and occupations—and capacities for free thought and agency—in ways that Hugh is not, although to him the men, especially young Mitchell, are themselves symbolic of “Man all-knowing, all-seeing, crowned by Nature, reigning,” representative of something he longs for rather than distinct individuals—themselves types of of the bourgeois liberal male who is valorized throughout the story (441). Yet Hugh's voice is not the one that prevails in the story; his

⁶The thoughts in these last two paragraphs owe a significant debt to Lang's reading of “Life in the Iron Mills.” For this particular point see page 140 of her essay.

presence is almost completely effaced at the mill except as it functions as an illustration of the exception to the norm, an exception that threatens to stabilize the visitors' view of the fitness of the things. Kirby's visitors, out on a leisurely tour of the works, talk about and above Hugh, critical of each other while the narrator criticizes them, even as the story is directed towards their real-life counterparts. The narrator is the story's controlling voice, and for him Hugh and Deb are mostly tokens—types—just as Mitchell and his ilk are to them, while Mitchell, May and the readers they stand for are individuated enough to bear primary responsibility for the conditions the texts unveils. Hugh is both idealized and feminized throughout the story even as his capacity to transcend the limitations of his soot-covered body is denied him. He cannot inhabit “Mitchell's privileged, free, disembodied position, one unhampered by negative denotations of class and race” without the help of Mitchell and others who do inhabit it (Miles 94). Instead, he is constrained to function as untapped potential, an artist trapped in a working man's body. When he accepts the stolen check from Deb—an action excused, as we have seen, on the grounds that it is motivated by a woman's love—he doesn't immediately attempt to cash it or flee the scene but wanders around town drinking in the color and beauty of the setting sun that represents the life he has been denied. He is less frustrated by his physical ills than by his mental and spiritual ones; what he ultimately wants is not money—which the author knows would make him a less sympathetic character—but “Beauty, Content, and Right” (444). “A consciousness of power stirred within him,” the narrator tells us; “a man,—he thought, stretching out his hands,—free to work, to live, to love! Free! His right!” (444).

Hugh's plea for rights and freedom rather than for anything more grossly materialistic is meant to signal his middle-class birthright, his fitness for induction into the bourgeois liberal dream; the ironic juxtaposition of these civilized desires with his working-class dependency forms the substance of the narrator's appeal to her audience. Simultaneously insisting on both his capacity for enlightenment and his absolute impotence, the narrator intersperses her grim tale with aggressive interrogations of her readers that are supposed to remind them that, unlike Hugh, they do have agency; in fact, they have absolute power over whether or not he lives or dies. Only her readers can reach out to clasp the hands stretched out in hunger, hunger that cannot be dismissed as hunger for "meat" or whiskey" but as hunger for the right to live—and only individual actions by such readers can save men and women like Hugh and Deb (338). But what kind of actions might these be? The narrator clearly disapproves of Mitchell's insistence that "no vital movement of the people's has worked down, for good or evil" and that only one of the people can save the people (440). Doctor May is pointedly criticized for tacitly agreeing with Mitchell that praying that "power be might given these degraded souls to rise" fulfills his duty to those souls (440). Yet as we have seen, the narrator's own artistic intervention on Hugh's behalf has equivocal results; the only action that the text seems able to endorse is the one modeled by the Quaker woman at the end of the story: one person—a friend—reaching out to another with "slow, patient Christ-like love" (450). Mitchell and May are both condemned for assuming that the impossibility of saving all the men excuses them for saving one; neither May's lack of funds nor Mitchell's scruples about interfering in cross-class situations—about assuming that his "pity" for Wolfe justifies his interference in Wolfe's affairs—are treated as legitimate

excuses for inaction. The Quaker whose Christ-like and far-reaching sense of compassion will be modeled by other female figures in future Davis novels is the kind of private philanthropist the text seems designed to produce. As we have seen, this kind of philanthropy is not figured as particularly effective, but—as we have also seen—the text is designed to preclude the possibility that readers might take refuge in imaginary acts of compassion rather than actually attempt their own; there is supposed to be some measure of shame involved in depicting the story's moneyed elite as pre-empted by a lowly Quaker—some burden born by the audience in recognizing that they (or their fictive counterparts) were actually present in the town that the Quaker had to travel to get to.

In short, the story's goals are not to represent or even to imagine working class individuals who might be different or unknowable in ways that ought to be both explored and respected or to argue that laborers' need better working conditions and better pay regardless of their apparent ability to appreciate it or to motivate the working class to rise up in its own behalf, to understand its own strength and capacity to inaugurate change; rather, its goals are to present middle-class readers with characters who under all their dirt and grim look very similar to them—who exhibit not only incipient traits of bourgeois respectability but even exceptional capacities, appropriately gendered, for societal contributions that can be recognized as such by the established class—so that those readers will be inspired to undertake the private acts of philanthropy that lift those of their inferiors who prove to be extractable out of the cycle of poverty and exploitation. This is not to deny that compassion often involves making a connection between one's own needs and capacities and the needs and capacities of others; as Glenn Hendler has pointed out, sentimental literature of the period has the tendency to conflate feeling *like* a

character with feeling *with* a character, to confuse an “*analogy* it posits between [subjects] with an illusory and risky coincidence between them,” but Hendler rightly remarks that this confusion can have the seemingly paradoxical effect of allowing the sympathizer to expand the boundaries of class and family by insisting that marginalized Americans are in fact indistinguishable from middle-class family members (121).

Whether or not Davis has actually achieved—or even attempted—an accurate representation of the lives of individual members of the working class, she nevertheless insisted upon seeing them in the same light in which she views family and friends, deliberately juxtaposing her position with Mitchell’s, who insists that recognizing the irreducible otherness of the working class precludes intervention in their affairs. Davis also makes the valid point that many people confined to the working class have the talents and abilities to contribute to society in more complex ways than they are often allowed to do, that the working class is not a homogenous mass of ignorance and feral desires, a prejudice clearly more widely prevalent—or at least more openly voiced—in the nineteenth century than in the twenty-first. Yet perhaps for that reason, Davis seems unable to conceive of a middle ground in which otherness and intervention are not represented as mutually exclusive. Her strategy for evoking sympathy involves imbuing her working class protagonists with recognizably bourgeois tendencies to sublimate and aestheticize their physical desires and material needs; it also reinforces a top-down social hierarchy in which middle-class hegemony is extended without counter-pressure being exerted from below.

In *States of Sympathy: Seduction and Democracy in the American Novel*,

Elizabeth Barnes argues that many post-revolutionary and antebellum novelists, male and

female, “employ sympathetic identification to reinforce a familial model of politics that subordinates difference to sameness and that teaches readers to care for others as if they were reflections of themselves” (17). Such novelists sought to reconcile liberalism’s emphasis on independence and self-regulation with a republican investment in the good of the body politic through the practice of sympathy as modeled in or elicited through fictional narratives. Sympathy becomes a way of regulating one’s own emotions by making them responsive and responsible to others while at the same time imagining those others as similar to or even coextensive with oneself; the practice of sympathy was also understood to perform a public function by creating and maintaining a version of cultural and political cohesion modeled on family structure, one in which the public is articulated by way of the private and the collective by way of the individual, but an individual whose private desires are already constrained by an imaginative appreciation of the needs of others, construed as versions of himself. Barnes also points out that the cultivation of sympathy was not considered a gendered enterprise in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries to the extent that it would become later in the nineteenth century. Citing the influence of Adam Smith as well as the general tendency of Enlightenment thinkers to understand sensibility or right feeling not as antithetical to reason but as necessary for its proper exercise, especially in the realm of moral judgment, Barnes notes that sentimental novels were the provenance of both men and women and—in America—performed the important task of articulating and regulating the proper but essential exercise of emotion within the national body. Both post-revolutionary novels of seduction and the domestic fiction that eventually replaced them shared an understanding of the *political* importance of rightly negotiating the claims of feeling or sentiment within

the domestic sphere, of understanding the well-ordered family to be the model for the well-ordered nation; it was not until later in the nineteenth century that women's domestic fiction became increasingly exempt from public discourse, as "liberal women" writing in the wake of the Civil War found (as Nina Baym observes) "the redemptive possibilities of enlightened domesticity no longer credible."

We can watch this shift from sympathy to sentimentalism taking place not just within the Davisean corpus but in the middle of Davis's first novel, *Margret Howth*, which was published a year after "Life in the Iron Mills." But the important thing to recognize about "Iron Mills" is that despite being neither a novel of seduction nor a work of domestic fiction it sets itself to the task of modeling and eliciting the kind of sympathy that Barnes describes and that Davis intends and understands to be "a value scheme for ordering all of life, in competition with the money and exploitation that is perceived to prevail in American society" (Baym 27). By putting a dysfunctional but recognizably middle-class version of a working-class family at its center, Davis literally takes the domestic and the sentimental out of the home and places it in the marketplace, forcing readers to recognize the mirror image of their own lives within the working class environment. Emotional responses are then extorted from readers who are seduced through descriptions that (as we have seen) are tied less to the travails of any specific individual than to existential conditions wrought in sensational detail, conditions clearly unconscionable for characters who contain the germs of respectability. Yet the seduction is immediately—sometimes even simultaneously—harnessed to sympathetic recognition that prevents the self-indulgent enjoyment of emotion as an end in itself and entails rational social action, sympathy as public duty, as the foundation for civil society and the

patriotic basis for resisting the corrosive effects of industrialization. Family ought to be treated like family; people who “act like us” ought to be treated like us—a principle whose Kantian echoes Davis invokes alongside a deliberate re-limning of the boundaries of the family circle.

It is understandable that Davis would make a last desperate appeal to family resemblance and human commonality at the onset of a war that pitted brother against brother and played out in her back yard, a war that suggested both in its cause and consequences that sectional and racial differences were unbridgeable and more fundamental to human self-recognition than sympathetic relations—a war whose motivations were indistinguishable, in her mind, from those that generated the inferno of the iron mills; nevertheless, it is also important to recognize that the notion of sympathy Davis promotes even here is essentially a conservative one, implicated in the erasure of difference typical of Enlightenment ideology and committed to a conception of public duty that depends solely on private intervention rather than collective action. The aggressive but masturbatory quality of Davis’s polemic foreshadows the dilemma at the heart of this notion of sympathy and, by extension, at the heart of the American democratic project, a dilemma intensified in her later sentimental fiction and endemic to sentimental fiction in general: the difficulty involved in generating compassion for the problems of others whose otherness has to be “erased” in order for sympathy for them to be imagined or legitimized at all. If readers are meant to save and weep over Hugh Wolfe whose identity has been evacuated of any substance beyond an idealized creative potential that mirrors their own bloodless values, the rhetoric has to overcompensate to manufacture grief both for the pseudo-character and the pseudo-loss. Moreover, if one of

the differences persistently (or increasingly) denied in literary and political discourses of the nineteenth century—discourses attempting to manufacture solidarity out of a nation conceived out of autonomy, individualism and capitalist (self) interest—is the difference of gender itself, then female writers have the choice either of masquerading as men to continue to insist on the public value of their already etiolated concept of sympathy or of surrendering any claim to intervention in a public sphere dominated increasingly by materialistic and “rationalist” values, instead retreating into the home to reify emotions already thoroughly inflected with patriarchy. In “Life in the Iron Mills” Davis makes the former choice, but after 1862 she will increasingly make the latter.

In the afterword to the 1990 feminist press edition of *Margret Howth* Jean Fagan Yellin recounts the “feminization” process by which Davis’ polemical manuscript “The Deaf and the Dumb” was transmogrified—at the behest of her publisher James T. Fields, then editor of *The Atlantic Monthly*, who objected to the book’s “gloomy” tone—into the sentimental “Story of Today” and eventually published in book form as *Margret Howth*, enacting—literally mid-text—Davis’ devolution from pioneering realist to popular women’s writer (Yellin 271). Clearly, Fields wanted Davis to mold *Margret Howth* along the lines of the domestic fiction of the period, putting Margret at the center of the story as a young woman who experiences personal hardships—in this case, as in most domestic fiction, family impoverishment—and consequently develops the independence, strength, and various inner resources necessary to guarantee her survival, the unique twist in this case being that instead of going to work as a teacher or seamstress Margret takes a

job as an accountant in a woolen mill.⁷ In addition to the imposition of gainful employment, Margret is exposed to another hardship, that of being recruited by the fanatical socialist Dr. Knowles in his scheme to start a charitable phalanstery. In the nick of time, however, she is rescued by her repentant lover Stephen Holmes, who abandons his cold-blooded “Fichtean” independence partly under her influence and partly because the mill on whose ownership he had staked his hope of independence—the same mill in which Margret is forced to work—burns down and leaves him chastened and injured although fortunately not permanently maimed, despite the instructive example of his literary forerunner, Mr. Rochester. Yet Yellin conjectures that in the original story that Davis wanted to publish she allowed Holmes to be killed in the fire that destroys the mill and doomed Margret to “live out her days supporting her parents by working among the slum-dwellers with Dr. Knowles,” a hypothesis that accounts not only for the jarring disjunction between the book’s declared intention to avoid easy romanticism and its cloying conclusion but also for the difference in chronological structure between the chapters leading up to the fire—which take place over the span of forty-eight hours—and those coming after it, which unfold over the course of a year (Yellin 295).

The question becomes, then, to what degree the published version differs in its aims and achievements from its hypothetical original version—how much the transition from sympathy to sentiment really alters the novel’s agenda. Does its capitulation to the trajectory of the decaying genre of domestic fiction compromise its basic value commitments or—as in “Iron Mills”—is its notion of sympathy “always already” compromised by its inability to imagine an outside to the social and political paradigms

⁷Here I’m referencing Nina Baym’s analysis of the stock plotline of American eighteenth-century domestic fiction.

in which it is enmeshed? In the sentimental version that we have inherited the two competing male protagonists are brought to a recognition of the error of their ways and recouped under the aegis of the domestic, which is figured as the only possible salvation for a town and—by implication—a society and nation that teeters on the brink of selling out not simply to vulgar material interests but to the rationalist and socialist ideals that both enable and occlude those interests. Holmes is a “Fichtean,” as Davis labeled him in her letters to Fields, someone who models “the development in common vulgar life of the Fichtean philosophy and its effect upon a self-made man,” and Dr. Knowles is a socialist, a follower of Fourier, Saint Simon and Comte (qtd. in Yellin 288). Fichte, Fourier and Comte are unfamiliar names to many twenty-first century readers, but Davis identified them all with forms of idealism that unhealthily subordinated the personal and the emotional to the rational and the scientific; she had little interest in doing justice to their actual theoretical complexities rather than pointing out that such complexities were often lost—as they seemed to be to her—in their translation into everyday conduct guides.

As Mr. Howth and Dr. Knowles debate the relative merits of feudalism and socialism in the opening pages of the novel, Margret is a silent auditor whose thoughts and emotions are portrayed as highly susceptible to her father’s romantic portraits of suffering and heroism in the days of chivalry; only those ideals that are rooted in the emotions have any intelligibility to her. For her and for Davis, Holmes’ living Fichteanism consists in a version of liberalism that makes no gestures, however specious, to incorporating sympathy into its agenda, despite the fact that Fichte himself made a distinction between the practical freedom of the ethical self and the necessary intersubjectivity of the theoretical self. Comte too—the father of modern sociology—was

critical of what he called the metaphysical stage of human existence, which he associated with the liberalism of post-revolutionary France; his own solution was to replace a society based on freedom and rights with one bent on collective pursuit of the communal good. Yet both men arrived at their respective concepts of inter-subjectivity and social cooperation through a process of scientific investigation into what they believed to be the organizing principles of the human self and human society; they both used the word “science” to describe their lifelong ambitions to systematize human identity and history, whereas Davis was consistently suspicious of any social schemes that originated from a posture of detachment—of supposed “objectivity”—and that privileged reason, will, duty and universal benevolence over love and natural attachments, primarily those between husband and wife and parents and children. In *Margret Howth* Davis seems presciently aware that detachment can breed a kind of proto-fascism, a willingness to treat other people as if they are specimens in a jar, as means to achieving one’s personal or political ends—an attitude that is all the more dangerous when those ends are conceived as promoting the elevation of the self or the human race as a whole. The narrator describes Holmes as “practic[ing] self-denial constantly to strengthen his benevolent instincts,” and relates a story of Holmes “chuck[ing]” a dollar at a cripple who resented being treated like a dog being tossed a bone (120-1). “You will find no fairer exponent than this Stephen Holmes of the great idea of American sociology,—that the object of life is *to grow*,” she adds; “self-salvation, self-elevation,—the ideas that give birth to, and destroy half of our Christianity, half of our philanthropy!” (121).

The rational cultivation of self or social improvement is clearly linked in *Margret Howth* to issues of control that Davis sees as inimical to Christian principles of

contentment and surrender. To attempt to be more than one is—to deny the more humble capacities and place in life God gives us—is to commit the sin of pride. “God help you, Stephen!” Dr. Knowles warns Holmes early in the text: “For there is a God higher than we. The ills of life you mean to conquer will teach it to you” (118). The place for Holmes’ pride lies not in the cultivation of a self-determined and determining identity that can worship itself as its own creator but in its reconfiguration in a more limited role, under God, as the master of a wife and home. By surrendering his ambition to master himself and by extension the world (since the world only exists as a manifestation of the will of the determining self, in Davis’ “vulgar” articulation of Fichteanism) to instead take his rightful place in the home, once “life’s ills”—namely, an apocalyptic mill fire that almost destroys along with his financial backing—have in fact taught him that “there is a God higher than we,” Holmes reclaims his rightful role as a creature not a creator, abandoning his attempt to replace or efface God. The work Holmes has left to do in the public sphere remains vague and unspecified as the story closes—the home subsumes the novel’s world in much the way Holmes originally meant his self to subsume the world—but nevertheless, in his repentance Holmes is portrayed as closer to the right path than his continually frustrated friend Knowles, who at the end of the novel is still groping for answers to the perennial problem of suffering. When robbed of his hubris, Holmes’ sturdy self-reliance, his yen for doing his immediate duty without worrying unduly about the workings and sufferings of those around him, is reconfigured as an asset—as long as that duty is understood to incorporate his obligations to his wife and family—whereas Knowles’ constant worry over the wrongs of the world, over “the cry of the slave and of nations going down in darkness” is condemned as the story closes. In fact, Knowles

becomes one of Holmes “unwilling” followers, “knowing him closer to the truth than he” (265). The minister Vandyke, with whom Holmes deliberately allies himself after his own come-uppance, has the final say, a perspective that the narrator aligns with her own: “the instant peril of the hour”—the seeming urgency of the pervasive problem of human suffering—enables us not to intervene but to “lift clearer into view the eternal prophesy of coming content,” making it possible for us to “hold no past and no future, to accept the work of each moment, and think it no wrong to drink every drop of its beauty and joy” (266).

Thus, the novel’s rejection of notions of individual freedom and autonomy for a commitment to familial inter-subjectivity ultimately facilitates a conservative agenda, one in which everyone and everything that cannot be incorporated into the family structure gets consigned to God and to the more perfect justice that will only be made manifest in and after death. In fact, suffering and death become the means by and through which we legitimize our nonintervention in larger matters of human justice, since it teaches us to surrender hope for—and aid in—the amelioration of suffering in this life and to accept the limitations attendant upon our finite lives and wills. Love is the answer, not justice, and love by nature has its limits, at least according to *Margret Howth*: it is an intensely personal emotion closely tied to biology and to natural instincts, especially those of women, who are always portrayed as having a desperate and almost ungovernable passion for a husband and children which somehow becomes distorted and unnatural if it is redirected into works of universal benevolence. Men, on the other hand, have to be trained to recognize and prioritize their passion for any specific woman or for their “longing for rest, on something, in something,” rather than continue to feed their egos

and prize their autonomy and ambition, and a great deal of Davis's corpus is directed towards this task, towards domesticating male energy (122). In fact, one of the more consistent features of her writing—and its crucial difference from the tradition of domestic fiction described by Nina Baym, which was often directed (albeit conservatively) towards promoting female independence and self-assertion as a prerequisite for entering into matrimonial bonds—is its emphasis on women's intense investment in domestic love and happiness, which exert pressure on men to conform to family values. Men are the real source of Davis's concern because their values are the ones that will—or that primarily do—shape the nation. In novels like *Dallas Galbraith* (1868) and *John Andross* (1874), for example, the protagonists are men who open themselves up to social scorn that sometimes seems disproportionate—to modern readers—to the nature of their infractions. However, Davis clearly wants that scorn to warn men against capitulating to standard masculine vices, vices which are tied to the temptation to power and sordid money-getting and that are only forsaken and forgiven through the influence exerted by the love of a good woman.

Stephen Holmes is a forerunner to such characters, although the pressure Margret exerts is a feeble thing compared to the more purely feminine power with which Davis will endow some of her later female characters (a power which she will limn with greater intensity as her female characters become more feminized and as her own writing is channeled away from the high-brow market represented by the *Atlantic* and towards a more popular female audience). The desperate need to establish the power of women's capacity for love as a controlling force in men's lives so that women will *not* feel the need to identify with marginalized characters in the humiliating way that Margret is

forced to see herself in the tragic mulatto Lois or fall prey to Dr. Knowles' charitable endeavors—much like Jane Eyre falling prey to St. John when she is forced to work in his charity School—seems to be the driving force behind *Margret Howth*, and religion becomes away of avoiding that potentially demoralizing identification. After Holmes parts from Margret for what she believes to be the last time and Knowles finds her in a state of collapse by the roadside and drags her to a tavern that he's converted into a poor house in order to prey on her emotions at her most vulnerable moment, Margret rallies and resists him by insisting that Christ “was a man, and loved as we do” rather than someone who expects her to give up her love for Holmes to serve the poor (157).

Christianity thus works in the book primarily to provide the limit or counterforce to the seductive pressure of sympathy, to prevent it from being extended outside of the bonds of family and to promote family itself—very narrowly defined—as central to social order: Holmes' proposes to Margret on Christmas Eve and the entire book resolves in a triumphant celebration of the fact that coming of Christ has appropriately contained the problem of suffering. “Even the lowest slave half-smiled, on waking, to think it was Christmas-day,” the chastened and reclaimed Holmes imagines as he leaves the scene of his betrothal (245).

We could argue, then, coming back to our original question, that in killing off Holmes in what Yellin speculates might have been the original ending for “The Deaf and the Dumb,” Davis could have been enacting a moment of artistic revenge on a male character who refuses to be seduced into domesticity, the moral being that men who hurt women by refusing to love and marry them are better off—for themselves and for society—dead. It seems clear even in the opening chapters of *Margret Howth* that Davis

did not intend for self-renunciation in the service of others to be read as the best outcome in life for women or for anyone, despite the original title's apparent prioritization of the concerns of the unheard and the voiceless and its possible assignment of the task of taking care of them to Margret, once Holmes is out of the picture. As we have seen, Davis' preferred solution to such concerns—evident not just in *Margret Howth* but throughout her entire corpus, beginning with “Life in the Iron Mills”—is to incorporate the less fortunate into the structures of already-constituted middle-class families just like Deb in “Iron Mills” is adopted by the Quakers or the mulatto Lois is adopted by middle-class families of the town community in *Margret Howth* or several other embattled African-Americans are adopted by the saintly young matron Ross Garrick in *Waiting for the Verdict*, whose “hearth and home would take in all the orphans of the world,” her husband recounts fondly (340). Dr. Knowles is characterized as something of a brutal and oppressive force throughout *Margret Howth*; his frantic “groping” after the answer to the problem of human suffering is continually contrasted to the light of Christ that prevents even the “fetid dens” and “deepest mires of body” from seeming completely impenetrable (91).

The difference, then, between the original and final versions of the text probably lay less in their underlying values than in their different methods of promoting and reproducing those values. In constructing an initial story that consigned Margret to Knowles rather than to Holmes, Davis might have been endorsing a narrative agenda similar to that of “Life in the Iron Mills”: denying readers the satisfaction of a happy ending in order to impress them with a sense of their real-life responsibility to fix things themselves, using fiction to provoke emotions that are not resolved or resolvable within

the text or within the experience of reading the text—and provoking emotions that are not only tragic rather than comedic but that deny readers the potential catharsis involved in invoking emotions through literary and rhetorical strategies that might prevent them from losing sight of their own powers of judgment in the midst of their pity. Yet ultimately, the goal of such an agenda is still the valorization of private philanthropy, of bourgeois liberal morality—morality conceived in the first half of the story as a potent antidote to contemporary political and social ills and in the rewritten second half reified, within the closing chapters of a woman’s novel, as a consolation prize for its failure to achieve the kind of cultural authority to which it originally aspired, but still middle-class morality from first to last, with all its insistence on moderation, caution, uniformity, conformity, and the careful cultivation and maintenance of boundaries between uplifting and corrosive inclusions of others.

One of the curious facts about the novel, but about the first seven chapters especially, is that they contain very little action: they revolve around descriptions of the protagonists’ personalities and states of mind or around conversations about ideas that do little to propel the action, except to the extent that measuring ideas and different ways of being in the world are in fact what the novel is about. The novel is pervaded by ruminations, by a spirit of rumination, in which it is often unclear whether the characters themselves are thinking or the narrator is thinking about and for them, a version of third-person omniscient in which the narrator is such a frequent and close commentator on the characters’ thoughts that she comes across as a mother attempting to interpret the speech of an inarticulate child. She positions herself, in fact, as an interpreter, a sympathetic liaison between her conflicted characters and her resistant readers. Much like “Life of

the Iron Mills,” the story opens with an extended address by the narrator, who is determined to take readers away from the scenes and subjects they usually expect and plunge them into an experience she expects them to resist, a strategy reinforced by frequent appeals to the reader and counter assertions to these imagined appeals by the narrator: “you think” often followed by “I say.” This time, however, the narrator is not taking readers from the sanitized interior of a store or office or library to the “foul effluvia” of the iron mills but in the opposite direction—from the “bloody glare” of war to the “crude and homely” commonplace, a move also prompted by a relic, not an statue of korn but an old iron-bound ledger; yet Davis clearly believes her impetus to be the same, the desire to deny her readers—who are again conceived as male, while the narrator here seems more recognizably female—anything that smacks of escapism or idealism—aestheticism or heroism—in order to remind them of their everyday obligations to virtue (“Mills” 431, *Margret* 6). In fact, she specifically directs herself to the bourgeois need to escape the “common” as manifested in the current cant on the war:

Your ears are openest to the war-trumpet now. Ha! that is spirit-stirring!—that wakes up the old Revolutionary blood! Your manlier nature has been smothered under drudgery, the poor daily necessity for bread and butter. I want you to go down into this common, every-day drudgery, and consider if there might not be in it also a great warfare (6).

These romantic expectations are anticipated and then denied throughout the story, each time the narrator introduces a new character; and although we might think that even in these early chapters Davis exhibits the inferior realist’s schizophrenic tendency to sentimentalize the commonplace in ways that make it even more cloying than the

romance, avoiding sentimentalism is not Davis' goal; harnessing it to right action is, and what she relinquished in moving from the more dialectical mode of the first half of the novel to the more purely saccharine (and probably revised) mode of the second half of the novel is the aggressive appeal to individual agency and personal responsibility. The goal of the novel's self-celebratory final chapters is not to provoke people into action but to indulge their sense of self-complacency, to allow them to feel that in reading about the reconciliation between Margret and Holmes or about Lois' triumph death—all wrapped up in a glowing Christmas package—they have witnessed the world being set to rights in ways that exempt them from further action; and indeed—as we have repeatedly seen—the novel closes with a belabored insistence that the larger wrongs of the world are not ours to correct but to surrender to the contentment of today and the acceptance of our own finitude.

Although this message might at first seem to directly contradict the message of “Life in the Iron Mills,” my simple point here is that despite Davis' much-rued transition from serious to sentimental novelist after the publication of *Margret Howth* (or right in the middle of it, as we have discussed), a transition that is rightly attributed—since she apparently protested, albeit weakly, the mutilation of her original story—to contemporary prejudices and preconceptions about women's participation in the literary marketplace, the conservative values that underlie even the seemingly progressive text “Life in the Iron Mills” probably made that transition much more logical and inevitable than it might otherwise seem. If the plan for achieving social transformation entails eliciting sympathetic recognition from middle-class citizens on behalf of characters whose latent capacity for bourgeois respectability might not be immediately clear outside of the pages

of a novel—and if, in addition, “bourgeois respectability” involves prioritizing appropriately gendered domestic virtues over a corrupt money culture—then the corrective to a male-driven business culture is still a male-dominated family circle. None of Davis’s writing is the traditional eighteenth-century domestic fiction that critics like Baym and Jane Tompkins praise for being subversively invested in establishing women at the centers of homes and homes at the heart of the nation, fiction in which male validation and concerns are often and surprisingly peripheral. Davis’s homes are male-centered too; reflecting back over her major texts reveals how few of her female characters are provided with strong maternal or sororal support or the opportunity to develop self-sufficiency or even to figure prominently or positively in the plots at all. Davis wrote many novels and short stories over the course of her career that featured men as protagonists and title characters, but she protested turning “A Story of Today” into one of her few woman-entitled works, rightly claiming that Margret was “the completest failure in the story, besides *not* being the nucleus of it” before acquiescing to Fields’ demands (qtd. in Yellin 290).

This is not to suggest that Davis should *not* be praised for protesting the repercussions of industrial capitalism run amuck, including the valorization of sentiment. She should also be commended for suggesting that family or community values, not business ones, ought to be at the center of national life and for insisting that political activism can and will be at its most effective when grounded in the cultivation of private virtue—virtue which places emotion at the service of individual commitments to extending the family circle to include the underprivileged. However, we would be remiss to deny that Davis’ notion of family is a conservative one and that she seems

determined to see its survival as contingent upon men's continuing commitment to lead it. Her writing betrays an anxiety endemic to much of the decadent sentimental fiction of the late nineteenth century, anxiety that domestic life and virtue—and consequently, women's power and sphere of influence—are being pushed to the margins of national life and that the only way to exert any counter-pressure or to provide women with any comfort in this scenario is to continuously construct fictive worlds in which men are held hostage to hyper-refined standards of conduct. Davis was clearly writing in the lull that superseded women's domestic fiction and that preceded the political resurgence of women's voices at the end of the nineteenth century.

One of the unsurprising and unfortunate consequences of Davis' position in this struggle over national identity and culture—which I will mention briefly in closing our discussion of *Margret Howth*—is that she becomes increasingly willing to sacrifice characters who prove incapable of assimilation into the nuclear family model. Besides Lois and her father the convict—and the Howths' marginally literate but self-important servant, who exemplifies the potential dangers of a democracy that makes its freedoms too readily available to a marginally educated underclass—there are no significant lower-class characters in *Margret Howth*, and the few who are present are depicted as outside the pale of redemption. Lois is black as well as deformed, and like Deb from “Iron Mills” her only hope of salvation lies in the thoroughness with which she manifests a saintly interior that purifies the taint of her repellant exterior and the serenity with which she waits for eternal salvation. Yet Deb is allowed to be weak—and allowed to be reclaimed and reformed on earth—in ways that Lois is not; apparently there is a difference between physical deformity that is either directly or indirectly attributable to

human error and that which “sets Lois apart from the poorest of the poor—the taint in her veins of black blood” (*MH* 56). The consolations of religion are underplayed in “Life in the Iron Mills” in order to emphasize the value of earthly intervention in the fight against social injustice, whereas Lois’ happiness is quite clearly dependent on a hope of heaven that involves—and enables—letting go of any expectation of equity here on earth. When Hugh Wolfe dies society is to blame; when Lois dies God is to blame, and heaven alone can rectify her wrongs. Lois is denied even the advantage of physical beauty typical of tragic mulatto figures of the period, nor is her lack of physical appeal portrayed as potentially liberating in any secular sense, à la *Jane Eyre*. The only compensation for physical disfigurement in Davis’ oeuvre is religion, and the loss or absence of beauty is consistently depicted as a tragedy for all women, since it often deprives them of the opportunity to fulfill their true destiny, marriage. Even on her deathbed Lois experiences a pang of regret at the sight of a pretty young girl in her wedding dress, and Margret herself is forced to face the pain that Davis insists on attributing to all her female characters who despair of finding a man: the self-loathing that comes from being denied “every woman’s right,—to love and be loved” (*MH* 60). There are two kinds of wrongs in Davis’ novels, those inflicted by God and those inflicted by man, and ugliness in women and black blood in anyone belong to the former category and can only find alleviation in an appeal to their source. The suffering of (the best of) the working class can be ameliorated if their superiors will set their priorities right and help them rise to their natural place; but martyrdom is the only outcome for those who identify with the deaf and the dumb, either by choice or necessity.

Davis does, however, make a distinction between the martyrdom of necessity and the martyrdom of choice: Lois has no alternative but to trust in something outside the boundaries of the material and the immediate if she wants any happiness in this life at all, whereas Margret at least has the consolation of her whiteness and class status, something she clings to very closely in chapter two when she rides into town—to her job at the wool factory—on Lois’ peddler’s wagon, simultaneously recognizing and denying the similarities between their lots in life. All three of the story’s major middle-class characters are given the choice between lives lived in the service of high ideals and lives lived for ordinary human satisfactions; their internal conflicts over these competing goods (if they *are* both goods) drive the story’s action, as the narrator wanders in and out of their individual consciousnesses, using Lois as a foil against which to measure all three. Margret has to decide between marrying Holmes and assisting Knowles and her choice is constrained by Holmes’ choice between a “self-actualization” that abjures affection and an embrace of domestication that comes at the expense of his life dreams. Yet despite the paucity of these choices, Margret’s destiny still entertains the possibility of agency in a way that Lois’s does not.

As Shirley Samuels has pointed out, critical assessments of the political value of nineteenth-century sentimental literature always involves negotiating between “a *dismissal* of the sentimental move outside or beyond the boundaries of a gendered and racialized body—a move seen as a *betrayal* of the specific embodiment figured—and, alternately, a celebration of the emancipatory strategies of a sentimentality that *rescues* subjects from the unfortunate essentializing that the fact of having a body entails” (5).

Because of its susceptibility to the influence of rationalism and materialism or the unacknowledged need to impose a certain vision of the world onto others, sentimentalism, even in its least sentimental versions, often proves inadequate to imagining the bodies of others—or anyone’s bodies, anyone’s embodied essence—in ways that would seem most likely to foster the connections that it seems bent on making, since the ability to imagine different and alien experiences—even if they are only imagined *as* different—seems to be as fundamental to genuine sympathy as the ability to imagine that others are having experiences exactly like our own. When cultural powerlessness is added to this basic blindness sympathy can degenerate into a fetishization of sameness that has potentially disastrous consequences. However, none of this detracts from the recognition that sentimental fiction had an overt social mission and message that was potentially empowering to its nineteenth-century female audience, a message which claimed that surrendering control over one’s self, over one’s body and environment, could allow a person to reclaim them all on a higher plane, even a plane ruled by a male Christian God—and that this spiritual realm is not only the true source of personal power but also the wellspring of social and political change. Nevertheless, there are obvious limitations to this configuration of power even when healthily worked out, and when promoted from a position of ignorance about exactly what is possessed that needs to be surrendered it can become a nasty business of making pieties out of renouncing things that have not been properly understood or desired to begin with.⁸

A young Henry James Jr. wrote devastating reviews for *The Nation* of both *Waiting for the Verdict* and *Dallas Galbraith*, Davis’s next two novels after *Margret*

⁸ See Jane Tompkins *Sentimental Designs* for one of the earliest and best discussions of the Christian ideology that undergirds the sentimental novel.

Howth. In his review of *Waiting for the Verdict*—a novel that he deemed “monstrous”—James used the occasion to vent his spleen towards sentimental writing in general:

Nothing is more respectable on the part of a writer—a novelist—than the intelligent sadness that forces itself upon him on the completion of a dramatic scheme which is in strict accordance with human life and its manifold miseries. But nothing is more trivial than the intellectual temper which, for ever dissolved in the melting mood, goes dripping and trickling over the face of humanity, and washing its honest lineaments out of all recognition. . . . Spontaneous pity is an excellent emotion, but there is nothing so hardening as to have your pity forever tickled and stimulated, and nothing so debasing as to become an agent between the supply and demand of the commodity (411).

In her spirited 1985 defense of the worldview of the sentimental novelist, Jane Tompkins argues that for sentimental writer, “a dramatic scheme which is in strict accordance with human life” is one that understands that life’s “manifold miseries” can be transcended through a recognition that “it is the spirit alone that is finally real” (Tompkins 133). For such writers, to attempt to see the face of humanity “objectively” as James demands in his review of *Dallas Galbraith* is to wash its lineaments out of recognition, to deprive its face of the spiritual aura and immanence that comprises its real essence (331). Viewing Lois the deformed mulatto or the poor and outcast characters in *Waiting for the Verdict* as children of God rather than sub-par human beings is to perform both a revolutionary social act and the most authentic kind of recognition; the point is *not* to see such characters as the world sees them or—more significantly—even as they see themselves,

but to see them as they are capable of being seen by those who have been given the mind, eyes and love of God. James seems incapable of critiquing these novels from their essentially religious viewpoint, but we can perhaps reformulate his critique along terms that his sentimentalist contemporaries might have understood by suggesting that the constant tickling and stimulating of pity he contrasts with genuine sympathy aroused by novelists who are *not* straining after moral affect could be symptomatic of sentimental writers' limited conception of the way God's eyes might work. Why can't God see Lois or Dr. Broderip from *Waiting for the Verdict* as something more replete than either deformed mulattos or dead saints? Davis and sentimental novelists in general seem unable to entertain the idea that seeing people as God sees them rather than as the world often dismisses them may not be incompatible with portraying them as complex, embodied human beings.

Tompkins would doubtless argue that Protestant dualism and anti-materialism and the bodily disempowerment to which American culture often consigned women prevented them from imagining a God who might have a redemptive purpose for people's bodies as well as their souls. Women's only source of cultural power and resistance lay not just in a Christian ethic of renunciation but in a Christian ethic that demanded that renunciation be complete: a renunciation not just of the possibility of reclaiming the body in any sort of earthly incarnation but also of the possibility of even knowing or understanding one's body to begin with. The path to women's freedom lay not through attempting to claim their own bodies but through persuading or forcing men to relinquish theirs, an act that is figured throughout Davis' novels by the motif of disclosure, by the act of making one's life and body both transparent—through self-negation—and

transparent to the gaze of others, an act symbolized in “Life in the Iron Mills” not only by Hugh literally offering up his body to the “white splendor of the moon” as he allows his blood to spill out on the floor—a martyr to Davis’ social message—but by his offering up the pale statue of the Korl woman in his place, as something his middle-class auditors and their real-life prototypes can embrace instead of his grime-covered body. Something similar happens in *Margret Howth* and Davis’ other sentimental novels, except that these male characters are not asked to surrender their bodies altogether but to make them transparent to the controlling gaze of women who are recognizable as good because they themselves are not at the mercy of their bodies or of unhealthy emotions. Revealing one’s secrets—sometimes literally the secret of one’s body, as when the mixed-race doctor in *Waiting for the Verdict* exposes the secret of his blood to the white woman he hopes to marry—is the first step towards entering into sympathetic relationships with others. “I want you to come right down with me,—here into the thickest of the fog and mud and foul effluvia,” the narrator of “Iron Mills” begins: “There is a secret down there...I want to make it a real thing to you” (431).

In what follows I want to trace out this emphasis on disclosure in three of Davis’ sentimental novels and then compare it briefly to James and Howells handling of the same issue. I have been arguing thus far in this chapter that despite Davis’ laudable attempt to wrest the discourse of sympathy out of its conventional and commodified packaging and clarify its intentions as well as extend its domain, this attempt has mixed results precisely because, for Davis, disclosure ultimately involves not the exposure of the “real” body (as opposed to its sentimentalized version) but its erasure altogether. What I want to do in closing, however, is recoup a bit of that ground by comparing

Davis' attitude towards disclosure to that of the realists who succeeded her—to James since he criticized her so harshly for her “unnatural” commitment to exposing Dr. Broderip's secret but also to Howells who wrote a novel of passing in which he makes the Aunt who unhelpfully exposes her niece's negro blood an avid reader of sentimental novels. What reading Davis against Howells and James helps us do is recognize the degree to which the latter's realism is predicated on the repression of certain kinds of experience—on the denial of sympathy to those who lack the possibility of assimilating into the sociopolitical world of the white bourgeois male. Although Davis may not completely recoup such characters either—choosing instead to consign them to God or to the uncertain aid of the art whose limitations she has already exposed—what she at least does is force their suffering to remain out in the open. What I would also like to argue is that sentimental reform fiction's failure to reclaim the lives and bodies of those it exposes to our (ideally) sympathetic gaze may ultimately be not because of its complicity in a problematic economic and political system but because of its complicity in human experience. There are obvious dangers in suggesting that the problems to which sentimental fiction responds are in some sense unsolvable, but it is important to recognize that such fiction is at least registering the anguish involved in facing life and cultural issues so grave and so apparently irresolvable that some kind of mystification is required to face them at all—especially if the other alternative is to accept suffering as a “fact of life,” à la James in *The Golden Bowl*. James puts Charlotte Verver, née Stant, in a “long silken halter” and leads her off to slaughter as complacently as if he held the ends of her rope himself, which he does—an aestheticization of the suffering of the “other” much more cold-blooded than anything Davis can devise (523). Female sentimental writers are

obviously displacing their own feelings of impotence onto the world around them in arguably unhealthy ways, but there is a sense in which their inability even to understand that they are doing this—except as dimly as Davis seems to feel it—is a manifestation of how appallingly deep their feelings of helplessness lie.

The three novels Davis published after *Margret Howth* all feature male protagonists. Although two women share the spotlight in *Waiting for the Verdict*, neither of them is allowed the kind of life-altering experience that Davis bequeaths to her two male protagonists, one of whom reveals his negro blood near the novel's end, loses his work and social standing but then leads a negro regiment in the Civil War until he dies a heroic death—the male counterpart of the tragic mulatta. The other makes the ugly mistake of selling off a loyal family retainer because “Old Hugh” knows a secret that could disinherit his master, who is afterwards forced to go on a journey of penance to reclaim his servant and his own integrity. *Dallas Galbraith* and *John Andross* also feature title characters who, like Dr. Broderip in *Waiting for the Verdict*, keep secrets that according to sentimental convention they would be best advised to disclose, despite the potentially devastating consequences: Dr. Broderip hides the secret of his negro blood, Dallas Galbraith the secret of his incarceration and John Andross the secret of his shady collaboration with a whisky ring modeled after the real-life Tweed Ring. All three of the men possess temperamental, childlike, charismatic personalities—Romantic personalities—that captivate everyone around them but that also make them subject to frequent moral vacillations, which Davis describes with a great deal of uneven melodrama. Consequently, the three men's journeys toward maturation involve purging themselves of this susceptibility to error and, along with it, the tendency to hide and

coddle their weaknesses and to avoid the kind of transparency necessary for integration into polite society. Clearly, James says wryly in his review of *Waiting for the Verdict*, Davis has “read Dickens with great assiduity, to say nothing of “Jane Eyre” and “Wuthering Heights” (410).

What is potentially absurd about these three men’s secrets is that they rarely involve real sins: presumably, a real sinner—a murderer, perhaps—would be beyond the pale of redemption and certainly of matrimonial consideration, despite the fact that John Andross’ criminally silly love interest—on whom Davis heaps a great deal of scorn—insists that if John had been a murderer she still would have loved him. John is not a murderer, but he is certainly the worst of the three characters, since after being weak enough to do the dirty work for the corporation of a friend who pays for his “support and education” after his father’s death—and who keeps John chained to the corporation by blackmailing him with a tale that his father was a forger whose crime will be revealed to the world if John ever leaves—he steals money from another friend who has given him the chance to start afresh, unaware of his past; in fact, he steals the money in order to buy off the first friend who has come looking for him, afraid he will spill the corporation’s secrets. All Dallas has to hide is a five-year incarceration for a forgery he didn’t commit but that he chooses to take the blame for—destroying the letter that could have exonerated him—so that he can spare the fiancée of the man who has framed him. Dr. Broderip has even less to hide, although his life itself could be called a forgery—an attempt to pass himself off as someone he is not. To lie about one’s past—to forge one’s identity is the great Romantic sin; and disclosure—confession—offers the only chance for redemption, the necessary condition for integration into respectable society and for

purging oneself of the subversive turmoil of the id. “It is either a fool or a knave who must have secrets,” says the upright characters who has given John Andross his fresh start but who is not himself spared from confronting and expunging a capacity for falsity that manifests itself as lust for the same silly—and evil—female creature who leads John astray and who is the one female character in all these novels who hordes her own secret, one that she refuses to reveal until she has wrought havoc on the lives of everyone around her. In contrast, the “good” women in these novels are transparent as day: the only one who possesses a secret reveals it unhesitatingly to the fastidious but wavering man who asks for her hand in marriage.

For Davis, encumbering her male characters with secrets from which only pure and honest women can liberate them comprises a large part of the her novels’ cultural work of bolstering and sustaining women’s precarious social power. Each of these men is saddled with a host of faults characterized as especially pernicious to the maintenance of a well-ordered state, chief of which is an incapacity for self-regulation—specifically an inability to negotiate between legitimate and illegitimate claims on sympathy. Unlike Hugh Wolfe—who lacks personality altogether—or the stern and self-contained protagonist of *Margret Howth*, the heroes of Davis’ sentimental romances are (unsurprisingly) Byronic figures who lack fathers, maintain intense attachments to their mothers and possess an unfortunate tendency to form seductive friendships with degenerate older men. Although an emotionally repressed and egocentric male like Holmes is usually placed somewhere in the novel as a foil to the childlike Byronic hero, the weakness that Davis is now intent on exposing is less the tendency to abjure emotion and personal attachments altogether but the susceptibility to the wrong kind of emotional

attachments, although the end result still seems to be a greater susceptibility to the corrosive influence of money and power and the other depravities of modernity. Both egotism and excessive emotionalism are inimical to tendencies need to be mitigating by the counter-pressure of relationships with the opposite sex. In this new scenario, women's cultural work consists less in coaxing men into appreciating the role that sympathy and domesticity play in creating a democratic nation-state than in training them to direct and contain their emotions within forms of domesticity that won't imperil the ordered workings of the republic, and the women best suited to this task are the ones who possess an incongruous mixture—which Davis unsuccessfully attempts to pass off as a delicate balance—of hearty commonsense and female submissiveness. In these novels women themselves run the risk of becoming either frivolously self-indulgent, caricatures of real femininity like the perniciously flighty Anna Maddox in *John Andross* or dangerously masculine like Old Madame Galbraith, who invests all the money and attention she might have invested in her dead son and missing grandson into a utopian scheme for creating a self-supporting community of immigrants on the family land, which she decides to drill for oil.

The oil that erupts and coats the entire landscape before Dallas returns to put out the fires and, in the process, to reveal his true identity and to assume his role as the family heir forms an obvious symbol for the simultaneous process of disclosure and containment that Davis understands to be necessary for the successful deployment of emotion in the service of communal enterprise. Women who repress their emotions and men who overindulge them are both disadvantageous to progress, order and decency, although the opposite is not necessarily true—men who repress their emotions and women who

indulge them usually only need to recognize their need to open themselves up to the stabilizing influence of the opposite sex. In the new order of things, however, an order in which everyone seems liable to the self-delusion and overweening appetites fomented by consumer culture, the first order of business is to distinguish between wholesome and unwholesome emotions, between authentic and false or artificially inflated passions. This is the primary business of *John Andross*, for example, which is a novel set in the corruption of the Grant administration and featuring a man who has difficulty saying no to people who tempt him into doing dishonorable deeds in the name of love and family honor, a man whose first business in life seems to be to make things easy for himself, who steals and evades instead of facing the consequences of his actions—who lets himself be influenced by second-rate women whose sole motivation is greed. The goal the text sets for him is to recognize that feelings indulged at the expense of integrity inevitably lead to destruction; true love and friendship engender mutual progress towards self-control and the exercise of domestic and civic virtue, which are always mutually reinforcing.

What clearly frustrated James was the irony of an author attempting to make this kind of argument while suffering from obvious delusions about her own relationship with consumer culture and the realities of American life—an irony that can also strike a twenty-first century reader confused about the seeming contradiction between Davis' continuous condemnations of Romanticism and the overwrought artificiality of her own prose. Obviously, Davis is not able to embrace the level of openness that James will later valorize in his texts; the position of (relative) empowerment from which Jamesian characters feel free to confront the limitations of their worldviews and open themselves

up to new impressions is not an option for Davis' women—although we could probably argue that it is never a completely realized option for James' female characters either, who inevitably suffer for their attempts to push past the boundaries of the conventional. In fact, a case could be made that the entirety of James' fictive corpus is dedicated to probing the limits that women's vulnerability to exploitation places on their—or anyone's—commitment to shedding received wisdom and immersing themselves in the flux of experience; no surprise then that for Davis, who recognizes more thoroughly than James the extent to which women's potential for pain is exacerbated in a culture that promotes pliancy but rarely encourages its moderation, much less the delicate capacity for discrimination with which James invests his characters, disclosure is about maintaining rather than undermining traditional values and social mores, about promoting the kinds of divulgence dedicated to self-discipline rather the self-exploration.

One of the secrets that Davis insists ought to be subject to exposure is the secret of miscegenation and its tragic consequences, and I want to look now a little more closely at Davis' contribution to tragic mulatto literature and the difference between her treatment of Dr. Broderip in *Waiting for the Verdict* and that of Howells writing on the same issue a generation later. One of the criticisms James makes of *Waiting for the Verdict* is the “unnaturalness” of Dr. Broderip's decision to reveal his black blood to his fiancée and identify with his “negro brethren” rather than attempt to pass for white; and when Howells publishes his own novel of passing in 1891-2 he foregrounds a guardian aunt whose miserable compulsion to “out” her mixed-race niece is traceable to her “morbid sympathy with the duty-ridden creatures of the novelist's brain” (55). Howells' narrator—a Dr. Olney who specializes in treating women who suffer from nervous

disorders and who eventually marries the unfortunate niece, despite the taint of her blood—expands on his impressions of Rhoda's Aunt Caroline in a criticism that has obvious implications for Davis' fiction:

He remembered from that first talk of the winter before... that she had shown herself incapable of sinking the sense of obligation in the sense of responsibility, and that she apparently conceived of what she called living up to the truth as something that might be done singly; that right affected her as a body of positive color, sharply distinguished from wrong, and not shading into and out of it by gradations of tint, as we find it doing in reality. Such a woman, he had vaguely reflected, when he came to sum up his impressions, would be capable of an atrocious cruelty in speaking or acting the truth, and would consider herself an exemplary person for having done her duty at any cost of suffering to herself or others (55).

The title of Howells' novel, *An Imperative Duty*, is meant to question how imperative this duty is. As Paul R. Petrie points out in his introduction to a recent reissue of the novel—and as this quotation demonstrates—Howells' attitude towards truth was colored by the pragmatic and utilitarian influences of his day; in general, in Howells' fiction, truth is ultimately answerable to social utility, to a larger view of the ends that telling the truth will serve: the “sense of obligation” to the truth must be “sunk” in the “sense of responsibility” to others. For Davis, however, there is no contradiction between these two things; the obligation to truth *is* always the obligation to others—if one does not tell the truth, society will suffer; more specifically, women will suffer in very practical ways

like lacking knowledge of the antecedents of the men who try to marry them, an ignorance which could have devastating consequences for their futures. It isn't an accident that the tragic mulatto in *Waiting for the Verdict* is a man—an effeminate man but still a man whose decision to hide his descent might have impressed even twenty-first readers as a caddish thing to do to Margaret Conrad, whose marriage will not only affect her already fragile future but the future of her blind and impoverished father.

The confrontation that occurs between Dr. Broderip and Miss Conrad is ultimately a measure of who has the most freedom in American culture—a very direct attempt, as sometimes occurs in Davis' novels, to weigh white women's power against that of other marginalized groups. In the stand-off between Conrad and Broderip the winner is in many ways the latter, who even after his revelation and Margaret's rejection has the support of his colleagues at the hospital, who respect his skill and character, as well as the option of leading a colored regiment into the war and dying in a blaze of glory and heroism while Margaret—much like Deb in "Iron Mills"—is left to languish in the here and now. Although she too undertakes a heroic task after Dr. Broderip dies—teaching in a negro school—she is not able to find fulfillment and redemption in heroic work alone, and very few of those around her read her actions as heroic; her father (the text tells us) would rather have seen her a foreign missionary than a teacher at a negro school. By the end of the novel it seems clear that Margaret will probably marry Broderip's (white) rival who has been sanctified by his attendance on Dr. Broderip's deathbed and who wants to join Margaret in her sacrificial work. As Amy Lang rightly observes, African-Americans were in some sense blank slates to white observers of the time period: they were free to be inscribed with whatever potential artists saw fit to mark

them, whereas white women or working class men were to a certain extent already bound and burdened by specific cultural markers (138-139). Davis inscribes Dr. Broderip with all the markers of her stock romantic hero, a figure whom James disgustingly calls “a woman’s boy”—“unnatural, irrational, and factitious” and (the real reason for James’ irritation) completely dependent on women to shape and direct his social personality. But by refusing Broderip her hand, Conrad frees him to direct his aspirations towards a higher standard than she can set for him, one that allows him to transcend his need for her control and direction and achieve the otherworldly influence of a saint.

The “tragic mulatto” in *An Imperative Duty* is actually a “tragic mulatta,” as such figures typically were in literature of the period; and Rhoda’s double powerlessness as both a woman and a member of a despised class is emphasized by the careless freedom with which Dr. Olney rescues her from it, laughing at fears that continue to plague Rhoda herself as the novel ends. What is interesting about the contrast between Davis’ and Howells’ stance on the issue of passing, however, is that the latter’s pragmatic and progressive ethics enable him to circumvent the racial issue while Davis’ commitment to truth at all costs forces readers to confront it, despite the fact that she allows them to displace some of the responsibility onto God. Davis approach is very similar to that of Charles Chesnutt in *The House Behind the Cedars*: they both prevent their mixed-race characters from passing even though they are unable to imagine alternatives that do not force these characters to become martyrs. Nevertheless, their willingness to pander to their audience’s religious and romantic sensibilities seems no less avoidant than Howells’ determination to dismiss the plight of mixed-race characters and the problem of race altogether; at least *Waiting for the Verdict* insists on making the sympathetic connection

between Dr. Broderip's tragedy and that of his browner brother Nathan, whereas *An Imperative Duty* stages a dramatic chapter in which Rhoda, after learning of her black ancestry, rushes out of her Aunt's house and takes refuge in a negro church, where she is driven half-mad with repulsion at the "hideousness" of the church members before she runs back to her Aunt (85). One of the points Chesnutt will later make in *The House Behind the Cedars* is that passing usually involves insupportable decisions to cut off family members and accept subterfuge as a way of life, and the ease and impatience with which both James and Howells insist that such subterfuge is necessary and appropriate in situations like Rena's or Rhoda's or Dr. Broderip's can come across as a bit glib. While clearly right to resist the popular assumption that a few drops of black blood imply some kind of insurmountable taint, Howells nevertheless backs away from the race problem and specifically the African-American body more thoroughly than Davis does. By the end of *Waiting for the Verdict*, its heroine, Ross Burley—now married and mother of a son—has installed a freed slave and his wife and child in a cottage she has prepared for them right next to her own, and she has also adopted an orphaned mixed-race child. Her part in the novel closes with an intimate conversation with this mulatto wife, whose name is Anny, over the necessity of solving the race problem so that the latter's child can have the advantages and future that every mother wants for her children; and the novel itself closes without resolving the question of Margaret Conrad's future or attempting to assuage the pain of thwarted love and a lost life; in fact, the novel closes on a series of questions—Davis' signature move resurfacing again—designed to provoke the reader into seeking the answer to the pain that the novel insists on portraying. Howells, on the other hand, allows Rhoda to avoid the import of the deep and desperate questions about

suffering and justice that she puts to the “old colored woman” she meets on the street as she rushes out after her aunt’s revelation: “What does [God] leave you black for, if he could make you white?” (88).

My point here is not just to reiterate the standard observation that the sentimental (race) novel, despite its attempts to solve (or dissolve) issues of class and race through appeals to the common bonds of gender and/or equal status as children of God—containing and displacing those issues even as it confronts them—nevertheless insists on keeping these fault lines visible in ways that a realist like Howells has to force himself to do, and keeps them visible in the first instance merely by enacting the difference between certain situations and the available means (artistic and otherwise) to figure their resolution. What I also want to suggest is that the sentimental novel figures certain situations as irresolvable not just within the constraints of the bourgeois liberal system but within human experience as a whole; for Davis, the problem is not just that art is inadequate to repairing the gap between self and others symptomatic of modern life but that art—and the sympathy it attempts to generate—is inadequate to resolving human evils that are ultimately depicted as generating and transcending the corruptions of a capitalist culture. Men are always going to resist women’s attempts to domesticate them; they will always want money and power more than they want love and family, unless forced to think otherwise; women are always going to want a man and children more than they want anything else, even though there will never be enough good men to go around; people who are not male, white, privileged and beautiful are going to suffer more than those who are male, white, privileged and beautiful; and the only real escape from such inequities is death, which has to be portrayed as an escape in order to make earthly

injustice bearable at all. Whether or not these things *are* true, the trajectory of Davis' literary career from novelist of sympathy to sentimental novelist suggests that ultimately she found it difficult to sustain the belief that they weren't, even as she found it impossible to let them be true.

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Chapter Two: Howells, Cahan, and the Nature of Property

The supreme dread of every one who cares for the good of nation or race is that men should be adrift for want of anchorage for their convictions. —Harriet Martineau, Preface to *The Positive Philosophy of Auguste Comte*

It is unsurprising that William James was a bigger fan of William Dean Howells' fiction than he was of his brother Henry's. Henry's fiction was obscure and indirect and Howells' was not; Howells' perceptive eye was usually directed towards ideas and politics rather than the subtle nuances of social relationships. Howells was anxious to engage with the dilemmas of modernity in their sociopolitical rather than their psychosocial forms; he was also unable to take the aesthete's comfort in clarity of vision when he was confronted with experiences of suffering and injustice or the breakdown of political or religious beliefs on which he had tried to rely. His novels not only imagine resolutions to the fracturing of nineteenth-century social mores and established discourses; they attempt to enact them by creating cultural spaces that resurrect and perform the functions of the public sphere, that draw people together in an empowering and unifying experience. The literary realism that Howells promoted from his positions of editorial influence was Populism in action—the people lifting their diverse voices as a collective nation—and if its vision sometimes outran its stamina, as was the case with the People's Party itself, it was because, like the Party, it underestimated the strength of its opponent—the power of the marketplace to co-opt these experiences as well as the form and experience of novel-reading itself. For Howells, situating himself in opposition to the marketplace proved especially difficult because he was in some sense a true heir to the bourgeois liberal dream: his intellectual and artistic property *was* his personal experience of the middle-class success story, and his two most enduring novels are both

dedicated to determining if there is something left in the myth of American success that might be leveraged to save America from its abuses of that myth.

While both *The Rise of Silas Lapham* and *A Hazard of New Fortunes* possess this same agenda, they deploy different tactics to achieve it, in true pragmatic fashion. *The Rise of Silas Lapham* tries two defenses: one to fall back on businessman Silas Lapham's dormant but ultimately indomitable respect for the sanctity of honor and property; the other to endow an heir of the Boston Brahmins with Silas' daughter and paint business, to merge that marriage with a family of West-Virginian brothers who have discovered a cheaper way to process paint, and then to send the entire operation on an expedition to Mexico to expand its markets and expose the Mexicans to the wonders of corporate brotherhood: family business on the grand scale. Recognizing the nostalgia of the first tactic if not the nascent imperialism of the latter, Howells abandons such radical gestures in *A Hazard of New Fortunes*. He does not, however, abandon his desire to impress his audience with the reality of their interdependence and the necessity of their acknowledging that interdependence if they are to resist the grimmest encroachments of industrial capitalism in any way at all. But he no longer attempts to tie this interdependence to the old republican bonds of family and property and, through them, nation; or if he does, he re-figures them for an industrial age: everyone in *A Hazard of New Fortunes* is "complicit" in the capitalist system, a complicity colored by Darwinianism and comprising Howells' new basis for arguing for the necessity for greater concern for others. Even the *nouveau-riche* Dryfoos, Lapham's counterpart in *Hazard*, has been forced to sell his farm and turn to business under the combined pressure of the Standard Oil Company and his acquisitive daughters. Yet the story's only real

“out” lies with Dryfoos; he is the one with the most money and power and, consequently, the one whose choices will affect the most people, and the choice he eventually makes affirms Howells’ enduring hope that capitalists can act from motives other than greed: Dryfoos’ remorse over his son’s death and grudging respect for his principled employee Basil March causes him to sell his magazine to March and liberate that enterprise to become the organ of free speech that March has wanted it to be.

Predictably, given Howells’ lingering horror over the Haymarket affair, freedom of speech is the right at the heart of *A Hazard of New Fortunes*. Ultimately March’s contribution to Dryfoos’ change of heart lies in his refusal to fire the German socialist Lindau, who is doing translation work for the magazine, for incendiary comments that Lindau makes at Dryfoos’ dinner party. Thus, March’s contribution to the morality of society consists in his refusal—weak and ineffectual as it may be, since it neither saves Lindau from death nor solves the labor problem—to allow his concern for his own livelihood to compromise his commitment to basic American liberties. The point of *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (if it has a point besides letting the story evolve in all its complex ramifications without attempting anything more than a series of partial and pragmatic solutions) is that such a stand as March’s, however half-hearted and ineffectual it may be, is still capable of generating the kind of micro-level effects that Howells has come to believe to be most realistic to expect from a class growing increasingly incapable of dramatic and heroic gestures. Howells has moved away from his belief in the efficacy of grand gestures like Silas Lapham’s, but not from his hope that people like March—or Dryfoos—will keep making such choices in quieter ways. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that the power of such choices has been diminished not merely by a more diffuse and

decadent culture but also by an increasing suspicion among thoughtful people like Howells that such actions need to be linked to something more than older bourgeois notions about the sanctity of property. What these newer notions might look like is a question whose answer evades Howells, who after *A Hazard of New Fortune* turns increasingly to utopian romances. Consequently, in the last third of this chapter I turn briefly to the short story “The Imported Bridegroom” by Abraham Cahan in order to discuss his template for a nation in which the corrective to capitalist excess is not a return to the earth but the cultivation of property in a less a literal sense—the cultivation of the self *as* property, a concept that is liable to its own corruptions but that nevertheless has the benefit of not necessitating a wholesale restructuring of American society.

In *American Literary Realism and the Failed Promise of Contract*, Brook Thomas suggests that ongoing efforts to find unifying themes or principles behind the two major plotlines of *The Rise of Silas Lapham* are misguided; Howells’ point, Thomas thinks, is that moral judgments are specific to discrete spheres and *not* universally applicable (124). Thomas’ appreciation for Howells’ sensitivity to the historical and cultural contingency of moral judgment is one of many current contributions to the ongoing rehabilitation of Howells’ literary reputation, which was clouded for almost a century by his immediate successors’ belief that his realism was stodgy and blinkered and by mid-century reformulations of the same criticism, in which Howells’ texts were characterized as enfeebled compromises between James’ romances and Dreiser’s fierce social commentaries.⁹ Only recently have critics begun to recognize that James and Dreiser

⁹See Donald Pease for an excellent overview of the reception history of Howells’ fiction in general and *The Rise of Silas Lapham* in particular.

were perhaps more similar than otherwise in their sense of the futility of resisting the onslaught of industrial capitalism and that the motivation underlying Howells' anxious rhetoric of truth, reality and commonsense was his determination to continuously re-apply art as a counter-pressure to this onslaught, even if that meant accepting the malleability (although not the relativity) of what counted as "true to life" in late 19th-century American culture. This recognition has perhaps been delayed by the fact that, Thomas' assertions notwithstanding, Howells did not conflate historical contingency with spherical contingency: while he was very much invested in the former, he was not at all committed to the latter—his appreciation for the historicity of both the true and the good was often a motivation for, not a deterrent to, the construction and maintenance of an overarching mode of being in the world. Howells was not afraid of system-building, despite his awareness of its liabilities, particularly its encouragement of the human tendency to overlook the exceptional case and to ignore marginalized groups. In his neurotic, middle-class way, he was extremely anxious about the problems of race and class in America, but like many of his white, middle-class peers, he was ever on the lookout for a national narrative into which all groups could eventually assimilate, a narrative that would repair the kinds of divisive dichotomies that capitalism and idealism had conspired to produce.

As Amy Kaplan observes in *The Social Construction of American Realism*, "the major work of the realist narrative is to construct a homogeneous and coherent social reality by conquering the fictional qualities of middle-class life and by controlling the specter of class conflict which threatens to puncture this vision of a unified social totality" (21). But building on Kaplan's pivotal work means providing a comprehensive

framework through which to anatomize the narrative of the “unified social totality” that Howells was attempting to construct in and through *The Rise of Silas Lapham*. Kaplan spends very little time dissecting Howells’ “homogeneous and coherent social reality” besides identifying it with a “search to posit character,” rooted in productive work, as a “moral anchor” in an increasingly frenetic and superficial world—a search that opposes the popular press’ obsession with plot and personality in sensationalist novels and journalism (42). And while Howells is clearly invested in character in contradistinction to personality—in the exercise of virtue rather than the deployment of charm—his commitment to character is embedded within an investment in narrative that Kaplan glosses over by making the mistake of conflating “narrative” with “storyline” at the expense of a more thorough investigation of the overarching cultural narratives that drive Howells’ novelistic production throughout the 1880s. What Howells is actually attempting to do in *Silas Lapham* is establish or reconstruct a moral tradition akin to the kinds of tradition described by virtue ethicist Alasdair MacIntyre, a tradition in which morality is tied to a shared teleological conception of human flourishing that provides individual moral agents with roles and practices—and virtues attendant upon those roles and practices—through which they can advance a common cause, and in what follows I want to use MacIntyre as a way in which to understand what Howells was doing in *Silas Lapham* and how relevant it is to discussions of virtue that are still underway a century later.

According to MacIntyre, pre-Enlightenment moral deliberation was characterized by “a threefold scheme in which human-nature-as-it- happens-to-be (human nature in its untutored state) is initially discrepant and discordant with the precepts of ethics and needs

to be transformed by the instruction of practical reason and experience into human-nature-as-it-could-be-if-it-realized-its-*telos* (53). Post-Enlightenment (or rather, post-Protestant) moral discourse is consequently rendered unintelligible when it abandons the idea that reason can generate any conception of “human-nature-as-it-could-be-if-it-realized-its-*telos*” and instead attempts to root the “precepts of rational ethics” in various conceptions of “untutored human nature” that it retains from earlier moral and religious traditions, static ideas of human reason or human sense whose only fundamental justification outside of the teleological context in which they originally evolved is how vociferously their proponents can advocate for them. For MacIntyre, the stand-off that results between appeals to human goods and appeals to human obligations in the absence of an appeal to a communal *telos* opens a moral vacuum in Western culture, one in which someone like Howells can see industrial capitalism running amuck. In *The Rise of Silas Lapham* reviving a “narrative concept of selfhood” entails reviving a cultural narrative in and through which—and only in and through which—individual human stories, behaviors, and practices are rendered intelligible (*Virtue* 217). Superficially akin to the standard progressivist narrative of upward mobility with a conscience, though more urbane than earnest, Howells’ narrative nevertheless possesses some deep features that make it very much a narrative tradition in this MacIntyrean sense, committed to reintegrating the spheres of the public and private, fact and value, self and world, science and art. Narrative understood in this sense means something much more replete than plot—it is simultaneously a formal artistic device and a cultural organization strategy. Consequently, when Howells’ plot lines waver or fail to come together it is not because his novelistic interests lie outside plot or because he is endorsing disparities between the

moral structures that govern the domestic and the business worlds but because he is struggling to articulate a tradition that will in fact harmonize a culture—and a genre—that is predicated on the fragmentation of society and the individual, a struggle that cannot be dismissed as nostalgic if only because Howells is so dogged in his determination that it not be so and so persistent in insisting—at least in *Silas Lapham*—that the ideology of the middle class is adequate to the task.

This chapter dissects the particular narrative tradition which Howells attempts to construct in the cultural moment of *The Rise of Silas Lapham* and, in the process, pays attention to the many dilemmas that Howells attempts to circumnavigate in advancing a holistic justification for the virtues in which he is invested. Along with Donald Pease and against Kaplan, I argue that Howells does *not* abandon his sociopolitical agenda at the end of the novel by “stripping [Lapham] of his story and returning him to his mythical origins” on the family farm where he began, reducing him to a spectacle of decayed heroism on par with the tired aestheticism of the novel’s old Boston elite (Kaplan 42). As Pease insists, Lapham’s financial catastrophe “become[s] an exchangeable social property able to generate profound social effects,” but more importantly, the novel’s forward motion ultimately depends not on Lapham’s success in defending his agrarian values against the onslaughts of laissez-faire capitalism but on his daughter and son-in-law’s success in articulating a new tradition that models what we might call—for lack of a better word—a cosmopolitan notion of family business, albeit a distinctly bourgeois version of cosmopolitan virtue that attempts to combine the virtues of stability and proprietorship with those of tolerance and class permeability (Pease 18). This latter tradition has its own problems—namely, that it depends for its exercise on expanding its

reach into foreign territories in a kind of budding imperialism—but it nevertheless shows that Howells was consistently working against the temptation to flee his responsibility to society altogether.

Altruism, brotherhood, partnership—whatever Howells called it, he believed that this virtue, like all virtues, could best be defended to his middle-class readers through constructing a narrative that might garner communal consensus on the nature of human flourishing, as well as on how that human flourishing could best be achieved. Howells was painfully aware that virtue could no longer be backed by an appeal to shared religious principles like it had been in the past, and that secular versions of such principles lacked popular force without the power of God behind them. In the early pages of *The Minister's Charge*, a novel published a year after *Silas Lapham* and featuring several of the same characters, Reverend Sewell (the minister of the title) notes that he is

rather faithfuller and busier in [his parish duties] than he might have been if he had not laid so much stress upon duties of all sorts, and so little upon beliefs. He declared that he envied the ministers of the good old times who had only to teach their people that they would be lost if they did not do right; it was much simpler than to make them understand that they were often to be good for reasons not immediately connected with their present or future comfort, and that they could not confidently expect to be lost for any given transgression, or even to be lost at all. He found it necessary to do his work largely in a personal way, by meeting and talking with people, and this took up a great deal of his time, especially after the summer vacation, when he had to get into relations with them anew, and to help

them recover themselves from the moral lassitude into which people fall during that season of physical recuperation (6).

We might think of “duties” here as equivalent to Alasdair MacIntyre’s idea of practices, defined as “any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity” (187). Virtues are specific to duties and practices; for Sewell’s parishioners, these duties clearly include acts of philanthropy that demand the exercise of virtues like compassion, sensitivity and generosity. But both MacIntyre and Sewell believe that duties and practices often need to be justified not only in terms of the goods “internal to” these practices but also in terms of their place within some larger conception of the nature and direction of human activity that “transcends the limited goods of practices by constituting the good of a whole human life”—a human life which is itself articulated in reference to the communal *telos* (MacIntyre *Virtue* 203). Sewell tries to influence his parishioners in a “personal way,” but by the end of the *Minister’s Charge* he feels the need to preach a sermon that describes a “complete philosophy of life”—that ties these duties to a larger way of being in the world. The way of being in the world that the Reverend Sewell describes in *The Minister’s Charge* is different from the one articulated a year earlier in *Silas Lapham*—the former grounded more in an appeal to shared experiences than shared values—but nevertheless both texts share this need to find some way of providing Americans with a shared conception of the good that enables its adherents to identify the roles, practices and virtues through which each member of the community can best promote this good.

The tradition that is sketched out in the most complete detail in *The Rise of Silas Lapham* is the agrarian tradition that Silas sketches out to Bartley Hubbard in the opening pages of the novel, and we can look at it in some detail here in order to uncover the structure of a tradition before suggesting that this structure is apparent in the cosmopolitan mindset that Howells is in the process of articulating throughout the latter half of the novel. Silas offers up his agrarian narrative to Bartley (albeit uneasily) as an object of consumption for the popular press, an exchange which signals the extent to which—and the moment in which—this particular tradition is passing from a living to a commodified entity, one that no longer defines Silas' life but that instead functions as a diversion for a mass reading public. Howells always becomes uneasy when human relationships degenerate into those of spectacle and spectator—and indeed a tradition must still be in play if it is to have any moral payoff—which is one of the reasons for his discomfort with an ossified character like Lapham's old-money counterpart Bromfield Corey, who refuses to adapt to the times even as he recognizes, from the safety of his library, how much they are evolving. No one sits around inactive in the narrative Silas tells Bartley, however. Everyone works in the service of a common good, the narrative *telos*, which in this case is advancing the family unit, the family farm and fortunes (“fortunes,” not “fortune”), and the well-being of the individual family members along with it—well-being which comes from healthily fulfilling one's proscribed familial role. Each family member has a distinct role to play in promoting the common *telos*: Silas' father “work[s] like a horse in doors and out—up at daylight, feeding the stock, and groaning all day with his rheumatism, but not stopping” (6). Silas' mother is the homemaker, and she does “the whole work of a family of boys, and board[s] the hired

man besides” (5). As the last of five brothers, the rest of whom move West to continue the pioneer tradition in far-flung locations (and we might note here the way in which Howells conflates the pioneer tradition, which prioritizes freedom and self-determination, with an agrarian tradition rooted in home and family), Silas’ role involves continuing his parents’ work by “keep[ing] up the old house” and developing the paint that his father finds on the land—finds literally at the root of a family tree—but is unable to “make go” before he dies and passes the dream to his son. Clearly, work is one of the virtues attached to this way of life, but other virtues are tied to the specific kinds of work that each person’s role in the family dream entails. It is important, for example, that Silas’ mother be good at “cooking, sweeping, washing, making and mending,” which no doubt demand a commitment to cleanliness, order, and good health, alongside a variety of practical skills that are important to keeping up house—“cooking well” is a virtue just like “working well” is. It is also important that Silas’ father be good at working the stock and the house and farm. Perseverance, self-discipline and family loyalty seem to be virtues demanded of everyone—or at least of everyone whose role involves maintaining the core family unit—and morality is tied to judgments about how well each member is exemplifying the virtues tied to his or her specific role within the common good.

Thus, a commitment to roles, practices and virtues that forward the collective *telos* is one feature of a tradition. Another is an appreciation not only for the indispensable contributions one’s partners make in forwarding the collective dream but also for the natural resources and physical structures—the paint, the house—that play a role in forwarding family prosperity. Initially, Silas develops his paint as a tribute to his family and his father’s dream; the paint would never have come into being, he tells

Bartley Hubbard, without his family, without the relationship they cultivate not only with each other but with the land on which they live. Silas' father discovers the paint literally at the roots of a family tree, and Silas inherits and develops its potential through the collective efforts of his father, mother, and eventually his wife. Every cask, barrel or keg is inscribed with Silas and his father's initials as well as the date his father discovered the paint and the date Silas "tried" it, inscriptions which read like "mystic devices" branded on the containers' sides (10). The refined Persis-brand paint appears on the market on the anniversary of Persis Lapham's birthday and exemplifies (rather than merely symbolizes) the continuity between their marriage and his business, the union of the private and the spiritual with the public and material. Lapham is emphatic about the extent to which the development of his paint depends on both his wife and his mother: "If it hadn't been for her," Lapham says of his wife, "the paint wouldn't have come to anything" (13). Remembering his mother and her tireless contributions to making the family work gives Silas "a lump in the throat" (5). "When I hear women complaining nowadays that their lives are stunted and empty, I want to tell 'em about my *mother's* life," he tells Bartley. "I could paint it out for 'em."

That Silas identifies both his mother and his wife not only with the success of the paint but with the paint itself—that their stories are told *in* the paint and that the paint "tells" through their stories—demonstrates the thoroughness of Howells' belief not only that the business and private realms ought to be integrated but that they were "always already" intertwined. Both paint and people have a potentiality that can only be developed through appreciation for their mutual interdependence. "The paint was like my own blood to me," Silas says to Bartley, who himself becomes a conduit, albeit a corrupt

one, for the perpetuation of the story of the paint. It may be a truism that people don't develop in isolation, but it is a truism that needed reiteration in the America of the Gilded Age, where the stratification of classes and cultures was becoming increasingly transparent even to the more obtuse members of the middle-class. What makes Howells' version of the agrarian tradition unique is less the virtues and practices to which he is committed—work, property, marriage, family, progress—than his recognition that the propagation of these institutions depends on individual people's willingness to recognize human "complicity" or continuity with the world around them and to develop collective narratives that support these goals, which is a role that art can take on. Of course, Americans' reluctance to acknowledge their interdependence is the real root of the problem, one which Howells will address in later novels using different strategies, but in *The Rise of Silas Lapham* he is still attempting to achieve this acknowledgment by emphasizing the community values at the heart of the agrarian tradition as well as the community values at the heart of the cosmopolitan tradition that he will try to construct out of its remnants.

The root of Silas' ruin in the novel's main plot lies in his forgetfulness of this truth of acknowledged dependence. Silas' mistake lies not in listening to his wife's insistence that he take a partner but in believing (along with her, apparently) that anybody with capital will do. On the contrary, partnerships only work in the world of Howells' novel when both members share a commitment to treating people and things as valuable in complex and individual ways that have very little to do with their market value. It is not enough that Silas have a partner with capital; he must have a partner who shares his appreciation for the paint and who is also an honest and capable businessman. His

partnership with Tom Corey, which eventually proves to be incredibly lucrative for all involved, is sealed when Tom insists on his belief in the paint, not when Tom offers to invest “a little capital in the business,” an offer that Silas refuses (66). Mrs. Lapham’s reluctance to blame Silas for crowding Rogers out of their partnership is based on her vague but accurate perception that “his paint was something more than business to him; it was a sentiment, almost a passion...it was the poetry of his nature, otherwise so intensely prosaic” (44). The partnership between Tom and Silas works because each man is appreciative of the other as a human being who exhibit traits that are answerable to and with something more than their cash value—traits that are answerable to a more holistic conception of human flourishing that is itself rooted in observable (and even biological) descriptions of human capabilities. Both paint and human beings—and individual human beings—have observable capabilities that are in a large incipient sense tied to their particular material or biological composition: clearly, there are things that paint has the capacity to do that are different from the things that a house or a horse or a human being can do, some of which every house or horse or human being will have in common with the rest of their species and others which will be specific to a particular house or horse or human being. For Tom and Silas, an effective partnership supports their shared desire to develop the capacities of the paint while maximizing the development of their own capacities in relation to each other, the paint, and their individual human potential.

In 1954 Everett Carter wrote that “the ability to rise above self-interest to the interests of another, the ability to rise above the interest of another, no matter how close, to the interest of the group, the strength to rise above even the interests of a group to which you have ties of proximity and affection to the interests of the larger society of

which you are impersonally a part—these were the successive stages of the salvation of modern man, Howells told us in *The Rise of Silas Lapham*.” We may disagree with Carter’s use of the term “rise above” and prefer something like “build upon,” especially if we understand that Howells tied genuine self-interest to the interest of the group(s) in which any given individual is (always already) involved; but we can also recognize that the Howellsian self is inter-determined with and by the Howellsian marriage or the Howellsian state; the smaller partnerships like those between man and land or man and wife are the building blocks for business or national communities. At each step there must be an appreciation for and re-evaluation of the capacities of the individual things and people involved as well as an appreciation for the capacities of the group entities built by and through these individuals. The self defines itself in relation to its own capacities and the environment in which it finds itself, and that self makes connections with other things or selves through organizing entities like marriage or businesses or property contracts, and marriages are connected under the organizing umbrella of society or the state and states are connected through the nation and so on, and each of these things also builds upon the structures below it and is ultimately answerable to the smallest unit.

If we turn now to look at the characters whose marriage forms the basis for the new tradition that emerges at the end of the novel we can see that they too possess characteristics that become the building blocks for the narrative which they begin to construct for themselves. This narrative is not as clearly delineated as the narrative that precedes it—Howells is not yet able to discern its roles and values as clearly as he can

anatomize the agrarian traditions of the past—but we can begin to decipher its parts if we look more closely at the individuals at its heart. Tom Corey is described as

an energetic fellow, a little indefinite in aim, with the smallest amount of inspiration that can save a man from being commonplace. If he was not commonplace, it was through nothing remarkable in his mind, which was simply clear and practical, but through some combination of qualities of the heart that made men trust him, and women call him sweet” (110).

Howells clearly values the common and the commonplace, which all the guests at the Coreys dinner party—old and new money alike—are capable of valuing, with a typical American appreciation for the virtues of rationality and commonsense. Yet Tom Corey exudes both reason and spirit: his “clear and practical” mind is contrasted with his father’s vague and dilettantish one, but it is also contrasted with his grandfather’s mind, which was the mind of an “old India merchant.” The old India merchant commands Silas’ respect, but Bromfield Corey likes Tom “for the gentleness that tempers his energy” (61). In short, Tom is neither a pure businessman nor a pure aesthete; he possesses the best characteristics of both, and he also has an honest and forthright character. He has money to invest in his partnership with Silas, but more importantly he brings his “belief” in the paint (67).

Penelope has a similarly complex character. The narrator tells us that she has “an odd taste of her own for reading,” and her family flatters this fancy even as they stand outside of it (23). Penelope lacks Tom’s social manners but she has a better developed capacity for irony and reflection. She is emphatically not pretty; she is small and dark and eccentric. At one point in the novel her looks are called Japanese; later Tom’s sister

will suggest that Penelope form herself on the “Spanish manner...strange and foreign” in order to gain the polish she lacks (316). Penelope is something of an anomaly in the text; she never develops polish—or if she does, we never know it—and she escapes categorization as a type. She has “mind” but she is not an intellectual; and she is supposed to be “sensible” even though she behaves nonsensically in her interactions with Tom (141, 213). She may be a symptom of Howells’ recognition of the need to allow for the possibility of chance, of aberration, in his system—the ironic and inexplicable factor, the random mutation, that makes change and the evolution of new traditions possible—or she may be a token of his confusion over how women do, in fact, fit into his partnership model when they are not allowed to be full equals with men in every realm of life. As an aside, we can note here that one of the fault-lines in *The Rise of Silas Lapham* is its inability to take up one of the most obvious implications of its own commitments; Silas’ real partner should be—and initially is—his wife, and her inability to legally inhabit that role and Howells’ inability to fully imagine her into that role (he allows her to fail Silas at several crucial business junctures) is the real cause of the novel’s crisis. But despite the inexplicable elements of Penelope’s personality and Howells’ reluctance to pursue them, what *is* discernible is that she is not Irene, that she possesses qualities that make her Tom’s equal in ways that Irene is not. Irene “isn’t really equal to [Tom],” Mrs. Lapham says to Penelope in an early burst of perspicuity: “She hasn’t mind enough” (109). Howells is much more confused about the role of women in his new cosmopolitan tradition than he is about the role of men—he does better with Silas’ wife and mother, who are both elemental pioneer-women types—but this very confusion, we could argue, opens up one of the places in the book where Howells’ formula for success shows the

most promise for adaptability and its most ingenious integration of the romantic and realist modes—of the unexpected and the commonsensical. It *is* a surprising twist that Tom cares for the “little, black, odd creature, with her joking and —— ” (253). Mrs. Corey leaves it to the reader to finish the sentence.

An allowance for the unexpected or the incommensurable is a hallmark of most theories of narrative ethics, and we might also argue (and will take this up later) that the presence and disappearance of the lower classes in the novel is another clear example of the recalcitrant societal issues that constantly send Howells back to the drawing board. At any rate, Irene’s value is very clearly superficial. Along with Rogers, she is the character who embodies most closely the easily bought qualities that Howells believes to be least useful to a civilization that takes its moral development seriously. Of all the Laphams, she is the one whose identity is most closely identified with the money and status Lapham acquires through his business ventures. She spends her “abundant leisure” in shopping and spends “hours on her toilet every day” (23). Her beauty is itself made to order, modeled on the popular type of the period as it appeared in countless novels and portraits; the narrator tells us that she is a “very pretty figure of a girl, after our fashion of girls,” with red hair and “delicious” coloring (46). When Tom proves indifferent to her, she withdraws onto the family farm in an act of self-exile worthy of any sentimental heroine, refusing to be consoled with her Cousin Will. Howells is careful to show that such self-sacrifice is not nearly as romantic in real life as it is in the novels, but in pairing Tom with the peculiar Penelope when even his snobbish family expects him to choose the “beauty” as the only possible excuse for marrying outside his caste, Howells seems to be drawing on the ever-popular Jane-Eyre myth and the legions of small, dark, and plain

heroines it inspired to undermine class distinctions and make the democratic (but also romantic) point that true worth and inner beauty ought to conquer superficial value. The only difference is that in this case “Jane’s” virtues are not the tempestuous willfulness of the indomitable original but a “pert” sense of humor, an untutored wit and something that passes for “character”—and that the rejected sister is neither evil, greedy nor manipulative but no less undesirable for her “innocent” vacuity.

But whatever qualities that Penelope and especially Tom embody that Irene does not, both Penelope and Tom are the kind of “thick” characters who belong in a narrative in which success depends on neither money nor character but on some useful combination of both, on some particularly modern combination of industry and ambition that does not come at the expense of either irony or “authenticity.” In short, it seems that one of the characteristics of the cosmopolitan family tradition is that its characters’ roles are more porous—more complexly and ambiguously defined—than the roles in either the pioneer or the aristocratic traditions of the past. Although Tom and Penelope will reappear (at least via hearsay) in *The Minister’s Charge* in less ambiguous roles—Tom will be the head of the very successful paint company and Penelope is referred to as the “dam” of some “very pretty chickens”—they are nevertheless portrayed in *Silas Lapham* as characters loyal to a concept of family whose enlarged borders demand that they develop virtues of awareness and malleability that their progenitors do not possess, at least to the same extent. Tom acquires this virtue earlier than Penelope, partly because he is thrown—or throws himself—into contact with her family much sooner than she is willing to embrace his family (a fact that, once again, seems to reflect Howells awareness and/or reinforcement of the more limited opportunities for growth available to middle-

class women of his time, and the more defensive positions in which they consequently found themselves) but their exit from the Corey family home strikes all involved as a migration to new frontiers that, to the extent these frontiers are defined, are defined as opening into an exotic unknown and demanding a reciprocal openness in the newly married young couple—a civic humanist might argue that this openness comprises the safety valve often included in American cultural traditions to guard against the potential for corruption inherent in any enterprise that attempts to establish a coherent order within the constraints of history and mortality. The only clearly defined structure on the horizon, besides Tom and Penelope's inter-cultural marriage, is the merger of the Tom-Silas remnant of the Lapham family business with the business of the West Virginia brothers, a merger that requires not only that Tom and Penelope adapt to the differences in their own family backgrounds but that they bring people into the family business who are not technically family at all. Yet the fact that these new partners are themselves brothers seems to reinforce Howells' insistence that, in his new tradition, family and business should remain indistinguishable from each other even though the borders of the family have been enlarged.

Despite their more malleable characters, neither Tom nor Penelope is expected to embody all the qualities of their progenitors or to be an amalgamation of everything that has preceded them. Instead, they both come to the partnership as members of families whose other members possess the values that they lack. Penelope might not have the same connection to pioneer values that her parents and grandparents had, but her parents and grandparents embody that connection for her, so that while Penelope herself might fit more solidly in the progressivist tradition than in the older pioneer tradition of her parents

and grandparents she nevertheless bears both the legacy of that tradition in some of the traits she brings to her new life (like her indifference to Boston “society”) as well as in the more undiluted pioneer traits that survive in her parents and that Tom recognizes in Silas, despite Silas’ own corruption during his brief period of immersion in the “tradition” of new man of business or the *nouveau riche*. When Tom marries Penelope he is marrying not just an individual but the family and tradition(s) in which she is involved. In fact, the novel sets up the situation so that neither the readers nor the Lapham family are clear if Tom is even coming to see Penelope—or her sister—rather than to going into business with her father, although Tom is already aware that going into business with Silas involves embracing a specific set of outlooks and values from which his family has heretofore disassociated themselves. Tom’s father thinks those values reduce to a love of making money, but Tom is able to recognize that Silas is “simple-hearted and rather wholesome” in addition to being a business “force”—that Silas is *not* in fact a vulgar capitalist, but instead possesses some virtues independent of avariciousness, his dedication to his paint being among the foremost (59). The Lapham family is more aware of the tradition and values that the Coreys represent: a social and artistic milieu from which they have been excluded, at least until their money has been in the family for several generations and they have acquired all the culture that their library in their new house on Beacon Street seems to promise. The families find common ground in their appreciation for the virtue of courage and honesty and integrity, particularly the integrity of not pursuing financial gain at the expense of others, but even this ground seems shaky until Silas’ big stand, and even after Silas’ stand they do not come completely together or attempt to deny their differences. The Coreys “find a delicate, aesthetic pleasure in the

heroism with which Lapham had withstood Rogers and his temptations,” but Bromfield conveys his pleasure in a letter that he mails from the safety of Boston to the Lapham farm. The last we see of Tom and Penelope, she is crying on Tom’s shoulder, relieved to be escaping the inmates of the Corey manse, and the narrator concludes that “our manners and customs go for more in life than our qualities. The price that we pay for civilization is the fine yet impassable differentiation of these” (317).

This “impassable differentiation” is obviously not completely impassable if Tom and Penelope have bridged it, thanks to her odd taste for reading and his unusual practical bent. They are the mutations that make the evolution of new traditions happen. Traditions, MacIntyre insists, are living entities, built upon and answerable to the past even as they evolve to meet the demands of the present: “it is central to the concept of a tradition that the past is never something merely to be discarded, but rather that the present is intelligible only as a commentary upon and response to the past in which the past, if necessary and if possible, is corrected and transcended, yet corrected and transcended in a way that leaves the present open to being in turn corrected and transcended by some yet more adequate future point of view” (*Virtue* 146). Yet for Howells this is not simply an assimilationist position; in *Silas Lapham* he seems to believe that the formation of new traditions out of elements of the old, with the necessary aberrations, can happen within a culture that also makes room for older traditions to survive intact. Indeed, Bromfield Corey reappears in *A Minister’s Charge* more comfortably ensconced in his aesthetic indolence than ever, thanks to his shares in his son’s company and despite the fact that he is going blind and must hire a young country bumpkin to read him his books. Tom’s acquisition of wealth guarantees the survival of

his father's way of life in much the same way that it allows Silas to continue *his* legacy by upgrading the family farm and producing the fine grades of Persis-brand paint that were at the heart of his original business. The only "tradition" whose existence Howells seems to find unequivocally threatening is a tradition defined by and committed to nothing but the accumulation of wealth and to structures that support the accumulation of wealth, a tradition that—if it is one—is certainly as thin as its devotees appear to be, characters like Rogers and Irene or Jim Mellon's wife and daughter who collapse without money to indulge their compulsive behavior, whether that behavior is drinking or shopping or merely making more money. What unites the traditions of Bromfield Corey, Silas Lapham and Tom Corey (the Boston Brahmin, the pioneer, and the progressivist traditions, respectively) is that they are all characterized by complex value systems designed to support a plethora of human virtues and ends, traditions that understand human flourishing to entail more than indulging individual or collective greed, especially at the expense of others. Howells valued work, and Bromfield Corey is a slight and slightly contemptible character in a way that Lapham is not, without much "force" or presence outside his library or dining room, aware that his tradition is dying out but not particularly perturbed by that or by much else—the Reverend Sewell is probably a more accurate embodiment of the virtues Howells appreciated in the tradition of East-Coast establishment—but Bromfield nevertheless represents a tradition that possesses virtues lacking in the Laphams' world: culture and manners, refined tastes and pleasures, delicacy in human interactions, and appreciation for other cultures and traditions. The cosmopolitan family tradition, in turn, embodies virtues of complexity, reflexivity and inclusiveness that neither of these older traditions exemplify; yet all three are infinitely

preferable to the culture of commodification and exchange against which they are set, because they place a higher value on goods internal rather than external to practices (the latter would include things like wealth, power, social status) and because they feature practices that cultivate more than the virtues attendant upon money making, virtues that answer to a notion of human flourishing established through a socio-biological assessment of, and appreciation for, a plethora of wholesome human capacities and goods.

The effete Bromfield Corey is the one who expresses the most approval of Silas Lapham's isolated and isolating stand against Rogers and the representatives of the British investors, when Silas is forced—at the novel's climax—to make a choice between losing his business or selling a piece of property that he knows to be worthless without enlightening the potential buyers. Although Bromfield avoids seeing Silas in person, he writes Silas a letter praising him for the “heroism with which [he] had withstood Rogers and his temptations” (315). Yet this “heroic” stand has consigned Silas to a life similar to Bromfield's—a life at the margins of the social world, exiled to a place that time is passing by. Even though Silas' exile is still “an exchangeable social property able to generate profound social effects,” perhaps the most useful of which is exposure of the upper class delusion about the superiority of their principles to those of the *nouveau riche*, we have seen that for Howells the ideal solution is not, ultimately, that businessmen be forced to make agonizing moral choices within a existential wasteland but that they be active participants in building and supporting a tradition in which respect for the rights of others and a nuanced understanding of what those rights look like is the

norm. As we have already pointed out, however, business ethics was in its infancy in the later half of the nineteenth century: of the three standard tomes of moral philosophy in circulation, only one outlined a code of business ethics that extended moral obligations beyond the latitude of the legal (Dooley 75-9). This “divorce of the private from the public and the separation of personal from social duties were not accidental or unconscious,” Patrick Dooley reminds us (76). Slavery and, later, the exploitation of immigrants and the underclass demanded the demarcation of a distinct line between what a business owner owed himself and his family and what he owed anyone else. In addition, the rise and expansion of corporate power in the late 19th-century created a shift of the burden of fiscal responsibility and integrity from individuals onto corporate entities; the *Santa Clara County v. Southern Pacific Railroad* Supreme Court case, which provided corporations with fourteenth-amendment protection, was only a year distant when *The Rise of Silas Lapham* was being serialized in *The Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine*. More generally, the belief that mechanization, industrialization and incorporation were ineluctable stages in the march of human progress was increasingly the mindset of the population at large. Inventing a tradition in which business and family ethics were inter-determined and good choices were undergirded by that tradition was part of Howells’ long-range solution, at least in *The Rise of Silas Lapham*; but in the meantime, what recourse did American citizens have in the moral vacuum of the immediate present, in a situation such as the one in which Lapham finds himself?

First of all, Howells was keen on insisting that individual human beings possessed an ability of some kind, whether learned or innate, to apply counter-pressure to the seemingly irresistible force of the marketplace. Silas’ mistake is not that he leaves his

farm to market his paint or that he bows to his wife's pressure to take a partner or even that he treats that partner unfairly, but that he doesn't understand himself well enough to make the right choice of partner—that (as we have seen) he makes a choice that confirms the primacy of avarice untempered by other values. This original choice, not the pressure of outside circumstances (since this is slight—listening to the voice of one's wife does not absolve anyone of culpability), leads to Silas' isolation when he is faced with the situation with the English investors. “It seems to me I done wrong about Rogers in the first place,” Silas tells Reverend Sewell at the novel's end; “the whole trouble came from that” (320). Even though the business world in which Silas finds himself is clearly not answerable to a notion of human flourishing that would support transparency in business dealings or a respect for private property—not to mention one in which Mrs. Lapham might be informed enough about business dealings to have helped Silas in his extremity—in Howells' view Silas himself is answerable to such a notion regardless, and his failure to make choices that could help create and maintain such a world, choices that Tom *does* make, is why he is consigned to his family farm in the end, visibly chastened and worse for the wear. “Preservation of a belief in a ‘moral universe’ in which rewards and punishments flowed from character and moral choice assumed an urgency in these years of massive mechanization,” Alan Trachtenberg reminds us (45).

Yet this still leaves open the question of how Howells justifies the specific choice, not just the act of resistance, which Silas does eventually make within the moral vacuum of the late 19th-century business world. That choice is to protect the British investors at the expense of his own family and business (not to mention his workers and other dependents)—to refuse to sell the property back to Rogers when he knows Rogers will

sell it to the investors without telling them that the land is worthless, worthless because it is only accessible by a road that has just been bought by a large railroad company.

Clearly, Silas' unease with duping the British investors lies in his belief in the sanctity of private property, in his adherence to the importance of "not robbing people" who trust him (288). The evil to be avoided in this situation is the "easy-going, not evilly intentioned, potential immorality which regards common property as common prey, and gives us the most corrupt municipal governments under the sun," and the good to be respected is the well-being of the government and institutions that keep society going and ensure the protection of "common property" (286). The "common property" referenced here is the money of the absent English investors, whose representatives turn out to be in cahoots with Rogers in his attempt to cheat them; thus the basis for moral action, in this particular situation (which is unfolding, let us not forget, in the age of incorporation) is respect for private ownership, for individual and cooperate financial property, even when the trail back to that owners of that property has been obscured.

However, Howells does not attempt to defend his respect for private property except by pointing out that *not* respecting it leads to chaos, a point he returns to in a novel like *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, where labor agitation does little but engender death and resentment and keep everyone from going about his work; nevertheless, Silas' decision and Howells' valorization of it seems to suggest a top-down rather than a bottom-up justification for morality, one in which the answer to the question "Why is this particular decision right?" is "because it upholds order and civilization," not "because it guarantees human flourishing for every human being." Howells' most respectable characters frequently voice a commitment to the good of society as a whole, in the long run, rather

to what seems expedient to individuals in immediate danger—a commitment that they equate with a utilitarian ethic, self-evident to those who are ruled by common sense. The traveler in Howells' 1894 utopian romance *The Traveler from Altruria* claims that the ideal great man in his country is one who “has been able, for the time being, to give the greatest happiness to the greatest number” (119). That “one suffer instead of three, if none is to blame” is “the economy of pain that naturally suggests itself, and which would insist upon itself, if we were not all perverted by traditions which are the figment of the shallowest sentimentality,” Sewell tells the Laphams when they come to him for advice about the love triangle between Tom, Penelope, and Irene (212). How do we square this (seeming) top-down element in Howells' fiction with what we have been arguing about his appreciation for a family-oriented tradition in which a shared commitment to a particular concept of human flourishing seems to ensure that each and every member of the community achieves those goals?

Perhaps the most honest answer is that cosmopolitan family tradition only *appears* to include everyone, but that, on the contrary, it actually excludes those whose well-being is not clearly indispensable to the success of the larger social endeavor. The agrarian narrative with which *The Rise of Silas Lapham* opens mentions several groups of people whose connection to the Lapham family farm does not seem to guarantee them the consideration given to those connected by birth or marriage to the property owner himself. The “hired men” who work for Silas' father for wages are mentioned in passing and not given any of the credit for the success of the farm that Silas heaps on his father, mother, wife or even the paint itself. The “shif’less Kanuck” to whom Lapham rents the farm before the latter begins to develop his paint is eventually turned into a prototype of a

factory worker and put to work, along with his entire family, firing up the kiln that processes the raw paint—apparently, the Kanuck’s “shif’lessness” is more closely connected to his foreign status and lack of connection to the land than to a fundamental inability to work. This connection to the land, or to the land-owner, seems to be what guarantees individuals a place and a common goal within the agrarian tradition; an emphasis on the sanctity of a particular kind of relationship to property is one of its underlying factors. It is not just that human beings can and ought to have a relationship with the land and its resources that mirrors and furthers their relationship with each other; it is that they *can’t* have that relationship with each other unless each of them also has the same relationship with the land. It is as if a specific relationship with the land—and “land” can be construed as some kind of property that possesses intrinsic and not just financial value; paint, pictures, books, horses and houses are some of the things that possess intrinsic value in *Silas Lapham*, besides land—is a mark of the kind of things one values and, consequently, a mark of one’s right to be valued as someone who is worth more than mere money, whether that money takes the form of wages or capital. If a person is no more than the sum of his wages, then how can he expect to be treated as more?

In the account Silas gives of his family, the way in which they have acquired their land is shrouded in the mists of the past: the farm is simply there, and when Silas’ brothers escape the pressure of their father’s obsession with the paint to head West and “take up” their own land, the metaphor of “taking up” is the only explanation Silas gives for that process, as if the land is lying there waiting to be found by wandering men whose right to it lies with their ability to recognize its potential and wed themselves to its

development. This particular kind of “stewardship” of the earth is more closely allied to the Protestant new-world mythology of the original New England settlers than to the ruthless acquisitiveness of the Gilded age, but it is still tied to the idea of ownership, to the desire to make a personal and exclusive claim on the ownership and development of some corner of the earth. But the acquisitive and exclusionary overtones of this connection to the land cannot blind us to its differences from the exploitative ideology that characterizes Rogers and the big railroad companies that are about to swallow him up: in the long run, Howells identifies the desire to steward the land *not* (just) with a lust to exploit the land solely for the sake of its financial value but with a more complex and mystical desire to possess and develop it for reasons that include its connection to our past and to those we care about, as well as its hold over our own hearts and souls as we work with it to enable it to reveal itself both to and for itself and for us. In Howells’ utopian romance *The Traveller from Altruria*, published nine years after *Silas Lapham* and over the course of a period in which Howells was working out his social and political ideals through interactions with many of the progressive and socialist leaders of his day, the “one occupation [that] is honored above another” with the peaceful Altrurians is “the cultivation of the earth” (161-2). “We believe that this,” says Mr. Homos, the Altrurian ambassador who has landed on American shores, “when not followed slavishly, or for gain, brings man into the closest relations with the deity, through a grateful sense of the divine bounty, and it not only awakens a natural piety in him, but that it endears to the worker that piece of soil which he tills, and so strengthens his love of him” (162). In *The Traveller from Altruria*, Howells makes a very transparent attempt to connect this love of land to the abrogation of class divisions and to contrast the honest and hard-working local

people to the clueless and self-satisfied representatives of the middle-class who are summering at the hotel. The hapless and conventional novelist who is Mr. Homos' patron registers frequent consternation upon finding Mr. Homos working in the fields or fraternizing with the hotel staff. But in *Silas Lapham* a relationship with the land is not necessarily tied to either a love for God or for a romanticized peasantry but rather with a more general capacity to respect things for what they are, not for what they can purchase, and to demonstrate that respect by showing oneself to be a caretaker of the earth.

Clearly, Howell felt that mutual investment, rightly conceived, in property—which is ultimately an investment in the earth, the material, and by extension the body itself—was a necessary condition for sustaining human community. For Howells—or at least the Howells of *Silas Lapham*—community could not be sustained outside of a mutual commitment to stewardship of the material world, and having some stake in that world seemed to be a prerequisite for valuing it properly in the cosmopolitan tradition discussed at the end of the novel as well as in the agrarian tradition that begins it, although having a stake in the world might be interpreted slightly differently in the former than in the latter: an argument could be made that for Tom “the earth” is broadly construed and means material goods—like the paint—in general rather than land in a stricter sense. The larger point, however, is that Silas' commitment to property rights at a juncture when larger issues seem to be at stake, like the life and health of Rogers' wife or Jim Millon's family or the “hands” at Silas' “Works,” can be shown to be consistent with the role that property plays in the narrative traditions that are worked out in other places in the novel, although acknowledging this also means recognizing that both traditions value a particular kind of relationship between man and beast and earth as a prerequisite

for valuing these things in any way at all. “I don’t care what becomes of the hands,” Lapham cries when his wife expresses pity for them: “They’ve shared my luck; now let them share the other thing. And if you’re so sorry for the hands, I wish you’d keep a little of your pity for *me*. Don’t you know what shutting down the Works means?” (253)

To say then that Howells would like to wed rights and principles (no longer sanctioned by God) to a narrative that transposes them into talk of character and virtues answerable to a common notion of human flourishing does not mean that such a transposition would make (or is intended to make) flourishing an option for everyone in America; and certainly many of the traditions that MacIntyre favors for their successful integration of the material and the spiritual were notorious for their denial of what would now be considered inalienable human rights to groups like women and slaves. In fact, one of the recurring dilemmas in Howells’ novels of this period is how to preserve the purity of the cosmopolitan outlook, which prides itself on its tolerance and openness to adjustment, when this openness exposes it to the erosion of some of the qualities that ensures its viability—a dilemma that Howells never resolves successfully, as we shall see in the next section.

Before turning to that topic, however, I want to briefly address how Howells makes up for the lack of transparency between Silas seemingly overwrought stand for “justice” and “right” and the larger cosmopolitan narrative to which it is attached. When material connections are occluded, when the ground slips out from under a character’s feet and he is forced to take a stand for “complicity” with and in a world where these connections are no longer tangible—where he is no longer able to ascertain whether money is backed by anything of real value—Howells comes to his or her aid by

envisioning and enacting a role for art that is different from its primary goal (in his works) of constructing sustainable cultural narratives. Instead, Howells puts pressure on art to provide a principle like “not robbing people who trust [us]” with an emotional appeal that becomes a justification for action in and of itself. Although Silas’ commitment to principle is ultimately connected to a buried tradition of respect for individuals’ relationships with their property, that connection is not immediately clear in the immediate context, and rather than succumb to didacticism, Howells heightens the emotional affect of the situation itself, doing everything he can to enhance the dramatic affect of the opposition Lapham faces and, consequently, the heroism of his resistance. Silas’ wife listens to him pacing up and down his room all night and compares him to Jacob wrestling with the angels. Rogers accuses him of “ruining” him and his invalid wife. The entire novel is meant to create a portrait of modern-day heroism by evoking a picture of a lone businessman standing for law and justice against the wilderness of modern speculation; even the description of Silas in his retirement evokes the pathos of the shabby and retired man of action. The guests at the dinner party that occurs in the middle of the book spend an extended period of time discussing acts of heroism committed during the Civil War and conjecturing about what heroism ought to look like in modern life and modern art.

The upshot of all this is that, in his effort to consolidate these principles in the absence of a clear consensus on their correctness, Howells allied himself with the sensationalism he spent so much of his career—and so much of this novel—decrying, although we could undoubtedly conclude that his issues with sensational and sentimental novels were less with their methods than with their matter. Presumably, if sentimental

novels had marshaled their resources around proving that virtue rather than love was the “chief interest of life,” they might have been better approved by the Reverend Sewells and by Howells himself: Howells is not an enemy of emotional appeals, only of emotional appeals deployed in the service of vice and excess. Love is a necessary and ennobling feature of the cosmopolitan storyline he constructs for Tom and Penelope, but Howells is not embarrassed about manipulating emotion even when the narrative rationale is obscured, demonstrating how thoroughly he understands the value of adapting his message—or rather, the vehicle for his message—to his audience in an age in which “product packaging” and mass marketing were increasingly important and traditional narratives no longer seemed convincing to large numbers of people.

It should not then surprise us, in light of what we have just discovered about Howells’ devaluation of characters without roots in the world, that Howells has a reprehensible habit of killing off his lower-class and immigrant characters just when their suffering threatens to disrupt his middle-class protagonists’ tidy lives: Jim Millon’s widow, daughter and disreputable son-in-law, not to mention the seedy Rogers and his invalid wife, disappear from *The Rise of Silas Lapham* once they have threatened Silas’ marriage and business, never to be seen again. In *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, the German immigrant for whom Basil March compromises his new career as a literary journalist is clubbed to death by a policeman just in time to prevent March from actually losing his job; the populist preacher who lures Annie Kilburn to a life among the mill workers is struck dead by a train before Annie is forced to fulfill her promise; the callow factory girl who prevents Lemuel Barker’s upward mobility in *The Minister’s Charge*

proves to be inconstant just as he is about to merge his life with hers; only characters of an equal social standing, whose respectability is backed by property and other tangible manifestations of virtue, have claims on other characters that Howells seems willing to enforce—eager to enforce, in fact, with all the shameless sentimentalism that he condemns in other contexts. But we should also note, in an attempt at partial expiation, that the impetus for Howells' novels of social realism was his growing sensitivity of the conditions that strike Basil March and his wife with middle-class guilt when they accidentally ride through one of the poverty-ridden streets of New York looking for a new apartment. *A Hazard of New Fortunes* depicts a middle-aged, middle-class family man attempting to navigate his way between his obligations to his *nouveau riche* boss, a bumpkin-turned-tycoon named Dryfoos who will eventually undergo a much ruder awakening than the one that Silas Lapham experiences, and his obligations to the New York working class, represented by the aforementioned German immigrant, named Lindau, whom March hires for his magazine. Unfortunately, the tycoon demands that March fire Lindau once he learns of Lindau's socialist commitments. Many critics have argued that the novel lets March off the hook by aligning him with Lindau in their "common dispossession," their impotence against forces of greed larger than themselves, while also allowing March the consolation of "recuperat[ing] his own self-image and dissociat[ing] himself from the identity of a worker" by refusing to fire Landau (Kaplan 58). But in one recent article Sophia Forster suggests that Howells deliberately allows March this consolation—which both he and Howells suspect to be specious—in order to root his novel in the "typical" rather than the exceptional and to ground his characters in a historical dialectic even at the expense of its resolution. Howells allows Lindau to be

sacrificed because his real-life counterparts *are* being sacrificed on the streets of New York every day, and to pretend that anything that March does can salvage the situation—or that March would typically do anything more than the little that he does—is in some sense to belie its grimness.

Unfortunately, Forster undermines the acuteness of this argument by arguing that at the end of *Hazard* Howells cannot help but resurrect a version of American exceptionalism by portraying the tycoon Dryfoos as susceptible to motives that are not purely acquisitive. By making Dryfoos' motive for starting the magazine his desire to provide some creative outlet for his sensitive son and his motive for selling the magazine to March his remorse over that son's death, Howells strays from his allegiance to the typical in this renewed attempt to do what he did in *Silas Lapham*: obscure the excesses of capitalism behind a family face and suggest that its practice in America can genuinely be benign. While there is doubtless some truth to this reading, I also want to suggest that in this particular novel Howells exhibits a greater awareness of the limitations of his old allegiance to virtues rooted in the cultivated of the earth, limitations rooted not only in their elitism but also in their growing impracticality; significantly, Dryfoos himself is a former farmer who has been forced off his land by the Standard Oil Company. Interdependence in America is becoming increasingly linked to its citizens' common dispossession rather than their shared possession of the land, a dispossession whose manifestations Howells finds more sympathetic in a farmer like Dryfoos than an immigrant like Lindau—and whose resolution he cannot envision without reverting to some version of Christian and agrarian ideals—but which nevertheless forces him to

deploy such ideals with much more caution and sensitivity than he did in *The Rise of Silas Lapham*.

In addition, any hope Howells still displays in the efficacy of these ideals is linked, curiously, to a notion of evolutionary progress influenced by Darwinism. For Howells the possibility of aberration is built into the structure of the “typical” situation that he tries to portray in *A Hazard of New Fortunes*.—the possibility of a mutation or (less dramatically) a genetic drift that will ultimately evolve the species towards a kinder and gentler place. The speech that he puts in March’s mouth at the end of the novel, when March strenuously denies the possibility that Dryfoos has undergone a radical change of heart since his son’s death, supports such a reading:

I suppose I should have to say that we didn’t change at all. We develop. There’s the making of several characters in each of us; we *are* several characters, and sometimes this character has the lead on us, and sometimes that. From what Fulkerson has told me about Dryfoos, I should say that he has always had the potentiality of better things in him that he has ever been yet; and perhaps the time has come for the good to have its chance. The growth in one direction has stopped; it’s begun in another; that’s all (485-6).

“We are always looking for the miraculous!” March tells his wife a few sentences later after she accuses him of drifting dangerously close to “fatalism” in his assessment of Dryfoos possible motivations for selling March the magazine: “I believe that unhappy man truly grieves for his son, whom he treated cruelly without the final intention of cruelty, for he loved him and wanted to be proud of him; but I don’t think his death

changed him, any more than the smallest event in the chain of events remotely working through his nature from the beginning (486). March's deliberate rejection of the possibility of "miraculous" transformation in favor of a more evolutionary notion of progress, of "chains of events remotely working," of alterations that occur not at once but through the slow intricate process of mutation and "growth"—through recessive traits becoming dominant through a series of responses to environmental changes, the development of an organism's "potential of better things"—allows for Dryfoos' motivations to be mixed, for him to exhibit latent traits of generosity and benevolence that might emerge within the right set of circumstances. In short, Forster's claim that Howells reintroduces the rhetoric of American exceptionalism through his reversion to the "atypical" possibility that Dryfoos might have started a business out of a complexity of motives that could be mercenary or not or both or more bespeaks her insufficient understanding of what the "typical" might entail within the possibility of benign evolutionary progress that Howells' attempts to imagine here—the "typical" allows for precisely these kinds of complex inter-weavings of greed and love, motives and situations, genetic inclinations and environmental factors that might introduce unexpected results.

In *A Hazard of New Fortunes* Howells is, in fact, inching away from his more aggressive attempt to unify society under the version of Americanized cosmopolitanism that he unveils in *The Rise of Silas Lapham*. He has not completely backed away from his aggrandizement of characters like Lapham or Dryfoos nor his allegiance to the agrarian and family values to which both characters return, to one degree or another, by the end of their respective novels. But he seems to be having a quieter recognition that

such values are being undermined by forces more complex than pure greed and that the best way for him to resist—at least given his etiolated arsenal of weapons—is not to swim against the stream but to swim with it and, in the process, attempt to divert it into pleasanter channels. As Edward Bellamy remarks at the end of his 1888 utopian bestseller *Looking Backward*:

To the stream of tendency setting toward an ultimate realization of a form of society which, while vastly more efficient for material prosperity, should also satisfy and not outrage the moral instincts, every sigh of poverty, every tear of pity, every humane impulse, every generous enthusiasm, every true religious feeling, every act by which men have given effect to their mutual sympathy by drawing more closely together for a purpose, have contributed from the beginning (243).

The forces to be resisted are no longer, as they were in the early days of America, the repressive British government; they are now the oppressive conglomerate of corporate monopolies that *do* “outrage the moral instincts,” and resistance can take different forms and grounds. It can be a quiet resistance backed by the relative independence that his wife’s inheritance provides Basil March—a stance based in property—or it can be backed by more a forceful commitment to a refigured notion of property that Howells can’t quite envision but which a Jewish-American socialist like Abraham Cahan does. Nevertheless, what Howells does see is that all resistance to capitalist culture that attempts to articulate an alternative that will work within the confines of a system is going to be characterized by a certain amount of compromise that is not necessarily fatal to the value of that resistance.

Abraham Cahan exemplified the kind of American success story that Howells wanted to believe was still possible for immigrants and others who were willing to adapt to the middle-class lifestyle and work their way upwards. Born in Lithuania to a rabbinical family, Cahan chose to pursue a secular education against his father's wishes and became a school teacher in Vilna after passing his teaching examinations. Within a couple of years his life was endangered by his socialist associations and the threat of the pogroms that began after the assassination of Alexander II, so he fled to America in 1882, at the age of twenty-one, where he worked in New York sweatshops and studied English at night, paying his board through teaching lessons in Yiddish and Hebrew and eventually giving English lessons to newly arrived immigrants when manual laborers began to feel insupportable to him. Almost immediately he became a champion of Yiddish as a vehicle for spreading socialist propaganda among the Jewish working class, giving a Yiddish speech at a socialist meeting less than three months after his arrival, and in the late 1890s he helped found the Yiddish socialist newspaper the *Jewish Daily Forward* that would eventually become "the leading Yiddish newspaper in the world" and which he ran as sole editor for over forty years (Marovitz 1996). His entrée into the New York literary scene came at the behest of Howells, whose wife discovered Cahan's first story published in English in a magazine that she bought on an elevated train platform in 1895. Howells invited Cahan to dinner and helped him find a publisher—and a more marketable title—for his first novel, which was published in 1896 as *Yekl, A Tale of the New York Ghetto*.

For his part, Cahan was a Howells' enthusiast who read "every line" that Howells wrote (qtd. in Kirk). In 1889 Cahan gave a lecture on "Realism" to the New York Labor Lyceum which was subsequently published in the *Workman's Advocate*, an English journal supported by the Socialist Labor Party, and in a paragraph devoted to Howells, Cahan wrote that "Mr. Howells is not a socialist, and yet, unconsciously, free from the pressure of partisan passion, merely at the bidding of his realist instinct, he accentuates in his works...and brings into high relief a fact in American life which lays bare the fictitiousness of American equality" (qtd. in Kirk). Cahan was still an admirer three decades later, publishing a reverent obituary in the *Jewish Daily Forward* after Howells died, calling Howells' "famous character" Silas Lapham "an American 'allrightnik' (qtd. in Kirk). The title of Cahan's 1917 novel *The Rise of David Levinsky* is an allusion to *The Rise of Silas Lapham*; like Silas, David Levinsky is a young man who rises from Russian poverty to become a successful American industrialist, although—in true naturalist fashion—he never undergoes the crisis of conscience that arrests Silas' upward climb, experiencing instead a steady forward progress that the novel represents as corresponding to the gradual death of his soul, a death that culminates in the rejection of his hand in marriage by a modern young socialist girl who finds him personally and morally repugnant.

The Rise of David Levinsky is considered Cahan's masterpiece, but my focus here is on the lead story from Cahan's 1898 collection "*The Imported Bridegroom*" and *Other Stories of the New York Ghetto*, a collection that lies more squarely within the realist tradition promulgated by Howells himself. Howells wrote a review for *The Imported Bridegroom* as well as for the earlier *Yekl*, and his brief but positive analysis of Cahan's

second major foray into English-language fiction places Cahan within a pantheon of regionalist writers like Mary E. Wilkins Freeman who were then creating “topographical” but “lifelike” American fiction (qtd. in Kirk 40). Cahan was reared reading the Russian realists whom Howells was only beginning to read and emulate in the 1880s and 90s, and his own realism in his novels of Jewish-American life is in many ways more sophisticated than Howells’, less marred by intrusions of “useless information,” preachy characters or aimless and awkwardly resolved plots. Indeed, a comparison between the two men highlights the connection between the form and function of the realist novel, between its success at storytelling and its success at constructing sustainable cultural narratives, and we might argue that—as we have already seen—Howells’ trouble integrating lower-class characters into the cosmopolitan family tradition is indistinguishable from his inability to resolve their presence in the plot; whereas Cahan’s success at sustaining all the narrative threads through the end of “The Imported Bridegroom” without reverting to the *deus ex machina* of death is an indication of the extent to which he was able to make the (Jewish-American) immigrant experience palatable to a genteel English audience, a feat that Howells does not pull off in *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, whose dead German immigrant could very easily pass for one of the characters who are very much alive at the end of Cahan’s story. Part of Cahan’s success lies simply in the fact that he *was* a Russian-Jewish immigrant, and “otherness” was not alien to him the way it was to Howells, but the rest lies with Cahan’s conscious rejection of assimilationist ideals for a version of the American success story that looks similar to Howells in some ways but very different in others.

Character and not plot—and words rather than deeds—often seems to be a focal point for Howells because, despite his best intentions, he has trouble sustaining a narrative that will actually imbed all his characters within a shared way of being in the world, one that will fix the cultural problems that he sets himself to address. In *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, Howells puts several different American narratives in conversation with each other, some old and some new: the East Coast establishment tradition that Tom Corey and his parents represent; the agrarian tradition out which Silas emerges; the new business “tradition,” which, as we have seen, Howells hardly considers a tradition at all; and, finally, the narrative of the American underclass, which in *The Rise of Silas Lapham* is constructed out of the remnants of the Jim Millon family, who are indigenous to America as Silas himself—Mrs. Lapham and Mrs. Millon grew up together in Lumberville. The vices that prevent Millon’s widow, daughter and son-in-law from being assimilated into the novel’s resolution consist in their disreputable behavior, which threatens the sanctity of marriage and property, and their lack of any assets that guarantee their respectability beyond the heroism of their dead husband and father. Jim’s daughter Zerilla married her drunken husband because—so she tells Mrs. Lapham—“he had a little property then,” a fact that seems to stand in for his right to be taken for a person of character, as it often does in the novels of Jane Austen. By the time of the novel’s opening, however, he is a sailor who will neither stay on land nor leave for long enough to allow Zerilla to marry someone more substantial, and the novel abandons all three of them to succumb to their fate.

In contrast, the three narrative strands introduced in “The Imported Bridegroom” are still in place at the end of the novel: the first-generation story of the self-made Jewish

immigrant Asriel; the story of his daughter Flora, the Jewish-American princess; and the story of the imported “prodigy of Talmudic learning” who defects to atheism and socialist ideas as soon as Flora helps him get his hands on Gentile books. By the end of the story, a marriage has taken place, the marriage between Asriel’s daughter Flora and the young scholar Shaya, whom Asriel has fetched back from a trip home to Poland in an attempt to redeem himself in the eyes of God from the taint of his American success (Cahan 776). Another marriage is in the works, the marriage that Asriel contracts with his pious widowed housekeeper when he realizes that his new son-in-law has become corrupted by American culture and turned into an “*appikoros*” (797). “America is now treife to me,” he says mournfully to the widow Tamara as he suggests that the two of them get married and “end our days serving God in the Holy land together” (803). Asriel’s retreat from America, a much less ambiguous retreat than Silas’ escape from Boston at the end of *Silas Lapham*, signals the incompatibility of the values of the old world with those of the new. Asriel’s money has made Flora’s transformation possible, but he himself remains “only a boor,” unable to satisfactorily negotiate between the competing claims of the past and the present (803). The burden of that task then falls on Flora and Shaya, who are left to figure the future of the Jewish-American identity and tradition through their marriage and individual characteristics.

In many ways a shallow character, out of place in the “veritable icon of a ‘race’-mixing, diasporic, radical immigrant, Lower East Side modernism” with which Cahan closes the story, Flora is a mediator not only between the old world of her father and the new world of her husband but between the old America of Cahan’s genteel American readership and the new America to which he is attempting to introduce them (Blair 276).

The story opens with her reading *Little Dorrit* in her parlor in a scene immediately recognizable to the middle-class women who formed so large a part of the late 19th-century reading public. Unlike Irene Lapham or the other girls of her own circle, Flora is aware of the advisability of reading Dickens, Scott and Thackeray, of perfecting her idiomatic English, and of marrying a doctor, an “educated American gentleman, like those who lived uptown” (765). When her father brings the boyish Shaya back from Poland, she demonstrates a stubbornness equal to Asriel’s in her resistance to Shaya’s charms—until she manages to convince the nineteen-year-old boy, who is already besotted with Gentile learning and threatening to surpass Flora “on her own ground,” to study to become a doctor (790). Unfortunately, the learning that he acquires and the company he keeps “queers” her expectations in ways that make them unintelligible in light of any of the languages she knows and turns Shaya himself into someone she no longer recognizes outside of the glow of the bourgeois halo she has thrown about him. In the crowded attic into which he draws her on the eve of their wedding day, as she sits among the men who strike her like “some of the grotesque and uncouth characters in Dickens’s novels,” Shaya himself seems “a stranger and an enemy,” and the people in the room are obscured in their smoke and “broken English” (806). The compassion with which the text treats her “desolation and jealousy” even as it bears down on the word “excluded,” the last word of the story, demonstrates not only the thoroughness with which Cahan understood the limitations of the middle-class mindset but also his awareness of the price it will pay for its ignorance in its unsought but inevitable alliance with the races and classes that make up the new America. At the same time, his knowledge of the language and conventions of this white audience are what guarantee

Cahan himself—the real mediator between his up-town readership and the motley crew of modernity—access to the parlor room in which Flora nurtures her accomplishments and keeps Shaya at bay as well as the to over-crowded attic into which Shaya manages to introduce her, and Cahan’s empathy for Flora’s predicament reflects his awareness of his own precarious position as the “Yiddish-language intellectual who has helped give life-formative idioms, practices, institutional models and cultural forms-to English-language radicals and avant-garde writers, only to discover that those transactions are rendered invisible” by their appropriating audience, just as Flora’s role in helping Shaya navigate the American terrain is effaced in the smoky attic (Blair 277-8).

Ultimately, Flora is no more a part of the uptown white community than Cahan himself is, and his gentle mockery of her aspirations, not to mention the more disquieting “nightmare” into which he eventually leads her, demonstrates his sense of the cost of an assimilationist strategy like the one that Howells endorses (806). In the last analysis, Flora’s mediation between immigrants like her father and immigrants like Shaya is unnecessary—the money and knowledge of American culture that she has at her behest are as available to Shaya as they are to her, and Shaya is discovered not through her agency but through her father’s. “You know I ain’t to blame for it all,” Flora says sobbingly to Asriel when he rages at her clandestine marriage; and in truth the relationship between Shaya and Flora is described less in hierarchal than in egalitarian terms, despite the patronizing attitude Flora initially adopts towards the beardless young “holy child” dressed in uncomfortable Gentile clothes. The two are portrayed as siblings and playmates, children of a common benefactor, and their infantile romps throughout the prelapsarian Eden of the Stroon household constitute one of the story’s main charms.

Flora's "labored Yiddish" strikes Shaya "as the prattle of a child" and he feels "as if he were playing with another boy," while Flora is "amused and charmed as with a baby" and gets used to his presence in the house "as if he actually were a newly discovered brother of hers, brought up in a queer way which she could not understand" (782-3, -9). By underplaying the gender divisions between the two in the early sections of the story, Cahan emphasizes their equal potential as heirs and bearers of the Jewish-American cultural identity, but their joyous partnership only holds up in the front and back parlors of Asriel's house on Mott Street. In the final scene in the attic Flora's gender plays a conspicuous part in her outsider status and her inability to comprehend and adapt to Shaya's life outside the house as well as he has adapted to hers inside the house. Shaya is the one who roams the streets freely, who discovers the Astor library, who eats the forbidden Gentile food and makes friends beyond the confines of a narrow circle of Jewish acquaintances, and Flora's security becomes dependent on her doubtful ability to make the same adjustments that he does or on an increasing dependence on him; the story closes without enlightening us as to which of these dubious alternatives Flora will choose to take.

In short, the tradition that holds up least well to the conditions of modernity is the one that most closely resembles Howells' bourgeois cosmopolitanism tradition, highlighting what Howells himself seems to have suspected, that "bourgeois" and "cosmopolitan" might be contradictions in terms. The necessity of bringing them into some sort of relation was clearly more urgent to him than to Cahan, who—not being a part of the white middle-class—was less worried than Howells by a fact that seemed equally clear to them both at the turn of the twentieth century: the class with which Flora

aligns her behavior is becoming increasingly irrelevant in the fight over the future of America, and its continued relevance depends in large part on how it positions itself in relation to both the industrialist class that increasingly provides its means of subsistence and the immigrant and working classes which are threatening to overtake it. *The Rise of David Levinsky*, published almost twenty years after “The Imported Bridegroom,” makes clear that Cahan had no illusions about the ability of the industrialist class to overcome qualms inherited from older traditions or cultures about the morality of ruthless acquisitiveness, even at the expense of its own best interest. Despite being trained in a Talmudic seminary in his native Russia, David Levinsky experiences little of the guilt that characterizes his forerunner Asriel Stroon—or *his* forerunner Silas Lapham. In the novel itself the Jewish middle class and the old-world elite both revolve around David in an attempt to curry his favor; the only exceptions to the ubiquitous ass-kissing contest are a few of the East-side Jewish socialists and intellectuals that David professes to treat with contempt. In reality, they embody and symbolize some aspect of his soul that he has neglected in his pursuit of financial success, one that proves impossible to reclaim and that is intractably, even if not very effectively, set against him. As David moves closer to his fortieth birthday without having married and produced heirs, he becomes obsessed not just with the idea of love but of marrying into a tradition whose values represent those he has never possessed (since he does not come from an old and respected Jewish family) or has neglected to acquire. “It was my ambition,” he proclaims, “to marry to some orthodox family, well-to-do, well connected, and with some atmosphere of Talmudic education—the kind of match of which I dreamed before my mother died, with such modifications as the American environment rendered natural” (377). He achieves this

ambition, becoming engaged to a girl who fulfills these conservative requirements, the daughter of a retired merchant and the granddaughter of a Russian rabbi, a family whose social prominence in the old world created a chasm between them and the impecunious David, whose rabbinical education was funded by charity and donations. Nevertheless, David is not in love with her; she is more a representative of ideals he himself finds empty than of any substantive personality. Fanny's intellectual range is "not that much wider than that of her old-fashioned mother, and her reading is "confined to the cheapest stories published" (397). Although David attempts to convince himself that what matters is that she will be perfect as a "wife, a mother, and a housekeeper," he breaks the engagement as soon as he meets and falls in love with the alluring Miss Tevkin, a budding socialist and the daughter of an impoverished artist who frequents "a well-known gathering-place of the East Side Bohème" (397, 455).

Miss Tevkin rejects him, but the conclusion is the same as that reached in the earlier "The Imported Bridegroom"—the values of the middle are becoming increasingly pre-empted by those on the right and the left. Asriel is not yet as heartless as David nor Shaya as strident as Miss Tevkin but both stand for more (good and bad) than Flora does. The battle lines between Asriel and Shaya are not yet clearly drawn, at least on Shaya's end, but what is implied in "The Imported Bridegroom" is made clear in *David Levinsky*, that the values that have been exclusive to the white middle class—tradition, work, family—are being appropriated by other intersections of race and class in American culture and worked out in ways that are more responsive to the dynamics of life within an industrial capitalist culture run amuck. Cahan was clearly better placed than Howells to recognize that the older traditions of both Europe and America were being supplanted by

the battle for money and position; the substitution of the norms of American consumer culture for the traditions of Russian-Jewish orthodoxy created a more apparent divide than the transmogrification of older versions of American culture into what sometimes looked to Howells like (and were) cheaper and flimsier versions of the same. Yet Cahan understood that Howells and others like him were not only attempting to provide life support for the American middle class but attempting to do so by reaching out to the more reputable members of the immigrant class in hopes that they would join their ranks, like Basil Marsh reaches out to Lindau, whose lack of gratitude surprises his would-be benefactor. Cahan was similarly aware of the liabilities of Jewish-American immigrants buying into the conventions of the middle-class, not necessarily because the assimilation process was any harder for Jewish immigrants than it was for Americans who were many generations in—Flora seems to be much more at home among the books and trappings of gentility than her Western counterparts Irene and Penelope Lapham—but simply because the lifestyle manifests a sterility that Cahan recognizes is difficult if not impossible to surmount. Flora is no more alienated in her back parlor on Mott Street than Bromfield Corey in his library or the Lapham women at their window or Annie Kilburn in her lone splendor on the right side of the tracks in a town that has been renamed for its burgeoning hat industry. And while Cahan is more than willing to drag Flora into modernity—largely because he identifies with the experience of marginality that she comes to embody—he makes clear that the difficulty lies with her inability to assimilate, not his.

If we treat the scenes in the two different rooms in which “The Imported Bridegroom” opens and closes as creating a kind of visual synecdoche in which the contents and atmosphere of the rooms are reflexive and constitutive of two different

versions of American national identity, we will perhaps be better equipped to see why Cahan embraces the latter at the expense of the former, besides the expediency of doing so for an impoverished Jewish intellectual eking out a living on the Lower East Side. The indices in Flora's back parlor are its isolation and emphasis on material comfort—and on Flora's identification with this material comfort, with a particular kind of interiority rather than with other human beings. The room creates a recognizable version of American late-Victorian gentility in the incipient stages of high modernist isolationism, shoring itself up with both borrowed and cheap culture (“Dickens, Scott or Thackeray in addition to the ‘Family Story Paper’ and the ‘Fireside Companion’”) in “triumphant [un]consciousness of the snowstorm” of the twentieth century raging outside (7). The opening paragraph tells us that

Flora was alone in the back parlor, which she had appropriated for a sort of boudoir. She sat in her rocker, in front of the parlor stove, absorbed in “Little Dorrit.” Her well-groomed girlish form was enveloped in a kindly warmth whose tender embrace tinged her interest in the narrative with a triumphant consciousness of the snowstorm outside (1).

The back parlor has become a boudoir where visitors are no longer expected and Flora sits in her rocker, a forerunner to Sister Carrie, entertaining herself with a novel about the conditions of the poor and the working class in Victorian England. As we have already seen, Flora is a stand-in for the typical female reader of the period who will no doubt be “absorbed” in *The Imported Bridegroom* from the safety of her boudoir. Flora is also Cahan's contribution to the pantheon of American girl characterizations of the period,

characterizations which functioned as a locus for recording, observing and furthering the changes underway in American cultural identity.

One of the main interests of the Penelope/Irene subplot of *Silas Lapham* is constructing a coherent version of American girlhood that might “honor the name of American Woman and redeem it from the national reproach of Daisy Millerism” (19). Bartley Hubbard means this as sneer at the back-woods conservatism of the Laphams in the article he writes for the “Solid Men of Boston” series, but this allusion alerts readers that Howells is engaging in contemporary conversations about American womanhood through the characters of Irene and Penelope Lapham, especially through Penelope; and Flora Stroon, who may be the first version of the Jewish-American princess in American literature, is like Penelope in having a taste for more substantive reading than the girls in her immediate circle (Blair 273). The novels both girls read are indicative of their own investment in portrayals of women in fiction as well as of the ways in which they are fashioning their identities in relation to these characters. Penelope is critical of George Eliot’s heavy-handed control over both her readers and her female characters, aware of fiction’s potential to stimulate—and simulate—independent thinking and action, a potential that was extremely important to Howells himself, as we have already seen. In contrast, Flora reads with very little critical insight, engrossed in a novel titled after one of Dicken’s angel-in-the-house heroines. Reading is a status and class marker for Flora, confirming her complacency in her difference from the other girls in her Jewish circle and enabling her to re-imagine herself as something other than what she is. The opening paragraph of “The Imported Bridegroom” describes Flora’s “well-groomed girlish form”—the story makes a consistent point of her “dignified bearing” and careful dress—

as “enveloped in a kindly warmth whose tender embraced tinged her interest in the narrative,” an interest that is heightened rather than diminished by her “consciousness of the snowstorm outside” (64,1). The things with which Flora surrounds herself narrow her experience to a small space delimited by a personified “warmth” whose primary function is to enable a greater degree of withdrawal into the inner regions of the self, aided by the practice of solitary reading. At the same time, this reading displaces any real opportunity for self-recognition; the next paragraph tells us that “the thickening twilight, the warmth of the apartment, and the warmth of the apartment blended together, and for some moments Flora felt far away from herself” (1). Thus the accoutrements and activities that construct Flora’s world enable a withdrawal from others that simultaneously enacts an alienation from her own self. Like her father before her, Flora is “too busy to live, much less think of death”—her soul is as lost to her as Asriel’s soul is to him, and as the “afternoon light beg[ins] to fade into a melancholy gray” dusk creeps into Flora’s room “in almost visible waves” (9,1).

Unfortunately for Flora, she is just as lost in “stuffy, overheated atmosphere of the misshapen apartment” in which she finds herself at the end of the story as she is in the melancholy gray of her parlor at the beginning, although her awareness of her alienation in the overcrowded attic increases its pathos for the reader and obviously for Cahan himself. Flora “gaze[s] about her perplexity” at a world which is “anything but the world of intellectual and physical elegance into which she had dreamed to be introduced by marriage to a doctor” (119). Reading is as important a marker of values in this new world as it is in Flora’s boudoir and in all the other worlds and traditions of the novel. When Shaya first arrives in America he brings with him—in Asriel’s baggage—“a huge

box full of Hebrew books...of various sizes” which “frighten” Flora, “as if they were filled with weird incantations and Shaya were the master of some uncanny art” (58). The book being read by the group assembled in the attic apartment is similarly unintelligible to Flora—Harriet Martineau’s translation and condensation of Auguste Comte’s *Cours de Philosophie Positive*. The substitution of a work by the man who coined the word “sociology” for the books of the Talmud and the novels of Dickens signals the transfer of cultural authority from art to science under way in the second half of the nineteenth century; the men in the attic are not crouching close to a dying fire—they are reading aloud in an “overheated” room by the light of a kerosene lamp that casts a halo on the “frank, pleasant face” of the reader, a Scotchman who is “a leading spirit in positivist circles” (118). Modernity is figured here as a horizontal rather than a vertical phenomenon, one that involves a recognition of plurality and the possibility of disparity and dissent rather than conformity to a master narrative inherited from above. Although the common language is English, it is significantly “broken English,” informed and modified by a heterogeneous collection of cultures whose differences are insisted upon rather than elided, and the discussion “engages itself” seemingly without effort, as an organic outgrowth of the simultaneous insistence on diversity and commonality. In this case, the commonality resides in a common interest in politically-oriented intellectual inquiry filtered through the works of a philosopher (himself filtered through an interpreter) bent on tying science to political philosophy, on viewing sociology as the last development in the progress of science and the human race. In fact, we could argue that the story’s progress from the Jewish through the bourgeois to the modernist/socialist worldview illustrates Comte’s three stages of human development as outlined in the

Cours, confirming “The Imported Bridegroom’s” implied point that the liberal bourgeois tradition is an intermediate stage between the supplanting of the theological stage by the positivist one. In the positivist stage, the search for absolute knowledge has been abandoned and a harmonious balance between order and progress achieved through the rule of technocrats who understand that society itself operates according to the ongoing process of connecting observable facts to general laws.

In Comte’s sociology, science and industry are detached from their seemingly inevitable association with exploitative economics and associated with the harmonious balance of the positivist mindset, with the organized but non-reductive plurality of the ideal mind and the ideal society. The scene in the attic illustrative of this ideal mind and state, a scene in which the diversity of the debaters’ backgrounds is described in eccentric detail—a Swedish tailor with “the face of a Catholic priest; a Zurich Ph. D. in blue eyeglasses; a young Hindoo who eke[s] out a wretched existence by selling first-rate articles to second-rate weeklies, and several Russian Jews”—while their fundamental egalitarianism and indifference to financial success are insisted on with equal vehemence. “There is a lot of such nice gentleman there!” Shaya enthuses as he urges Flora to come with him into the attic. “You’ll see what nice people. I tell you they are so educated, and they love Jews so much! A Jew is the same as a Gentile to them—even better” (117). What the men do have in common is their education, intense intelligence and love of learning; they are all “insatiable debaters” and most of them have “university or gymnasium diplomas” (118). They are also impoverished day laborers who, like Shaya, are characterized by a kind of natural refinement except when they are reflected through Flora’s perplexed gaze; thus the emphasis of this particular version of modernity seems to

be on an ambivalent relationship with work as well as a more significant emphasis on virtues associated with education, enlightenment, natural refinement, curiosity and open-mindedness—virtues that are much easily imagined in conjunction with a group of displaced European intellectuals than with the middle-class characters to whom Howells attempts to attribute them. For Cahan’s intellectuals, work is not the haloed and unqualified good that Howells’ texts seem to want it to be; its value depends on its kind. Manual labor that exhausts and degrades people who are suited for something better is not depicted as ennobling, nor is living in a culture that provides insufficient outlets for its intellectuals. In theory, Howells endorses the same position, and his anxiety over American’s lack of appreciation for its artists and intellectuals is manifested in middle-class characters like Basil Marsh who have spent their youth in uncongenial occupations because their culture does little to nurture the talents and opportunities of its “natural-born literary men” (3). Yet the assumption still lingers in Howells’ novels that natural talent will have its day, that characters like Lindau who fail to succeed despite their natural abilities have a predisposition towards and inclination for adversity; whereas Cahan has lived a little too closely to the Lower East Side to be able to accept this sanguine interpretation of American opportunity, as all the stories in the collection of *The Imported Bridegroom* attest.

Another significant difference between Cahan’s and Howells’ versions of modernity lies in their attitude towards land or place. As we have seen, Howells ends *The Rise of Silas Lapham* with an attempt at assembling a cosmopolitan tradition that modifies the pioneer connection of value and identity with land to include the connection of identity with property—although, ideally, property more intrinsically interesting than

cold hard cash. Houses, horses, art and paint, rightly incorporated into the well-lived life (i.e. treated as ends in themselves and not merely means to one's own ends) become genuine markers of value and virtue, as they could still afford to be in the spacious and fashionable—or unfashionable—neighborhoods of Boston. Space is more available than it is in a crowded attic in New York City and it is demarcated and protected; even Flora's connection to her environment is predicated on her proprietorship of a "little private house on Mott Street," which belongs to her father (2). But the crowds in the attic apartment of which even its resident is only a lodger force the boundaries of personal identity to stop quite literally at the edges of the body, and "language, ethnic markers (clothes, speech, associations), body language, codes... and disciplinary distinctions in universities and church and organizational affiliations" become more crucial to demarcating the limits of the self than physical spaces or literal ground (Jacobson 17). At the same time, the crowd in the attic is not crammed into a space that is portrayed as especially porous, as open to infiltration and interaction from outside, as might be if the text were engaging with issues of global identity and affiliations. Instead, the Scotchman, the Swedish tailor, the Zurich Ph.D., the Hindoo journalist, not to mention the Russian Jews whom Flora particularly dislikes, are all crammed into a room from which there seems to be no escape, a figure of the nation as a "heterogenous commonwealth" delimited by real physical and geographical boundaries that let select people in but very few out and that demand that all classes stop tugging at each other's coat-sleeves in an effort to escape and, instead, settle down to do justice to the various embodiments of difference with which they are now trapped in marriage and logistical proximity (*Hazard* 199).

This new national order is not without its own anxieties, however; the empty tea-glasses sitting on the table with “the slices of lemon on their bottoms” do not hold out the same promise as the lemon pie that becomes the ironic symbol of the promise of salvation associated at different times with both the old and new worlds.¹⁰ (In Jewish culture the etrog, a variety of lemon integral to festival of Sukkot, represents the heart as well as the ideal Jew, one who is characterized by good deeds as well as knowledge of the Torah—a goal that eludes everyone in “The Imported Bridegroom.”) Shaya is not, after all, quite a full participant in the discussion—he sits “brimful of arguments and questions which he had not the courage to advance... fidgeting about in a St. Vitus’s dance of impotent pugnacity” (120). Cahan clearly has his own nostalgic leanings for the innocent environment of Flora’s apartment, where the two young people, second and first-generation immigrants, can pursue their selective sampling of American modernity under the auspices of Asriel’s patronage—a marriage of bourgeois and bohemian values under the protective umbrella of the capitalist machine—but Cahan is aware that while the immigrant class may acknowledge some debt to the more established classes, the middle-class itself has a harder time embracing values that seem particularly threatening to the propriety and homogeneity that have been the hallmark of its longevity. Nevertheless, Cahan is clear that the ongoing vitality of the middle class—its resistance to the leveling effects of greed and injustice—depend on its ability to ally itself with intellectual and ethnically diverse communities whose version of cosmopolitanism is built on relationships characterized by a shared commitment to political and intellectual comradery rather than on an extension, literal or metaphorical, of blood and property ties.

¹⁰In Cahan’s fiction lemons and lemon pies often symbolize characters’ desire for . See for example “The Apostate of Chego-Chegg.” *The Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine* 59.1 (November 1899) 95-105. *Electronic Text Center, University of Virginia Library*. Web. 15 January 2011.

Cahan's cosmopolitanism is an inversion of Howells', an inversion in which ties built on marriage, family and their material accoutrements are flipped to the margins and voluntary ties built on a mutual appreciation for internalized property—human intellectual and cultural capital—are moved to center stage. Virtue is still tied to the ability to respect people and things as ends in themselves, but this ability is independent of actual proprietorship of anything other than one's own body and mind.

In "The Imported Bridegroom" the difference between Shaya and the Stroons' strategies of self-conceptualization is very pronounced, with the latter dependent upon Flora and Asriel's ability to project their desires onto its objects and Shaya disinterestedly delighted in even the things that concern him most. But in Howells' novels the characters often occupy some midway point between these two positions, a point in which self-definition is tied to ownership but ownership that has somehow been purged of any attempts to impose its effects on the objects owned—a compromise that can be seen in Howells' attitude towards literature itself, which he believed should be freed from its servitude to the tastes of the masses while retaining some commitment to the advancement of democracy. Cahan's own realism internalizes the instructive to the point that it becomes invisible, precisely by not attempting to impose it on a cultural narrative that seems by its (fragmented) nature to resist it; whereas Howells never fully conceives of the possibility of a coherent cultural narrative that preserves its coherence precisely by its internalization of an appreciation for difference as a shared cultured practice. Yet the two men shared an essential belief in "an idealistic society and in a higher standard of life" whose goal was to preserve qualities virtues and practices that they believed would

ensure a higher standard of human flourishing than that connected to the consumer culture which was—ultimately—the common enemy of both (qtd. in Kirk).

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Chapter Three: Charles W. Chesnutt and the Appeal to Care

It is as difficult to trace the dividing-line between the real and the romantic as to plant a milestone between north and south. —Henry James, Preface to *The American*

In many ways William Dean Howells and Charles W. Chesnutt's lives had similar trajectories. Both were outsiders, born in Ohio to solid but middling families, self-taught men who saw literary careers as the most practical means to self-advancement, who practiced fiction in the service of social and political reform but eventually became disillusioned with its power to effect change. Both were feted but thought fusty in their old age. "Spiritually" a Mugwump, Chesnutt had all the markers of the middle-class reformers—of whom Howells was a prototypical example—whose ideals dominated the Progressive Era (Hofstater 167).¹¹ Yet Howells' fight against what he believed to be the dehumanizing effects of commodity culture on middle-class American life was more sustainable, at least in the short term, than Chesnutt's battles against racism in the New South. In the eighties and nineties Howells was still able to envision the integration of capitalist expansionism with traditional narratives of pioneer and agrarian life that continued to resonate with white Americans, and if things got too compromising for his urban protagonists he could always solace them and their audience by sending them back home—via fictive dream—to rural New England and middle America. But such idyllic escapes were impossible for Chesnutt, either in fiction or in fact: return meant either invoking an idealized version of the past or present or facing the harsh realities of Reconstruction. There was no option for Chesnutt but to push forward, even though his belief in the American myth of the self-made man was clouded by his experience of the inequities of the color line. In stories like "The Web of Circumstance," for example,

¹¹See also Pickens pp. 5-6 for an extended discussion of Chesnutt's similarity in upbringing and outlook to Howells and other typical Protestant middle-class reforms of the Progressive Era.

Chesnutt shows that Afro-Americans' increasing commitment to professionalism and economic advancement in the years after the war could be undercut in an instant by the injustices of the Southern legal system and the culture at large. Consequently, most of Chesnutt's fiction is spent uncovering the limitations of the accommodationist agenda supported by men like Howells and suggesting that Negro advancement and assimilation could only come through blacks' acquisition of civil rights as well as economic opportunities. In all of his novels and short stories on the race question, Chesnutt is bent on showing the limitations of the accommodationist agenda and exploring the possible means of arguing for civil rights in a culture in which rational moral theories exclude the Negro by definition and popular prejudices against realist depictions of (lower-class) black experiences prevent him from constructing a viable narrative ethic in and through his fiction. For Howells the great task of fiction was to protect the American way of life from the corrosive effects of modernity by providing some way of interweaving its rural past with its urban present in and through a sustainable cosmopolitan narrative; for the young Chesnutt writing in his journal in 1880, the task of fiction was to remind white audiences that such narrative needed to be extended to all American citizens and that their failure to do so was both a cause and an effect of *its* failure to achieve the kind of internal coherence and external force it needed to prevail against an increasingly exploitive consumer culture.

“The object of my writings would be not so much the elevation of the Colored people as the elevation of the Whites,” Chesnutt wrote on May 29: “the negro's part is to prepare himself for social recognition and equality; and it is the province of literature to open the way for him to get it—to accustom the public mind to the idea; and while

amusing them to lead people out, imperceptibly, unconsciously, step by step to the desire state of feeling” (*Journals* 139-40). For Chesnutt, American business practices were not necessarily as hostile to his purposes as they sometimes seemed to Howells—achieving economic success was an important aspect of “the negro’s part” in “preparing himself for social recognition and equality.” Chesnutt was extremely sensitive to the continuities between chattel slavery and capitalist exploitation of wage laborers, to the ways in which freed slaves were vulnerable to exploitation by industrialists looking for cheap labor; however, *The Colonel’s Dream* is just one among Chesnutt’s novels to suggest that more humane business practices might supervene in situations where the remnants of slavery made economic exploitation of the underclass by both Northern and Southern profiteers seem like an inevitable development. The options in a capitalist economy were not selling out or getting out, but of remaining in—once you were in—and attempting to convert wage labor into free labor and opportunities to accumulate capital, thereby gaining power and leverage in the culture at large.¹² Indeed, Elizabeth Hewitt has argued that Chesnutt understood his own authorship as a business venture of this type, as an attempt to “craft his fiction in such a way that authorial labor is aligned with capital ownership and not compensated labor,” in the hope that such an investment might be a means towards upward mobility much like his stenography business (935). Slavery itself was a capitalist institution and not something that stood outside it, Chesnutt suggests in the *Conjure Tales*; and the storyteller, like the conjure woman, has a marketable product that gives him or her some bargaining power within a consumer culture (Hewitt 935). Uncle Julius has something that Annie and John need, and he can protect it by refusing to reduce it to a skill for hire and by using the purchasing power with which it provides him

¹²This entire paragraph is heavily indebted to Hewitt 931-962

to establish himself as a consumer of goods—a power increasingly important to assert in a society in which “two-thirds of Americans were hirelings” (qtd. in Hewitt 940).

Yet “the material realities of authorship at the turn of the century” made writing a less lucrative business than Chesnutt had hoped (Hewitt 958). Many white authors were struggling to establish and protect the status of their work. The path to fame and fortune led through a few large literary publications and the field was glutted with aspirants as well as writers for hire. In addition, there was very little market for the increasingly polemical fiction Chesnutt chose to write. “The present aspect of the race question in this country is decidedly unpleasant,” wrote a reviewer of Chesnutt’s 1901 novel *The Marrow of Tradition*: “It arouses bitter resentments in politics and personal relations. It tends to revive the sectional differences which culminated in the civil war. It may be questioned, therefore, whether it is wise to force public sentiment in this direction by presenting the involved question in the form of a novel in which the writer’s feelings are neither obliterated nor skillfully concealed” (“With”). Howells himself lamented the “bitter, bitter” tone of *The Marrow of Tradition*, which disturbed his belief in the patience and long-suffering of the black population and the efficacy of the reconciliationist approach adopted by Booker T. Washington (Howells).¹³ Howells’ own treatment of the problem of the color line in his 1859 novella *An Imperative Duty* ignores the larger political implications of race relations by suggesting that whoever can pass for white, should. Indeed, Chesnutt’s attitude towards race relationships was more radical than Howells or Washington’s, and a large part of his authorial mission was to resist and counteract Washington’s accommodationist agenda, which encouraged the aspiring negro to be

¹³ See also Andrews, “William Dean Howells” for an account of Howells’ relationship with Chesnutt and his responses to Chesnutt’s fiction, especially his dismissal of *The Marrow of Tradition*.

content with “tilling a field” rather than “writing a poem” in the path to racial uplift (Washington). Accommodationists and assimilationists shared a commitment to “individual self-help, thrift, self-reliance, economic security, Christian principles, and what Edward White called ‘popular elitism,’” but assimilationists also possessed a “deep commitment to human rights for black and white Americans,” a commitment that Chesnutt is determined not only to uphold but depict as already implicated in the goal of economic advancement (Danielson 75). Yet if we identify Chesnutt the author with the defeated Colonel French at the end of *The Colonel’s Dream*, as Paul R. Petrie has suggested we should, we can conjecture that the Colonel’s failure to realize his dream of reform is a reflection not only of Chesnutt’s awareness of the difficulty of solving race problems given Northern and African-American commitment to accommodationism but also his awareness of the limits of using fiction to as a path to personal fame and fortune or to social justice for his race.

As most critics has agreed, Chesnutt’s move away from fiction in the early part of the twentieth century after the poor sales of *The Colonel’s Dream* was influenced by his increasing preoccupation with more lucrative business ventures as well as his “deepening doubts about the efficacy of literature to create the social and ethical transformations at which he aimed” (Petrie 110). As Petrie remarks, Chesnutt was much more sensitive than Howells could have been to the ways in which readers’ preconceptions influenced how novels were read and received (109-16). Chesnutt repeatedly wrote for what he thought white audiences might read—his journals indicate that his turn to increasingly inflammatory subject matter in his last two published novels was fueled at least in part by his hope to become the next Albion W. Tourgée or Harriet Beecher Stowe, a hope that

shows how deeply his profit and humanitarian motives were intertwined.¹⁴ He returned to race fiction during the 1920s when the market for black authors seemed brighter, albeit without successfully finding a publisher; in the meantime he focused on building up his stenography business and stepped up his commitments to social and political activism. But within the short window of time in which he saw two short-story collections and three novels into print he demonstrated both a keen awareness of the extent to which art, like any other commodity within a capitalist culture, is delimited and determined by the demands of the market as well as a shrewdness about the ethical ends to which it could nevertheless be put. He was aware of the extent to which authorship could simultaneously produce both financial and cultural capital and he wrote until the market forced him out. He deliberately wrote for white Northern audiences not only because that was the surest way towards financial prosperity but also because he hoped it would be a swifter path to accumulating political and social capital for blacks than might be generated by Washington's "go slow" emphasis on industrial jobs and education. In addition, he continuously pushed his own authorship past the limitations imposed on it by white audiences and, when he foresaw that those audiences were not going to be responsive, used his last published novels as spaces in which to urge human rights considerations in even more transparent ways.

Both *The Marrow of Tradition* and *The Colonel's Dream* insist that economic progress and industrial education are necessary but insufficient conditions for ensuring racial progress: in both novels, characters—black or white—who put faith in the

¹⁴Chesnutt's journal entry of March 16, 1880 reads "...why could not a colored man, who has lived among colored people all his life: who is familiar with their habits, their ruling passions, their prejudices...why could not such a man, if he possessed the same abilities, write a far better book about the South than Judge Tourgée or Mrs. Stowe has written?"

possibility that Southern blacks might achieve personal security, much less civil rights, only through contributing to the economic and social viability of their communities are brutally disabused. Chesnutt disagreed with Washington's confident belief that "no race that has anything to contribute to the markets of the world is long in any degree ostracized" (Washington 223). Nor did he believe that, as Washington claimed in his celebrated Atlanta speech, "the wisest among my race understand that the agitation of questions of social equality is the extremest folly, and that progress in the enjoyment of all the privileges that will come to us must be the result of severe and constant struggle rather than of artificial forcing" (223). In fact, he deliberately refutes that position in *The Colonel's Dream*. The colonel, who is fighting for the abolition of peonage in his home state of North Carolina, observes at one point in his battle with Southern conservatives that:

There was another party, of course, which deprecated any scandal that might involve the good name of the state or reflect upon the South, and who insisted that in time these things would pass away and there would be no trace of them in future generations. But the colonel insisted that so also would the victims of the system pass away, who, being already in existence, were certainly entitled to as much consideration as generations yet unborn (230).

Identifying the points at which the humanizing power of upward mobility falls prey, in Chesnutt's novels, to the law of diminishing returns—the point at which other paths to justice have to be explored—is part of my purpose in this chapter. For Chesnutt, this point seems to lie flush with any and all particular instances of injustice; there is no room

for sacrificing current victims of abuses like lynching and peonage for the sake of “generations yet unborn.” The horrors of lynching, peonage, unprovoked riots or unjust trials constitute immediate imperatives to change.

Beginning with *The Conjure Tales*, this chapter examines how Chesnutt understands blacks’ participation in an industrial capitalist economy—a participation that includes the production of artworks—to be helping and/or hindering their pursuit of civil rights. Uncle Julius is a savvy capitalist player, even though his aims are never as thoroughly mercenary and predatory as his white employer John’s; yet ultimately his stories, like Chesnutt’s own, fail to win him the larger rights and considerations, proprietary or otherwise, that might make him a true competitor in the Southern economic landscape. Instead, they often circumscribe him within roles that have been determined by the consumer markets. Nevertheless, there is still room for maneuvering within these roles: by skillful manipulation of the conventions of the genre, the stories Julius tells provide both him and Chesnutt with a forum for generating sympathy for the victims of slavery and support for the natural rights of equity where rational arguments for justice might fail—a utilization of what Alasdair McIntyre would call emotivism, perhaps, but one that seems necessary given American whites’ reluctance to invest in realist novels about Southern race relations. Chesnutt shows an acute sensitivity to the emotional effectiveness of an appeal to the maternal instinct in building the sorts of sympathies that might lead to civil action, an appeal that he directs especially at the white (upper) middle-class female reader who comprised a large section of Northern audiences. Relationships between African-Americans and white women are complicated in Chesnutt’s novels, but a preoccupation with the redemptive power of motherhood and the

maternal instinct runs throughout Chesnutt's fiction from *The Conjure Woman* through his unpublished 1928 novel *The Quarry*. In all three of his published realist novels on race relations, in which, as Brook Thomas remarks, "progress is connected to a sense of loss," Chesnutt blames the defeat of his characters' hopes for social and political justice not only on the failure of economic progress to guarantee civil rights but also—among other things—the failure of the common bond of motherhood to generate the kind of cross-racial sympathy that might hasten political action (173).

Chesnutt consistently suggests that economic progress is not enough as long as whites either refuse to profit from black enterprise or are willing to allow blacks the opportunity for economic advancement side by side with an ongoing refusal to guarantee them civil rights; however, the difficulty lies in formulating an argument for according blacks rights when they lie outside the pale of the arguments that usually hold water in the white world. These rights are not self-evident when they are applied to African-Americans, nor does guaranteeing them hold any social benefits for whites, who felt threatened rather than gratified by the thought that blacks might hold some utilitarian value for their culture. In addition, traditional American cultural narratives did not prioritize interracial justice. Both Howells and many of the regionalist writers he championed valued the genre in part because it comforted white urban audiences with the belief that pioneer and agrarian values were still somehow in play in the culture at large; part of the appeal of a work like *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, for example, is that it demonstrates a belief in the possibility of grafting pioneer narratives onto the trajectory of industrial capitalism and coming out on the other side with a kinder, gentler business world in which the pursuit of profit is not only compatible with the virtues of industry,

respect, community and justice for all but is somehow productive of them. But such an illusion was impossible for a race of people whose presence in America was a result of planters' greed for the cheapest possible labor source, whose national narrative was a story of slavery and exploitation; therefore, in his search for grounds for basic rights and protections for African-Americans Chesnutt frequently falls back on an appeal to something that present-day feminist philosophers might call a rudimentary ethics of care, which insists on the fundamental interdependence of human beings as the basis for moral reasoning. *The House Behind the Cedars*, *The Marrow of Tradition* and *The Colonel's Dream*, which I want to look at here, all suggest that a major component of racial renewal might lie in awakening in white people a dormant recognition that we are all capable of either needing, feeling or eliciting a mother's love. In addition, Chesnutt's final novel *The Quarry* features a dusky orphan of uncertain origin who is adopted by a black woman who raises the money for his education, which equips him to become "a leader of his people," by starting a cosmetic business that generates a multiracial following—a plot development that suggests that capitalism can only be exercised humanely when it is generated by compassion and care and used in the service of justice.

The basic premise of an ethics of care is that post-Enlightenment justifications for moral norms start from an inadequate conception of human nature. Human beings are not necessarily rational, self-interested, and autonomous beings who only bond together when their private interests are better served than not through cooperation with others; they are equally motivated (or capable of being motivated) by emotional and social impulses that have their roots and metaphor in the mother-child relationship.

Consequently, deliberations about the nature and basis of moral judgments should not

avoid presupposing a belief in our basic desire for cooperative and caring relationships or our capacity to be persuaded to invest in such relationships. Whether or not Chesnutt would—or could—believe that human beings were by nature cooperative, he was aware of the value of emotional appeals and the fertile ground that art provided for them; much of the success of his first works, including *The House Behind the Cedars*, might be attributed to his skill in creating characters who inspire sympathy and pity in his readers. Yet Chesnutt was also aware of the dangers and limits of such appeals; it was comparatively easy for his white audience to sympathize with the travails of slaves under a system that had passed away or the sufferings of a pretty “colored” girl who could pass for white; it was harder for a black writer to evoke the horrors of lynching or peonage as practiced against ordinary African-Americans without alienating his target audience. Moreover, Chesnutt was aware of the extent to which emotional appeals could feed his audience’s hunger for sentiment and sensationalism without necessarily furthering his cause; and as he raises the subject of Southern civil rights abuses in *The Marrow of Tradition* and *The Colonel’s Dream* he is no doubt influenced by both these considerations in his studied avoidance of lynching scenes or sensationalized depictions of the conditions of peonage, a delicacy that awarded him the grudging praise of Howells and others for his fair and balanced (albeit “bitter”) handling of the issues. Ironically, Chesnutt’s own identification with the “talented tenth”—his impatience with the “bigotry, superstition” and stubbornness of the uneducated blacks in the rural South—probably made his choice of white and upper-class black focalizers and his dispassionate handling of such situations easier than it might have been otherwise (*Journals* 81). Chesnutt was not a believer in emphasizing racial difference; in fact, he believed, as he

claims in various essays, that “the future American race—the future American ethnic type—will be formed of a mingling...of the various racial varieties which make up the present population” (“Future” 846-7).

Yet his subject matter lent itself to emotional and artistic appeals more easily than that of white middle-class writers Howells; the moral deliberations to which Howells commits his characters in his novels of social realism are frequently several times removed from anyone who might really stand to suffer from them—and are, consequently, often difficult of dramatic realization, as at least one critic has remarked (Carter 169). Howells’ ultimate concern was for the health of the social body, on which he believed the well-being of its individual members depended; his characters are often depicted as sacrificing their own or the well-being of those around them for the sake of some notion of the right that is supposed to be self-evident but yet rarely manages to make the impression that the portraits of individual sufferers might. Chesnut, on the other hand, recognizes that the good being invoked to justify the sacrifice of individual African-Americans is the well-being of the social body as a whole, a form of utilitarianism that he finds indefensible, as the opinions he attributes to Colonel French make clear. Yet he is often denied recourse to accurate and sensitive portrayals of individual sufferers, the clearest method of making his point within an artistic medium, by the prejudices of his audience as well as by the restrictions of an art form (the novel) whose polarization of the realist and romantic modes—whose internalization of the fact-value dichotomy—makes any attempt to do justice to the situation in the South seem simultaneously both biased and brutal—both too subjective and too real. His solution to this problem is to show it to be precisely the reason that both art (his art) and morality are

breaking down: his novels' inability to achieve what he wants them to achieve—an integration of the romantic and realist modes, an honest and emotional look at the lost “negro” whose fate is their absent center, whose tragic and brutal end is alluded to but never actually shown in the pages of Chesnut's fiction—is symptomatic (and no doubt, generative) of society's inability to acknowledge and appreciate the value of individual human beings who happen to be black. Thus, Chesnut shows the success of both art and civic morality to depend on a fundamental and holistic valuation of the individual human that he links very closely to the maternal instinct in both its creative and care-giving aspects.

The collected conjure tales were published in 1899 along with *The Wife of His Youth and Other Stories of the Color Line* and Chesnut's biography of Frederick Douglass. Howells wrote an appreciative review of all three for the *Atlantic Monthly*, focusing on the merits of *The Wife of his Youth* as an effective work of realism. The *House Behind the Cedars*, the last of Chesnut's novels to be a success, was published the following year. Of all of Chesnut's published books of fiction, *The Wife of His Youth* makes the most sustained attempt to depict the lives of ordinary African-Americans, culminating—deliberately, no doubt—in “The Web of Circumstance,” the story of a respectable young blacksmith named Ben Davis who is falsely accused of, and imprisoned for, stealing a white man's whip. Chesnut makes Davis a champion of property acquisition and upward mobility: “...ef eve'y nigger in dis town had a tuck keer er his money sence de wah, like I has, an' bought as much lan' as I has, de niggers might 'a' got half de lan' by dis time,” Davis says to his friends as he works; and a white man

who is passing by says, "You're talkin' sense, Ben... Yo'r people will never be respected till they 've got property" (251). But in the last analysis property only makes Davis more vulnerable to the jealousies of his neighbors and employees, one of whom steals the whip and plants it in Davis' shop so that he can get Davis out of the way and hook up with his wife. At the trial, the prosecutor connects Davis' opinions on property, which are "prejudicial to the welfare of society" with nihilism, communism, and a secret devotion to Tom Paine and Voltaire (253-4); but because he is "the best blacksmith in the county," according to the colonel whose whip is in question, he is let off with the "light sentence of imprisonment for five years in the penitentiary at hard labor" (257, 61). In a move that at first reads like a nod to his white audience's penchant for "impartiality" when it comes to racial questions, Chesnutt has Davis try to break out of jail the night before his sentencing, even though his lawyer has suggested that he might be let off with a light fine. Chesnutt makes a point of emphasizing that Davis is not privy to the exchange between the colonel and the judge in which the colonel suggests that the judge "let him off easy" because of his blacksmithing skills: "It is a pity," Chesnutt remarks, "that Davis could not hear what was said" (257).

Chesnutt wrote a number of stories—"The Sheriff's Children" earlier in the same collection is another example—in which the reader knows what the black prisoner/victim doesn't, that the white man in power is inclined to mercy, but before the white man can act on his sympathies the black man takes matters into his own hands and seals his tragic doom. The point to such stories is that justice cannot be trusted to the idiosyncrasies of individuals any more than to the accumulation of property; it needs to be codified in some public way that frees it from dependence on private interests. At the same time,

however, Chesnutt shows that the responsibility for ensuring this legal protection lies with men like the colonel and the sheriff (who is also a colonel) who need to make the connection between their familial responsibilities and their responsibilities to their fellow men. In “The Sheriff’s Children” an imprisoned mulatto turns out to be sheriff’s illegitimate son, to whom he owes a natural duty: “neither law nor custom could destroy a responsibility inherent in the nature of mankind. He could not thus, in the eyes of God at least, shake off the consequences of his sin” (146). But in “A Web of Circumstance” this natural obligation is extended to the human family: the recently released Davis is dissuaded from killing the colonel by the sight of the colonel’s little girl, a sensitivity that the colonel—who shoots him—declines to return. The obvious irony is that Davis recognizes and responds to human feelings that the privileged class have chosen to ignore, feelings like respect and tenderness for “purity and innocence” and sympathy for parental love (265). The little girl herself displays a sympathy for Davis’ sufferings that forms a contrast to her father’s violence and indifference.

The ironic contrast that Chesnutt creates between Davis’ feelings—or the little girl’s—and the colonel’s actions is just one of the ways he uses a literary technique to “lead people out, imperceptibly, unconsciously, step by step to the desired state of feeling” when rational arguments have failed. Chesnutt also relies on irony in *The Conjure Woman and Other Conjure Tales*, a collection of stories featuring a frame narrator named John, a white Northerner who has come down to North Carolina to buy an old plantation and “start a new industry” (31). In their initial reconnaissance of the land, John and his wife Annie encounter an ex-slave named Uncle Julius who still lives on the plantation and whose stories about plantation life, told in dialect, become the centerpiece

of the tales. Each tale that Uncle Julius tells has an apparent meaning and a hidden meaning, the apparent meaning (according to Annie) being the expression of pathos or the illustration of some moral for the entertainment of his listeners, and the hidden meaning (according to John) being the achievement of some underlying material end, some sort of usually mercenary agenda in the unequal war for assets that Julius is waging against John. The reader is left to choose between the two, to see Annie as sentimental and naïve or John as cynical and patronizing—or to recognize that both positions are equally limited, that Annie’s apparent sympathy with Julius is driven in large part by her own needs and frustrations, by her own stultifying reification as a luxury good within a consumer culture, and that John’s dismissal of Julius is motivated by his desire to downplay Julius’ significance as a competitor for the land and its resources. Chesnut’s emphasis on the “artificiality” of the Southern local-color genre and the potential subversiveness of a character like Uncle Julius has become a commonplace observation among twenty-first century critics: not only does Julius inhabit a social world whose values and systems are as codified and complete as John’s, he also understands that his world is intertwined with and defined over and against the larger capitalist culture in which he is forced to compete for limited goods and resources (Brodhead *Cultures* 196). His conjure tales are not just “means by which [his] sense of the world is stored and transmuted” in a culture whose relationship with the land is more “predial than proprietary”; they are also commodities that provide him with a source of leverage within a larger culture that turns all art forms, indigenous or otherwise, into bargaining tools (55; Brodhead *Cultures* 199). The real irony, then, is that Uncle Julius knows what he is doing—he is exploiting both John’s condescension and Annie’s sympathy for real

cultural and economic gains. But how valuable are those gains and at what cost are they achieved?

Chesnutt's deliberate disavowal of the local-color genre after the publication of *The Conjure Woman* might suggest that the cost of capitalizing on black folklore outweighed the benefits; and indeed the material gains that Uncle Julius registers against John—an un-demolished church building, a new set of clothes, employment for his nephew—are fairly limited and fail to reestablish him as default proprietor of the plantation and its resources, even though most of these gains—which disrupt John's plans in some way—are made through Julius' exploitation of the effect that his stories have on John's wife. In "Po' Sandy," Uncle Julius tells the story of a young slave named Sandy who is such an obliging worker that his master loans him out to the other family members every month or so. When Sandy falls in love with a young conjure woman named Tenie he asks her to turn him into a tree during the day so he can remain on the plantation and not be separated from her. Unfortunately, however, Sandy is chopped down for lumber one day while Tenie is away nursing one of "Mars Marrabo's" grandchildren and the lumber is used to build a new kitchen and eventually a schoolhouse. Annie clearly sympathizes with the agony and impotence that Tenie feels when she returns to the plantation to find Sandy chopped down and in the process of being ground through the sawmill, and her distaste for having her own new kitchen built from the lumber of the old schoolhouse enables Uncle Julius to keep the schoolhouse intact for his new community church. The same thing happens in "Mars Jeems's Nightmare," when Uncle Julius' story about an unsympathetic plantation master persuades Annie to re-hire Julius' lazy nephew against John's wishes; and similar things happen in other Uncle Julius tales that

were excluded from the 1899 volume. In “Dave’s Neckliss” Uncle Julius relates a horrific tale of a young black slave, a literate preacher, who is falsely accused of stealing meat from the master’s smokehouse and punished by having a ham chained to his neck until he comes to believe that he is a ham and hangs himself in the smokehouse to cure—a story that compels Annie to send Julius home with the rest of the ham that she has just been serving him.

As Richard Brodhead remarks, “Dave’s Neckliss,” is one of Chesnutt’s most “powerful” works not only in its portrayal of a literate slave but in its record of the ways that slavery stripped African-Americans of their freedom as well as their capacity to develop a coherent and humanizing selfhood (“Introduction” 18). But as John frames it, this brutal story of oppression and injustice becomes a tool for Uncle Julius to procure the rest of Annie’s delectable ham. John’s need to control and contain Uncle Julius parallels “Mars Dugal’s” need to control Dave, in both cases a more benign form of control than that exercised by Mars Dugal’s overseer but much more insidious for that very reason. Like Mars Dugal, who needs to believe that the only use Dave has for his reading skills is to read the Bible and “‘I’arns dat it’s a sin fer ter steal, er ter lie, er fer ter want w’at doan b’long ter yer; en l’arns fer ter love de Lawd en ter ‘bey my marster’ John needs to believe that Uncle Julius is, as he states in his extended prologue to the tale, “curiously undeveloped” and unable to feel, except in a “vague, uncertain way” his own degradation (126). John doesn’t want Uncle Julius to disrupt his economic system or question his right to control the means of production; consequently, he not only attempts to yoke Uncle Julius to an infantilized and infantilizing self-conception—the darky too benighted to know the import of what he is saying—but he also attributes duplicitous motives to

Julius' storytelling just like Mars Dugal attributes false motives to Dave's preaching when he believes Dave has stolen his meat. John is just as bent on turning a black man into a ham as Mars Dugal was, in reducing what Uncle Julius is and the potentially subversive power of what he might have to say to a cheap and greedy motive—or a motive that John wants to appear cheap.

But Chesnutt also insists, through Dave, that content can and should be taken at its apparent/real value, not (merely) its seeming market value: even though Mars Dugal and Mars Walker are right to believe that black literacy does pose some fundamental threat to their economic hegemony—that it is form of human capital that often enables African-Americans to materially better themselves—they are nevertheless wrong to believe that Dave is not committed to the things he reads and says: Dave *does* believe it's wrong to lie and steal and disobey his master. He's not saying those things as a blind so he can steal hams. If he's saying them as a blind—as he clearly is, feeding Mars Dugal exactly the lines that will pacify him—he's saying them in order to protect his right to continue speak and read and preach. In addition, the truths he preaches have subversive potential in and of themselves, not just as they are tied to their power to generate financial capital—which they clearly don't do in this particular instance. The professions of letters, as both Washington and (eventually) Chesnutt realized, are not always the clearest or swiftest path to economic empowerment in a capitalist culture. But Dave's words do have power of another kind: black men who preach and teach that it's wrong to steal not only lay these obligations on themselves but make others subject to them as well. Part of the remorse Mars Dugal eventually feels—and the pathos the story

creates for readers—lies in the fact that Dave is someone whose integrity and good name deserve respect.

Clearly this remorse, or any good name Dave has created for himself, is insufficient to save him from a fate that Mars Dugal and Walker make doubly retributive because of their resentment at having trusted him in the first place. And the respect that Dave does generate is obviously of the Uncle-Tom variety, the noble and long-suffering martyr who appeals to white readers because he models a type of Christian suffering that they can emotionally endorse without having to practice it themselves—or having to look too closely at the hypocrisy of their self-righteous condemnation of fictional plantation owners from a past era. Chesnutt recognizes that white readers (at least the men) probably will identify with John, yet given the form and the limits of his audience's sympathies he cannot make his critique of potential allies too apparent, which is no doubt part of the reason he eventually abandoned the genre. Yet by making the parallels between John and Mars Dugal and Uncle Julius and Dave so obvious—and then implanting in Dave a willingness to manipulate his master for ends that are not related to finagling hams or any other grossly acquisitive agenda—Chesnutt makes an argument for preaching, storytelling or novel-writing as ennobling practices in and of themselves, even if they don't ultimately achieve anything beyond (temporarily) elevating an individual's aspirations and self-conception. Uncle Julius, Chesnutt suggests, could be telling stories—as John dimly and uneasily perceives—because telling stories is an expression of “simple human feeling,” a way of being human that is fundamentally self-fulfilling (125). It also often generates appreciation—and sometimes apprehension—from people who recognize the import of demonstrations of thought, creativity, and self-expression,

people who understand that storytelling is a sign of humanity that cannot be discounted without some fundamental denial of the best manifestations of themselves. In addition, Uncle's Julius stories—and Chesnutt's—have meanings that are potentially subversive of imperialist agendas even if those meanings boil down to the disquieting reminder that black people have souls and aspirations and creative gifts of their own. In this case, however, we can probably attribute to Uncle Julius himself—whose agenda in almost all his stories, even the ones that are more obviously told to achieve some kind of material end, is to draw an analogy between life under slave masters and life under John—the classic double gesture of attempting to placate the white man while also showing him, whether he gets it or not, that his ways need to be adjusted—that the black man to whom he's condescending can exploit that condescension to his own gain—meet him with his own game—and go beyond this by providing his employers with an essentially human and creative pastime that John himself is unable to provide them, since John's own spirit, in would seem, has been desiccated by dry philosophy and trivial novels, the unfortunate fruit of the disparity between the rational and the emotional that exists within his culture.

We can attribute this same agenda to Chesnutt, whose relationship with his white audience replicates and complicates the John/Julius and Dugal/Dave relationships. Chesnutt isn't just writing for white audiences, careful of what aspects of his humanity they are and aren't ready to see—he also writes in a white man's voice, demonstrating an ability to write stories that embody and inhabit a white perspective. Such a move had to be unsettling for white readers, although no doubt a large part of Chesnutt's target audience identified with Annie, who is often in cahoots with Julius behind John's back. Annie is the one who grasps the moral or pathetic elements in each story, who insists on

their “truth” when John scoffingly dismisses them as “fairy tales” (92). In two of the last three stories of the original volume Uncle Julius tells stories that are designed to help Annie and Annie’s sister regulate their personal affairs, and even the ever-suspicious John cannot discover what mercenary motives that Julius might be hiding. In the first of these stories, “Sis’ Becky’s Pickaninny,” Julius tells a story about a slave woman who is parted from her baby but eventually reunited with him through the power of conjure. One of the few conjure tales to end happily, it achieves Julius’ goal of rousing Annie from a bout of “settled melancholy” that the reader is left to infer is connected to her own childless state as well as to her liability to the malaise that was associated with middle and upper-middle class women at the time who were “leisured, unproductively employed, and given to neurasthenia”(Brodhead “Introduction” 7). In “Hot-Foot Hannibal,” the last story in the volume, Julius tells a story about thwarted love that motivates Annie’s sister to mend her relationship with her young suitor, a reconciliation in which Julius takes an active part. The collection ends with John’s puzzled attempt to attribute selfish motives to Julius in this particular affair—the best he can come up with is to suggest that he was trying to get on Mabel’s suitor’s good side, although he notes—still humorously puzzled—that when “the young people set up housekeeping” they invite Julius to “enter their service” but he chooses to remain with John and Annie. Thus, the volume closes with John’s implicit acknowledgement that love and good will have triumphed over trickery, that Julius’ stories have created a bond between mistress and man—and through mistress, master—that has transcended the power struggle.

Yet Petrie insists that “Julius’s success in reaching his listeners is at best a Pyrric victory: he has succeeded in making his white audience see *themselves* in the black

protagonists' lives, but the limited terms of that identification do virtually nothing to expand their sense of group identity to include the more alien aspects of black culture—those aspects that define it as Other and necessitate literature's cross-cultural mediation in the first place" (133). Ultimately, Petrie suggests, Julius' tales highlight the impossibility of using such a medium to puncture the prejudices of readers whose reactions will mimic those of John and Annie—at best the tales allow white audiences to appropriate black experiences for agendas of their own, whether economic or emotional, personal or political, and any willingness on African-Americans' part to surrender their own ends results in their being re-inscribed in the role of the good-natured, accommodating negro. At the end of the volume Julius is in the same place as he was at the beginning, reduced from a nascent ownership position as default proprietor of the old McAdoo plantation to a wage laborer with, at the most, a choice of wealthy employers. There has been an exchange of sympathies between Julius and Annie—a recognition, on both their parts, of their respective humanity—but not one that has generated real results for Julius of the kind that matter for Chesnutt. Both authors and audience—Julius and John/Annie as well as Chesnutt and the real Johns and Annies—are circumscribed by the limitations of a genre that evolved as a compensatory gesture for white Northerners already exhausted by the personal repletion they were experiencing in an increasingly fraught urban environment; very few readers are “careful” enough to get the ways in which Chesnutt is attempting to subvert these expectations through ironic inversion of generic conventions, turning a story meant to provide Northerners with escapist entertainment into subtle social critique.

Petrie's reading is generally correct, and bolstered by Chesnutt's own subsequent rejection of the Southern local-color genre or of any stories making use of "blacks, full-blooded, [whose] chief virtues have been their dog-like fidelity to their old master" (*Letters* 65). To complicate this analysis, however, I want to close by examining the Uncle Julius story "A Victim of Heredity" that Chesnutt wrote for the 1899 collection but which was left out by editorial decision. In the introduction to his 1993 edition of *The Conjure Woman* and related tales, Brodhead claims that this story, among other uncollected conjure tales, shows Chesnutt "flirting fairly unironically with demeaning racial stereotypes" (19). "The Victim of Heredity; Or, Why the Darky Loves Chicken" sets out to explain African-Americans' supposed preference for chicken with a folk tale about an exceptionally avaricious plantation owner named "Mars Donal'" who starts out as a poor overseer and works his way to wealth, becoming so greedy for greater profit at the expense of his laborers that he goes to Aunt Peggy, the conjure woman, to ask her to give him a spell that will make his slaves work more on less food. In his greed to maximize results he overuses the conjure and his slaves begin to starve, forcing him—at Aunt Peggy's recommendation—to begin feeding them even higher-quality meat than he had given them previously in order to keep them alive. When he buys up all the pork and beef in the surrounding counties he begins to feeding them chicken, again at Aunt Peggy's recommendation, since she has previously loaned Mars Donal's defrauded nephew Tom the money to buy all the chickens that he sells back to his Uncle at exorbitant rates, thus recovering the fortune that his Uncle has stolen for him years ago. Aunt Peggy aids Tom, Uncle Julius tells us, because Tom had saved her life after she had fallen in the river. As Hewitt remarks, this is a unique story in the Uncle Julius canon not

necessarily because Aunt Peggy is shown to have capital of her own and to successfully manipulate the laws of supply and demand in order to ruin a wealthy white man—one of the overall themes of the conjure tales is blacks' ability to be savvy capitalist players—but because she uses her knowledge and power to help another white man achieve financial success that includes buying a plantation and “a lot er” slaves (Hewitt 950). She herself is rewarded with the promise of “a cabin on [Tom’s] plantation en a stool by his kitchen fiah” (182), but as Hewitt observes, “this does little to mitigate the strong sense that conjure, capitalism, and slavery work hand in hand” (950). Conjure, and storytelling as a form of conjure, are incorporated into a capitalist system as “techniques for the production and reconfiguration of value,” but what happens in the frame narrative is more telling: Julius is inspired to relate the tale because John has caught a chicken thief and is trying to decide how to punish him—and by the time he finishes it he has “conjured” Annie into letting the prisoner go, the only instance in the conjure stories in which a tale results in a positive act of retributive mercy/justice for one of the black characters, a benefit that goes beyond a trite material benefit for a black character or an emotional payoff for a white one.

In John’s introductory frame narrative for this tale his similarities with the heavy-handed white classes who are depicted in more ominous light in other stories are made more apparent than they are in other tales. Aware that “the law in North Carolina, as elsewhere, was somewhat elastic,” John decides that “five years in the penitentiary would be about right for this midnight maurader” (172). He briefly rethinks the severity of that punishment later in the afternoon, especially when he finds out that his prisoner has “a large family and a sick wife,” no steady employment and is “dependent on odd jobs for

his livelihood” (173). Still, John concludes that “while these personal matters might be proper subjects of consideration for the humanitarian, I realized that any false sentiment on my part would be dangerous to social order; and that property must be protected, or soon there would be no incentive to industry and thrift” (173). Holding firm at six months in the local jail, John vents to Uncle Julius about “your people’s” preference for chicken, a racist sentiment to which Annie objects but which inspires Julius to tell the story of Mars Donal’s defeat at the hands of Aunt Peggy and Mars Tom. The immediate impact of Julius’ tale is that when John goes off to tend to his vineyard Annie turns the constable away and lets the prisoner go, justifying her decision with much different criteria than John’s. While John believes that “personal” considerations ought to be ignored for the good of the “social order” whose preservation depends on respect for laws that “protect property” and incentivize “industry and thrift,” Annie believes that she can “trust [her] intuitions” (182). “I’ve been thinking more or less,” she tells John, “about the influence of heredity on environment, and the degree of our responsibility for the things we do, and while I have not been able to get everything reasoned out, I think I can trust my intuitions” (182). The contrast between the couple’s opinions is the difference between judgments driven by an ostensibly dispassionate assessment of what it takes to make (a particular kind of) society work and judgments rooted in sympathy and sensitivity to the demands of a particular situation. The culprit *has* stolen the chickens, a fact that is beyond dispute; but listening to Julius’ story has led Annie to reflect that Southern blacks have inherited a set of circumstances that predispose them not to favor chicken but to behave in certain ways, circumstances that she finds harder than John to dismiss, like the legacy of slavery and the poverty and necessity into which many

uneducated African-Americans were forced after the War. If theft is always a bad thing, the way to discourage it, Annie implies, is to fix the environmental factors that encourage it. Chesnutt is not advocating laws that bend to the whims of particular individuals—in both his fiction and his political writing he criticizes Southern states like North Carolina that leave the severity of punishments up to individual enforcers who are allowed to punish petty crimes committed by negroes out of proportion to their severity. But he is after a recognition that certain environmental factors that incite crime need to be addressed. States need to adjust their laws to fit the severity of the crimes committed; they need to make laws that are less subject to the idiosyncrasies of individuals like John (or Annie), but states also need to create a social and cultural atmosphere that supports cooperative behavior: people who are constantly being victimized are not going to be particularly respectful of the rights of those who are victimizing them. Chesnutt may even be pointing out the ways in which the struggle for property ownership and the accumulation of capital inevitably leads to exploitive relationships; in Uncle Julius' story, property is not exactly the holy term that John and the American establishment—including someone like William Dean Howells, whose rhetoric John often seems to be echoing here—claim that it is. As former slaves were in the best position to know, the protection of “property” is often an incentive to things much less wholesome than industry and thrift.

A story in which a colored person is allowed to escape unpunished because the wife of his captor recognizes that he may not be completely liable for his misdeeds—and that the accumulation and consolidation of property under the new industrialists is replicating many of the injustices of slavery—is a story that, in a collection of local-color

tales, probably needed to be cloaked under a fairly heavy blind; and an anecdote that purports to justify a racist stereotype seems an appropriately ironic choice. Thus, the conjure tale that on the surface appears to be pandering to white prejudices in the most flagrant way is doing so in order to make the collection's strongest criticism of racist practices ("A Victim of Heredity" was written to be included in the collection, after all). We may still want to criticize the mobilization of such a stereotype, but we can nevertheless see why Chesnutt might have thought it necessary given what happens a few years later when he tries to make the same points in a straightforward realist novel. In addition, we can also see the value in his attempt to both explore and suggest audience responses by way of John and Annie. If, as Petrie argues, *The Conjure Woman* is a record of Chesnutt's attempts to gage the strength and weaknesses of reaching white audiences through this particular medium by actually staging their responses in and through the stock figures of John and Annie, we can say that he does demonstrate or suggest that the judicious use of folklore can achieve counterintuitive results. By pandering to white preconceptions of blacks' inherited dispositions Julius wins freedom for one of them; Annie's sympathies are aroused because she recognizes the deeper theme of Julius' story, that people are in large part determined by their environment and that environmental factors need to be considered in deciding their degree of culpability.

Annie is not concerned about upholding the social order; she is concerned about sparing someone a punishment that she believes is disproportionate to his degree of responsibility for his crime. To say that something is wrong because it violates certain rules that contribute to social order—and that rules that promote social order take precedence over the suffering of any specific individual who may in fact be a casualty of

the weaknesses in this social order, in which punishments for crimes might outweigh the positive incentives to good citizenship—is a kind of rule utilitarian position that privileges the good of the whole over the good of the individual or sees individual human flourishing as tied to and secured by the health of the social body, a position that Chesnutt seems bent on criticizing not only in *The Conjure Woman* but in subsequent realist novels. This was the rationale used by many leading thinkers of the time—or at least here in John’s case—to justify ignoring the human rights abuses occurring in South in the period between the end of reconstruction and the Civil Rights movement ninety years later; and Chesnutt seems to understand that fiction is a good forum for employing the technique of the counterexample, for reminding readers, partly by playing on their sympathies, that—in fact—the republic has not necessarily ensured justice for all its citizens. And while Julius does not say this directly nor paint a moving portrait of the sufferings of the incarcerated chicken thief, he tells a story that creates a link in Annie’s mind between Sam Jone’s misfortunes and African-Americans’ suffering under slavery, suggesting to Annie and to his readers that moral culpability is collective in a different way, that the republic is only as strong as its investment, and its understanding of its investment, in the well-being of its individual members.

The idea that people can be victims of their environment was one that Howells and many conservatives were reluctant to embrace, believing that—despite appearances to the contrary—personal responsibility and willpower were the key to social change, but Chesnutt was writing in the Progressive Era, the same year that Norris produced *McTeague*, and he was astutely aware of the extent to which human beings’ fates were not only intertwined—a belief that Howells shared, if we identify Howells’ beliefs with

those of his character Reverend Sewells—but sometimes fixed and immobilized by that interconnectedness. Yet unlike the naturalists, Chesnutt was unwilling to invest the “web of circumstance” with transcendent and inexorable force; he believed that human beings had the power to change things, even if that belief was shot through, as Brook Thomas has remarked, with a heavy sense of tragedy—tragedy engendered by human failure. Chesnutt was unwilling and unable to concede that anything like the “social order” could impose a necessity of its own, whereas someone like Howells believed that the social order was what guaranteed the possibility of human freedom in the first place (). Chesnutt recognized that feelings like Howells’ were one of the main impediments to racial reconciliation in America and that such feelings were bolstered by an almost unconscious “spirit of caste” that undermined any counter-pressure that might be applied by the specter of black suffering, a spirit that might best be addressed through the medium of fiction. In the 1880 journal entry that outlines his plans for authorship Chesnutt writes:

I consider the unjust spirit of caste which is so insidious as the pervade a whole nation, and so powerful as to subject a whole race and all connected with it to scorn and social ostracism—I consider this a barrier to the moral progress of the American people, and I would be one of the first to head a determined, organized crusade against it. Not a fierce indiscriminate onslaught; not an appeal to force....but a moral revolution which must be brought about in a different manner...The subtle almost indefinable feeling of repulsion toward the negro, which is common to most Americans...cannot be stormed and taken by assault...it is the province of

literature to open the way for [the negro] to get [social recognition and equality]—to accustom the public mind to the idea, and while amusing them to lead people out...(*Journals* 139-40).

This agenda is in full effect in *The Conjure Woman* as Chesnutt attempts to sway John and Annie's emotions not by force or reason, but by reminding them of the humanity of the African-Americans around them, by depicting blacks telling stories or extending friendship or, more significantly, suffering pain as much from the emotional as from the physical abuses of slavery. Most of the conjure tales involve slaves using conjure to avoid being separated or sold away from their loved ones, tales which leave Annie, and are meant to leave Chesnutt's audience, feeling an empathetic connection with their protagonists and a recognition of the similarity between the feelings slaves have for their families and the feelings that Annie and Mabel have for their own. Annie and Mabel bond not just with Julius but with Becky and Chloe over the recognition of the human losses that these female (characters) suffer. As we will see again and again in Chesnutt's novels, he relies heavily on this woman-to-woman—or woman-to-female-character—recognition as a possible motivation for human and civil rights' agitation. He mirrors it repeatedly in his fiction, creating white female characters whose sympathy—or lack thereof—with embattled black or mixed-blood characters proves key to those characters' salvation or demise.

Annie has no conception of how her feelings should affect the contemporary legal system—she has “not been able to get everything reasoned out”—but she does demonstrate that empathy with fictional characters has real-world implications not only for her, in her appropriation of these experiences as outlets for her own suppressed

emotions, but for African-Americans themselves, at least in “A Victim of Heredity.” In addition, she believes that emotion and intuition are strong factors in moral judgments. For Annie and for Chesnutt himself, the horror or disgust we feel at Mars Donal’s actions or at Becky or Chloe’s tribulations are morally relevant emotions. When faced with a perspective like John’s, Chesnutt’s response—at least in the medium of fiction—is not to launch a counter-argument but to depict human suffering as an impetus for change.

Chesnutt was obviously not against rational deliberation, but he understood that deliberation could only begin when all parties were seated at the table, and that no one could be seated until whites could be persuaded that blacks ought to be included—a persuasion that would not be effected solely through appeals to reason. What is also interesting is that unlike Abraham Cahan, who sees his moral community as beginning with educated individuals who come together through common purpose and choice in a tradition built around virtues more intellectual than natural, Chesnutt sees the ideal community (and we should hasten to point out that like other social-realist novelists, Chesnutt was convinced that morality should not be reduced to a set of principles but be conceptualized as a shared way of being-in-the world) as beginning with a recognition of shared investment in values that he wants to see as inevitably and irreducibly human: shared experiences of loss and suffering, of motherhood, of family, even of food or possession of goods or some practical advantage over someone else.

Chesnutt is attempting to demonstrate the necessity of starting from a more fundamental point than either Howells or Cahan recognizes to be necessary—a tradition built neither from the scraps of old ones or in reaction to new ones but on a mutual re-evaluation of what it means to be human, a re-evaluation that in order to be any different from the

others ought to include an attempt to probe the kinds of human experiences that sentimental fiction is both generating and responding to.

In *The Conjure Woman*, Chesnutt aligns rationalism with sentimentalism, showing both to be manifestations of the eviscerated conditions of life that prevail under industrial capitalism. John yawns as deeply over “the impossible career of the blonde heroine of a rudimentary novel” as Annie does over his dry and “nonsensical” works by Herbert Spencer (70, 96). Both he and Annie stand in dire need of the entertainment that Uncle Julius provides them to alleviate their Sunday boredom, yet the text invites us to consider the possibility that Julius’ tales might function as something larger than a more satisfying form of escapism, a more textured sentimentalism. The relationship between John and Julius is a purely economic one—Julius provides John with a service that John intends to get as cheaply as possible, while Julius attempts to extort more from John through whatever means possible, including telling manipulative stories—but Julius’ relationship with Annie opens up the possibility of a more humanized and humanizing culture of exchange: the two characters’ need to profit from each other remains intact, but the definition of profit expands to include nonmaterial gains like emotional assistance or civic justice, and the idea of cooperation for mutual benefit enters the picture. At the heart of this cooperation lies both Julius and Annie’s willingness and ability to view the exchanges in which they are involved as more than exploitive, to understand the stories that Julius tells as more than an idle afternoon’s entertainment—as an attempt, also, to create connections, to convey feelings, to civilize the entire process of human interaction. Like many examples of the local-color genre, the conjure tales attempt to synthesize the

disparate elements of consumer culture, to re-unite the pleasurable and the profitable, the romantic and the realistic, the emotional and the rational, the useful and the good. Yet whether or not this attempt succeeds—or just remains an exercise in nostalgia—depends on Chesnutt’s audiences’ willingness to push past generic expectations and to establish unconventional but intentional relationships with texts, to understand that their relationships with fictional characters are meant to be analogous to their relationships with those around them: characterized, ideally, by appreciation rather than appropriation.

In turning my attention to Chesnutt’s three published novels, I want to keep my focus on his ongoing attempt to negotiate the line between the romantic and the real, to determine the point at which he has mined the limits of what each mode can provide him in the service of humanity and civil rights. *The House Behind the Cedars*, Chesnutt’s first and most successful published novel, is foremost a romance, despite its commitment to the issues of passing and the color line. Set in the fictional town of Patesville, North Carolina a “few years” after the war, the novel opens with a scene of an old Southern marketplace in which “Time seems to linger lovingly long after youth has departed, and to which he seems loath to bring the evil day” (267). As William L. Andrews observes, this story of a brother and sister of mixed blood who attempt to pass for white begins as a “conventional bourgeois romance”:

As children of lowly origins seeking happiness and prosperity, [John and Rena] are compared to well-known characters in popular romances and fairy tales, making their aspirations seem utterly natural to nineteenth-century readers. John Walden is named after and compared to Warwick the king-maker in Bulwer-Lytton’s popular novel *The Last of the Barons*

(1843), and Rena is compared several times to Cinderella (*Literary* 159). More accurately, John Walden names himself after Warwick when he decides to pass for white; both his identity and his aspirations are shaped by the books in the library that his white father keeps at John's mother's home, a library filled with novels and tales of knights, wanderers, and adventurers, of men going forth to seek their fortune armed with nothing but their courage and wits. The young John Walden devours the adventures of Tom Jones, Eugene Aram, Richard the Lionhearted and Gil Blas, and "when he had read all the books—indeed long before he had read them all—he too had tasted of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge: contentment took its flight, and happiness lay far beyond the sphere where he was born" (375). The secret of his blood is not revealed until midway through the novel—it is only alluded to, portentously, as the dark shadow that threatens to undo his progress—and his path upward is painted like that of an "Alger hero" (Andrews *Literary* 160). Leaving home at eighteen, he goes to South Carolina, avoiding military service "by some good chance" (which the novel shrouds in mystery) and overseeing a large plantation "in default of older and more experienced men" (282). He eventually marries the orphaned daughter of the late plantation owner, becomes a lawyer and uses her money to establish himself professionally "on a high plane" (282). Eventually she dies and leaves him with a young son of his own.

His sister's journey is the female version of this rags-to-riches story, but with a downward rather than an upward trajectory: when John Walden returns home in a fit of sentiment after a ten-year absence he suggests that Rena come live with him and help him take care of his son. After a year in boarding school, she takes up her position as Rowena Warwick at her brother's home and is engaged to marry the manly and spirited George

Tryon, a friend and client of her brother's, within a month of their acquaintance. Significantly, she meets George during a mock-jousting ceremony that John's South Carolina town has modeled on the novels of Sir Walter Scott, where George wins the tournament and crowns her the Queen of Love and Beauty. Convinced against her scruples that love will conquer all and that concealing her true identity is an act of "self-sacrifice" in the service of her brother and nephew, she agrees to marry George after some faint attempts to test his constancy and disinterestedness (323). Unfortunately, she is rudely disabused of her hopes for his character through a series of fateful and highly contrived circumstances, including a series of dreams that recall her to her mother's sickbed, that culminate in Tryon's awakening from his charmed sleep—quite literally, as he lounges in the window of the doctor's office in Patesville—to discover that his princess is a "young cullud 'oman," a discovery that promptly leads him to break their engagement (339). Disowned by her lover, Rena resolves to devote the rest of her life to improving the welfare of the negro race, a act of renunciation typical of mix-blood heroines of the period (Andrews *Literary* 152-4). Unfortunately, she is pursued in her retreat by both an evil mulatto with corrupt designs and the tormented but love-sick Tryon, whose own designs are suspiciously unclear. Cornered by both on her way home one day, she plunges off the road and is hounded to collapse in a storm--recovered, as she lies senseless in a thicket, by the devoted family darky Frank, who carries her home to breathe her last breath in her quadroon mother's arms.

Andrews has argued that despite Chesnutt's unfortunate descent into this melodramatic plotline and his one-dimensional portrait of the martyred Rena, Chesnutt uses the more "remarkable and original character creation" of John Walden/Warwick to

represent a more forward-thinking and pragmatic solution to the problem of passing (Andrews *Literary* 165). Like Dr. Olney in *An Imperative Duty*, John is unmoved by the need for complete transparency that troubles Rhoda and Rena; his romance, if it is one, is the practical romance of the American dream, strongly rooted in commonsense and the acquisition of wealth and middle-class status, even though Chesnutt deviates from this pattern in at least one way by marrying into money and status instead of earning it first. But “once persuaded that he had certain rights, or ought to have then, by virtue of the laws of nature, in defiance of the customs of mankind,” Chesnutt tells us, John “had promptly sought to enjoy them...with no troublesome qualms of conscience whatever” (320). If John possesses imagination and sentiment, he “nevertheless ha[s] a practical side that outweigh[s] them both” (320). As a man—as an American man—John possesses much more modern sensibilities than Rena: his romance has adapted itself to the conditions of life under bourgeois capitalism—or rather it *is* the romance of bourgeois capitalism—which includes adopting a more fluid and pragmatic morality, the same sort of ethics-in-progress approach that characterizes Tom Corey and other Howells characters who attempt to succeed under the terms of the new American dream and to navigate their way through the tumultuous terrain of the post-bellum American landscape. Interestingly, John also recommends this approach to Rena when her engagement with Tryon ends: let me “send you to some school at the North,” he suggests, “where you can acquire a liberal education, and prepare yourself for some career of usefulness” (386). When she refuses this plan, he suggests that the two of them “go to the North or West...far away from the South and the Southern people, and start life over again” (388). And when she refuses even this, he leaves her alone with the

pragmatic reflection that she may once again “tire of the old life” after she has been back home for a few months (389).

But Rena’s refusal to leave her mother, her performance of this romantic fatalism —“God must have meant me to stay here,” she tells her brother—is not just, as Andrews believes, an indication of Chesnutt’s unfortunate susceptibility to the constraints of the tragic mulatto plot and his fear of pushing his characters too brazenly down the path to assimilation; it is more accurately an attempt, like *The Conjure Woman*, to take a stereotypical plotline—one that resonates with white Northern audiences—and to make it pay in ways that it normally wouldn’t, to subject it to an ironic inflation of its original meaning (387). If Chesnutt felt constrained throughout his literary career by the demands of his audience to reproduce generic conventions, he nevertheless continued to put pressure on these conventions to produce unconventional results. In fact, Rena does *not* make a noble and self-sacrificial choice to deny the opportunity to pass for white: she eagerly accepts this option, including her brother’s arguments against revealing her black blood, and abandons her new life only with angry remonstrations against her white lover’s inconstancy: ““He did not love me,”” she cries “angrily” to her brother, ““or he would not have cast me off...He might have gone anywhere with me, and no one would have stared at us curiously; no one need have known”” (386). The blame here is placed not on fate or on the aggregate of racial prejudice that has the cumulative weight of fate—or on some abjured imperative to honesty—but on a specific white man who fails in an obligation contingent upon his commitment to a private emotion, an obligation that a forward-thinking white man like Howells was already portraying—in *An Imperative Duty*—as real and binding (and indeed in all of his novels on love and marriage, provided

the feeling was real and both parties of sufficient maturity to judge that). If Rena might still have gone North and pursued not only an education but the option of marrying—as her brother suggests—“a better man than even Tryon,” Chesnutt denies her this freedom because he needs to deny his mixed-blood characters the appearance of success in order to impress upon his white audiences that the pragmatic solution is not enough (386).

Chesnutt provides scant rationale for John’s decision to reside in South Carolina or Rena’s refusal to go North, and the commonsensical reader may feel annoyed by Chesnutt’s refusal of these obvious solutions. “It might have been wiser,” observes Judge Straight, who serves as the novel’s seer, “for [John] to seek [his chance in life] farther afield than South Carolina” (291). But John goes to South Carolina because South Carolina is “the land of his fathers, where, he conceived, he had an inalienable birthright” (282). Both John and Rena’s decisions are based on sentiment, on some human feeling that looms larger than common sense, and Chesnutt’s suggestion is that these reasons are not wrong but merely overwrought because they have been denied, that in fact they point to natural emotions or intuitions that has not been allowed adequate expression, that have not been factored into the process of judgment and acculturation as they ought to be. Social and economic advancement should not have to come at the expense of denying familial connections, and Chesnutt is not interested in having mixed-blood characters succeed up North: he wants them to reclaim their birthright in the land of their fathers. If his romances never end happily, it is because they are deliberately depriving their colored protagonists not only of the realistic option of going north but also of the romantic compensation of devoting their lives to (pseudo-) heroic self-sacrifice. Neither realism nor romance offers a satisfactory solution to the problem of race in

America: if black people take the realist path they cut themselves off from natural ties that always come back to haunt them. If they take the romantic option they die.

In both scenarios, a natural obligation to love and connect with other humans is violated, an obligation that always involves acknowledging the disparate influences that make up the human self. John's decision is problematic because it involves abandoning his mother and sister—abandoning the natural ties of “sentiment”—and legitimizing the alienation of self from others that occurs under the auspices of the American myth of the self-made man. Going north would only displace this dilemma, as John and Rena both realize. They would still have to choose between abandoning their mother or identifying as black, and either option entails denying some real part of their identity, some actual person in their lives. On the other hand, the romantic solution involves a similar deception, a belief that the real, interconnected human self can be transcended and denied through service to a “higher” ideal and an empty conception of human freedom. Both responses involve flight from the immediacy and complexity of personal identity, responses that backfire in both directions. John is unable to resist returning to his mother; Rena is unable to escape the burdens of the real world. In addition, neither the judge nor Tryon, the two major white characters in the novel, are able to avoid their obligations to the black characters whose lives are enmeshed in their own. Flight is not the answer, Chesnutt insists in response to black novelists who portrayed migration as the only option in the face of Northern complicity in Southern oppression.¹⁵ The sentimental and the real are inescapably intertwined, and the problem of race in America is in some sense symptomatic of the culture's distorted and long-standing attempts to divorce the two, to

¹⁵See Andrews *Literary Career* 182-9 for a detailed discussion of white and black novelists writing about the race question in the South.

deny or deflect natural human sentiment—“human sympathy” Chesnutt repeatedly calls it—in the name of human progress. “Love is the only law,” George Tryon recognizes as he is “driven by an aching heart” back towards the woman he has spurned, just as John and Rena are driven back to the mother they have denied (460). Forward progress will always be hampered by the return of the repressed, Chesnutt warns; consequently, the solution is to rehabilitate sentiment and the romance, not to abandon or fetishize them.

Chesnutt’s project here is almost identical to Howells’: Howells’ obsession with marriage—with what makes a good marriage—in his novels of social realism is driven by his recognition that marriage is a place where sentiment and civilization intersect, a locus for reuniting the claims of the personal and the social/economic, for rescuing love from its marginalization and distortion within consumer culture and recovering it as a humanizing influence on that culture. Howells’ solution to Silas Lapham’s business crisis and Penelope Lapham’s emotional one is a marriage that unites the aims of both, that consolidates Lapham’s business interests by extending them to his son-in-law, who in turn enters into a business partnership that reflects the dynamics of his unusually egalitarian marriage. Rehabilitating the romantic involves not abandoning love but understanding it to be best expressed—i.e. expressed to best social advantage—within the context of bourgeois companionate marriage, as well as understanding upward mobility to be best achieved by uniting economic interests with personal ones, by backing financial investments with strong familial ties. Chesnutt clearly agrees with these aims, and *The House Behind the Cedars* insists that racial prejudice impedes the implementation of these goals, that as long as the “one drop of black blood makes the whole man [or woman] black,” society itself will be mired in these endless dramas of

thwarted love and missed opportunities that could have been resolved into socially constructive marriages and strengthened family and economic ties—Tryon only meets Rena, we should note, because his business relationship with John develops into a friendship (379). The romance of the tragic mulatto is a symptom of social illness, an illness that needs to be emphasized, not obviated, in order to be fixed. Chesnutt is trying to write might be something along the lines of a James novel (if we read James as Martha Nussbaum wants us to read him), in which the lack of a satisfying resolution is meant to leave the audience with an uneasy sense that something different remains to be done—in this case, a sense that such a tragedy might have been avoided if either Rena’s father or her lover had fulfilled their natural obligations. And while the psychological confusion that plagues John or Tryon is not nearly as complex as that which torments the typical James character, neither are the issues: there are clear wrongs and rights in this case, as well as a cultural narrative trajectory that stands ready to be restored when certain white people decide to acknowledge the ties that they have denied against their own best interest.

Chesnutt’s next novel, *The Marrow of Tradition*, is neither the considered work of realism that Howells hoped Chesnutt would publish—something akin to the stories in *The Wife of His Youth*—nor a straightforward romantic melodrama like *The House Behind the Cedars*.¹⁶ Chesnutt seemed to have believed that both genres were too accommodationist, that his ironic use of them was too subtle, and that the political agenda which inspired him was best served by turning to the didactic or “purpose novel.” The novel that he

¹⁶See Andrews “Criticism and Race” 331 for a discussion of Howells three extent letters to Chesnutt, including a 1900 letter in which he urges Chesnutt to produce “something about the color-line, and of as actual and immediate an interest as possible—that is of American life in the present, rather [than] the past, even the recent past...”

published in 1901—and which he confidently believed to be his best product yet—was a message novel that nevertheless proposed to entertain. To that end, it contained, Chesnutt assured his readers, standard characters like “a typical old ‘mammy,’ a faithful servant who is willing to die for his master and an ideal old aristocrat who practically sacrifices his life to save that of his servant” (“Own View” 873). It also features a cantankerous old Aunt with a hidden inheritance and secret papers, a murderous young aristocrat who impersonates the faithful servant, and two half sisters who could pass for each other, except that one is “black” and the other is white. All these characters contribute to the story’s sentimental subplot, set against the overarching realist narrative that fictionalizes and dramatizes the Wilmington, North Carolina race riots of 1868, riots in which the town’s white supremacist leaders, feeling threatened by the fusion of the Republican and Populist political parties, led a premeditated, unprovoked attack on the city’s black population, killing an untold number of African-Americans and provoking a mass black exodus from the city (Bentley). In the subplot of *The Marrow of Tradition*, the wife of one of the leaders of the white supremacy movement discovers, after her Aunt Polly is robbed and killed by an impecunious young aristocrat who impersonates a family servant named Sandy to disguise his identity, that her supposedly illegitimate colored half-sister is actually legitimate and entitled to a significant portion of the family estate. Olivia Carteret burns the papers that prove this inheritance after finding them in her murdered Aunt’s room, keeping the secret until her son Dodie Carteret falls ill during the riots and Olivia’s black brother-in-law Dr. Miller becomes the only doctor available to perform the tracheotomy that will save her child’s life. Unfortunately, Dr. and Mrs. Miller’s own son has just been killed by a stray bullet from the riots, and the doctor—

eschewing his professional obligations—refuses to attend to Dodie until Olivia shows up and makes an appeal to her sister Janet in person.

The two women's impassioned confrontation over the body of the dead child allows Janet to assert her moral superiority. Eschewing Olivia's appeal to their common relationship, rejecting "your father's name, your father's wealth, your sisterly recognition," Janet places her acquiescence to her sister's plea on less personal grounds (718). She is showing mercy on Olivia and the Carterets, she says, so that Olivia will know "that a woman may be foully wronged, and yet may have a heart to feel, even for one who has injured her (718). The action that serves as a bridge towards racial reconciliation (various critics have pointed out that the novel's last line, spoken from the top of the stairs as Dr. Miller and Major Carteret start up them together, embodies Chesnutt's guarded but hopeful prognosis for the possibility of change and renewal) involves a repudiation of private, idiosyncratic motivations, even in the name of family feeling, for a larger and more universal conception of human sympathy. Janet commissions her husband to save Dodie not because Olivia is her sister—a motivation that at this point seems to incline her towards revenge—but because Olivia is a woman, a fellow human being, and because sympathy for fellow human beings, a "heart to feel" and to forgive, is a "noble" quality (718). Janet also asserts the superiority of compassion to justice: since Olivia and her family have denied Janet her birthright and Major Carteret has incited the riots that result in Janet's son's death, it is "but just," as Olivia must acknowledge, that Janet should deny Olivia any favors based on an appeal to that same relation or attempt to save Olivia's child (718). "Love, duty, sorrow, *justice* call me here," Dr Miller exclaims when Olivia begs him to come save her child: "I cannot go"

(715). The italics are Chesnutt's, and the conclusion is that the Carterets are reaping an appropriate punishment for their transgressions, a punishment that the Millers would be guiltless in watching play out. But like twentieth-century feminist philosophers, Chesnutt is cautious about relying on notions of justice: for one thing, justice is not always constructive; it is often merely retributive as it has the potential to be here for both the Millers and the Carterets. Allowing Dodie to die does not help Chesnutt achieve the reconciliation that he is after.

In addition, Chesnutt knows that justice is often implicated in rationalist moral epistemologies that deny African-Americans the right to consideration because they lie outside the scope of consideration that applies to "white men and gentlemen" (491). Yet Chesnutt doesn't eschew justice altogether: during the debate that takes place around Sandy's narrowly escaped lynching, Wellington's upstanding black citizenry, including Dr. Miller, repeatedly appeals to its white counterparts for protection and a fair trial for Sandy, which the white citizens deny it in the name of a higher authority that overrules justice. The town judge admits that "lynching was, as a rule, unjustifiable, but maintained that there were exceptions to all rules—that laws were made, after all, to express the will of the people in the ordinary administration of justice, but that in an emergency the sovereign people might assert itself and take the law into its own hands" (613). Here, as in Olivia and Janet's confrontation and elsewhere in the novel, Chesnutt suggests that justice has a universal and self-evidentiary content that resonates with both black and white characters but that is frequently overruled by caste and race prejudice, by white invocation of its "divine right" to "take the law into its own hands" and perform acts of supposed higher justice that are really outbursts of resentment, hatred and

hysteria—acts that, in fact, ally this higher justice with the worst kinds of emotivism. Consequently, Chesnutt sees the necessity of providing whites with an alternative “first-order” conception of humanity and human relations that will undergird and clarify their commitment to justice, some idea of the natural order of things that does not reduce itself to a belief in white supremacy. What he articulates through Janet is a commitment to a common humanity based in a mutual, compassionate recognition of similar and shared experiences, not skin color. In this case—as in the *House Behind the Cedars*, where neither John nor Rena is able to justify a program of upward mobility that involves neglecting or forgetting their mother—these experiences begin with the common experience of motherhood and the bond between mother and child. They also include the experience of love and something even more basic than that: the experience of common ancestry. Chesnutt is, of course, reminding whites that blacks share their blood and genes as well as their feelings and instincts, that the proof of African-Americans’ humanity lies as much in the biological possibility—and fruitfulness—of miscegenation as in any sympathetic or rational recognition of the similarities between the life experiences of the two races. Thus Chesnutt affirms the essential interconnectedness between a biological/evolutionary description of progress and one rooted in a compassionate identification with otherness, between the material and the ideological paths to uplift.

And we should further note that Janet’s articulation and performance of compassion as the more authentic form of higher justice integrates reason and emotion in a way that neither the whites’ ordinary or “higher” concepts of justice do. After all, Chesnutt is interested in something more than fairness, law and order: only compassion, with its commitment to transforming the most constructive of human instincts, like the instinct to

nurture and create, into a mandate for respecting and preserving the creative and regenerative power of humanity wherever that appears, can fully transform and dispel its dark inverse, the instinct to codify and rationalize hatred as justice.

Therefore, it becomes important for Chesnut to divest these convoluted human interrelations of their occult status and bring them to the light of day, to see them supported by laws that acknowledge their legitimacy and their right to legal protection. In *The Marrow of Tradition* this goal becomes identified with rehabilitating romantic tropes and paradigms involving secrecy and illegitimacy and incorporating them into a realist novelistic paradigm. As in his earlier stories and novels, Chesnut takes the romantic tropes of the doppelganger and the secret/illegitimate relatives and attempts to invest them with something more than a symbolic function. Chesnut's black characters are not merely representations of repressed aspects of white consciousness and culture, symbols of the human capacity for evil and exploitation, as they are in a proto-modernist story like *Heart of Darkness* being written around the same time: Janet is a person, and not a particularly dark (in looks *or* temperament) or repressed person, not heavily laden with markers of Otherness and exoticism. In fact, she looks exactly like Olivia, and instead of lurking around the margins of the story she proves extremely difficult for Olivia to avoid, especially since Dr. Miller has bought the Carteret mansion and Janet and her son are frequently depicted riding in their buggy out and about in the town. Janet is also provided with thoughts and feelings of her own before she and Olivia finally interact, feelings which revolve around her sympathy for her sister and her longing for an acknowledged relationship between them. In addition, her romantic feelings and desires culminate in a bourgeois marriage that is identical (if not healthier) than Olivia's, and her

sisterly feelings toward Olivia express themselves in outward and upward impulses towards reconciliation and recognition and not toward the secret desires or designs that Olivia imputes to her. When her child dies (as in *The Colonel's Dream* and many other Chesnutt stories, children here bear the weight not just of the natural expectations they give rise to but of their symbolic significance as the hope for larger justice and a better future for the human race), Janet refuses to let her relationship with her sister become caught in a narrative of family retribution and vendetta, forcing even the natural tie of blood to be subsumed within the larger narrative of justice *and* compassion, of moving forward in a socially constructive and life-affirming way. Thus the novel implies that the romantic trajectory itself is a symptom of an eviscerated conception of human experience, one that needs to be incorporated into a narrative that is neither realist nor romantic under the contemporary conceptions of the term but something that is an organic synthesis or manifestation of both. Many critics have suggested that despite these lofty goals, the novel as a whole suffers from the fault of being “a tract in the guise of the novel,” undeveloped in terms of character and story (“Fireside”). “One might almost fancy it a lot of clippings from editorials on the negro questions strung together by a few illustrative incidents and characters,” a contemporary reviewer sniped (“Fireside”). Yet, as in Howells’ case, I would argue that the fault lines in the project—Chesnutt’s difficulty in reconciling the two modes into something that resembles a full-orbed and integrated alternative narrative—lie less with any artistic failure of Chesnutt’s than with the very real difficulty of assembling materials sufficient to the task.

In *The Marrow of Tradition* Chesnutt depicts several levels of response—both individual and collective—to what he considered the natural and inevitable state of

human relations, which were miscegenation and ultimately assimilation: white characters can sometimes ignore it, pretend it doesn't exist, like Olivia ignores Janet or like the white and black populations in Wilmington ignore each other—or pretend that they ignore each other—before the riots. They can also attempt to forcibly halt or suppress the intermingling of the races like the “Big Three” do before and during the Wellington riots (the original Wilmington riots were sparked by an editorial by Alexander Manly, a black journalist who was also the grandson of former North Carolina governor Charles Manly). Or they can acknowledge and provide for private ties and relations without suggesting that those relations have larger public and civic implications, a response that is—as everybody in the book knows—very difficult to maintain, although many white men in the novel attempt to do it, Olivia's father included. But the fourth response is not dependent on specific relational ties; rather it takes for granted that the fact of miscegenation itself demonstrates the ways in which human beings are similar and interrelated and should help and provide for each other to ensure their common progress in the “harmonious fusion” of the races. In *The Marrow of Tradition*, unlike earlier stories like “The Sheriff's Children,” the awareness of blood ties hinders rather than hastens the path to civic justice unless it is accompanied by some larger cultural or civic mandate. Significantly, Olivia does not begin to feel guilt about her (non)relationship with her sister Janet until she discovers that her father actually married Janet's mother, at which point she begins to feel both impressed and oppressed by her belief in the seriousness of the marriage tie. Private emotions are relevant if helpful but they're not enough, Chesnutt suggests—they certainly don't keep Mammy Jane from being killed, nor do they keep her from being objectified and sentimentalized by the Carteret family.

In short, Chesnutt is qualifying and expanding the moral of *The House Behind the Cedars*: if it is important to recoup the private and the sentimental, to become aware of the extent to which public virtue and civic progress depend on our ability to acknowledge and appreciate natural ties, it is equally important for those ties themselves not to mark the limits of moral responsibility, although we should note again that Janet attributes her magnanimity to right feeling, not to a dispassionate commitment to justice. Compassion—human sympathy—is necessary for right action but it is also larger than private sympathies or antipathies: Janet feels for her sister like she would for any other woman whose child was in danger of death, a feeling that her sister never gives evidence that she returns.

In a 2008 article published in the *Southern Literary Journal*, Susan Danielson argues that there are actually three narratives in *The Marrow of Tradition*, not two. Besides the romantic and realist plots, the private and public storylines, there is a third narrative that Danielson calls the “professional” narrative, in which Dr. Miller is able to achieve some kind of status and power within the community of Wellington by solidifying himself within the professional class, adopting the supposed neutrality and impartiality of his profession and devoting himself to racial uplift through establishing a black hospital without white support and establishing collegial relationships with white physicians (Danielson 76). Closely allied with an assimilationist standpoint through his desire for civil rights and his resentment of the indignities of Jim Crow, Dr. Miller nevertheless fails to take a strong stand for justice when the riots break out and the work he has built—and the child he has fathered—are threatened and then destroyed by white violence. “Our time will come—the time when we can command respect for our rights,”

he responds to Josh Green's cry for armed resistance, "but it is not yet in sight. Give up, boys, and wait" (684). Danielson suggests that the inefficacy of Miller's pacifism and professionalism in stemming the tide of white violence—his "conflation of assimilation and accommodation"—points towards Chesnutt's frustration with the limitations of professional ethics in the service of racial uplift; ultimately, Miller abandons his standpoint in favor of the "discourse of domestic feminism" articulated by his wife, in which both private feelings and professional values are replaced by a commitment to "compassion and social justice":

The Millers' repudiations of both Olivia's and Carteret's pleas for help implicitly reject both the New South creed and the sentimental ties of family as grounds for building a new, more inclusive nation state.

However, in criticizing Dr. Miller's professionalism, Chesnutt also indicts the modern ideological perspectives such as assimilation or accommodation or racial uplift supported by the black bourgeoisie for putting individual (masculine) claims over domestic and community interests (87).

Chesnutt's alternative, Danielson suggests in her closing sentence, is to infuse "the public world with the values of the private, the masculine world with the values of the feminine, and the white world with a deeper understanding of the black," so that "there may yet be 'time enough but none to spare' to build a nation of compassion and justice" (87-8).

Though arrived at independently, my own conclusions coincide very closely with Danielson's. *The Marrow of Tradition* does, in fact, seek to establish a separate trajectory for Dr. Miller and his professional ethics, an ethics that the novel ultimately

shows to be in collusion with the hollow New South Progressivist agenda embodied and practiced by Major Carteret, General Belmont, and “Captain” George McBane. The similarities that Chesnutt sets up between Major Carteret and Dr. Miller are deliberate, including their parallel but ineffectual attempts to quell the violence of the riots (Danielson 81). However, I would point out that the discourse and practice of professionalism, which arose alongside Progressivism in the nineteenth-century as “an attempt to sweep away petty bias and present a neutral, scientific ground from which to begin the process of social amelioration,” was simply a more “refined” articulation of the practice of alienation already in play in American culture, a patch-work solution to the problem of exploitation endemic to the nature of consumerism itself (Danielson 77). Professionalism was one manifestation of bourgeois culture, another being the increasing sentimentalization and enervation of the domestic sphere; it is no accident that both Janet and her half sister are frequently portrayed as wandering around rather aimlessly in their respective buggies, preoccupied with overwrought obsessions and desires. As Chesnutt knew, regulating industries and professions in order to eliminate unfair or unsafe business practices did not eliminate several core problems endemic to the nature of capitalist culture, not merely to its manifestation as professionalism: one is that the respect that a character like Dr. Miller accrues as a member of his profession—one who has received an education superior to many white doctors of his time—depends solely on whether or not the culture provides a market for his services, which does not happen in *The Marrow of Tradition* until the riot brings the accoutrements of white civilization to a rather contrived halt. All four of the doctors that Major Carteret tries to find to save Dodie are busy with (white) fall-out from the riots, except Dr. Price who has deliberately left town

in order to avoid becoming involved. The fortuitous consequence is that Dr. Miller's services suddenly become indispensable to a bigot like Major Carteret—a hollow victory, since it only comes after Miller has been forced to recognize that his claims to consideration as a human being are contingent upon the market for his professional skills.

The second and more obvious problem with professionalism and with the public face of bourgeois culture as a whole, one that has perhaps been sufficiently explicated by twentieth and twenty-first-century critics (though the contemporary academy's obsession with professionalization may be an indication that its lessons have not hit home) is that it relies on supposedly objective standards of knowledge and conduct that ignore the extent to which professional behavior is influenced by “irrational” considerations that are in fact profoundly relevant to the practice of such activities. As Danielson points out, even before the riots Dr. Miller's skill and accomplishments are not enough to overcome the prejudices that he encounters on the segregated trains and in the Carteret home during Dodie's initial life crisis. In fact, the justification for segregation is given in terms that echo the systemizing impulses of professionalization: “The beauty of the system lies in its strict impartiality—it applies to both races alike,” the conductor tells the Northern doctor who asks if he is free to sit in the colored car (507). This same Northern doctor submits to Major Carteret's objections against Dr. Miller's inclusion in on Dodie's surgical team when Dr. Price assures him that the major's objections are “personal” and not merely based in race prejudice (522). And while these personal objections are as much personal as racial, Dr. Burns is nevertheless forced to concede that “personal questions” have a valid role in deciding what initially seems to be an issue of “standing upon [his] professional rights” (522). Olivia and her husband may be in the wrong—if

the case had been brought before her, Olivia's duty would have been to swallow her pride and antipathy in the service of fairness and compassion, as Janet will do later—but the situation still demands an adjudicator with an ability to negotiate its complex interrelations of personal feeling and professional execution; and Dr. Burns, with his blunt sense of Northern efficiency and “professional honor,” his simple commitment to a hierarchy of skill, is ill-equipped to deal with the intricacies of Southern customs, prejudices and emotions and eventually resigns them to Dr. Price to address, washing his hands of the affair “like Pontius Pilate” (520, 522). We could also add that to the extent to which such emotions and prejudices *are* in fact irrelevant to the stark exigency of a choking child in need of an expert surgeon, depending on the code of conduct specific to that skill for deciding larger matters of human justice is clearly inappropriate. In this particular situation, Dr. Burns has a professional obligation to save Dodie's life that supersedes his obligation to fight for an egalitarian working space and is in some sense irrelevant to it, if he can in fact perform the operation without Dr. Miller's help. So while Dodie Carteret's sickbed is not irrelevant to issues of racial justice, it is nevertheless not the place where such issues can ultimately be decided.

If Dr. Burns is ill-equipped to deal with the realities of Southern existence, Dr. Miller—and Chesnutt himself—is less so, to the extent that any character or individual can be less than ill-equipped to deal with the paralyzing realities of the New South racial climate. Danielson is wrong, I believe, not to make a distinction between Chesnutt's attitude towards Dr. Miller and his attitude towards the accommodationist position that Dr. Miller seems to inhabit as much by default as by deliberation. As other critics have pointed out, Chesnutt's attitude towards Miller's position is one of the novel's “more

nettling ambiguities” (Andrews *Literary* 192). “Because their social disengagement leaves the racists a free hand,” Andrews says, “the adherents to the philosophy of evolutionary progress in the novel may be scored for unwarranted optimism and a lack of moral initiative against the forces of reaction” (192). Yet until the forces of reaction break out, Dr. Miller is living in a town that doesn’t seem to demand much activism, whose citizens seem unusually conciliatory and progressive in their attitude towards race relations. “If our race had made as much progress everywhere as they have made in Wellington, the problem would be well on the way to solution, Dr. Miller “declares” to Dr. Burns; and when he *is* confronted with overt discrimination he makes at least a weak attempt to resist it (504). He protests when General McBane is allowed to sit in the railway’s colored car, and more significantly he attempts to intervene with his white friends to get Sandy Campbell a fair trial when Sandy is accused of murdering Aunt Polly. He is the one who alerts Mr. Delamere to Sandy’s incarceration in time to save Sandy from lynching. Unquestionably Chesnutt is attempting to expose the limitations of a program of racial uplift that relies on “evolutionary progress” alone, that is not supported by black advocacy for social and civic justice, but he also understands the futility of actions like Josh Green’s, which are driven by private vendettas as much as outraged justice and—if successful—do little more than satisfy their perpetrators’ lust for vengeance. In fact, Janet’s decision to show mercy on her sister Olivia is as much about demonstrating the futility of private vengeance as it is about asserting standards of justice that apply regardless of the success of economic programs of racial uplift.

If the confrontation between Josh Green and Dr. Miller demonstrates anything, it is the ineffectiveness of both their approaches and the extreme options to which African-

Americans of the period seem to be confined—and Chesnutt is sympathetic, I would suggest, to the dilemma in which men like Miller find themselves. Although Miller makes a distinction between the heroism of “dying in defense of the right” and the weakness of “killing another for revenge,” he nevertheless chooses to be “wise” rather than heroic when the riots give him a clear rationale for taking up arms in defense not just of family and home but of innocent people who have been wrongly attacked (684). For him the decision comes down to a pragmatic assessment of what the black citizens of Wellington stand to gain by such a resistance versus what they stand to lose: he tells Josh and his followers that “in this riot we are placed as we should be in a war: we have no territory, no base of supplies, no organization, no outside sympathy...we stand in a position of a race, in a case like this, without money and without friends” (684). This “philosophical” assessment of the realities of the situation—a black man must be “either a philosopher or a fool” to live in American, Miller recognizes early in the story—is not only accurate but compounded by other factors, including national fatigue with the Negro problem and with the whole idea of war and revolution (511). “Eighteen hundred and fifty-two [the year *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was produced] was a year when men’s passions and men’s imaginations were quickly fired” wrote one reviewer of *The Marrow of Tradition*, “Nineteen hundred and one is a different year. Men differ, the spirit of the time differs. We are more lethargic; we think more and do less; we refuse to let our passions run away with our actions. And we are become so accustomed to the negro problem, which, like the negro, seems destined to remain with us, that we are become indifferent to it” (“Books”). Despite his hopes that *The Marrow of Tradition* would become the sensation that *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* did—a hope fueled no doubt by his own sense of the

continuing urgency of the negro problem—Chesnutt was highly sensitive to white indifference and the limitations it placed on black self-advocacy; thus, his dramatization of Miller's dilemma is less a condemnation of Miller for his reluctance to act than a depiction of situation in which all current strategies for handling it seem equally ineffectual. Chesnutt is sympathetic to the particular kind of frustration that exists when two different value systems collide, when human rights violations that seem to demand an immediate and unequivocal response come in conflict with a status quo that even would-be revolutionaries consider necessary to maintaining and sustaining progress—or at least order and decency—as a whole.

“He would be a dreamer, indeed, who should hope to change these conditions save by the slow processes of growth,” wrote another reviewer of *Marrow* (“Review”). Yet the novel seems targeted to dreamers, to those who feel that the accommodationist position still leaves some larger and graver questions unresolved, Chesnutt's readers—he hopes—among them. Miller's obvious impotence (confirmed by the destruction of his son/seed), when set against Josh Green's equally nihilistic actions, opens up a vacuum in which Janet Miller's position can be heard and felt. Janet's position involves a vehement assertion of her right to consideration as a wronged mother and woman as well as a principled refusal to deprive Olivia of the same right, despite Olivia's crimes against her. Janet does justice to the most authentic intuitions behind both Miller and Green's positions: the validity of black protests against violations of human rights as well as the wisdom of pursuing those rights through nonviolent and conciliatory actions. We should note, however, that Janet is able to articulate this position only because her husband has a skill that Major and Mrs. Carteret finally need—Chesnutt is very clear that even in this

crisis Olivia is motivated entirely by her desperate fear for her own child; she never expresses any real sympathy for Janet's loss. "You are young," she says instead, "and may yet have many children—this is my only hope!" (244) Olivia confesses her involvement in covering up Janet's legitimacy and inheritance only as a final bargaining tool, and it is definitely possible to argue that in this novel Chesnut's final hope for racial reconciliation lies neither in black nor white virtue nor anything moral at all but in the inevitable "evolutionary process" of the two races drawing into closer proximity with each other and being forced to find harmonious ways of dealing with the vehement demands of their respective needs and desires, one of the most basic of which is motherhood and its intense admixture of possessive and nurturing instincts. Yet we must also note that this process depends on two equally indispensable contingencies: on Miller's cultivation of a marketable skill that gives him (and his wife) leverage to make demands and on their ability to wield that power in ways that extricate everyone involved from the constraints of exploitive exchange. The moment of freedom and hope is the moment in which the ethos of the marketplace enables its own transcendence, in which the pursuit of profit provides buyers and sellers with an opportunity to transform financial payoff into a moral/emotional one. We might note too that the transformation does not involve substituting equitable exchange for exploitive exchange but imagining a world in which people are awarded what they are assumed to deserve as human beings even if they never live up to that potential or even manage to produce some socially serviceable good.

If *The House Behind The Cedars* is about validating the sentiments that undergird the tragic romance and *The Marrow of Tradition* is about finding some strategy for

incorporating those sentiments into the narrative of American life, *The Colonel's Dream*, Chesnutt's third and last published race novel, is about understanding the reasons for the failure of these goals. Colonel French is a character who combines—supposedly—the best of both worlds, a Southern aristocrat with a romantic appreciation for Old South traditions who has migrated North after the war and achieved success as a principled industrialist. When the novel opens, his business has been forced to sell out to a larger trust, and he and his partner are waiting by the telephone to see if they have sold out for a gain or a loss. Once they find out they have realized a gain, the Colonel packs up his ailing son and returns to his boyhood home in North Carolina for what he intends to be a three-month vacation. While there he falls under the charm of old associations, buying back his ancestral home and rescuing the old family retainer Peter from being sold into peonage. Eventually he sees “the old Eureka cotton mill of his boyhood” standing idle and he decides to buy the old place and revive the milling industry in Clarendon along principles that are more enlightened than those governing the Excelsior Mills in the neighboring town (104). The Excelsior Mills are controlled by Bill Fetters, Colonel French's childhood enemy, who “came back after the war, with money” and owns a monopoly over both towns' business and property interests (35). Fetter's father was the town slave trader, and the similarities between the sins of father and son remind readers that slavery and wage labor perpetuate the same abuses if industry is not regulated by humane laws and enlightened principles. Although forced out by a monopoly in the North, Colonel French imagines that his money and ideals, along with his appreciation for the best of what the old South stands for, will enable him to implement progressive business practices in his “backward old town,” in ways that would be impossible in “the

great centers of commerce” from which he has come (117). In the process he hopes to “do something for humanity, something to offset Feters and his kind, who were preying on the weaknesses of the people, enslaving white and black” (117). Unfortunately, the Colonel’s enthusiasm proves unequal to the townspeople’s prejudices: despite weathering numerous setbacks, French finally surrenders and returns north when a mob unearths his servant Peter’s coffin and dumps it on his front porch. Peter has died after unsuccessfully attempting to save French’s son from being crushed by a railway car, and little Phil’s dying wish was that the two of them be laid to rest together in the family plot in the white folks’ cemetery.

Critics have puzzled over why this particular action becomes the last straw, when French has stood firm through his unsuccessful battle against peonage, through the lynching of a black man whom French had attempted to save from unlawful imprisonment, and through the death of his son as well as his servant Peter. The cotton mill, the actual enterprise in which French is engaged, is still standing and moving forward at the novel’s end, and Colonel French is no radical—until he involves himself in the issue of peonage through an attempt to do a favor for his new fiancée, he has been prepared to work slowly and achieve change primarily through promoting industry and helping establish a prosperous and law-abiding middle class in Clarendon, overtly challenging racism only when it interferes with his business practices or results in some grievous injustice. “Diligently he would work to lay wide and deep foundations of prosperity, education, and enlightenment, upon which would rest justice, humanity, and civic righteousness,” French thinks even after the lynching: “Patiently would he await the results of his labors, and if they came not in great measure during his own lifetime, he

would be content to know that after years would see their full fruition” (279). As Ernestine Pickens remarks in *Charles Chesnutt and the Progressive Movement*, French is the ideal “super-white” character whom Chesnutt believes it is the duty of the fiction writer to portray, a character not too accommodationist but also not too extreme to incur white opprobrium (92). Although he relies on the “foundations of prosperity, education, and enlightenment” to surmount prejudice in the long run, he is also not above agitating for immediate justice when the occasion presents itself—even taking his case against peonage to the national courts, arguing that generations “already in existence” are as entitled to consideration as “generations yet unborn” (219). French clearly does not lack courage or initiative, nor does he exhibit a naiveté about the amount of time and effort his reforms will need to achieve fruition; after the lynching, he writes a letter to his Northern detailing his intention to stay in the South and continue his work. But when he wakes up he finds Peter’s coffin sitting on his porch, with a note attached that has been written by the less literate members of the white community, and immediately packs up and leaves.

Although the unearthing of the coffin has an oppressive and fatalistic force that seems to align the text with naturalistic narratives of the period, it is difficult to determine why this particular acts has such an unsettling effect on the Colonel, especially in light of his determination to struggle through worse adversities. Only Laura Treadwell, the colonel’s fiancée, seems to anticipate the reaction the unearthed body will have on him, expressing no surprise at his decision to leave even though she confronts him (albeit with “sorrow rather than reproach”) with abandoning “the work which you have begun” (285). In a brief summation at the novel’s end, Chesnutt himself accuses the Colonel of “having put his hand to the plow and turned back,” insisting that while men cannot “gather grapes

of thorns or figs of thistles...other hands have taken up the fight which the colonel dropped” (293). Manufacturing and popular education are growing in the South, Chesnutt says, as well as a “new body of thought, favorable to just laws and their orderly administration (294). Yet despite Chesnutt’s willingness to sound a positive note at the novel’s end, French’s defeat by the unearthed coffin signals Chesnutt’s awareness that Southern problems are deeper than can be fixed by the idealistic and piecemeal process of one reformer, however well-intentioned. “A new body of thought” is needed—“a changed attitude of mind” (294).¹⁷ Colonel French embodies an idealism that concerns Laura (and Chesnutt), especially since she is one of the most idealized elements of French’s dream, the ““dream...of the old and happy past on which [he] hoped to build, as upon the foundations of the old mill, a broader and a fairer structure”” (284). This dream can survive the self-sacrificial death of an old servant and the far-off lynching of a guilty Negro—as long as the colonel is “spared the details”—but it cannot survive a rude assault on the delicate memories and sensibilities that form the “foundation” of a specific kind of philanthropic motivation (277). From the beginning Peter has been one of the colonel’s most treasured links to the “dead past,” and the townspeople’s apparent regret over his death is one of the factors that consoles French in his grief and fuels his resolution to stay in Clarendon (25). His dream has been augmented by the desire to make the town “a monument to mark his child’s resting place” (276). As he takes comfort in the town’s sympathy, he resolves that “his fight against Fetters and what he represented should take on a new character: henceforward it should be a crusade to rescue from threatened barbarism the land which contains the tombs of his loved ones” (276). Consequently, when these tombs are unceremoniously and inelegantly desecrated the colonel, like many

¹⁷See Andrews *Literary Career* 255-6 and previous.

a Greek hero before him, considers this an unpardonable injury, one that he can no longer focalize in Fetters—the enemy is indeed baser and more pervasive than he has proved capable of imagining or confronting.

Andrews argues that *The Colonel's Dream* is in many ways the classic American initiation story of the idealist who becomes disillusioned with the American dream, who falls victim to oppressive cultural forces that are also always a symbol or manifestation of the evil that lies within the human heart. Colonel French is unable to stand this glimpse into the “New South’s heart of darkness,” the human predilection to run after evil like little Phil chases after the black cat, and his retreat is an indictment on both the thoroughness of Southern degeneracy and the inefficacy of the ideals of most well-intentioned but naïve middle-class progressivists (*Andrews Literary* 250). Chesnut himself has French-like sensibilities that have been exacerbated by his twenty-year absence from the South; his own inclinations and experiences lie closer to those of middle-class whites than they do to a Bud Johnson or an Uncle Peter (259). He has himself fled the South like Colonel French flees it, and his attempt to intervene in Southern affairs through the medium of fiction is heavily indebted to romantic stereotypes that he is nevertheless aware are often dangerously and debilitatingly deceptive. No doubt this double-consciousness, this awareness of the inadequacy of middle-class ideals and experiences in dealing with Southern ills, combined with a natural identification with these same values—and a fear of offending against these values—contributes to Chesnut’s reluctance to completely condemn French or to graphically depict the “sordid, brutal” details of actual instances of oppression (“To

Be”).¹⁸ As in his other novels, this confusion of affinities and intent has repercussions for the novel’s form: Chesnutt finds it hard to identify with any single character or even to create full-orbed characters when he exists in an unlicensed and undefined place between the white and black worlds, yet he also proves squeamish about describing the lynching in a genuinely affective manner, thus leaving readers in doubt about the Colonel’s character and effectiveness, Uncle Peter’s humanity or the genuine urgency of the problem. As with *The House Behind the Cedars* and *The Marrow of Tradition*, Chesnutt experiences difficulties in fleshing out narratives that his audience is determined to keep from becoming too realistic; consequently, he is almost always driven back to romance or allegory to make his essential points. If American racial relations make the kind of narrative that Chesnutt glimpses—at death’s door—in *The Marrow of Tradition* seem increasingly unimaginable and unmarketable, then Chesnutt has no choice but to attempt to allegorize the reasons why, in an allegory that is itself a symptom of the problem. Chesnutt recognizes that the bourgeois reluctance to confront evil directly—to see it as anything more than an affront to some effete code that pertains between men and gentlemen—is a large reason for its failure to remedy that evil.

For a twenty-first century reader, one of the most annoying features of any given Howells novel is his protagonists’ refusal to treat lower-class suffering and anger as if it demands a stronger response than a conciliatory dinner party. Yet the coffin on Colonel French’s front porch is not meant just to guild the outrage of the black holocaust with an appeal to how tacky its methods are to the sensibilities of gentleman. As in *The House Behind the Cedars*, Chesnutt is both appealing to middle-class sensibilities and reminding

¹⁸ See Andrews *Literary Career* 235 a quotation from Chesnutt’s correspondence with Walter Hines Page, his eventual publisher, over the advisability of moderating []

his sheltered readers that the truths that bourgeois novels dramatize, sentimentalize, or allegorize are still there to be unearthed by the real reformer, who never assumes that a pretty burial in a white cemetery gets rid of the corpse inside. What the real reformer/attentive reader might recognize is that the colonel's hopes for racial renewal in the wake of his son's death point towards a more authentic expectation that, like Olivia and Janet over the body of another child, death will have clarified everyone's priorities, reminding both black and white of their common humanity and the insignificance of their differences in light of their common end. The last nine chapters are laid out to illicit this expectation, as well as its defeat. The situation is extreme enough to demand a Christ figure, someone innocent whose sacrifice might become the means of salvation and redemption for the people, since all other means have failed. Chesnut feels compelled to offer two, one of them a white child, since his sacrifice of black characters in previous novels has failed to accomplish the desired end. In addition, Chesnut has the black character "sin" against the white child by telling him the story that "unwittingly lure[s] him to his death," a story that itself dramatizes the black (i.e. human) proclivity for evil that lies within everyone (290). Yet this does not prevent Phil, with true little Eva innocence, from requesting that he and Uncle Peter be buried side by side. It also enables the colonel to articulate to the protesting undertaker a sentiment that Chesnut expects to ring true for his middle-class audiences: "when a person reaches the grave, he is not far from God, who is no respecter of persons, and in whose presence, on the judgment day, many a white man shall be black, and many a black white" (262). The colonel's similar expectations are initially confirmed when the cemetery's board of trustees is convened by the mayor, a man "from the same class as Fetters" (264). The

rest of the trustees are aristocrats, and among them they manage to mollify the mayor by linking arms with him as they proceed to Colonel French's house, where the colonel's dignity under his palpable grief convinces them all to "let the matter go by default" (266). The only person who displays any vulgar disrespect in the days leading up the funeral is Feters himself, whose "tasteless" opinions are not relayed to the colonel but nevertheless confirm his sense (and presumably, the readers) that Feters is the real culprit in a town whose offenses are merely their "conservatism" and their susceptibility to wrong opinions and wills stronger than theirs (269, 276).

The double funeral is a triumph of humanity, sanctified by both God and art, in which Chesnutt repeatedly invokes the similarities between Peter and Phil's burials/ends as proof of and propaganda for egalitarianism. Afterwards, however, things begin to disintegrate fairly rapidly as a series of confrontations with death undermine this exalted depiction of it as the great equalizer. The first challenge to this summation comes in the subplot, which Chesnutt has developed from a short story written in conjunction with the conjure tales. In its early version this story was an aesthetically and emotionally satisfying tale of successful black vengeance. In the version that intrudes into the Colonel's dream, however, an aging and impoverished plantation owner—the patriarch of a family whose most recent descendent is a suitor for the hand of Laura Treadwell's niece—lives with his equally ancient slave mistress on his decaying plantation, a slave mistress he had whipped and mutilated during the War for destroying his marriage prospects with a white woman. After this whipping he discovers that she is the only one with knowledge of the whereabouts of a bag of gold his dead predecessor had supposedly hidden on the property, but she pleads dumbness as a result of her injuries, which

presumably include (although once again the novel refrains from providing details) some injury to her tongue and mouth. In the present time of novel, the master is dying as little Phil and Uncle Peter's double funeral is moving towards its conclusion, dying in a melodramatic scene in which the slave mistress proves she can speak and could have spoken all along but that the gold was never hidden on the property except for the hour in which the master had her whipped. In the earlier version meant for the conjure tales (and to Uncle Julius' delight), the slave mistress doesn't speak at all until after the master dies, at which point she shows his successor the hidden jewels and plantation deeds and everything is restored to its former glory. In *The Colonel's Dream*, however, the hidden treasure has never been there at all and its legend proves to be an(other) empty dream. The master's death and the futility of both his and his mistress' ineffectual remorse over their respective sins, avarice, hatred and revenge, suggest to the reader that death does not always breed reconciliation and redemption, that in fact it came come too late to do anything but entrench the legates of slavery even deeper in their vengeful pasts.

The next chapter portrays both the lynching and the unearthing of Peter's coffin. The lynching depresses the colonel—it signals a defeat—even though it does not completely deter him from his dreams. Yet it confirms the sense established in the preceding chapter that the emotions that collect around death, especially violent deaths, can often reignite and inflame hatreds and passions in the living rather than invoke a sense of their futility or suggest the value of incorporating thoughts about the finality of death and/or the possibility of divine judgment into daily actions. Colonel French's response to the lynching is typical of people of his class: lynching practices were known and reported throughout the North and were deplored by the better classes who

nevertheless preferred to be “spared the details,” to avoid confrontations with violence and Otherness that are less successfully ignored when mahogany caskets are dumped on their doorsteps. In this case, the lynching victim’s obvious guilt seems meant to bear the complex burden of both conceding the wide-spread belief that such measures were confined to clear-cut cases of violent criminality and of insisting that “law and order” should prevail even in “clear-cut” cases. Unlike the muckraking journalists of the time—or even an anti-lynching activist like Ida Wells—Chesnutt exhibited a palpable and confessed reluctance to approach the sordid details of such events at the same time that he deplored this reluctance in the audience who read his books and whose willingness to look the other way was, as he was well aware, one of the main obstacles to stamping out the practice. Nevertheless, as one of a trio of violent deaths/incidents occurring in the wake of the double funeral, the lynching serves to heighten the sense established in the preceding chapter that death does not always accomplish the goals that Chesnutt sets out for it to accomplish in *The Marrow of Tradition*, where the two half-sisters bond over the body of the dead child in the post-apocalyptic wasteland of Wellington.

Despite its conciliatory coda, *The Colonel’s Dream* is meant to register Chesnutt’s increasing pessimism about the faint note of hope sounded at the end of *The Marrow of Tradition*, which depicts the auspicious convergence of several factors that Chesnutt believed were essential to racial uplift, the first being black educational and economic betterment, a goal Chesnutt that shared with black and white accommodationists. The second goal, however, was immediate civil and political rights for African-Americans, a goal that very few of his contemporaries shared. Consequently, Chesnutt spends a large amount of space in his novels and short stories demonstrating

how easily economic progress can be derailed by blacks' lack of legal protection; his dramatization of the Wilmington riots and the havoc they wreck on the thriving middle-class black population in just one reminder of the instability of economic gains when African-Americans are increasingly deprived of the few rights and opportunities they gained in the wake of Civil War. But he also recognizes that African-Americans' rights are not self-evident to many whites, that at the bottom of disenfranchisement and segregation and lynching and peonage is not—despite any insistence to the contrary—rational and impartial awareness or agreement, if such things are possible, but deep-rooted prejudices that cloak themselves in a variety of arguments—to divine right, to evolutionary “science” (often equated, as it is by Clarendon’s minister, with divine will) to tradition, to natural rights or to any combination of these and more. Prejudice cannot be answered by rational argument alone or at least by the kind of argument that passes for rational among the 19th-century. Consequently, the answers Chesnut suggests, his alternative foundations for justice, run the gamut from an appeal to the inevitability of miscegenation and interracial love to the commonality of black and white experiences, which include the experience of birth and motherhood and the experience of death. All of these arguments lend themselves to emotional appeals rather than rational ones, although Chesnut was not adverse to appealing to both or considering them inseparable; in the last analysis, all are meant to induce some kind of recognition that black people are human and that as humans they have a right to equal treatment regardless of any suggestions to the contrary. Consequently, it seems inevitable that Chesnut would turn to various syntheses of the romance and the realist novel if he was attempting to address emotions that transcended appeals to law and order or to accomplish reforms that lay

outside the scope of the black accommodationist agenda, which was notoriously anti-intellectual and anti-literary, invested in trades and industrial education. Novels are not, after all, pure political treatises, even when they are didactic or dedicated to social realism. In *The House Behind the Cedars* Chesnutt attempts to sway his audience simply by casting his heroine in a role they recognize, that of the innocent victim, in hopes that her plight—her death escaping both black and white molesters—will trigger responses that white audiences have become conditioned to make to threatened chastity in women. Yet even here the appeal of the character relies on the extent to which she is a recognizably bourgeois heroine, dedicated to marriage, family, decorum and self-sacrificial service to others. In *The Marrow of Tradition* Chesnutt skews in the opposite direction, invoking the romance in order to meld it more firmly to bourgeois conventions, demonstrating that many of the occult fantasies associated with miscegenation are, in fact, legitimate relations that need to be acknowledged in ways that neutralize the more sinister implications of the romance, particularly its preoccupation with retribution and vengeance.

In *The Colonel's Dream* romance has been drained from the Southern landscape and re-deposited in the Northern minds where it has (Chesnutt knows) resided all along. By the time the novel concludes, every romance or folktale it tells has been de-mystified and stripped of its nostalgic appeal, including Uncle Peter's dialect tale about a black cat, a tail that lures Phil to his death under a railway car. At the novel's conclusion, everyone has succumbed to the railway car, taking the trains back North where—as Laura's niece well knows—what is real in American romance resides in the dining rooms of the Waldorf-Astoria and the drawing rooms of the Vanderbilts and the Rockefellers and the

wit of the Ward McAllisters (48). Despite its appeal—especially in its Old South versions—to ideals of feudalism, aristocracy, and tradition, the American romance and its local-color sister are wedded too closely to their bourgeois origins to be an effective means of combating the problems of the New South, and the negro remains excluded from the bourgeois realist-romance of the self-made man and the American dream. Consequently, Chesnut is forced to turn romance into allegory if he cannot make it real. What is needed in the South, Chesnut suggests, is not men who occlude their vision with dreams and attempt to apotheosize institutionalized racism, to turn the Uncle Peters of the South into martyrs and fetishes, but men who are willing to open up the coffin and face the rotting corpse inside, resurrecting it as a new man. The lesson of both *The Marrow of Tradition* and *The Colonel's Dream* is that the upper-class white man's commitment to justice, a necessary component of the battle against racism, lacks force unless it is manifested as an outgrowth of intense personal feeling, as an encounter with love and death that could breed hatred and despair but instead becomes an occasion for surrendering grief and anger and latching onto the salvific virtue of universal compassion, which then fuels the grimy fight for civic and political rights.

Unfortunately, the colonel's confrontation with death is not violent enough to loosen him from the grip of his genteel dreams. That the novel lacks mothers is perhaps significant as well—that the colonel's wife is dead before the story opens and Laura Treadwell is childless and unable to extricate herself from the transfixing arc of the colonel's fantasies, although her own acts of philanthropy are more persistently and quietly effective than his even if not calculated to radically alter the Southern landscape. *The Colonel's Dream* is in many ways a novel about gender and class, about the ways in

which the dominant cultural narrative needs to be broadened and enriched by an investment in emotions and experiences that have been historically restricted to marginalized groups or diffused into escapist artworks, high or low. It is a novel about the ways that the bourgeois story of upward mobility represses deeper human needs and desires and the ways that middle-class art enable human-rights atrocities by pandering to middle-class sensibilities. Hampered by the realists' disdain for didacticism and sensationalism yet aware that his subject matter lay outside the accepted realist narrative trajectory, Chesnutt critiques the effectiveness of that narrative by reminding readers of its complicity in sentimentalism and the falsification of human experience under capitalism. This quasi-naturalist approach unfortunately failed to move readers, partly because the depiction of America's sordid underbelly held liabilities for Chesnutt that it lacked for Dreiser, Crane or Norris and which, consequently, he felt compelled to approach indirectly, a strategy that his audience failed to appreciate. Disappointed by the failure of his third race novel, Chesnutt turned his attention back to business.

Although my dissection of the romantic and realist narrative trajectories in these novels may seem over-determined in light of Chesnutt's own patchwork handling of both and the general American tendency to domesticate the romance, the distinction *was* over-determined by and for the late-nineteenth century realists who dominated the literary landscape that Chesnutt sought to penetrate, and one of the most curious proofs of the extent to which Chesnutt registered this dichotomy lies in the pair of race novels he wrote in the 1920s. Neither *Paul Marchand, F.M.C.* (written in 1921) nor *The Quarry* (1928) found a publisher, but they share an intriguing plotline: a man raised as a Negro

discovers in adulthood that he is actually white but chooses to “pass” rather than to repudiate his family and his people. The difference between the two books is equally interesting: one is a pure romance and the other a realist novel. *Paul Marchand, F.M.C.* is set in New Orleans in 1821 and bears little to no relationship to early twentieth-century life; its protagonist is—apparently—a well-to-do quadroon, a member of the large New Orleans community of free people of color. When he finds out that he is not only white but the legitimate heir to one of the city’s wealthiest and oldest Creole families, he is able to wreck vengeance on his enemies, who turn out to be his cousins, in a manner calculated to satisfy the most romantic reader. *The Quarry* is set in 1920s Harlem and features fictionalized characterizations of many race activists and prominent figures of the time period. It chronicles the story of an infant adopted by a childless white couple who turn him over to a prosperous African-American family when his dark skin tones and his belatedly-told back story convince everyone that he is a quadroon. When the young man proves, instead, to be a legitimate descendent of Italian aristocracy on one side and Mayflower ancestors on the other, there are no real wrongs to be righted—Donald Glover has had one of the best upbringings and educations available to an African-American of his time and chooses to continue to identify with the race with which he is “psychologically and spiritually” one (*Quarry* 277-8).¹⁹

The message of both these books is less that race is a cultural construct, not a genetic mandate, than that Chesnut’s assimilationist message pertains to whites as much as, if not more than, blacks. As Dean McWilliams says, “the logic of Chesnut’s assimilationism requires that whites must first become blacks before blacks can become

¹⁹Dean McWilliams edition of *The Quarry* follows the 276-page manuscript in the Fisk Collection. See McWilliams’ introduction for details.

white” (xiii). Regardless of bloodlines, “whites must be persuaded to enter the black world, morally and spiritually, to see the black condition from inside” (McWilliams xiv). The “elevation of whites” has been Chesnut’s goal from the beginning, and if he has achieved it here, in this ironic way, for at least two characters, his task has clearly been aided by a climate of greater opportunity for blacks. Although Donald is raised in the South where discrimination still exists, his educational and economic opportunities have improved from those of Chesnut’s earlier characters, and those opportunities have not come at the expense of repudiating his family or his race. Donald’s mother is one of the book’s strongest characters: she is the one who conceives the vision for Donald to be a leader of his people, refusing to let him be helped by whites, and she finances his college education by starting a cosmetics business that appeals to black and white consumers alike. In fact, Mrs. Glover’s enterprise, which she develops at Donald’s suggestion, enables black barbers who have traditionally monopolized the black and white beauty industry to commercialize their products and combat “the tightening of race lines and the competition of whites” (95). *The Quarry* is perhaps Chesnut’s silent acknowledgment of the power of economic uplift, even while he insists that it still leaves much to be desired—it has allowed to him to write a realist novel of upward mobility for blacks that assimilates and neutralizes many of the dark conventions of the romance. The Seatons’ discovery of Donald’s supposed black ancestry and their resignation of his upbringing, which “would make a theme for a romance,” as sighs one of the more “sentimental” daughters of the black Senator whom the Seatons ask for advice, turns out to rest on a confusion of hospital records, and when the situation is laid before Daniel he has the freedom to reach a “logical” decision that is nevertheless “in accordance with his feelings

and principles” (41, 278). This integration of reason and emotion in a realist narrative, the collapse of the white experience into the black—however contrived—frees Chesnutt to write a local-color novel that does not bear the burden of a political agenda. As more and more of the black experience becomes amenable to the rags-to-riches narrative, to the American *bildungsroman*, Chesnutt becomes more free to dismiss sentimentalism as entertainment, to situate discrimination in a more remote and exotic past: the romantic/realist dichotomy no longer reflects and sustains the black/white one, so Chesnutt feels increasingly free to succumb to its allure.

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