SOCIO-ECONOMIC CLASS MOBILITY IN AMERICAN NATURALIST FICTION

A Thesis

Presented to

The Graduate Faculty of The University of Akron

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

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August, 2013
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHAPTER</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I. INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. EXAMINING THE RISE</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. FACTORS OF THE FALL</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. THE IMMIGRANTS AND THE “AMERICAN DREAM”</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. CONCLUSION</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WORKS CITED</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Just like any other genre of literature, texts that are identified as a part of the category of American Naturalism must follow a series of conventions in order to be accurately labeled “American Naturalism.” Conventions of the genre include an examination of socio-economic class movement as well as class consciousness and a generally pessimistic attitude towards the capitalist system that creates differences in socio-economic strata. American Naturalism is defined by these terms, and yet there are a subtler, more sub-textual series of conventions that are not explicitly stated in the definition of American Naturalism. These implicit conventions are related to the explicit conventions of American Naturalism and largely focus on determinist factors of economic and personal success as well as social Darwinism, which is, of course, closely linked to objective financial and personal (i.e. social, familial, emotional) success.

The purpose of this study is to outline the various implicit conventions of American Naturalism as they relate to socio-economic class movement and class consciousness, as well as to identify an overarching theme throughout the genre related to a discussion of capitalism and socialism, and also to demonstrate how these implicit conventions function not only within their individual texts but also how they function in terms of a dialogue between texts in the genre. In order to effectively examine trends related to socio-economic class mobility, this study will examine a cross-section of
American Naturalist literature. In an attempt to examine as varied an authorship as possible within the confines of this format, this study will be focusing on the following texts: *Sister Carrie* (1900) by Theodore Dreiser, *Vandover and the Brute* (written in the 1890s and published posthumously in 1914) by Frank Norris, *The House of Mirth* (1905) by Edith Wharton, *Martin Eden* (1909) by Jack London, *The Jungle* by (1906) Upton Sinclair, and *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1917) by Abraham Cahan. This thesis will be split into three chapters. The first chapter will be focused on detailing factors and aspects of socio-economic class mobility in an upward direction, the second on examining the same mobility in a downward direction, and the third on exploring the experiences of immigrants as related to an embrace or disavowal of American Capitalism, and how the decision to accept or reject capitalism relates to immigrants’ ultimate socio-economic status.

The first chapter will focus on upward mobility and what American Naturalism implies is required for a successful upward move in socio-economic status. The factors discussed will be applied to two characters: Carrie Meeber of *Sister Carrie*, and Martin Eden of *Martin Eden*. These characters were chosen because they exhibit similar yet disparate paths to success. Carrie and Martin both experience financial success, but when examining the end of each novel, Carrie is the only character who can be seen as having accepted and embraced her level of success. This is largely due to her ability to reject her former station and cut ties with those with whom she had previously been close. This includes her immediate family, most notably her sister, who she moved in with when she first migrated from her small, rural hometown to the ‘big city’ of Chicago. Martin, on the other hand, becomes possibly more financially successful than Carrie, but is unable to
truly *internally* become a member of a higher socio-economic class. He is unable to cut ties with members of the working class he left behind, and is disillusioned by the individuals he finds in the higher class that he had worked so hard to join. This places Martin in a kind of socio-economic purgatory, un-tethered to either the class he had risen above or the class he had aspired to reach. The implicit conventions of American Naturalism explored in this chapter include primarily the disavowal of one’s previous working class background as a necessity for successful upward mobility.

Even though Carrie can be seen to be successfully upwardly mobile (at least in the most literal definition), she is lonely and depressed at the end of the novel, yet remains alive. Martin, on the other hand, is more deeply depressed and chooses to end his life. Carrie’s ability to survive through her upward mobility demonstrates that she feels at least partially connected to the class that she has moved into. She has a close friend in one of her peers and she is comfortable with and even revels in some of the luxury that she has earned. Martin is largely socially isolated (partially as a result of his own decisions regarding those around him) following the death of his poet friend Russ, and becomes completely disassociated from any sort of formal or informal social group. He is uncomfortable with his success and feels that others’ behavior towards him is inherently false, as they seem to worship him after his success where they shunned him so vehemently before.

The second chapter will focus on downward mobility and the factors involved therein. This chapter will examine Lily Bart of *The House of Mirth*, the one-named Vandover of *Vandover and the Brute*, and George Hurstwood of *Sister Carrie*. There are multiple deterministic factors in the socio-economic declines of these individuals, and a
great many of them appear in each of the three novels. Each character loses a great sum of money gambling at cards, either in poker, blackjack, or bridge. The specificity of this trend across the genre is significant for proving implicit conventions in American Naturalism, and that each character finds the card-gambling habit to be detrimental to his or her class status is important.\footnote{It is also interesting to note that in The Rise of David Levinsky, Levinsky makes a point to specifically mention that he did not have a weakness for playing cards; combining this with his financial success further illustrates the prevalence of this theme.} Another determining factor is related to sexuality and the appearance of or commission of sexual impropriety. For the men discussed in this chapter, sexual impropriety must be committed for their fortunes to be affected. Hurstwood commits adultery with Carrie and then tricks her into a sham marriage, and Vandover has premarital sex with a previously chaste young woman who subsequently becomes pregnant and commits suicide. Both of these indiscretions come to light in the community and serve as a basis for their social ostracism, which eventually affects their financial standing negatively. Vandover loses his spot in upper class society, and Hurstwood is sued for divorce by his wife, which leads him to make poor, hasty decisions that ultimate contribute to his decline in status. Lily however, as a woman, is not required to actually commit any act of sexual impropriety, and she in fact dies a virgin at the novel’s close. The mere whispered rumor of sexual dalliance is enough for Lily to experience a similar social ostracism as Hurstwood and Vandover, which has the same results for her financial standing as it does for the men. That there exists a double standard for men and women in terms of acceptable sexuality is not surprising, especially for the period in which the novels were written.
A final determining factor that will be discussed in this chapter is the role of fate. There are various moments in each of the three novels discussed in which a character’s outcome could be different based on the role of fate and chance. This is interesting especially because it is generally the characters themselves who attribute their misfortunes to chance, leaving little room for personal culpability. This idea of chance and fate is also very closely related to the lack of success each of the characters experiences while gambling.

The final chapter will explore capitalism and socialism and their effects on the success rate of the American immigrant. For this chapter, the titular character of Cahan’s *The Rise of David Levinsky* and Jurgis Rudkus of Sinclair’s *The Jungle* will be discussed. Levinsky finds financial success, while Jurgis spends the entirety of *The Jungle* teetering on the edge between survival and starvation. Both novels look at the capitalist financial system and the socialist financial system, and it is determined through the journeys of the protagonists that capitalism must be wholeheartedly embraced in order to be financially successful in America. Beyond just these systems, the novels also deal with the pros and cons of assimilation in America, and it becomes evident that in order to be successful, full assimilation is necessary. Levinsky is arguably more out of place as a Jewish Talmud scholar than Jurgis is as a laborer when they enter America, but while Jurgis and his family attempt to retain some of their Lithuanian traditions, (a decision that ultimately keeps them from becoming financially solvent) Levinsky is able and willing to completely abandon his Judaism and his Talmudic studies in order to find objective financial success.
By looking at this cross-section of American Naturalist literature, it becomes evident that Naturalists were using implicit conventions throughout their writing, conventions that are not necessarily laid out in a definition of the genre. Understanding these conventions allows for a richer understanding of the genre as a whole and of the various parts that make up a cohesive section of literature. Whether or not establishing these implicit conventions was conscious on the part of the Naturalist authors is not important. All that is important for showing themes across the genre is that these implicit conventions appear multiple times and are used by multiple authors. Authorial intent will not be significantly discussed in this study.

It may, at this point, be useful to briefly introduce some of the pertinent secondary sources that will be discussed alongside the primary texts. Perhaps the most relevant of these sources is Walter Benn Michaels’ *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism*. Michaels discusses three of the novels chosen for this study: *Sister Carrie*, *Vandover and the Brute*, and *The House of Mirth*. Michaels’ book examines the economic aspects of social status. He touches on the sexual economy and the commodification of the self as it is presented in *Sister Carrie* and *The House of Mirth*, and examines the implications of self-commodification in a market economy. He looks at issues of perpetual desire for goods and wealth, and puts all of these subjects within the historical context of the late 19th century. Michaels draws upon one of the other sources used this thesis throughout his book, namely the influential and seemingly timeless *Theory of the Leisure Class* by Thorstein Veblen. Veblen was one of the first scholars to explore the tendency of individuals to attempt to mimic and strive to rise above those individuals who are of a higher social class and financial standing, which he refers to as pecuniary emulation.
Veblen also introduces the idea of conspicuous consumption, a factor that appears and reappears throughout American Naturalism. The fact that Veblen’s book was published in 1899, directly before the publication of the novels discussed in this thesis is helpful as well in terms of contextualizing the behavior of the characters discussed. Veblen’s study presents compelling arguments about the formation of the leisure class, which will be especially helpful in a discussion of *The House of Mirth*.

Other secondary sources discussed within this thesis include, but are not limited to, Alan Trachtenberg’s *The Incorporation of America*, Amy Kaplan’s *The Social Construction of American Realism*, and TJ Jackson Lears’s *No Place of Grace*. Of these three texts, only Kaplan provides explicit literary criticism, as she discusses *Sister Carrie* and *The House of Mirth*. Kaplan’s book focuses primarily on authorship and social issues, and although this study is not interested necessarily in issues of authorship, her handling of the social issues that occur within *Sister Carrie* and *The House of Mirth* is helpful for understanding the socio-economic class movement that will be discussed throughout this thesis.

Lears and Trachtenberg do not engage in literary criticism, but their texts are helpful nonetheless for understanding the historical context of the novels discussed herein. Both authors explore social and economic issues that Americans were forced to deal with in the last decades of the 19th century and the first few years of the 20th, the time period in which all novels discussed here were written and published. By contextualizing these novels, the experiences that the characters go through and their issues involving socio-economic class mobility become easier to understand and easier to discuss. Instead of looking at these novels through a presentist lens, which would only
allow us to understand the issues in the text as they relate to our own modern worldview, using historical context and statements about the economic climate in which these characters ‘lived’ allows for greater understanding of and appreciation for the texts.
CHAPTER II
EXAMINING THE RISE

Between the 1860s and his death in 1899, Horatio Alger wrote over one hundred juvenile novels and short stories that followed a formulaic “rags-to-riches” plotline. His characters are poor but virtuous young boys who long to improve their station in life through hard work and honesty. They eventually reach a realistic, moderate level of success, generally with the assistance of a kindly elderly gentleman who recognizes something of himself in the struggling child. I point out that these protagonists reached a “realistic” level of success because it is pertinent to an exploration of similar themes in American Naturalism. Alger’s boys do not become President, they do not amass great wealth and status, and they do not rise from their lower-class beginnings to leisure class status. Rather, they raise themselves slightly above their original station, content to be clerks and modest businessmen, thriving in the center of the middle-class. Alger’s stories usually end with the young protagonist being established in his new position and invariably they have happy endings, with the reader content in the knowledge that everything will work out for this virtuous young man.

In his article *Rags to Riches to Suicide: Unhappy Narratives of Upward Mobility*, Renny Christopher points out that “the authentic Horatio Alger story always ends with the protagonist on the rise, rather than having arrived at success, because a curtain must be drawn against what happens next” (2-3). So, what is this great unknown that happens
after an impoverished boy gains standing and a modicum of economic success? This is the question that Naturalist literature seeks to answer. The question can only be answered by looking at the aftermath of the Alger trope and examining what happens after the story ends. This chapter will explore two texts written by two of the giants of American Naturalism, Jack London’s 1909 novel *Martin Eden* and Theodore Dreiser’s 1900 *Sister Carrie*. In my exploration of these texts, this chapter will focus on relationships between the texts and how they apply to the five themes that are crucial to a study of class dynamics in the genre. These themes are: the socio-economic homelessness that occurs when a successful rise in status is completed, the disillusion with middle and upper-class society that often appears following an elevation in status, issues of Social Darwinism and the question of free will, the impact sexuality and gender have on class, and finally, an examination of the prevalence of suicide in these works.

The two characters who can best be seen as having completed a successful rise in class status are the titular Martin Eden and Carrie Meeber. Their rise is slow for the majority of each of their novels, and then success comes rapidly as they are raised far above their previous socio-economic station. However, while Martin and Carrie each achieve commercial, economic success, they remain unhappy and alone at their novels’ endings, with Carrie left to sit in her omnipresent rocking-chair and ponder her loneliness, and Martin drowning himself in the final pages of the novel. In American culture where the phrase “money can’t buy happiness” is challenged daily, and economic and material success are barometers of a successful life, Martin and Carrie’s reactions to their newfound wealth may be puzzling to some. In the Naturalist’s world, however, true

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2 Aka Carrie Drouet, Carrie Hurstwood, and Carrie Madenda
wealth is measured by happiness, not a set of numbers, and it is plain to see that these characters are deeply unhappy, and therefore impoverished.

The question that remains, of course, is why are these characters emotionally impoverished with all of their material success? Although certainly not the only factor, one reason why these characters may be unhappy with their riches is that they exist between classes, socially homeless. They have been forced to leave behind their working-class backgrounds in order to fully ingratiate themselves into the upper-middle-class. What they fail to recognize, however, is that they can never be fully ingratiated into the upper-middle-class, because even if they cut all ties with their former world (as Carrie does), they still maintain certain ‘marks’ of the working-class. For Martin, making a complete break from his working-class family and friends is an impossibility. He maintains relationships with them even after he becomes a successful author, lavishing them with extravagant gifts (he goes so far as to buy his friend and former co-worker Joe a laundry) and attempting to remain as emotionally connected to his loved ones as he was when he was financially poor. This struggle between a class that must be abandoned and a class that may never be wholly accepting leaves Carrie and Martin un-tethered, homeless amidst all their money. As Christopher astutely notes, “people can’t be defined outside a community” (7).

Before entering into a detailed discussion of Carrie and Martin and their disparate paths to success, a slight digression regarding their chosen careers may be necessary. Both Carrie and Martin gain their success through artistic, performative work: Carrie thrives on the stage, and Martin finds his fortune through writing. These occupations are interesting because they are relatively unusual in the traditional “rags to riches” storyline,
and also because the prevailing theories about socio-economic class tend to ignore these
types of positions. When Veblen discusses occupations based on class, he divides jobs
and careers into a binary, stating that “modern economic institutions fall into two roughly
distinct categories- the pecuniary and the industrial” (ch. 9). So where does art fit in?
Carrie’s acting is certainly not industrial, and it would be rather a large stretch of logic to
try to assert that it is a pecuniary occupation, as those are generally thought of as being
business related. Martin’s writing does not fit into either category either. Here, then, we
have a dilemma. If, as Veblen claims, “entrance to the leisure class lies through the
pecuniary employments” (ch. 9), then how do we explain the financial success that both
Carrie and Martin find? This is not to say that Carrie and Martin truly reach the leisure
class, as they would be more accurately positioned in the upper-middle class, but their
success is unmistakable. It would appear that there is a third category of employment
needed to augment Veblen’s two-part system: creative and artistic employment. This type
of employment is not directly referenced anywhere in Veblen’s text, but it would seem
that it must be considered as an alternative means of approaching leisure class status.

There does appear to be a definitive difference between Carrie and Martin’s
ability to cast off their “previous lives.” Carrie seems to be able to see what Martin does
not, that “to rest happy with upward mobility, one must completely stamp out one’s
previous, working-class self, turn one’s back on working-class consciousness, and
embrace the oppressive values of the middle class without question” (Christopher 2). In
order to fully understand why Carrie is able to cast off her working-class relations and
thus ‘get out alive,’ as it were, from the novel, and why Martin has such difficulty in
doing so and is unable to survive his text, an examination of the paths that these characters take may be illuminating.

From the first pages of *Martin Eden*, Jack London takes pains to ensure that his readers see the former sailor Martin Eden as an aesthete (albeit, a crude one) with a yen for beauty and knowledge. His desire to rise in society and to raise his economic status is prompted by the opening scene of the novel, in which he meets the ethereal Ruth Morse and her family. Upon his entry into their bourgeois home, Martin takes in his surroundings and notices a pile of books lying on a table. Immediately, his sensitivity to the potential that these books hold is piqued: “Into his eyes leaped a wistfulfulness and a yearning as promptly as the yearning leaps into the eyes of a starving man at sight of food” (London 1). Martin’s desire to improve his status is introduced here and becomes more and more highly developed and detailed as he meets the middle-class University student Ruth Morse and instantly develops an attraction to her. He does not want to raise his class status because of greed or a desire for fame or power; it is his desire for love, for Ruth’s love, that makes him want to enter into her class. After leaving the Morse’s home following their initial dinner, Martin “feel[s] the prod of desire to win to the walk in life whereon she trod” (London 9). Martin is immediately aware of the gulf between himself and Ruth, and knows that the only way to bridge that gulf is to elevate himself to her station. Martin’s motivations are noble, if heartbreakingly naïve, as any experienced reader can recognize that, based on their dialects alone, Ruth and Martin do not make a likely match.

As Martin educates himself and begins to write, he does make *some* strides in bridging the chasm between himself and Ruth. However, for every step he gets closer to
Ruth, he moves one step away from his family and his working-class chums. One way in which this can be seen is by examining Martin’s speech, as grammar and dialect are often an indication of class in Naturalist literature. In the opening scene at the Morse’s, Martin describes the incident that led him to an acquaintanceship with Arthur Morse:

> It wasn’t nothin’ at all… any guy ‘ud do it for another. That bunch of hoodlums was lookin’ for trouble, an’ Arthur wasn’t botherin’ ‘em none. They butted in on ‘m, an’ then I butted in on them an’ poked a few… I wouldn’t ‘a’ missed it for anything. When I seen… (London 11)

In this example, Martin’s lack of education is startlingly evident. His usage of apocope and elision in his speech are sharply contrasted with the precise, controlled manner in which the Morses speak. When we meet Martin’s brother-in-law, Mr. Higginbotham, a few pages later, we see that his speech is similar to Martin’s when he tells his wife that Martin has “ben drinkin’” (17). At this point, Martin is still tethered to his working-class culture, which is manifested through speech patterns.

As Martin becomes more educated, however, he begins to leave his working-class brethren behind. His first one-on-one encounters with Ruth are devoted solely to improving Martin’s grammar. Their interactions are more tutor-pupil than that of lovers, and as Ruth molds him into the man she needs him to be, Martin becomes a sort of gender-reversed Eliza Doolittle to Ruth’s Henry Higgins. After Martin begins to master standard grammar and build his vocabulary, he thrills at showing it off to Ruth. In discussing his desire to write for a living, Martin asks, “‘but then, may not I be peculiarly constituted to write?’ he queried, secretly exulting at the language he had used” (48). At this point, Martin has linguistically left the world of the working-class and joined, at least in part, the bourgeoisie.
During his rise, Martin is able to live simultaneously in both worlds: that of the working class, and that of the upper-middle class bourgeoisie. He is not yet materially successful, which allows him to keep his pauper’s clothes and subsist on a meager diet, but he has become intellectually successful, which gives him the ability to converse with members of the middle-class on their level, occasionally even going above their own understanding and ability. When he begins working with Joe in the laundry in order to earn enough money to continue writing, Martin shows distinct self-awareness:

Martin knew of the enormous gulf between him and this man - the gulf the books had made; but he found no difficulty in crossing back over that gulf. He had lived all his life in the working-class world, and the camaraderie of labor was second nature with him. (85, italics in text)

At this point, Martin is still straddling the line between working-class and middle-class, a line that he soon realizes is more tangible than he had previously expected. At this point, however, Martin is still financially insolvent, which allows him to identify with Joe and other members of the working-class. Although he might not find much to stimulate himself intellectually, his financial struggles are their financial struggles, and so they operate under many of the same societal strictures.

In detailing some of the struggles that Martin goes through while trying to become a published author, there is some interesting language being used to describe the way in which Martin views the editorial bodies to which he is submitting his stories. With the rejections pouring in and overwhelming him, Martin envisions a mass body categorically rejecting everything he submits:

He began to doubt that editors were real men. They seemed cogs in a machine…There was no human editor at the other end, but a mere cunning arrangement of cogs that changed the manuscript from one envelope to another and stuck on the
stamps… It was the rejection slips that completed the horrible machinelikeness of the process… not one editor had given… proof of existence. (London 117-118)

The use of mechanized language here is relevant to this study as it relegates the publishing process to an industrialized system. The industrialization of publishing then may correlate to the industrialization and mechanization of writing. According to Cyclone Davis, as quoted by Michaels, “they ‘would not be surprised to hear that some man had invented a machine for making books that dispensed with [the] author… and ground out paragraphs by steam.’ Tales of ‘automatic writing’ were common in the literature of psychology” (Michaels, ch. 6). If the editorship can be a mechanical process, so can the writing, which would raise the possibility that writing could be classed as an “industrial” occupation, per Veblen’s binary of careers.

When Martin begins to struggle with a sense of social homelessness is after the financial success comes. Ultimately rejected by Ruth, and thoroughly disappointed with the world of the middle-class, Martin tries to return to his former comrades, only to realize that he has outgrown them. He spends one evening with his working-class friends, a bittersweet evening that serves to enlighten him as to just how un-tethered he has become. London writes:

He had found no new home. As the gang could not understand him, as his own family could not understand him, as the bourgeoisie could not understand him, so this girl beside him, whom he honored high, could not understand him nor the honor he paid her. His sadness was not untouched with bitterness as he thought it over. (222)

Martin is the victim of a divided habitus, which Markov defines as “the conflict within a person drawn to two classes but truly belonging to neither” (20). This seems to be an appropriate assessment of Martin’s situation. He simultaneously yearns for the
respectability of the middle class while still pining for the world he has left behind. This is the point in the novel in which Martin’s suicide becomes inevitable. Alone, metaphorically homeless, and rejecting all possible avenues of companionship, Martin begins a descent into an abject depression from which he never returns.

Martin’s struggle with a divided habitus also conjures up concepts of the unhomely. Homi Bhabha discusses the unhomely in *The World and the Home*, defining it as “the estranging sense of the relocation of the home” (141). While Martin does not relocate in any sort of spatial, geographical sense, his social “home” has been relocated, and he exhibits signs of feeling estranged from his new social order. Essentially, Martin is experiencing “fragmented and competing social realities” (Kaplan 9). The reality that he has begun to leave (the working class culture) and the reality that he is beginning to enter (the bourgeois culture) exist simultaneously and in opposition to each other. Because of their inherent opposition, Martin is unable to integrate both realities into his sense of self, which leads to his sense of complete social alienation.

Christopher states that “the fortitude needed for the struggle [to be upwardly mobile] is fostered by working-class culture, but it is working-class culture one must abandon to achieve upward mobility and fit into the middle-class world one has achieved” (6). While it takes Martin the entirety of *Martin Eden* to realize this truth that shocks him to his core, Carrie Meeber is aware of the impossibility of holding fast to her working-class roots if she wishes to make her way up the social ladder from the novel’s outset. The very premise of the novel, as outlined in its opening pages, is evidence that Carrie knows exactly what is going to happen with her familial relations once she enters Chicago and leaves Columbia City forever. Carrie is malleable and plastic, shaping her
thoughts and actions to whatever situation she finds herself in. On the train from
Columbia City to Chicago, she bids goodbye to her prior life:

[Carrie experienced] A gush of tears at her mother’s farewell kiss, a touch in her
throat when the cars clacked by the flour mill where her father worked by the
day, a pathetic sigh as the familiar green environs of the village passed in review,
and the threads which bound her so lightly to girlhood and home were
irretrievably broken. (Dreiser 1)

Perhaps Carrie’s ease at leaving her home and her parents behind is due to this final
parting and to the physical and geographical gulf that now separates her from her family.
Martin’s division from the working-class was financial and intellectual, and thus
intangible. Carrie, however, has a concrete, tangible parting with her past as she rides the
train from Columbia City to Chicago. While Martin is forced to attempt to metaphorically
leave his past behind him, Carrie is able to do so literally.

Carrie’s introduction to Charles Drouet on the train to Chicago is also important
for her complete divorce from her family. Although she does not know it yet, Drouet will
become a caretaker for her, helping her make her way while she struggles in the city. She
is thus able to immediately replace her family with this charming man, a new type of
companion, one more suited to who Carrie wishes to become: a cosmopolitan,
fashionable, successful adult woman. Even as she travels to Chicago, Carrie’s thoughts
quickly turn to the material objects she might be able to consume once she arrives there.
Ostensibly, Carrie is traveling to Chicago in order to get a job and help her sister and her
brother-in-law pay their rent. However, “during her train ride to Chicago, Carrie’s dreams
leave no room for the main purpose of her journey- a job; instead, they revolve around
the things she wants to buy” (Kaplan 145). These dreams are made tangible when she
sees the stack of cash that Drouet is carrying with him. Simply seeing money is enough to
make Carrie long for it to be hers, just as much, if not more so, than she longs for what money can buy her.

Another aspect of Carrie’s personality and behavior that allows her to succeed in removing herself from her working-class roots is her materialistic nature. From her first encounter with Drouet, Carrie is hooked on materialism and has a strong reaction to the finery that Drouet so consciously sets on display: “There was a little ache in her fancy of all he described. Her insignificance in the presence of so much magnificence faintly affected her” (Dreiser 5). Carrie’s desire for material wealth is set up even before she reaches the city. She places a great deal of importance on wealth and “things,” and her attraction to Drouet is not emotional or even sexual, but is instead an attraction based solely on the material wealth that he represents. Here, then, is one of the great differences between Carrie and Martin. Martin is influenced to better himself and move up socially in order that he may be an acceptable match for Ruth, whom he loves. Carrie is influenced to move up socially only so far as she can be happy materialistically. Their motives are entirely different, and while Martin’s relationship with Ruth is never fully realized, Carrie does become financially successful, which is potentially the reason that she is able to reach the close of the novel with her life. She has reached her initial goals, goals which Martin was never able to achieve.

Like Martin’s rise, Carrie’s socio-economic journey takes its time. With her move to Chicago comes the beginning of Carrie’s rise, a lengthy process that takes her through a brief stint in a shoe factory, two sham marriages, a midnight flight from Chicago to New York, and finally a place on the stage, with all of the socio-economic benefits that come from theatrical success. Before Carrie can realize any of this success, however, she
begins her time in Chicago with her sister Minnie, Minnie’s husband Hanson, and their child, an unnamed, un-gendered infant. Immediately upon entering their flat, Carrie is repulsed, and she “[feels] the drag of a lean and narrow life” (Dreiser 9). It takes only moments for Carrie to realize that the only life that living with Minnie and Hanson can offer her is one of “a conservative round of toil” (Dreiser 10). It has been mere moments into her time in Chicago, and Carrie is already disappointed by what she has found waiting for her. Carrie is able to immediately recognize that if she is to truly achieve the material wealth that she yearns for, she needs to separate herself from her sister and the impoverished life she leads.

After the initial disappointment in the living conditions she is expected to endure, Carrie goes job-hunting, and it is here, as she wanders the streets and department stores of Chicago, that her materialism becomes fully formed. Instead of applying to work at a department store, Carrie wanders around, gazing at everything the store has to offer, and wanting it all.

She could not help feeling the claim of each trinket and valuable upon her personally, and yet she did not stop. There was nothing there which she could not have used- nothing which she did not long to own…. She felt keenly the fact that not any of these things were in the range of her purpose. (Dreiser 17)

This is Carrie’s first encounter with affluence, and she wants to be a part of it badly. She is ashamed that she is “a work-seeker, an outcast without employment, one whom the average employee could tell at a glance was poor and in need of a situation” (Dreiser 17). The shame that Carrie feels is towards her current financial situation. She is embarrassed, not because of anything inherent in her personality or appearance, but because of her

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3 Characterizing Carrie as materialistic is not meant to be a disparaging comment on her character, but rather a realistic look at her priorities.
poverty and the necessity for her to work. Martin may find honor in being a member of
the working-class, but Carrie has no respect for the workers’ plight, another detail that
juxtaposes their viewpoints and makes it easier to understand how Carrie can cast off her
previous life while Martin cannot.

As is necessary, Carrie gets a position in a shoe factory, a job that she loathes
deeply. Even though she hates the position she has been forced to take, the promise of
earning money is intoxicating. She fantasizes about what she might spend with her
earnings, ignoring the fact that much of her pay must go towards her share of the rent.
Her desires are unrealistic, showing that “fancy or imagination is the very agent of
excessive desire for Carrie” (Martin ch. 1). This desire is excessive because it is unlikely
that Carrie will be able to fulfill her wishes. In hoping for finery and lovely things, she
betrays her inability to function within her means, a key skill for anyone existing in a
market economy.

At any rate, Carrie works at the factory only briefly, being fired soon after she
starts for missing two weeks of work with an illness. After the misery that accompanied
her first foray into the working world, it is no surprise that Carrie finds herself loath to
look for a new position. It is this mindset that permits her to allow herself to be taken care
of by Drouet. This is an excellent example of another difference between Martin and
Carrie. Martin is self-determined, an individualist who wants to earn everything that he
has. Carrie, on the other hand, is more than happy to allow others to provide for her. Her
passivity enables her to be swept along with anyone desiring to help her, and this
passivity supports a reading of her character as inherently malleable.
The agreement she reaches with Drouet is a perilous one, and it speaks to a wide gender divide. Carrie gets involved with a man who is of a higher socio-economic class than she is; Martin seeks to do the same with a higher placed woman. The difference between these situations is that it would be far more scandalous for Ruth to provide for Martin and keep him as a sort of house-husband than it is when Drouet and Carrie attempt the same. Upon discovering her destitution, Drouet offers Carrie help in the form of a room she can move into, cash, and the first of her false marriages. Carrie debates the morality of accepting Drouet’s offer only briefly, and consents to, for all intents and purposes, prostituting herself. There may be some confusion regarding her decision making process here. From what we know of Carrie to this point, her decision to make such a life changing and morally ambiguous lifestyle change can be troubling in terms of rationalization. The key here, in order to understand Carrie’s motivation, is money. Carrie wants pretty things and to live comfortably, but above all else, she wants money, and imbues it with a sense of power in itself. As Michaels points out, “money for [Carrie] is never simply a means of getting what you want, it is itself the thing you want, indeed, it is itself your want” (ch. 1). If money is her ultimate desire, then Carrie’s decision to move in with Drouet becomes much more logically based. The decision to live with Drouet and accept his financial and social assistance was made the moment he gave Carrie those “handsome” ten dollar bills. Carrie derives a sort of sensual pleasure from the sight and feel of the bank notes, and it is therefore a clear and logical step for her to project that pleasure onto Drouet.

In order to move in with Drouet, Carrie is forced to cut ties with the last reminder of her Columbia City past: Minnie. She leaves Minnie and Hanson quite furtively,
without announcing her goodbyes and only leaving a cryptic note to her sister telling Minnie not to worry about her. This is the last mention in the novel of Carrie’s sister. She breaks completely with her and makes no attempt to ever contact her again. Neither does she ever seem to think about her parents, or consider contacting them. This may seem cold and unnatural, but in actuality Carrie is doing what Martin could not by making a clean break from her former life. When she examines her situation, she realizes that “she might well have been a new and different individual” (Dreiser 70). This ‘new’ Carrie Meeber, this Carrie Drouet, has managed to completely separate herself from the working-class family she left behind.

What we can see here is that American Naturalism appears to be suggesting that the only manner in which one can truly rise socially and economically is to remove all suggestions of any former life, to make a clean break with one’s past and look determinedly towards the future. Martin is unwilling (or perhaps unable) to do this, but Carrie is able and willing to do so, which is why her rise is more successful than Martin’s, and why she is able to continue living after she has reached her goals.

As previously mentioned, both Carrie and Martin are able to raise their class status to a certain degree and become successful, at least financially. Martin makes a fortune writing, and Carrie becomes the darling of the Broadway stage. They have elevated themselves to the apex that they so long yearned for, and yet neither finds happiness. If Sister Carrie and Martin Eden were Horatio Alger stories, they would have ended with Carrie’s big break on the stage and Martin’s first published story. Alas, their stories continue, and the reader quickly begins to realize what the characters do, that no amount of financial success is satisfying enough to offset crippling loneliness.
As with their motivations to rise, the reasons behind Martin’s and Carrie’s loneliness and disillusion are similarly disparate. Martin is jaded, having worked for so long and received so many rejections, that when the same people who shunned and rejected him now fawn over him, he finds it increasingly difficult to submit to their hypocrisy. He also finds himself deeply disillusioned with the bourgeois class that he strove for so long and so tirelessly to join. For Carrie, disillusion comes in the form of her own self, rather than the people around her. Carrie spends the majority of the novel trying to make her way, to be successful enough to afford all of the finery that she lusted after when she was a poor working-girl. Carrie equates luxury, expensive things, and popular opinion with good taste, and it is not until near the close of the novel that she realizes that she has perhaps not come so far as she thinks.

In her article *Class, Culture, and Capital in “Sister Carrie,”* Nina Markov explores Carrie’s relationship with Ames, a minor character who was afforded a larger role in Dreiser’s original draft of *Sister Carrie.* Initially, Dreiser intended for Ames to be a sort of cultural tutor for Carrie, leading her towards an appreciation of high culture in the form of literature and music. To Michaels, Ames represents “an intellectual Midwesterner brought on near the end of the novel to express Dreiser’s own opinions” (ch. 1). If Ames’ opinions are indeed a representation of the author’s thoughts, his appearances in the novel may hold more weight than they appear to at the outset. In rewrites of the novel, Dreiser, in an attempt to preclude Ames’s possibility as a future love interest for Carrie, includes Ames only briefly in two scenes, but his impact on Carrie is nonetheless felt strongly. According to Markov, “Ames represents the habitus of the upper class, or haute bourgeoisie, that exists in tension with the vulgar materialism of
Carrie’s lower- or working-class habitus” (2). Markov’s assessment seems on target when examining the two scenes in which Ames plays a part. In their first meeting, Carrie is paired with Ames for a dinner out with the Vances, a married couple who live in her apartment building. At this point of the novel, Carrie is ‘married’ to George Hurstwood, and yet she still looks at Ames with interest and desires to please him, to mold herself to his predilections and opinions. As Dreiser puts it, “She would like to be agreeable to this young man” (236).

As we can see from their interactions, Carrie immediately locks onto Ames as being of a higher socio-economic strata than the one she is currently occupying. As she is continuously striving to climb the socio-economic ladder, it is no surprise that Carrie seeks to please and impress him. Carrie’s desire to be ‘agreeable’ to Ames is borne out of her impression of him as “better educated than she [is]… his mind [is] better” (Dreiser 236). Ever one to snatch up an opportunity to improve herself, Carrie takes everything that Ames says very seriously, never once questioning his opinions but viewing all that he says as gospel. When discussing literature, a topic that is wholly unfamiliar to Carrie, she looks to Ames “as to an oracle” (Dreiser 236). After he criticizes Dora Thorne, which Carrie “supposed… people thought… very fine” (Dreiser 237), she feels the first pangs of a lack of culture. It is not until Ames announces “I shouldn’t care to be rich” (Dreiser 237) that Carrie realizes how far apart their worlds are. Nonetheless, she wants to please him, and when he agrees that to be an actor is a great thing, she immediately locks into acting as her ambition. In her mindset, “if she were a fine actress, such men as he would approve of her” (Dreiser 238).

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4 Carrie believes their marriage is legally binding, however, they were married under false names and therefore any legality is void.
Although Ames is not mentioned for the next one-hundred plus pages of text, when he returns to Carrie’s life there remains the same desire on Carrie’s part to please him and to make him, and men like him, approve of her. The word ‘desire’ is key here. As has already been pointed out, Carrie’s ultimate desire is for social improvement through financial gain. When Ames comes back into Carrie’s life, she is reaching the peak of her comedic theatrical career. She makes a great deal of money and has many admirers, and it would appear that she has finally reached her apex and has achieved everything she set out to achieve. While reaching her goals would suggest that Carrie experiences a sense of comfort and satisfaction, she seems to feel as if there is something missing. What is missing, of course, is something left to desire, without which, she will devolve into complacency. When Ames finally returns to her life through a rekindled friendship with Mrs. Vance, Carrie’s feelings are less intense than they were during their initial meeting, but she still maintains an innate desire to please, a desire that again emphasizes her malleability. By this point, Carrie’s success on the stage is well established. She is a popular comedic actress and has amassed a significant amount of wealth. She expects, given her previous experiences with Ames, that this will please him and that he will offer her congratulations. However, her encounter with Ames is not as she expects it to be.

She could hardly tell why the one-time keen interest in him was no longer with her. Unquestionably, it was because at that time he had represented something which she did not have; but this she did not understand. Success had given her the momentary feeling that she was now blessed with much of which he would approve. (354, italics mine)

Unfortunately for Carrie, as Markov points out, “as rich and successful as she is… she will never cross the symbolic boundaries between [herself and Ames]” (13). What Carrie
does not know, what she *could* not know, is that “her little newspaper fame was nothing at all to [Ames]. He thought she could have done better, by far” (Dreiser 354). He encourages her to give up comedy and go in for more dramatic roles, a suggestion that thrills Carrie and makes her momentarily forget her loneliness. However, the reader never sees Carrie search out this new avenue of theater, and so we leave her with the cultural gulf between herself and Ames still yawning. She is still lonely at the close of the novel, still alone with all her money and her admirers.

In order to understand Carrie’s mindset at the close of the novel and its relation to her change in socio-economic status, it is important to note in this section that Dreiser describes Carrie’s feelings of happiness as “momentary.” She has flashes of contentment with her elevated economic status, but her encounters with Ames make her realize how far she still has to go before she can attain a higher social class. It is possible to argue, however, that although Carrie appears unhappy at the close of the novel, Ames, in refusing to give her the approval that she expects, actually gives Carrie exactly what she was looking for: room to improve. Michaels puts it eloquently when he claims that “the ideal that Ames represents to Carrie is… an ideal of dissatisfaction, of perpetual desire” (ch. 1). This perpetual desire gives Carrie perpetually changing and evolving goals. Without constantly striving to improve herself and her station, Carrie would likely find herself even unhappier than she appears to be at the novel’s end.

This notion of ‘perpetual desire’ is an idea that Michaels may have borrowed from Veblen. In *Theory of the Leisure Class*, Veblen claims that

The normal, average individual will live in chronic dissatisfaction with his present lot; and when he has reached what may be called the normal pecuniary standard of the community, or of his class in the community, this chronic dissatisfaction
will give place to a restless straining to place a wider and ever-widening pecuniary interval between himself and the average standard. (ch. 2)

The “chronic dissatisfaction” that Veblen refers to could easily be transmuted as Michaels’ “perpetual desire.” Carrie demonstrates this dissatisfaction in her shifting alliances and relationships. Carrie is happy enough with Drouet until she meets Hurstwood, who allows her to see that there is a higher pecuniary tier available for her to reach. As soon as she meets the glamorous Mrs. Vance, Carrie sees a new, higher standard to reach for, greater than what she had achieved to that point by associating herself with Hurstwood. At the close of the novel, seeing a more elevated plane (albeit not a financially based plane) offered by Ames, she yearns for more. Her cycle of dissatisfaction and desire is in perpetual motion, metaphorically represented in the text by the ceaseless rocking of her chair.

While Carrie’s unhappiness at the end of *Sister Carrie* is relatively straightforward and largely due to the outside influence of Ames and other men in his class, there are two major influences that test Martin’s psyche and eventually drive him into a deep depression, the end result of which is his suicide. These factors are Martin’s disillusionment with the bourgeoisie and his divided habitus. Initially, Martin is hugely impressed by the Morse’s bourgeois existence and sees them as living in a perfect sphere, one wholly foreign to him and extremely enticing. Although the reader is not aware of how Martin’s rise will play out at the outset of the novel, London provides a bit of foreshadowing in his description of Martin’s reaction to an Impressionist painting that the Morses have on their wall. London writes:

An oil painting caught and held him… there was beauty, and it drew him irresistibly. He forgot his awkward walk and came closer to the painting, very close. The beauty faded out of the canvas. His face expressed his bepuzzlement.
He stared at what seemed a careless daub of paint, then stepped away. Immediately all the beauty flashed back into the canvas.

Here we have a clear metaphor for what will play out in Martin’s experience with the bourgeois class that he aspires to. As an outsider, he idealizes the Morses and those in their class, equating their wealth and fine manners almost with divine qualities. He sees them as without fault and longs to be a part of their world. When he begins to see them more closely, as he does with the painting, the beauty of their life is stripped away and he is left with meaningless color and shine, “careless daub[s] of paint” on an otherwise blank canvas. Renny Christopher points out that “everything [Martin] had sought for was, in fact, his own idealized creation, and when he finds it does not exist in the world he enters, he is lost” (87). He has idealized the Morses and their ilk just as he has idealized the beauty of the painting. He is lost when he examines it up close and finds out that all that he thought was there is just a mirage. Martin is initially enthralled with what Veblen might consider “costliness masquerading under the name of beauty” (ch. 6). The Morse’s painting (and, indeed, the Morses themselves) seem beautiful, but are in reality only expensively attired and showcased, their exterior facades not necessarily in coordination with their interior selves.

In addition to his disillusion with the middle-class, Martin becomes increasingly distraught at the difference in others’ treatment of him following his initial publication and subsequent success. Once he becomes successful, all of those who scorned and ridiculed him in the past now reverse their positions completely and long to entertain him. Earlier on in the novel, prior to Martin’s success, at a dinner at the Morses’, Martin gets into a disagreement with Judge Blount about Spencer and Socialism that becomes heated and combative. Following Martin’s achievements, however, when running into
him on the street, Judge Blount greets Martin as an old friend and invites him to dinner at his house. Although he accepts the invitation, Martin is skeptical as to its motive,

Martin bethought himself of the numerous occasions on which he had met Judge Blount at the Morses’ and when Judge Blount had not invited him to dinner. Why had he not invited him to dinner then? he asked himself. He had not changed. He was the same Martin Eden. What made the difference? The fact that the stuff he had written had appeared inside the covers of books? But it was work performed. It was achievement accomplished at the very time Judge Blount was sharing this general view and sneering at his Spencer and his intellect. Therefore it was not for any real value, but for a purely fictitious value that Judge Blount invited him to dinner. (London 227, italics mine)

This is the first inkling that Martin has that he may be treated differently after his success than prior to it. Martin’s rationale for being disgusted by this is that since he was writing these works before anyone wanted anything to do with him, the mere fact of their publication should not change anything. His obsessive mantra work performed supports this interpretation of his mindset. What Martin fails to realize, however, is that by virtue of their publication, his writings are only now beginning to have worth and meaning for anyone other than himself. It is one thing to abstractly know that someone is a writer and possibly that they’re a very good writer, as Martin seems to be, but without the book in front of them, without a concrete sign of their success, it is difficult for anyone other than the author himself to have faith in his abilities, or even to recognize that such abilities exist. While he was unpublished, writing was a “hobby” in others’ eyes. Now that he is a success, his writing is seen as a profession.

Part of the reason why Martin is having trouble understanding the changed behavior that those around him exhibit lies in his misunderstanding of the capitalist market economy. While writing, Martin is involved in a non-productive form of work. It is not until he publishes his writing that it becomes productive in terms of a market
economy. While it generates him no income, it is worthless and non-productive. The change of behavior lies in the shift in Martin’s writing from a non-productive endeavor to a productive, capitalist profession.

Martin is clearly bright enough to intellectually understand what is going on with his newfound popularity, but he finds it nigh impossible to comprehend. The phrase work performed becomes a sort of parasitic mantra as it “haunt[s] his brain” (London 232). Martin fantasizes about calling out his false admirers, shouting at them, “it was all done long ago; it was work performed, I tell you, when you spat upon me as the dirt under your feet” (London 232, italics mine). Martin holds back, though, and does not permit himself to lash out at those who have earned his enmity.

Feeling cut off from both of his socio-economic worlds and unable to reconcile them, Martin falls into a deep depression, his divided habitus making it impossible to feel a connection to anyone around him. Perhaps Martin’s psyche could have benefited from lashing out at another person, or even physically expending his energy through exercise or sport. Without an outlet, Martin turns his anger inwards, letting work performed “[eat] at his brain like a deathless maggot” (London 237). As the mantra eats away at his confidence and sense of self, he becomes increasingly estranged from reality, to the point where he no longer is able to recognize himself.

He drove along the path of relentless logic to the conclusion that he was nobody, nothing. Mart Eden, the hoodlum, and Mart Eden, the sailor, had been real, had been he; but Martin Eden! the famous writer, did not exist. Martin Eden, the famous writer was a vapor that had arisen in the mob-mind and by the mob-mind had been thrust into the corporeal being of Mart Eden, the hoodlum and sailor. But it couldn’t fool him. He was not that sun-myth that the mob was worshipping and sacrificing dinners to. He knew better. (London 237)
Martin is beginning to lose his grasp on reality. Socially homeless, rejecting those who had previously rejected him, and unable to return to his working-class roots, Martin’s last tether on the world around him is beginning to slip away. He is so disturbed that anyone who did not want him before would want him now that he convinces himself that he must not be the Martin Eden, author, they speak of. He views this Martin Eden as an invading body akin to the “maggot” of work performed. His divided habitus manifests as a divided sense of self. There are two Martin Edens, just as there are two socio-economic classes calling to him. He cannot exist in such a binary, and the vacuum that he creates without a sense of self or a sense of home is equally uninhabitable.

Interestingly enough, as Martin’s grip on reality slips away, he develops not a true psychosis, nor does he experience a psychotic event, but instead he develops a deep, unceasing depression. Thinking back to the days in which he taught himself and began writing, Martin recalls “how he had grudged sleep! Now it was life he grudged… Life that did not yearn toward life was in fair way toward ceasing” (London 247). It is painfully clear in this moment that Martin is not only contemplating suicide, but feels that it is inevitable given his current mindset. He decides to take a ship to Tahiti in the hopes that a change of scenery might alleviate some of his suffering. It may be, also, that he is attempting to do what Carrie did when she took the train from Columbia City to Chicago. If he is able to physically remove himself from his past (and his present), then maybe he can find some sense of what the future may hold for him, and how he can survive and thrive within a new world.

It is not long after he boards the ship that Martin’s weariness and depression take over. He is striving to find his place in the world, but the divided habitus that engulfs his
psyche makes this impossible. In a beautifully circular plot device by London, Martin reads a poem by Swinburne, the very poet that he read from on his first visit to the Morses’ home in the novel’s opening scene. The poem reads:

From too much love of living,
From hope and fear set free,
We thank with brief thanksgiving
Whatever gods may be
That no life lives forever;
That dead men rise up never;
That even the weariest river
Winds somewhere safe to sea (342)

With this as inspiration, Martin slips out of his porthole window and into the ocean. In his last act of individualism, he drowns himself. In what are arguably some of the most heartbreaking and beautiful final lines of an American novel, London closes the story of Martin Eden with “Somewhere at the bottom he fell into darkness. That much he knew. He had fallen into darkness. And at the instant he knew, he ceased to know” (254). Unable to reconcile the life he left behind with the life he once yearned for and has come to despise, Martin’s lack of social identity proves fatal. With no one to connect with and no relationship without suspicious motivation, Martin gives himself up to the ocean, his death being the only semblance of control he has left.

In looking at the disillusion and emptiness that accompany the financial success of these characters, questions arise about the true nature of the social class system. Martin and Carrie both (mistakenly) believe that people in higher social orders are somehow “better” than they are, that they are more cultured and sophisticated and that something “magic” will happen to them and to their lives if they are able to attain a more lofty position. As we can see from the endings of both novels, these naïve beliefs are without substance. Martin and Carrie fail to initially recognize that the shiny veneer behind which
the upper and middle classes lead their lives is made up of so much empty space, and when they finally are able to see society for what it really is, it is too late and they are overcome with grief. Therefore, neither of them is able to truly be upwardly mobile, although Carrie is certainly able to come much closer than Martin. It would seem, based on these novels, that upward mobility is only possible financially, and that to be a member of an elevated social class, with all of the refinement and innate entitlement that it requires, is only possible for those who were born into that class; outsiders who “better” themselves may be tangentially related to this upper-middle-class society, but they will never be a true, real part of it.
CHAPTER III

FACTORS OF THE FALL

A capitalist society dictates that an individual must leave behind those who have not risen with him. As Christopher says, “only the fortunate few can rise, while the majority must remain in the working class so that the fortunate few can join those profiting off their labor” (3). What Christopher fails to note in his essay, however, is that these individuals experiencing a rise in class status are not only leaving their brethren behind, but they are in fact actively displacing individuals who are already in the middle-to-upper class. In this way, a capitalist class system seems to follow the same laws of physics as energy. There is no creation or destruction, simply displacement and change in form. For every success, there will be a failure, and for every failure, someone will succeed. In order for the upper-class to remain the upper-class, it must be small and elite. If everyone has a lot of money, inflation will occur, creating a new upper-class of those who can still afford luxuries even with inflation. Most scholarship on class issues has focused on those who have striven to elevate their status, whether or not they are successful. What I would like to add to the discourse is a question about those individuals (represented by characters in novels) who begin successful and find themselves in a much poorer position than those who yearned to rise.

Up to this point, this study has only examined those individuals in the genre of American Naturalism who start out poor and attempt to rise to a higher social and economic
class status. As mentioned above, according to the capitalist system of economics, for every rise there must be a fall; for every Martin and Carrie who achieve financial success and increase their socio-economic status, there must be another individual who loses his or her financial standing and socio-economic status. Horatio Alger may not have been interested in the implications of a redistribution of wealth, but Naturalist authors most certainly were. This chapter will explore three characters that experience a decline in personal wealth and will attempt to illuminate patterns in the literature between novels as to the factors that make up their socio-economic falls. Lily Bart of The House of Mirth, Vandover of Vandover and the Brute, and George Hurstwood of Sister Carrie will all be discussed. Each character has a particular downward trajectory, but when they are compared and contrasted to each other it is revealed that there are a few basic factors that contribute to their falls, including sexual indiscretion or the appearance of such, a weakness for gambling which is intertwined with the ideas of fate and free will, and the fickle nature of the bourgeois and “high” society.

The three characters that will be discussed in this chapter begin their respective novels with varying degrees of affluence. Hurstwood is a resort manager who would be best described as a member of the upper-middle class, the bourgeoisie. He works for a living, which makes it impossible to place him in the leisure class, as, according to Veblen, “the characteristic feature of leisure class life is a conspicuous exemption from all useful employment” (ch. 3). However, Hurstwood does exhibit some behaviors and thought patterns that would likely be found in the leisure class. Hurstwood may have to work in order to earn money, but his family does not, and their behavior, dress, and conspicuous consumption are consciously designed to “serve as a banner for his own success and
affluence” (Kaplan 143). Vandover and Lily, however, do not work (at least at the beginnings of their respective novels), and can therefore be defined as belonging to the leisure class, since they follow Veblen’s definition of membership in the leisure class, which includes the assertion that “abstention from labor is the convenient evidence of wealth and is therefore the conventional mark of social standing” (ch. 3). As non-laborers, then, Lily and Vandover can be usefully identified as members of the leisure class. They do not have obligations, and can and do spend the majority of their time idly, fulfilling Veblen’s tongue-in-cheek assertion that “the pervading principle and abiding test of good breeding is the requirement of a substantial and patent waste of time” (ch. 3).

Lily, especially, is entrenched in a society that requires her to be beautiful and sweet, but to not engage in productive public work. As Ammons explains, “the Victorian ethic of The Lady… demanded removal from the remunerative work world and therefore in a capitalist society no, or almost no, public identity” (ch. 9). What public identity these women do have is primarily one of ornamentation. Although she is unmarried, Lily knows that her market value is related to her ability to fulfill her prescribed role, a role that Kaplan lays out as being to “display the wealth and social power of [Lily’s future] husband and to conceal the source of this power” (93). The words display and conceal are key here. Display connotes not only a sense of publicity but also a sense of ornamentation. These women are not meant to extol their husbands’ wealth verbally, but only to silently display it, as shop mannequins display the wares of a department store. Conceal implies that the workings of their husbands must be kept secret. Working, for the leisure class, is frowned upon, as has already been established. Those women whose husbands earn their money (i.e. those members of the leisure class that have not achieved their status via inheritance)
must do their best to conceal the source of their wealth. What this all creates is an external self that is fashioned synthetically. Lily’s public self is not necessarily indicative of her inner, private self. By working, Lily would be removing herself from the private sphere where her external self is commodified but only available to a limited market. In the public sector, Lily-as-commodity would be available for public consumption. She would no longer be an exclusive product available to a privileged few, which would lower her market value and thus her social status.

Lily’s place in the leisure class as a commodity designed for ornamentation is revealed in the first pages of the novel. When we first meet Lily Bart at the beginning of *The House of Mirth*, she is shown through the eyes of Lawrence Selden, a young man living on the fringes of the leisure class. It becomes immediately clear that Lily is a young woman who has been blessed with great beauty and poise. She is evidently very popular, especially with men, and is described in language that suggests that her appearance and demeanor is somehow on a higher plane than “normal” women. When observing Lily from some small distance, Selden muses that “she must have cost a great deal to make, that a great many dull and ugly people must, in some mysterious way, have been sacrificed to produce her” (Wharton 3).

What Selden does here unwittingly acknowledges the entropic notions about capitalism and wealth distribution mentioned earlier. He sees Lily’s beauty and feels that since she exists in such a beautiful form, she must have been granted the beauty formerly reserved for others. If we look at this statement in terms of the economic themes explored in the text, Kaplan’s statement that “the price of making Lily is both the work of women who produce her and the cost of their spectatorship which sustains her” (101) becomes
hugely important. Those women who have ‘produced’ Lily include her mother, her aunt Mrs. Peniston, and all of the women whose ‘sponsorship’ enables Lily to remain fashionably dressed and idle. The spectatorship that Kaplan refers to here is harder to define. When we think of a spectator, we tend to think of individuals who are physically in the same space as the object being looked upon. For Lily, spectators exist who have never seen her in person. The best example of this is found when Lily is forced to seek help from a young woman who she had helped while volunteering in a settlement. Mrs. Struther is an avid fan of Lily, despite having seen her in person only once, and that briefly. She discusses her interest in Lily and admits that she and her husband “used to watch for [her] name in the papers, and [they’d] talk over what [she was] doing, and read the descriptions of the dresses [Lily] wore” (Wharton 508). Here, Lily is truly a commodity to be consumed by the spectators who read about her in the society columns of the newspaper. The spectatorship sustains her even though she is unaware of it. If nobody read about her in the papers in interest, her status as a socialite would diminish.

Returning to the opening scene between Lily and Selden, the reader is able to learn a great deal about Lily’s personality and her priorities. The overarching themes of the sexual economy and the self as commodity are also introduced obliquely in this scene, when Selden acknowledges a “speculative interest” (Wharton 3) in Lily. At this point in the novel, Lily is on a hunt for a rich husband. She is considered to be a part of the leisure class, but she has little money of her own and relies on her wealthy Aunt Peniston and the charity of her friends in order to maintain her wardrobe and her class status. While this first impression of Lily may not be the most positive to readers, it is not long before we realize that Lily is far from being proud of this husband-hunt, and likely wishes that she did not
have to engage in this type of behavior to maintain her lifestyle. During their conversation, Selden thinks to himself that “[Lily] was so evidently the victim of the civilization which had produced her, that the links of her bracelet seemed like manacles chaining her to her fate” (Wharton 5).

As briefly mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, “fate,” perhaps better referred to as “chance” or “luck” plays a large role in the socio-economic downfall of characters in Naturalist novels. This idea of being bound by chance and all of its capricious whims is relevant later on in the novel when Lily loses a large sum playing bridge. Although Lily can hardly afford to gamble, she recognizes that it is expected of her. She acknowledges “it was one of the taxes she had to pay for [the Trenors’] prolonged hospitality, and for the dresses and trinkets which occasionally replenished her insufficient wardrobe” (Wharton 41). On this particular occasion, Lily loses 300 dollars playing bridge, an astronomical sum without which she cannot afford to pay her bills. This loss of funds while playing bridge could have been avoided had Lily simply declined to play, but “she knew that the gambling passion was upon her” (Wharton 41). As with any other gambling activity, the chance of losing a great deal of money is always present, as is the chance for winning a great deal of money. In this way, “fate” or “chance” holds the cards that tell Lily’s future to a greater degree than she herself does, and it is chance that determines the outcome of her card playing much more than her own agency.

The 300 dollar loss that Lily experiences is the first step in a prolonged and gradual decline from the leisure class to poverty that Lily undergoes over the course of the novel. Her inability to repay her gambling debts and make payments to her dressmaker and the like put Lily in a difficult position. She sees her cushy lifestyle disappearing before her
eyes and is unsure how to salvage her situation. While driving with Gus Trenor, her friend Judy’s husband, Lily casually references her financial obligations, exhorting Gus to “help [make] Judy understand that [Lily] can’t, at present, go on living as one must live among [the leisure class]” (Wharton 134). Although it is unclear whether or not Lily is soliciting Gus’s financial assistance by playing on his sympathies, he offers to help her out by investing for her in the stock market. Lily accepts, neglecting to realize that the stock market is nothing more than a respectable form of gambling, and one that frequently involves extremely high stakes. Lily believes her financial troubles to be essentially at an end, although she does not totally understand the process by which she will be receiving money.

She understood only that her modest investments were to be mysteriously multiplied without risk to herself; and the assurance that this miracle would take place within a short time, that there would be no tedious interval for suspense and reaction, relieved her of her lingering scruples. Again she felt the lightening of her load, and with it the release of repressed activities. (Wharton 136, italics added)

The phrase “without risk” indicates rather explicitly that Lily does not understand the workings of the stock market at least in terms of possible loss. She may be deluding herself, but her pleasant thoughts relieve “her lingering scruples,” inferring that she is in all likelihood a bit unsure about entering into such an agreement with Gus. She recognizes that this arrangement may cause her problems in the future, but she is too enamored with the idea of having her financial problems taken care of to resist Gus’s offer. There is a sexual overtone to this scene, and Lily is somewhat ambivalent about what might be expected of her in the future. She is giving herself up to chance, again, and in a more dangerous way than when she plays cards. She is not only allowing the stock market to
determine her success, but she participates in the sexual commodification of herself when she makes this arrangement with Gus.

Lily should be ambivalent. She is entering very shaky territory in making this bit of business with Gus Trenor, and it instantly becomes clear not only that she knows the possible implications of such an arrangement but also that she is willing to enter into the realm of sexual economics in order to stay financially solvent. Immediately after agreeing to Gus’s proposition, Lily allows Gus to “lean a little nearer and rest his hand reassuringly on hers, cost[ing] her only a momentary shiver of reluctance” (Wharton 136). Although this may seem innocent enough to modern readers, in the early 1900s such contact with a married man was considered rather scandalous and almost dangerous. However, Lily allows her desire for financial security to override her moral misgivings. When they meet at a wedding some time later, Gus announces that he has made Lily $4,000 by speculating for her. She replies: “I think you the kindest of friends; but I can’t thank you properly now” (Wharton 147, italics added). This phrasing implies that she recognizes that she owes Gus some sort of sexual “favor” in return for his financial assistance. This “favor” is then identified as “the hand-clasp he would have claimed if they had been alone” (Wharton 147, italics added). Again, this may appear innocent, but the inclusion of the phrase “if they had been alone” acknowledges something clandestine and sordid about their relationship.

Here, then, the sexual economy impacts the relationship between Lily and Gus and their financial dealings. Lily is willing to pay for Gus’s assistance with hand-clasps and the like, because it falls within the realm of the unspoken code of acceptable behavior in the leisure class. As long as they are not overt about their encounters, and if no one knows about it, she does not feel as if she is doing anything morally wrong. The line between
acceptable and unacceptable sexual and social behavior has not been crossed, and Lily is able to continually delude herself that Gus will forever be content with clandestine hand clasps and other similarly chaste demonstrations of affection. Lily is unprepared, however, for their agreement to become public knowledge. Her jealous cousin, Grace Stepney, her “evil step-sister” (Lidoff 10) so to speak, has learned of the situation between Lily and Gus and delights in sensationally revealing to Mrs. Peniston the “flirtation” (Wharton 200) between Lily and Gus. This revelation causes Mrs. Peniston to revise her will, leaving the majority of her fortune to Grace, and a pittance to Lily. This loss of inheritance shows the fickle nature of Mrs. Peniston’s class, and is a major factor in Lily’s social and economic decline. Although Lily has done little to suggest impropriety and has retained her virginity, the very fact that her name is being bandied about in such a manner is enough to indict her. There are no victims or misunderstandings here; if someone has been accused of doing something indelicate, they are damned regardless of the facts of the situation. In Mrs. Peniston’s mind, “it was horrible of a young girl to let herself be talked about; however unfounded the charges against her, she must be to blame for their having been made” (Wharton 205). Lily is guilty of adultery while remaining virginal; the fates and society have come together to expel her from her gilded bubble, and her reputation is indelibly marred.

What Lily finds in her misadventure with Gus Trenor is that “feminine sexuality… turns out to be a kind of biological equivalent to capitalism” (Michaels ch. 1). Lily’s beauty and sexuality are her products, she herself the commodity for sale. Lily fails to recognize the sexual economy in place and seems to (mistakenly) assume that the market will somehow preserve her status as an unpurchaseable commodity; what she finds in her
dealings with Trenor, however, is that she has already sold her product. She believes that her beauty and charm belong to her, when they actually belong to whoever will pay the most, not realizing “the erotic potential of the self in a market economy” (Michaels ch. 4).

With her virginity in question, Lily’s greatest commodity has been taken off the market, and it is this that begins her socio-economic decline. Lily manages to remain solidly in the leisure class for a time, even though rumors are beginning to spread about the nature of her relationship with Gus Trenor. The entire situation comes to a head, however, when Lily is deceived by Gus and finds herself alone in his house with him. This is when Gus attempts to “cash in” on the unspoken sexual clause of their contract. Gus intoxicated and has worked himself into a frenzy waiting for Lily. In her article Another Sleeping Beauty: Narcissism in The House of Mirth, Joan Lidoff identifies Gus Trenor as Lily’s “frog-prince” (14), but this seems to be too positive of an angle by which to examine Gus and his motives. After all, under the frog’s amphibious skin lies a handsome prince, according to the fairy tales, and all that will transform him is a maiden’s kiss. Lily refuses to kiss Gus and to “honor” her part of the sexual contract, but readers will likely doubt that behind Gus’s exterior slumbers a handsome prince waiting to save Lily.

In any case, Lidoff does make a shrewd perception when she points out that Gus’s sexual advances “[make] explicit the real connections between money, power, and sex that Lily has purposefully kept from her awareness” (14). Lily is willing to acknowledge that she has promised Gus friendship and affection in the form of hand holding and other chaste and only remotely amorous attentions, but when he advances upon her, she is put in a dangerous and frightening position. However, Lidoff asserts, and perhaps correctly, that Lily is and always has been aware of the implicit sexual contract that she has made with
Gus. She may not have been able (or willing) to articulate it as such to herself, but all of her interactions with Gus support that she knew that there may come a day where she would have to “pay up” as it were. As with everything Lily does, she is thoughtful to keep up appearances to maintain her class status, even in the midst of an attempted sexual assault. While trying to find a way to escape Gus’s clutches, “her eyes… lit on the [servant’s] bell, and she remembered that help was in call. Yes, but scandal with it… no, she must fight her way out alone” (Wharton 237). Lily’s first instinct is self-preservation, but only as far as it will allow her to maintain her comfortable standing within society. This shows that for Lily, self-preservation and the preservation of her social standing are not mutually exclusive.

If, up to this point, Lily has been slowly descending the social ladder, the attack by Gus Trenor is enough to remove all the rungs from under her and force her to grasp for a hand-hold in any form. Although Lily has not actually done anything untoward, the very suggestion that she and Gus are involved in a scandalous romantic relationship is enough for most of her former “friends” to shun her and remove her from their social circle. In an attempt to regain her status or at least keep up what little she has left, Lily agrees to accompany Bertha Dorset and her husband George, along with young Ned Silverton, Bertha’s lover, on their boat to tour Europe.

The trip with the Dorsetts proves to be the fatal wound to Lily’s social “career.” Here we see the fickle nature of the leisure class begin to manifest as a major aspect of a socio-economic downfall. The whole purpose for Lily’s invitation is so that Bertha can have someone distract her husband while she goes about her affair. Bertha’s sloppiness in disguising her activities eventually leads to suspicion, and in order to throw suspicion off
of herself, she accuses Lily of engaging in an affair with George. Again, Lily has retained her virginity and is punished for someone else’s actions. She loses her status even further, and for the rest of the novel bounces from one social group to another, slightly lower, social group, until she is left entirely alone.

Lily’s social rejection and socio-economic collapse, through no real fault of her own save naiveté, becomes complete by the end of the novel. She has no one but the dumpy Gerty Farish to turn to, and although she makes one last attempt to rekindle a relationship with Selden, the last few pages of the novel find her entirely alone. The strain of trying to keep up appearances while she loses her social standing and economic status manifests itself in acute insomnia, for which she is given choral hydrate by a doctor. Chloral hydrate is a strong sedative that, when used over a long period of time like Lily engages in, causes dependence and high tolerance to the drug’s effects, a combination that ultimately results in Lily overdosing on the drug and dying in her sleep. Wharton leaves it ambiguous as to whether or not Lily killed herself intentionally, but there is no ambiguity when examining what led her to be in a position to overdose, accidental or not. Lily is a victim of social forces. Her greatest asset, her beauty, is also her greatest liability, as it creates jealousy among women and lust among men. Even though she dies a virgin, Lily’s reputation is tarnished by events largely out of her control. Much of Lily’s fate is given up to fate, and the rest of her downfall is made possible by fickle friends and sexual rumors.

As with much of the novel, Lily’s ultimate fate and social destruction can be linked to the themes of sexual economy and the female body as a commodity. As Michaels explains,

Lily’s impulses embody her desire to escape the market, and the story told by *The House of Mirth* is the story of her inability to do so. She is destroyed by the
calculating commercial society of New York… Lily herself collaborates in the suppression of her best self on behalf of the commodified self the New York social market demands. (Michaels ch. 7)

For Lily, refusal to embrace her status as commodity within a sexual economy leads to her expulsion from the leisure class, a society that fully endorses the marketplace and views women as “useless and expensive… valuable as evidence of pecuniary strength,” (Veblen ch. 6) but not necessarily valuable by any virtues of their own.

In *Sister Carrie*, Carrie’s second false husband, George Hurstwood, experiences a similar socio-economic decline in status as Lily experiences. Because she is a woman, the mere *suggestion* of sexual indiscretion dooms Lily socially; as a man, Hurstwood’s fall is predicated by *actual* sexual indiscretion, in the form of an extramarital affair with Carrie. His wife discovers the affair, and since most of Hurstwood’s holdings are in her name, his economic status quickly takes a turn for the worse. To make matters worse for Hurstwood, Carrie, whom he has promised to wed, discovers that he is already married and tells him she wants nothing to do with him. He tries to carry on as if nothing has happened, but his anxiety mounts and he starts thinking about a way to escape the situation he has put himself in.

As a devout follower of capitalist and the market economy, it is no surprise that Hurstwood looks to financial means in order to escape his situation. His escape comes in the form of cash, $10,000 to be exact, which he steals from the safe at Fitzgerald & Moy’s, the saloon at which he manages. The scene in which Hurstwood takes the money is fascinating, and Dreiser makes an effort to show the reader that Hurstwood may not be operating under his own agency, but by agencies of “fate.” At least, this is Hurstwood’s rationale for what he has done. He is unable to take full responsibility for his actions, and
seems to blame the entire situation on a twist of fate, when in actuality he is entirely responsible for what he does. When he goes to check to see that the safe is locked, as is his wont at the end of each business day, Hurstwood finds that his colleague Mayhew has neglected to lock it. Instead of locking the safe and leaving for the night, Hurstwood opens the safe, pulls out the drawers of money, and counts the contents. This is unusual for him, as Dreiser points out: “He did not know why he wished to look in there. It was quite a superfluous action, which another time might not have happened at all” (190). Before he begins counting the money, the suggestion is made by “a voice in his ear” (Dreiser 191), indicating that Hurstwood finds it disturbing to place the blame for his actions on himself. After a period of indecision, in which the “little voice” makes itself known a few more times, Hurstwood finds himself holding the money outside the safe. “While the money was in his hand the lock clicked. It had sprung! Did he do it? He grabbed at the knob and pulled vigorously. It had closed” (Dreiser 193). This sentence is important because it indicates a key aspect of this incident. Saying “it had closed” as opposed to “he had closed it” indicates that Hurstwood is unable or unwilling to take responsibility for what he has done in stealing the money. He puts the blame for the theft on fate, a refusal of agency that will be repeated throughout his struggles in the novel.

Hurstwood’s rejection of his own agency in stealing the resort’s money can also be at least partially explained by looking at a quote from Veblen. In discussing gambling and the role of luck and fate involved, Veblen asserts that

To the archaic man all the obtrusive and obviously consequential objects and facts in his environment have a quasi-personal individuality. They are conceived to be possessed of volition, or rather of propensities, which enter into the complex of causes and affect events in an inscrutable manner. (ch. 11)
Although Veblen published *Theory of the Leisure Class* a year before the initial publication of *Sister Carrie*, looking at this quote in the context of the novel seems to label Hurstwood as an “archaic man.” Veblen details various stages of human development in his text, and the archaic man is (as the name suggests) one of the first stages of human development. What we have here, then, is the suggestion that Hurstwood, in projecting agency onto the safe itself or the forces of fate, instead of taking personal responsibility for his actions, is reverting to a more primitive, possibly “brutish” state of humanity.

Regardless of whose agency, in Hurstwood’s mine, enables him to steal $10,000 from his employers, the deed is done and he flees to Montreal and then to New York with a reluctant Carrie. While in Montreal, Hurstwood is approached by a member of the Pinkerton Detective Agency, and he is contrite enough to send the majority of the stolen money back to Fitzgerald and Moy. With limited funds, Hurstwood attempts to make his way in New York, a position made difficult by the sheer size and wealth of the city. As Dreiser notes, “Whatever a man like Hurstwood could be in Chicago, it is very evident that he would be but an inconspicuous drop in an ocean like New York… in other words, Hurstwood was nothing” (214). Hurstwood’s job hunt is made markedly more difficult by the fact that he has to apply for positions using the pseudonym “Wheeler,” as “George Hurstwood” is wanted in Chicago for the theft of the money from Fitzgerald and Moy’s. After sending $9,500 back to Fitzgerald and Moy, Hurstwood is left with $1,300 with which to live in New York. Looking for a position similar to the one he had in Chicago, Hurstwood decides to take a third-interest in a resort, a prospect that earns him a substantially smaller income than he had previously enjoyed. Thus, Hurstwood-cum-Wheeler takes his next step down the class ladder.
As should be expected, given the topic of this chapter, this venture does not go very well, and the land that the resort is on is sold, leaving Hurstwood again unemployed and forced to live off what little remaining money he has, with no additional income to augment it. Unable to find new work and becoming increasingly concerned about the money that he is forced to spend to keep himself and Carrie comfortable, they move to a smaller apartment in a less affluent part of the city, and Hurstwood slowly begins to cut down on his expenses, starting with the luxury items:

He had been wont to pay fifteen cents for a shave, and a tip of ten cents. In his first distress, he cut down the tip to five, then to nothing. Later, he tried a ten-cent barber shop, and, finding that the shave was satisfactory, patronized regularly. Later still, he put off shaving to every other day, then to every third, and so on, until a week became the rule. On Saturday he was a sight to see. (Dreiser 260-261)

Hurstwood’s appearance continues to deteriorate, and Carrie begins to lose interest in him romantically. Unable to secure employment and feeling pressure from Carrie to provide for her, Hurstwood turns to the same form of money-earning that Lily was pressured into: gambling.

Hurstwood’s game of choice is poker, another card game that shows a trend throughout Naturalism. In one of his first gambling experiences detailed in the novel, Hurstwood enters a poker room thinking “I might win a couple of hundred” (Dreiser 264). He has no real thought that he might possibly lose money, money that he cannot conceivably afford to lose, which creates a connection between Hurstwood’s rationale and the rationale Lily employs regarding the stock market. But, lose he does, to the tune of $340. Reflecting on his experience, Hurstwood “decide[s] he [will] play no more” (Dreiser 265). Alas, his resolve is soon lost, and he finds himself down to his last hundred dollars. Struggling to feed himself and Carrie and keep a roof over their heads, Hurstwood starts
buying groceries and coal on credit, further enlarging his debt. Although his new habit of using credit instead of cash is detrimental, it is really the gambling that has put him in such a precarious financial situation. If he had not gambled and lost, he might not have been in such an uncertain financial position as to need to buy necessities on credit. As with Lily, it is the big loss, the loss of $340, that puts him in such dire straits.

Just as gambling was Lily’s downfall, so too does it prove fatal to Hurstwood’s socio-economic status. It does not take long after this loss for Carrie to leave him. Alone, destitute, shabby and homeless, Hurstwood becomes a beggar. He has fallen from the heights of Chicago society and a comfortable upper-middle-class existence into abject poverty. As with Lily, issues of sexual misconduct, the role of fate, and a predilection for gambling combine to doom him to a dreadful fate. He ends the novel by killing himself through asphyxiation by gas, having spent his last dime on a room in which to do it. Carrie never learns of his fate, and as we have already seen, manages to become successful herself.

A final figure that follows the same path of sexual impropriety, gambling, and fate that doom Lily and Hurstwood is Vandover, the eponymous anti-hero of *Vandover and the Brute* by Frank Norris. Just like Lily and Hurstwood, Vandover begins his novel in a very comfortable situation, financially and socially. Vandover is a recent Harvard graduate and the son of a successful building developer who makes most of his money through questionable business tactics that include taking out double mortgages on his properties. Vandover’s real passion is for art, not business, (thus shunning the pecuniary employment that might have cemented him in the leisure class) and as a youth he longs to go to Paris and study painting, but his father convinces him to go to Harvard, and when he comes back,
he has transformed from a boy to a man, a man with some unhealthy and not entirely socially acceptable habits.

Where Lily and Hurstwood’s paths through downward mobility can be described as “declines,” Vandover’s can best be described as a “descent,” the entire novel forming what Dana Seitler refers to as a “degeneration narrative” (2). Vandover is a dilettante when it comes to his art, and although he has high aspirations for it, he spends most of his time post-Harvard with his two best friends: Dolly Haight and Charlie Geary. The influence that the two of them, along with another friend, Ellis, have on Vandover is powerful. It is with Haight and Geary that Vandover first gets drunk, and in their company that he first gambles. As has already been established, a predilection for gambling goes a long way in the formation of a social collapse, and Vandover is no exception. When he first discovers that his friends are gamblers, he joins in, passively falling to peer pressure. At first, he does not even like gambling, and only does it because the others do.

At first the idea of playing cards for money shocked him beyond all expression. But soon he found that a great many of the fellows, fellows like young Haight, beyond question steady, sensible and even worthy of emulation in other ways, ‘went in for that sort of thing.’ …the stakes were small, he lost as often as he won, but the habit of the cards never grew upon him. It was like the beer, he ‘went in for it’ because the others did, without knowing why. (Norris 20)

Here we can see that Vandover’s character is pliable and elastic, much like Lily Bart and Carrie. He begins gambling for the same reason Lily does, because everyone else is doing it and it is expected of him. It is not until much later in the novel, after his descent is all but fully realized, that he begins enjoying the act of gambling in and of itself, a change in mindset that indicates how far he has fallen.

Vandover’s newly found love of gambling provokes questions of motivation. His desire to gamble seems to be inversely related to the amount of capital he possesses. In
other words, the less money he has, the more he wants to gamble. Although he is certainly disturbed by the speed with which his inheritance and incomes have dwindled, Vandover does not seem to want to gamble in order to win enough money to re-elevate his social status. Michaels suggests that

The excitement of Vandover’s gambling is not just any kind of excitement… it is instead the excitement of losing money. What you buy when you pay your gambling debts, Norris seems to suggest, is the excitement of paying your gambling debts, a purchase that seems nonsensical only because it doesn’t seem like a purchase at all. (ch. 5)

This explanation for Vandover’s behavior would seem to imply that Vandover does not gamble despite the risk of lost capital, but rather because of the risk of lost capital. As a ‘degeneration narrative,’ it is unsurprising that Vandover’s financial instability would become a cogent choice. “Luck” is not the agent that takes away Vandover’s money, Vandover instead chooses to take the onus of responsibility on himself.

It is important to look at Vandover’s personality formation in terms of his sexual experiences as well as those relating to gambling. He loses his virginity in college to a girl he feels is beneath him socially. When walking with her on their first encounter, he is wholly repulsed by her manner, reflecting “not only did she disgust him, but he felt sorry for her; he felt ashamed and pitiful for a woman who had fallen so low” (Norris 23). Even with all of this disgust, he beds her: “The thing was done almost before he knew it. He could not tell why he had acted as he did, and he certainly would not have believed himself capable of it” (Norris 24).

Again, there is a trend of refusing agency and blaming what befalls these characters on “fate” or “chance.” It is important here to note that Vandover seems incapable of truly taking responsibility for his actions. The disbelief at what he has done is reminiscent of
Hurstwood’s difficulty in accepting that he has committed theft. Although Vandover continually repeats that he does not know why he engages in these behaviors, there seem to be a few explanations that may enlighten the reader as to his motivation. The simplest of these is that Vandover is extremely susceptible to peer pressure. Although this is certainly one aspect of his motivation, there are other factors at work here. One more psychoanalytic approach of reasoning Vandover’s behavior is that he does actually enjoy what he is doing. He has a predilection for vice that began as a child when he first discovered the machinations of sex and reproduction, and his drinking, gambling, and illicit sexual encounters are a logical outcome of this early behavior. The Naturalistic view is one which falls in line with the scene in *Sister Carrie* when Hurstwood steals the cash from his employers: blaming “fate,” that little voice in his ear that tells him to do things that he knows he should not do. To put all of the responsibility on fate, however, is to remove any agency from Vandover, which is precisely what Vandover wishes to do. He does not want to admit to any desire to do these things because admitting desire is admitting agency, which is admitting responsibility. His aversion to responsibility is a necessary aspect of his personality that enables his descent.

The ‘little voice’ that Hurstwood hears is personified in *Vandover and the Brute* as the brute aspect of Vandover’s personality. As the title suggests, Vandover does not consider the brute to be a part of his innate inner self, but instead spends a great deal of time trying to convince himself that it is a somehow external part of himself that he cannot fully control. When he starts frequenting the more sordid cafes and bars of Boston, he feels the impulse to engage in self-destructive behaviors, which he rationalizes by blaming the brute. He does not attempt to quash the brute, choosing the path of least resistance when
he feels it “[awake] and [stir]. The idea of resistance hardly occurred to Vandover; it would
be hard, it would be disagreeable to resist, and Vandover had not accustomed himself to
the performance of hard, disagreeable duties” (Norris 29). At the same time, Vandover
convinces himself that he has the brute well in hand, feeling that “he was its master, and
only on rare occasions did he permit himself to gratify its demands, feeding its abominable
hunger from that part of him which he knew to be the purest, the cleanest, and the best”
(Norris 30). Vandover’s thought process here reflects his position as a member of the
leisure class, for whom work, even psychological work, is shunned. By separating his
‘pure’ nature from the sinful brute, he is able to remove any semblance of agency he might
have in enacting the “brute’s” sordid desires.

For a time, this works well for Vandover. He has a romance with a young woman
named Turner Ravis who comes from a good family. Their relationship makes Vandover
feel good about himself because it is pure (i.e. sexless) and clean and good. At the same
time, Vandover has flirtations with other women, including a prostitute named Flossie.
Vandover sees the differences between these two women, but is unwilling to forsake one
for the other. He wants to keep the brute separate from his self-conscious ego, and when
he thinks about the women he views them as a binary: “Turner Ravis influenced him upon
his best side, calling out in him all that was cleanest, finest, and most delicate. Flossie
appealed only to the animal and the beast in him, the evil, hideous brute that made instant
answer” (Norris 52). This is interesting because it indicates that Vandover does not
consider what he is doing to either woman as wrong, in terms of its adulterous overtones.
He and the brute are not one and the same, so his encounters with Flossie are not really his
encounters, but the brute’s. Again, this is a rationalization that helps Vandover avoid any real responsibility for his actions.

Sexual dalliance has been established in this chapter as a precipitating factor of a socio-economic decline, and Vandover’s “degeneration” is no exception. Even though his relationship with Flossie is illicit and would be looked down upon by his societal caste, hers is not the sexual experience that contributes to his downfall. This comes in the form of Ida Wade, a young woman considered “fast” by Vandover’s set. Where Flossie appeals to his brute nature, Ida appeals to all of Vandover, both the brute and the “pure” aspect of his personality, which is why hers is the sexual liaison that sends him somersaulting down the social ladder. Ever conscious of what others might think of him, Vandover has serious reservations about taking Ida out on a date, musing that

[He] was not at all certain that he cared to be seen on Kearney Street as Ida Wade’s escort; one never knew who one was going to meet. Ida was not a bad girl, she was not notorious, but, confound it, it would look queer; and at the same time, while Idea was the kind of girl that one did not want to be seen with, she was not the kind of girl that could be told so. (Norris 75-76)

The problem with Ida for Vandover is that Ida is between classes, socially homeless like Martin is towards the end of his novel. He cannot be his pure self with her as he is with Turner because she is not as refined as Turner and does not require that of him. At the same time, she is no prostitute, and is likely a virgin when she and Vandover first become acquainted, and therefore Vandover is unwilling to “allow” the beast to take over as it does when he is with Flossie. Finding it easier to treat Ida from the brute aspect of his personality, he seduces and has sex with her, and although it is never directly stated, it is implied that she becomes pregnant as a result.
To Vandover’s credit, when he hears that Ida is in ‘trouble,’ he is able to glean that her trouble might be pregnancy related. When he realizes what the problem might potentially be, he has the first of a series of panic attacks that plague him throughout the novel:

He was all at once struck cold with a great fear, so that for an instant he turned cold and weak, and reached out his hand to steady himself against the railing of the stairs. Ah, what a calamity that would be! What a calamity! What a dreadful responsibility! What a crime! He could not keep the thought out of his mind. (Norris 90)

Unfortunately, to Vandover’s discredit, all thoughts about the situation are self-centered. He cannot acknowledge that there is another person involved in this predicament, and has no inclination whatsoever to go see Ida and find out how she’s doing.

A few days later, Vandover is bathing when he gets a surprising visit from Geary, who informs him that Ida “committed suicide [the night before] by taking laudanum” (Norris 103). Ida’s death sends Vandover into a free-fall of guilt and ruination. He cries “I have killed her” (Norris 105) and rages “against himself and against the brute in him that he had permitted to drag him to this thing” (Norris 106). Vandover is emotionally distraught, and attempts to atone by telling his father what had happened. His greatest fear is getting found out by the law and by society, partially because he thinks he may be sent to jail, and partially because he realizes that a scandal like this would ruin his social standing and cushy lifestyle irrevocably. As with Lily, self-preservation and the preservation of one’s socio-economic status are not mutually exclusive. If he were to confess, Vandover would lose Turner, he would lose his father’s respect, and he may even lose the companionship of his friends. Unlike Lily and Hurstwood, with the sexual
improprieties that lead to their social declines, Vandover is self-aware enough to recognize that something big has happened and that his life may be forever changing.

Vandover finds himself desperate to retain his socio-economic status, and attempts to avoid his mistakes by leaving his home. Eager to start his life over and squash the brute within him once and for all, Vandover boards a ship to San Diego, only to quickly revert in his thinking and begin to feel sorry for himself rather than to be truly repentant. Instead of manifesting grief over Ida’s death, the irreparable damage done to his relationship with his father, and the certainty that Turner would not have him when he returns, Vandover’s thoughts are only for himself. “Of all the consequences of what he had done, the one which had come to afflict him the most poignantly was that his enjoyment of life was spoiled” (Norris 120). This “enjoyment of life” is available to him because he has remained a member of the leisure class. With the probable social shunning that waits for him upon his return to Boston, Vandover can only see that his leisure and enjoyment of life may not be waiting for him as well. It is for this that he mourns, rather than for Ida.

While on the boat, Vandover becomes the victim, to a certain degree, of “fate” or “chance.” The Mazatlan, the ship that Vandover is traveling on, crashes during its voyage, and Vandover is forced into another ordeal in which his only thought is for his own safety and comfort. His behavior over the ship’s wrecking is selfish, and he offers to help no one around him, anxious only for his own survival. He finally arrives home and instead of immediately visiting his father, he visits a café, and “delay[s] over [his meal] long, taking a great pleasure in satisfying the demands of the animal in him” (Norris 150, italics added). The inclusion of the phrase “the animal in him” is crucial, as it indicates that the brute within Vandover is starting to take over all of his behaviors, not just those related to sex.
and vice. When he does finally return to his father, he finds him dead. When he speaks to the doctor, who tells him that “any sudden shock” (Norris 153) could have killed his father, Vandover is forced to recognize his own potential culpability in his father’s death, but does not allow himself to dwell on the situation, finding it too disturbing.

Vandover gets over his father’s death fairly quickly, and when he meets with the lawyer for his father’s estate and will, he finds out that he is going to be forced to budget his money, something he never had to worry about before. He had expected a large inheritance, but it was not to come, putting him in a situation much like Lily’s when she learned that her Aunt Peniston had largely written her out of her will. Unaccustomed to having to budget his finances, and indeed, unaccustomed to even having to think about his finances, Vandover is put in a difficult situation made exponentially more difficult when he realizes that he has been shunned from the social circle in which he once held court. At a party held by Henrietta Vance, a close friend of Turner, Vandover is largely ignored and is even the recipient of openly hostile glances. Ida may not have been in Turner’s class, but she was respectable enough that the rumors of Vandover’s “ruining” of her are enough for him to be removed from his previous social order.

It was in the air, a certain vague shrinking and turning of the shoulder, a general atmosphere of aversion and repulsion, an unseen frown, an unexpressed rebuff, intangible, illusive, but as unmistakable as his own existence. The world he had known knew him no longer. It was ostracism at last. But why? Why? (Norris 199)

Vandover’s inability to see the consequences of his own actions is overwhelming in this passage. It is almost as if, since he is no longer sad about Ida’s death, that he expects everyone else to have forgotten about the incident. He has failed to acknowledge the social mores of his class, and is forcibly removed from it, forced to descend to the lower rung of the social ladder.
While Lily and Hurstwood mourn the loss of their social standing, Vandover revels in it. He sees his social ostracism as a way into a new life and does not engage in the vain attempts that Lily and Hurstwood use to try and regain his status.

Public opinion had been a great check upon him, the fear of scandal, the desire to stand well with the world he knew… now he was ostracized, society cared no longer what he did, his position was gone, his reputation was destroyed. There was no one now to stand in his way. (Norris 217)

Here we can see that Vandover’s loss of social standing has affected him greatly, but not in the ways that we have become accustomed to observing. Rather than suffering, Vandover chooses to allow the brute free reign over his life. Norris, while critical of societal norms and the kind of hypocritical ostracism that Vandover suffers at the hands of the leisure class, also uses Vandover’s mindset to illustrate how dangerous a position like his is. Vandover’s descent and physical and mental degeneration begin to speed up at this point in the novel, and when his ability to create meaningful pieces of art is nullified, the reader can see that Vandover’s lack of a social tether is contributing mightily to his downfall.

Without realizing it, Vandover has allowed himself to fall into the same trap that doomed Martin Eden: socio-economic homelessness. Vandover becomes depressed and emotionally blank once he realizes that his art is no longer available to him as an outlet. After his artistic talent abandons him, Vandover experiences a decline in his mental and physical health. At one point he resolves to kill himself only to realize that he had attempted to shoot himself with an empty gun. His financial state takes a turn for the worse when he is sued by Ida’s father and is forced to sell Geary some of his property in order to

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5 From his symptoms, it appears that he is suffering from neurosyphilis, although contemporary doctors would likely have diagnosed him with neurasthenia, the condition his mother likely suffered from.
settle the lawsuit. Geary’s financial maneuverings in regards to Vandover’s property are not entirely scrupulous, and he ends up cheating Vandover out of a significant amount of money. Vandover is now, for all intents and purposes, broke. Much like Hurstwood and Lily, he is forced to move from his comfortable apartments to a new living environment that is of a significantly lower quality than the living quarters he had been accustomed to.

Throughout all of his struggles to this point, Vandover has maintained one aspect of his “former life” as a member of the leisure class: his painting. The reader is told that Vandover is a talented artist, and the jobs that he works while his degeneration is occurring are related in some way to the creation of art. As Vandover sinks into poverty and the “brute” begins to take over his personality, his skills significantly diminish. Instead of creating something meaningful and reminiscent of human life, “the brute appears as a flatness that turns what should have been the depiction of a dying soldier and his (also dying) horse into a ‘tracing’ of ‘empty lines’” (Michaels ch. 5). The vitality of Vandover’s paintings has disappeared just as his own human vitality is vanishing, and the brute in Vandover begins to take a complete hold of his psyche. Michaels goes on to explain this by saying “as a painter, then, the brute is a minimalist; where Vandover excels at painting nature, the brute replaces the painting with nature itself” (ch. 5). The problem with Michaels’ assessment of the situation is one largely dealing with semantics. He offers no definition of “nature,” and if the painting that the brute accomplishes is a mere ‘tracing of empty lines,’ then it seems problematic to reconcile what the brute creates through Vandover as “nature.”

Beyond simply removing Vandover’s ability to create art, it is also here in these new, sordid rooms that Vandover’s descent and degeneration are fully established both in
terms of his financial status and his overall personality and social identity. He sells his former home for $15,000 (just a bit under $400,000 today, accounting for inflation), and proceeds to blow through the money in a period of about nine months. With his emotional numbness comes “an ennui, and Vandover beg[ins] to long for some new pleasure, some violent untried excitement” (Norris 281). He starts to gamble more heavily and for higher stakes, and finds himself enjoying the thrill of winning and losing large sums of money. Just as with Lily and Hurstwood, one incident stands out in which Vandover loses a significantly larger amount than any time previously. Here, he loses $240, and “at last [finds] the new pleasure for which he had longed” (Norris 287). It is worth pointing out that Vandover’s enjoyment of gambling only develops after he has lost most of his money. When he can afford to lose large sums of money, the game has no thrill for him. Now that he is in a similar financial position to Lily and Hurstwood when they begin gambling, the action has its own appeal to him. There seems to be an odd relationship, then, between losing money that one can afford to lose and losing money that one needs in regards to gambling. Only when there are true risks does the behavior become exciting and compulsive. At this point, Vandover is out of money and struggling to maintain any semblance of a life. He is forced into beggary, much like Hurstwood, completing his decline from relative wealth and high social status in the upper-class to poverty and a complete lack of social standing, even within the lower, working-class.

While Hurstwood and Lily’s stories end with suicide, Vandover lives at the close of his novel, although the life he has left is equally tragic. Without an income or a job, he is forced to beg Geary to hire him, and is put to work cleaning some of Geary’s rent-houses, houses which Geary was able to build thanks to the swindle he enacted upon Vandover.
The reader leaves Vandover hunched on the floor after a laborious day, forced to be grateful for a quarter tip from one of Geary’s tenants. Vandover’s new position as a menial laborer obviously represents a significant downfall in terms of his economic and social status. However, simply stating this is not sufficient to truly understand how demeaning Vandover’s position has become. In order to more fully grasp the role that labor plays in the culture of the leisure class that Vandover has been expelled from, we must turn to Veblen.

During the predatory culture [i.e. a stage of human development occurring prior to contemporary civilization] labor comes to be associated in men’s habits of thought with weakness and subjection to a master… By virtue of this tradition labor is felt to be debasing, and this tradition has never died out. (ch. 3)

For Vandover, then, with the leisure class mentality likely still influencing his psyche, resorting to manual labor is essentially “hitting rock bottom.” Vandover must be desperate indeed to have resorted to such a state.

It is interesting to look at these characters together and compare and contrast their falls from relative wealth to abject poverty. While there are definite differences between the lives of these characters and the paths that these individuals take, there are elements of their collapses that appear across the genre. The basic idea of a high social standing being perilous and subject to change can be seen as an explicit convention of American Naturalism. Changes in wealth and standing are found in many Naturalist novels, and it is not necessarily illuminating that this appears as a theme in these works. What is illuminating, however, is the prevalence of these hugely specific factors of economic and social decline throughout American Naturalism. These implicit conventions appear to be serving a different purpose in the genre than the larger, more explicit themes provide. These
determining factors of socio-economic decline provide the reader with insight into how and why these declines occur, rather than simply pointing out their existence.

When we examine Veblen’s assertions about the leisure class, further avenues of understanding are opened to us. When Hurstwood begins to lose his financial footing, it would be easy to label his avoidance of labor and his vain struggle to maintain his standing as obviously detrimental to his position. What we should consider, however, is Veblen’s astute observance that “a standard of living is of the nature of habit. It is an [sic] habitual scale and method of responding to given stimuli. The difficulty in the way of receding from an accustomed standard is the difficulty of breaking a habit that has once been formed” (ch. 5). Lily and Vandover also seem to find themselves in situations that exist partially because of their difficulties in accepting life in a lower socio-economic stratum. When Veblen points out the difficulty in changing one’s “standard of living,” especially when there is a loss in status as opposed to a raise in status, he allows readers to gain a greater understanding of the struggles that these characters are dealing with.

When we look at these three characters at the beginnings and ends of their novels, it becomes clear that there are certain factors at work in American Naturalism that occur in various narratives of social and economic decline. A weakness for gambling, an act of sexual impropriety (or, if the character is a woman, the suggestion of such), and the role of “fate” or “chance” all play into these characters’ declines. They fall from grace and they fall heavily, landing on their backs instead of their feet, dying alone with no one to comfort them.
CHAPTER IV
THE IMMIGRANTS AND THE “AMERICAN DREAM”

In his 1982 study *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age*, Alan Trachtenberg helpfully establishes for the reader the state of the American economy for the laborer in the late 19th century:

A rough economic profile from the end of the 1880’s indicates how close to the margin of poverty many workers were compelled to live. About 45 percent of the industrial laborers barely held on above the $500-per-year poverty line; about 40 percent lived below the line of tolerable existence, surviving in shabby tenements and run-down neighborhoods by dint of income eeked out by working wives and children. About a fourth of those below the poverty line lived in actual destitution. (90)

The statistics that Trachtenberg supplies here are important in order to effectively contextualize the world in which the two main characters discussed in this chapter are forced to live. The information is especially applicable to a complete understanding of Jurgis’s predicament and the destitution in which the Rudkus family struggles. Although Trachtenberg does not explicitly mention immigrants in this passage, much of the industrial labor force was made up of immigrants, and therefore this section is pertinent to the discussion of immigration and poverty in this chapter.

While American Naturalism is deeply interested in exploring the trends that influence a rise and fall in the socio-economic status of “native born” Americans, the genre also seems to hold a vested interest in examining American capitalism and society through the eyes of the foreign immigrant. This chapter will explore two novels that feature
immigrant protagonists and the similarities and differences between their experiences, especially in terms of the protagonists’ ability or inability to raise their socio-economic status after coming to America. The novels discussed will be Abraham Cahan’s 1917 work *The Rise of David Levinsky* and Upton Sinclair’s 1906 “magnum opus,” *The Jungle*. The two main characters of these novels, David Levinsky and Jurgis Rudkus (from here on referred to as “Levinsky” and “Jurgis,” respectively) hail from the same region of Europe and both enter America around age 20. From here, their stories diverge and they follow individual paths that become increasingly disparate. Levinsky throws off the trappings and traditions of his childhood and adolescence and embraces American capitalism and greed in the religious fervor of the newly converted, eschewing socialism and finding prosperity in the United States. Jurgis, on the other hand, is soon disillusioned by capitalism and reaches the novel’s final chapters with the implication that socialism will become his new religion. Throughout both works, capitalism and socialism are discussed extensively, and the reader is left with a similar “lesson” to take from both authors: for American émigrés, a complete disavowal of any former culture is necessary for financial success. Capitalism must be embraced and monetary success must be achieved in order to survive. The ubiquitous “American Dream” is available only to those who are willing to follow the doctrines of capitalism and anyone who attempts to reform the system or fight against it will fail. Interestingly, there also seems to be an inversely related connection between financial success and emotional stability and happiness. Levinsky, while hugely financially successful, admits his misery at the end of the novel, and the reader cannot help but note that he appeared much happier living in Antomir in poverty than he does living in the United States with all of his wealth. Similarly, Jurgis’s fate at the end of the novel is
reasonably optimistic in emotional terms. His family was not able to survive American capitalism, but Jurgis manages to move above it and in his embrace of socialism he finds meaning in his life. However, he too must sacrifice one element for the other. He is reaching emotional and spiritual stability, but is deeply impoverished and ends the novel with only a meager income. There has been very little scholarship done on these aspects of the two novels. *The Rise of David Levinsky* has been written about very sparingly, and should perhaps be re-evaluated for its critical merit. *The Jungle* has been written on extensively, but the vast majority of the articles are related directly to the depiction of the slaughterhouses in Sinclair’s novel and how the book changed the way meat is processed, rather than focusing on a study of the socialist and capitalist issues in the text.

What makes a comparison of these two novels and their protagonists so intriguing are the similarities between their origins and the subsequent divergence of their paths. Both characters come from the same region of Eastern Europe. Jurgis hails from an unspecified rural region of the country, and Levinsky comes from Antomir, a fictitious Russian town based on Cahan’s hometown of Vilnius in Lithuania. Although these characters exist in vastly different spheres of society while in Europe, their geographic proximity provides an interesting aspect to an examination of their experiences after coming to America. Even though Jurgis is uneducated and Christian, while Levinsky is a Jewish Talmudic scholar, they come to America with similar difficulties. Neither can speak sufficient English to communicate adequately with native English speakers, neither has a place to live upon entering the country, and neither has a job waiting for them. They immigrate to America with similar motivations and expectations: they have heard that a man can make his way there and earn much more money than in Eastern Europe, but neither of them is really
prepared for such a life-changing move. They each operate under the assumption that wealth, success, and happiness will fall into their laps when they move to the United States, not realizing that the streets are not, in fact, paved with gold, and that their status as immigrants will make success very difficult to come by. Their ignorance and naiveté operate as negative attributes that make finding their way in America extremely difficult.

This study will examine Levinsky and Jurgis as two sides of a binary based upon their beliefs and behaviors related to assimilation, capitalism, and socialism. The two men have numerous similarities, but their similarities and common region of origin only serve to emphasize the differences that are created by their willingness and ability to assimilate into American culture and the capitalist/socialist binary. That these two men from Eastern Europe, who are perhaps equally unprepared for America, experience such disparate levels of financial success provides ample evidence for the “moral” that these texts are attempting to demonstrate about assimilation, capitalism, and socialism: only complete assimilation and an acceptance of capitalism will allow you financial success in America, but there is a trade-off. In order to be “blessed” by capitalism, as it were, you must remove all of your former morality, and any European aspects of your life and yourself. As Vecchio puts it, Levinsky’s journey to success “reveals the compromises and sacrifices that are often made to achieve financial success in America” (51).

Even with all of the obstacles in front of newly landed immigrants, or “green ones,” as new immigrants are referred to in The Rise of David Levinsky, Cahan’s novel demonstrates that it is possible for an immigrant to be successful in America. Levinsky’s success, however, is determined by choices he makes regarding American capitalism and consumerism. He struggles throughout the first part of the novel to become financially
successful, and it is not until he replaces Judaism with capitalism and individualism\(^6\) as his religion that he truly becomes a financial success. Levinsky is continually reminded that “America is not Russia,” a maxim that will eventually serve as the basis for his transformation. *The Rise of David Levinsky* details Levinsky’s economic rise, but the rise in financial and social standing is linked with a downfall in his moral and emotional state.\(^7\)

It is important, before a discussion of Levinsky and capitalism can begin, that we establish something about the author, Abraham Cahan. Cahan was an immigrant himself, and, since he is not especially well known in non-literary circles, a casual reader of *David Levinsky* might surmise that Cahan’s novel is semi-auto-biographical, and that he subscribes to the beliefs that allow Levinsky to attain financial success. However, this is one of the few cases in literature where it can absolutely be stated that this would be a misreading of the novel. Cahan, unlike his protagonist, was a fervent socialist who disavowed capitalism and viewed it as a detrimental aspect of American culture. His tale of Levinsky’s rise in a capitalist society is more of a warning to immigrants that they will lose something of themselves if they embrace American capitalism. Levinsky’s tale is a cautionary one, and Cahan’s desire in writing this novel was not to endorse capitalism, but to warn against its tendency for corruption.

Before a comprehensive analysis of Levinsky’s embrace of capitalism can be attempted, some information regarding Levinsky’s “European self” as a Russian Talmudic

\(^6\) Interestingly enough, there seem to be a great number of parallels in Levinsky’s belief in individualism and that which Martin Eden advocates, including a devotion to Spencer.

\(^7\) That these two aspects of self are related inversely is also discussed in William Dean Howells’ *The Rise of Silas Lapham*. Howells was a mentor to Cahan, and it is indisputable that Cahan was influenced by the 1885 novel.
The novel is ordered into 13 “books,” the first four of which detail Levinsky’s life in Antomir prior to his emigration from Europe. The text is written as a fictional memoir, with a late-middle-aged Levinsky narrating his rise for the reader. He introduces himself to the reader at the outset of the novel, allowing us to see the end result of his journey from the very beginning:

I was born and reared in the lowest depths of poverty and I arrived in America- in 1885- with four cents in my pocket. I am now worth more than two million dollars and recognized as one of the two or three leading men in the cloak-and-suit trade in the United States. And yet when I take a look at my inner identity it impresses me as being precisely the same as it was thirty or forty years ago. (Cahan 1)

Levinsky’s braggadocio in this opening passage is fascinating because of the lack of self-awareness that it demonstrates. As anyone who has completed even a cursory reading of the novel can attest, Levinsky’s “inner identity” as an adult is unrecognizable as that of the boy growing up in Antomir in the 1870s and 1880s. In her article The Loss of Self in “The Rise of David Levinsky,” Diane Vecchio refers to Levinsky’s change in personality as a “slow progression of the loss of self” (51), an assessment that nicely illustrates the changes and revisions of persona that Levinsky experiences during his time in America.

Beyond the evidence related to assimilation into American culture, Levinsky’s conscience changes dramatically and his sense of religious guilt, which was extremely strong in him as a European child and adolescent, is completely removed as an American adult. Some evidence of this is found in the references to “sin” that appear in the first four books, especially those related to carnal sin. Levinsky recalls the days of his childhood where a girl he referred to as “Red Esther” would forcibly kiss him and then taunt him for

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8 13, interestingly enough, is the age at which most boys attain their Bar Mitzvah, the Jewish coming of age ceremony that establishes a boy as a man in the eyes of the Jewish community. In context of the novel, perhaps Cahan is making a statement about Levinsky becoming an American man.
being a sinner, since he had kissed a girl. Levinsky, as a child, was deeply disturbed by this involuntary sin, and felt significant guilt at doing anything that might resemble a sin in the eyes of God. If this raging guilt at the mere appearance of a sin is to be taken as an accurate account of his inner self, then the behavior exhibited by Levinsky after his immigration to America should be sufficient to prove that his “inner identity” was drastically changed by his relocation. Part of his disavowal of his former life includes the frequenting of prostitutes and several attempts at affairs with married women. Now, some of this change might be internally rationalized by Levinsky as being natural changes relating to his biological and emotional development from a child into a man, but even with this caveat there is still something remarkably disparate in the mindset he has as a European child in regards to sexuality and sin and the mindset he develops as an American adult.

This change in mindset that America enforces on Levinsky is even more strikingly apparent when examining a conversation between Levinsky and his mother regarding the street in Antomir where the prostitutes lived and worked. As we can see from the following passage, the ideas of “sin” and morality were influential in the way that a young David Levinsky looked at the world around him. After being told by his mother that he should stay away from that street because “it is a sin to do so” (Cahan 13), Levinsky is mollified. As he explains to the reader:

One did not ask why it was a sin to do this or not to do that. ‘You don’t demand explanations of the Master of the World’ as people were continually saying around me. My curiosity was silenced. That street became repellent to me, something hideously wicked and sinister. (Cahan 13)

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9 Many of whom seem to remind him of his mother, which is a topic best left to a completely different kind of paper.
Here we can clearly see the impact that something being “sinful” had on Levinsky while living in Europe. As much as our narrator wants to convince the reader that his “inner identity” has not changed, and that he is essentially the same person he was as a child, the very fact that he frequents prostitutes as an adult with no moral qualms disproves Levinsky’s assertion. He has changed, whether he wants to acknowledge it or not, and the beginning of his personality change can be definitively linked to his arrival in America. That the idea of sin and what constitutes a sinful act changed for Levinsky after coming to America is symptomatic of his religious “conversion” upon embracing capitalist doctrine.

Levinsky’s career path also elucidates the “Americanization” of his “inner self.” In Antomir, Levinsky was being groomed and raised to be a Talmudic scholar. This was to be his career, his livelihood. He produced nothing, as to write Talmudist commentary was a task for those much older and more experienced than he. His study was not so that he would go on and work in a specific industry or field, as it is in American colleges and universities. The purpose of his study was study. Capitalism, as practiced in America, is largely built on the production of tangible, useful objects. To produce nothing is to waste one’s time, and to devote a life to the study of a religious text that could provide no material results would be considered a useless endeavor by capitalist standards. Therefore, Levinsky finds himself living in a new country with no concrete, marketable skills. He must change himself in order to survive.

Not long after Levinsky assures the reader that America has not changed his “inner identity” is some additional direct evidence to the contrary. When he first learns about America in Antomir, Levinsky describes his desire to travel to this “new world;” “The United States lured me not merely as a land of milk and honey, but also, and perhaps
chiefly, as one of mystery, of fantastic experiences, of marvelous transformations” (Cahan 61). It is telling that Levinsky, who sees himself as not having been changed by America, makes a point to inform his reader about his first impressions that America was a land of “marvelous transformations.” Reb Sender, a kind of father-figure role model to Levinsky while he resides in Antomir, cautions him against the move, saying “one becomes a Gentile there” (Cahan 61). Here we can see that everything that happened to Levinsky in terms of changing from a European Talmud scholar to an American manufacturer was laid out before him prior to his journey. He had already been warned that living in America and becoming an American would remove his Judaism from him. It seems that Levinsky felt that he could be the exception to the rule, that he could avoid becoming secularized by sheer force of will, even though there was no evidence that such a thing could be possible. It is also worthwhile to note that the original purpose for Levinsky’s immigration to America was to learn the language and study at an American college or university. Perhaps he felt that if he were to continue his studies in some way, he would be less susceptible to American “gentile” influences.

What Levinsky finds in America, however, is that assimilation is absolutely necessary for success. He finds that America is full of “unfriendly voices… with a spirit of icy inhospitality” (Cahan 89), very unlike the friendly, small-town social climate of Antomir. The first person Levinsky meets in America is a tailor who immediately recruits Levinsky’s boat-mate Gitelson to work for him. This unnamed “cloak contractor” (Cahan 91) tells Levinsky that reading Talmud is “no business in America” (Cahan 91) and that “if a fellow isn’t lazy nor a fool he has no reason to be sorry he came to America” (Cahan 91). That this is the first impression Levinsky receives about American labor and success
is key to understanding his belief in capitalism and individualism. If Levinsky is to believe what this cloak contractor tells him, as he seems to, that a strong work ethic and a nominal amount of intelligence is all it takes to make it in America, it is no wonder that he reacts poorly to anything that might question this individualist belief. This idea that hard work and brain power will be enough to succeed in America is not only an individualist belief but one that is intrinsically connected to the basic ideals of capitalist enterprise. A failed capitalist only fails because he has a poor work ethic or is not intelligent enough to make himself successful. While this may seem like a bit of an over-simplification, it does adequately describe capitalist doctrine as it relates to individual responsibility in a free market economy.

Levinsky’s first day in America is riddled with similar instances to this with the cloak contractor which shows him that his former lifestyle may not be acceptable or even possible in America. He assumes that he can spend his first night in a synagogue, not realizing that this is something that this is simply “not done” in the United States. He speaks with an elderly man who provides him with some information about what is possible and what is not possible for a Jew in America: “One does not sleep in an American synagogue… it is not Russia… I wish I could take you to my house, but-well, America is not Russia. There is no pity here, no hospitality… America has turned me into a mound of ashes… America is a topsy-turvy country” (Cahan 96). The man goes on to repeatedly tell Levinsky that “America is not Russia.” It is at this point that Levinsky’s disillusion with America begins, and he starts to realize that retaining his religion and European sensibilities may not be possible. This disillusionment is not permanent though, and it does not take long before Levinsky begins to make compromises and concessions regarding his
religion and its place in an American capitalist society. For a man who has studied Talmud all of his life and seen little to nothing of the secular world, Levinsky’s first negative experiences in America are largely due to his extreme culture shock. Levinsky is pliable, though, much like Lily Bart and Carrie Meeber, and he soon sees the benefits that may come from living like an American and giving up on his old ways. In other words, he soon begins to realize the necessity of assimilation for survival and success in America.

Levinsky’s first extended encounter with capitalism occurs when he begins working in the garment industry. He starts out as a mechanic, stitching collars and binding seams. At this point, he still retains a latent desire to go to college and educate himself, but the work proves too exhausting and he finds that “studying or reading [is] out of the question” (Cahan 152). He looks down upon his fellow workers, thinking of them as brute laborers, individuals he is somehow inherently better than. This opinion in regards to his “colleagues” is crucial in setting up the foundation for Levinsky’s behavior and thought process regarding his employees after he finds financial success. There is, however, a moment in this section of the novel where Levinsky begins to embrace being a part of the laboring class. He is proud of the money he has earned, feeling that it is “the first money [he] had ever earned honestly” (Cahan 153, italics in-text). He is happy with his place, and in the following passage the reader can see that this is a turning point in Levinsky’s career, a point where, had anything gone even the slightest bit differently, he may have renounced capitalism and become a socialist:

I now ate well and slept well. I was in the best of health and in the best of spirits. I was in an uplifted state of mind. No one seemed to be honorable who did not earn his bread in the sweat of his brow as I did. Had I then chanced to hear a Socialist speech I might have become an ardent follower of Karl Marx and my life might have been directed along lines other than those which brought me to financial power. (Cahan 153)
This passage is extremely important in terms of the evidence it provides to the thesis of
this chapter. Here, Levinsky effectively acknowledges the exact argument being made in
this chapter, that socialism and Marxism would not have led him to financial power. He
recognizes that his success has always been contingent on his not becoming involved with
or interested in the socialist movement, and although he does not use the word capitalism,
it seems that the lines that did lead him to financial power were capitalist in nature,
especially when viewing socialism and capitalism as systems existing as a binary.

However, at this point in the novel, capitalism has not fully replaced Judaism as Levinsky’s religion. He still has a deep desire to become educated, and the fact that the
garment industry has an “off-season” allows him to take English classes and try to further
his education. He recognizes that at this point in his life, Judaism is no longer his main
focus, and his religion is slowly being displaced and replaced by more “American” ideals.
He acknowledges this when he says, “My old religion had gradually fallen to pieces, and
if its place was taken by something else… that something was the red, church-like structure
on the southeast corner of Lexington Avenue and Twenty-third street” (Cahan 169). Here,
Levinsky is referring to the city college, a place that embodies his desire for education. It
is, perhaps, this desire for education that allows him to avoid getting “sucked in” to the
Socialist rhetoric that surrounds him as a workingman. He has loftier goals than to perform
manual labor for the rest of his life, and thus is uninterested in any sort of union
maneuvering that might better his position and make working more comfortable. Any
interaction he has with unions is by necessity, and he avoids getting too deeply involved in
their politics.
While still functioning as a laborer, Levinsky is, ultimately, coerced into joining a trade union. He is reluctant to do so because he does not want to view cloak-making as a permanent position, but rather as a sort of temporary stepping-stone that he must endure before he is able to afford to go to the city college. He does, however, cower to pressure, “feeling like a school-boy in Antomir when he is made to furnish the very rod with which he is to be chastised” (Cahan 173). When one of his fellow workers tries to impress him with socialist rhetoric, Levinsky replies by saying “I haven’t made the world, nor can I mend it” (Cahan 174). This exhibition of complacency with the capitalist system in place is crucial to Levinsky’s eventual success. If he had tried to “mend” the system, he would not have been able to profit from it.

His involvement in the capitalist free market, even as a menial laborer, does a great deal towards Levinsky’s embrace of capitalism and assimilation. As he continues to work in the garment industry, Levinsky’s dream of going to college and becoming an educated American man slowly slips by the wayside. He is intoxicated with the amount of money he has been able to make, telling the reader that it makes him feel “omnipotent” (Cahan 175), and the first seeds of greed and a desire for wealth for its own sake are planted. The feeling of power that Levinsky gets from his first relatively large paycheck is important because it establishes the relationship between financial capital and a sense of power that Levinsky will retain for the rest of the novel, and presumably for the rest of his life. It does not take long for him to fully embrace capitalism and begin to search for the manner in which he will make his fortune. When he notices Ansel Chaikin, a talented tailor working in the same shop as Levinsky, who is being drastically underpaid, Levinsky sees his chance to make more money and become an independent manufacturer. His need for Chaikin’s
skill and his admiration for that skill are balanced by a feeling that he (Chaikin) is behaving foolishly by allowing himself to be underpaid. Levinsky describes the situation and his feelings towards Chaikin as such:

He appeared to me in a new light, as the willing victim of downright robbery. It seemed obvious that the Manheimers could not do without him, that he was in a position to dictate terms to them, even to make them accept him as a third partner.

(Cahan 189, italics mine)

The most important phrase here is “willing victim.” A socialist might view Chaikin as an unwilling victim, a member of the proletariat laboring class being subjugated by his wealthy capitalist employers. Levinsky, as a newly “converted” and “devout” capitalist, sees Chaikin as a willing victim, complicit in his own subjugation by not insisting on higher pay and a larger role in the manufacturing business. This goes back to the initial lesson Levinsky heard from the cloak contractor on his first day in America, that if an individual worked hard and was intelligent enough to take control of their situation, they would prosper in America. To Levinsky, Chaikin is violating this capitalist maxim by not seeking higher wages and a partnership in the shop.

It is not long after this initial idea springs into Levinsky’s mind that he acts on it. He approaches Chaikin and his wife and proposes going into partnership together to create their own garment manufacturing business. This is a key moment in Levinsky’s life and in the structure of the novel. He throws off all of his latent desire to go to college and become educated, and devotes himself wholeheartedly to becoming a financial success. His morals have begun to slip further than before, as well. While in the first part of the novel he was devout and morally rigid, his behavior in America is increasingly amoral. Before he even begins to flirt with capitalism he frequents prostitutes and makes romantic passes at married women, and the first act of his capitalist life is to lie to Chaikin and his wife. He tells them
that he has a large amount of money coming in from some mysterious benefactor that will serve as the basis for their business endeavor. Of course, no such sum or benefactor exists, and Levinsky begins to borrow on credit in order to build his business. He does, to his credit, show some signs of being uncomfortable with this behavior, at least at the outset. He describes his behavior as involving “subterfuges that could not exactly be called honorable” (Cahan 238), a polite way of saying that he attempted to “trick” his creditors and continued to borrow far beyond his means.

When discussing his “dishonorable” business practices, Levinsky attempts to justify and rationalize his behavior by reassuring his readers:

I have long since been above and beyond such methods. Indeed, business honor and business dignity are often a luxury in which only those in the front ranks of success can indulge. But then there are features of the game in which the small man is apt to be more honorable and less cruel than the financial magnate. (Cahan 239)

This seemingly contradictory statement says a lot about Levinsky’s view of the business world and gives an indication of the kind of behavior he may be engaged in currently, as he narrates his story. He views honor and dignity in business as a “luxury,” but then goes on to say that a smaller businessman is likely to be more honorable than the “financial magnates.” As Levinsky the narrator must surely fall into this “magnate” category, the reader is left to wonder what kind of business practices he is currently involved in. All of this rationalization seems to be a way for Levinsky to forgive himself for things that he may have done. This kind of behavior, of course, is purely capitalistic and driven by personal greed and Levinsky’s desire to increase his own wealth, regardless of the effect it might have on his employees and creditors. As a businessman, Levinsky sees himself as being a part of an elite class, set apart from the rest of society; this belief likely helps him justify his unethical business practices and the lack of regard he shows for his workers.
This belief is illustrated further when he reflects on his interest in the financial column of the newspaper, which “[he followed] with a sense of being a member of a caste for which it was especially intended, to the exclusion of the rest of the world” (Cahan 269). Levinsky allows himself to engage in whatever type of behavior will financially benefit him because he sees himself as not being a part of the rest of society, especially of that part of society in which his workers belong, and to which he previously belonged.

Levinsky further rationalizes underpaying his workers and not hiring union labor by citing the benefits that the old-world Europeans experienced by working in his shop. He describes his employees by saying that:

Three of [his] men were excellent tailors. They could have easily procured employment in some of the larger factories, where they would have been paid at least twice as much as [Levinsky] paid them… They felt perfectly at home in [his] shop, and would rather work for [Levinsky] and be underpaid than be employed in an up-to-date factory where a tailor… was made the butt of ridicule if he covered his head every time he took a drink of water… The insurmountable obstacle which kept these three skilled tailors away from the big cloak-shops was the fact that one had to work on Saturdays there, while in [his] place one could work on Sunday instead of Saturday. (Cahan 270-271)

There are two opposing factors at work here. Yes, it could be argued that Levinsky was providing an excellent working environment for these men because they would not have to give up any of the basic tenets of their religion in order to earn a living. However, as we have seen, Levinsky himself realized the necessity of replacing his Judaism with capitalism as a means to success very soon in his American life. In providing these conditions to his workers, he rationalizes his low pay, and likely thinks he is doing something good for them. What he is actually doing is subjugating them and keeping them from advancing into a higher economic class. He has recognized the need to change one’s European old-world ways in order to be successful, but he does not allow any of his employees to realize this.
In this way, he creates an atmosphere that has no room for growth, ensuring that none of his employees will surpass him or rise up against him in search of higher wages.

At this point in the novel, Levinsky’s morals and business ethics are essentially nil. All he desires is to earn more money, to grow economically and to do whatever he must in order to achieve financial success. When he is mentioned in the *Arbiter Zeitung*, a Yiddish-language socialist newspaper, as a “traitor” and “fleecer of labor” (Cahan 273), Levinsky’s reaction illuminates his opinions about his business behavior. Instead of feeling chagrined and shamed by the editorial, as was likely the author’s intent, Levinsky is proud to be mentioned in the same passage as men like Vanderbilt, Gould, and Rothschild. He is so disconnected from the working world that he honestly believes that “while there were people by whom ‘fleecers’ were cursed, there were many others that held them in high esteem, and that even those who cursed them had a secret envy for them, hoping some day to be fleecers of labor like them” (Cahan 273). Levinsky has now become completely separated from the man he was when he first immigrated to America.

Another aspect of Levinsky’s behavior that demonstrates his complete disassociation from his former self is his interest in Darwin and Spencer. As we have already seen in *Martin Eden*, Spencer was a favorite among the Social Darwinists, many of whom were fervent supporters of individualism and capitalism and were opposed to socialism. Levinsky’s interest in Social Darwinism is largely a result of the “intellectual intoxication… flatter[ing] [his] vanity as one of the ‘fittest’” (Cahan 283) that he experiences when reading these texts. Perhaps the most telling line in the entire novel regarding Levinsky’s opinions relating to capitalism and socialism is found in this section,

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10 It is interesting to note that Cahan was editor-in-chief of the *Arbiter Zeitung* from 1891-1894, a fact that colors Levinsky’s characterization.
where he tells the reader: “A working man, and everyone else who was poor, was an object of contempt to me- a misfit, a weakling, a failure, one of the ruck” (Cahan 283). Here we see the bridge between Levinsky and the working community irrevocably broken. He believes wholeheartedly in capitalism and abhors socialist rhetoric. Combining this with the objective financial success that he achieves shows that in order to be financially successful in America, behavior like Levinsky’s is not only socially acceptable, but is actually necessary.

In direct contrast to this type of success, we find Jurgis Rudkus, a laborer who refuses to embrace capitalist doctrine and also refuses to remove all traces of his Lithuanian heritage in order to assimilate and to be financially successful in America. Jurgis, like Levinsky, is young when he immigrates to America, and is just as unprepared for what he will encounter in this new country. There are two binaries operating in a comparison between Jurgis and Levinsky. The first is the socialist/capitalist binary. The second binary is based on an individual’s decision between assimilation and traditionalism related to retaining one’s native national identity. Levinsky assimilates completely into American culture, revoking his connection with Judaism and with Antomir. Jurgis, on the other hand, along with his family, refuses to be assimilated and attempts to make his way in America without renouncing his heritage. He does make some concessions to Americanism, but he and his family still retain much of their Lithuanian culture for as long as they are able to do so. In the opening scene of the novel, Sinclair describes for the reader Jurgis and his child-bride Ona’s wedding, and takes pains to emphasize the depression and poverty that these people are living in while also emphasizing their refusal to completely assimilate into American culture, as can be seen in the following passage:
Bit by bit these poor people have given up everything else; but to [the *veselija*] they cling with all the power of their souls- they cannot give up the *veselija*! To do so would mean, not merely to be defeated, but to acknowledge defeat- and the difference between these two things is what keeps the world going. The *veselija* has come down to them from a far-off time; and the meaning of it was that one might dwell within the cave and gaze upon shadows, provided only that once in his lifetime he could break his chains, and feel his wings, and behold the sun. (Sinclair 11)

In refusing to give up this last vestige of their former lives in Europe, Jurgis and his family rebel against assimilation and Americanization in a struggle that Levinsky was unwilling to attempt. That Sinclair chose to open the novel with this scene is important to the reader’s understanding of Jurgis’s decisions throughout the remainder of the novel. The reader’s first impression of Jurgis is that he is fighting to retain some of his Lithuanian tradition and that he is not willing to complacently assimilate, which will be shown throughout the novel in more detail.

The last lines of this opening scene are also hugely important to understanding Jurgis’s character. Following his wedding, he tells his new bride that she will not be attending her factory job the next day. He tells her that it will be alright, that he “will work harder” (Sinclair 17). That Jurgis is under the opinion that hard work will ensure success in America is reminiscent of Levinsky’s initial opinions about America and what he was told by the cloak contractor upon entering the country. At this point, Jurgis is both a capitalist and an individualist, believing that his youth, strength, and strong work ethic are all that he needs in order to be successful and take care of his family. Jurgis is ready to embrace America when he arrives in Chicago, but while Levinsky is able to successfully assimilate, Jurgis never does, which makes his attempts at financial success largely futile.

It is important here to look briefly at the Rudkus family’s initial reaction to America and the disillusion that accompanies their immigration. They have been convinced to go to
America because a friend of the family had gotten “rich” while there. Jurgis is intoxicated by the idea of America and by the three rubles a day it has been rumored that he could earn there. Naively, “Jurgis figured what three rubles a day would mean, with prices as they were where he lived, and decided forthwith that he would go to America and marry, and be a rich man in the bargain” (Sinclair 18, italics mine). The italicized portion of this quotation is vitally important. Living in rural Lithuania, Jurgis understands nothing of exchange rates, and succumbs to the logical fallacy that three rubles in America would buy the same amount and quality of goods as it would in Lithuania. It only takes a few days in America for the family to realize that:

In [America] the poor man was almost as poor as in any other corner of the earth; and so there vanished in a night all the wonderful dreams of wealth that had been haunting Jurgis. What had made the discovery all the more painful was that they were spending, at American prices, money which they had earned at home rates of wages- and so they were really being cheated by the world! (Sinclair 22)

Jurgis and his family are quickly disillusioned by the high prices of American goods. Their dreams of being rich are dashed almost instantly and yet they do not give up hope on the promise of capitalist success. Everything in their surroundings tells them that success is still possible, that a better life than in Lithuania is attainable. Signs abound advertising luxury goods at exorbitant prices, but the mere fact that such goods exist and are, at least theoretically, available to be purchased is enough to awe the Rudkus family. Employment also seems to be easy to come by. Within the first days of their life in America, Jurgis and a few members of his family obtain jobs. Jurgis’s job is in the Chicago stockyards, which he tours shortly after being hired.

This tour of the stockyards shows the first glimpses of a few of the primary themes of the novel, including imagery that metaphorically compares individual workers to parts
of a larger, capitalist machine, the descriptions of the ‘killing beds’ of the stockyard that shocked so many readers when *The Jungle* was first published, and the disconnect between the relatively affluent managers of the stockyards and their poverty-stricken employees. When Jurgis first lays eyes on the stockyards, he feels pride at being a part of the process; “Had he not just gotten a job, and become a sharer in all this activity, a cog in this marvelous machine?” (Sinclair 27). At this point, Jurgis is embracing the capitalist machine in all its glory. He has yet to realize how difficult and totally without reward the work will be. He has yet to realize how quickly his job could be taken from him, and how close he and his family are to starvation at any moment in time. Jurgis is also in the dark as to his place within this “marvelous machine.” He may be a cog in the machinery, but his position is so insignificant and expendable that he is not able to benefit from the profits of the stockyards in the same manner that his managers and bosses are able to. Jurgis is unaware of the truth of the capitalist system he is becoming a part of. Based on his knowledge of the myth of American opportunity, Jurgis mistakenly believes that everyone in America is given the same chance to succeed. He has not yet discovered that “gross inequalities of opportunity existed in the United States during the Jacksonian era; by the 1880s the growth of organized corporate capitalism had made genuine economic independence a near impossibility” (Lears 18). Simply immigrating to America is not enough to become economically successful and self-sufficient. Those born into higher socio-economic classes have more opportunities for success, and a foreign-born laborer with a limited skill set is not likely to find American success easy to come by. There was a belief that “newer Latin and Slavic immigrants, unlike their Nordic predecessors, were biologically inassimilable to American life” (Lears 30). Although this belief, held by the restrictionists, is bigoted and prejudiced,
Jurgis and his family fulfill the restrictionist prophesy by refusing to completely assimilate into American culture, which makes their situation that much more difficult to rise above.

Just as he is taken in by the wonder of the machinations of the stockyards, Jurgis and his family are similarly taken in by a housing scheme reminiscent of that which sent our country into a recession so recently. They are found the victims of a scheme wherein the Rudkus family is convinced that they have purchased a house that they are in actuality only renting. The house is described as being brand new, but is actually a dilapidated structure covered with a façade of fresh paint. The advertiser in this instance is behaving according to the laws of his trade. Returning to Trachtenberg, we find that “insofar as the advertisement inserts a name of ownership between the usable object and the potential user- insofar as it wishes to transform the potential user into a customer- it inevitably misguides its audience about the true character of the product” (138). This “misguiding” of the Rudkus family is a key aspect of commercialization. Today, most individuals are naturally skeptical of advertisements that seem “too good to be true.” In the late 19th century, however, advertising was a relatively new phenomenon. Had Jurgis and his family been native-born Americans, they might have been used to a certain degree of hyperbole and elevated expectations in their advertisements, and may have viewed the advert in question with a healthy dose of skepticism. As it is, coming from a small, rural European town, their concept of advertising is incomplete and misinformed. They likely believe that anything printed must be true, and therefore assume that the home they are considering purchasing could not possibly be anything other than that which is being advertised to them.
In the Rudkus’s encounter with the real estate agent, a bit of American assimilation might have been beneficial. As it is, their timidity allows them to be swindled, and even though they are doubtful of what the agent is telling them, “To press the matter would have seemed to be doubting his word, and never in their lives had any one of them ever spoken to a person of the class called “gentleman” except with deference and humility” (Sinclair 39). This is the first in a long line of situations that emphasize the danger of holding onto European values. This incident also emphasizes the importance for an immigrant of understanding how a capitalist free market economy works. As the “consumers,” as it were, of goods (in this case, the house), the Rudkus family actually has the upper hand and the power in this economic transaction. The real-estate agent relies on families like the Rudkuses for his livelihood. If they do not buy what he is selling (in every sense of the phrase), he will fail. Where the balance of power tips towards the agent (and where he has security in his position) is in the agent’s knowledge that these old-world European immigrants will not understand enough about America and capitalism to question anything he says. He is free to cheat these people because they do not know that, in America, they do not have to accept being cheated.

With the family settled into their new home, and Jurgis and the other working members of the Rudkus family settling into their new jobs, things go well for a time. At first, Jurgis enjoys his new job. He has trouble understanding why those men who have been working in the stockyards for an extended period of time don’t enjoy what they’re doing. He is a devout member of the twin churches of Capitalism and Individualism, believing that he will be successful where these beaten men are not because of his work ethic. His logic, however, is flawed because of his early “success.” He “consign[s] the unfit
to destruction, while going about all day sick at heart because of his poor old father, who [is] wandering somewhere in the yards begging for a chance to earn his bread” (Sinclair 48). He is all too ready to shun those who he sees as unfit while hypocritically wishing for his father to find some work, even though his father is just as unfit as those he condemns. This is a kind of exclusionary logic, where Jurgis deems himself and his family worthy of special treatment.

As his family continues to struggle to stay financially afloat, Jurgis becomes increasingly disillusioned with his job. He joins the meatpacker’s union and devotes himself to it “with all the zeal and fury of a convert” (Sinclair 75). Here we have an interesting parallel between Jurgis and Levinsky. Levinsky chooses capitalism as his religion, and with his membership in a trade union, Jurgis begins his lengthy conversion to the church of socialism. Jurgis is disillusioned by the suffering that he has witnessed and experienced at the hands of his capitalist managers and bosses, and he finds that everywhere he turns there is a new form of suffering ready for him to experience, all of which is related to the economic system. His house falls apart and he is forced to make repairs that he cannot afford. He sees his sister lose her job, his father die, and the youngest children of his family forced into labor. The end result of all of this is not a desire to join in with the ruling class like Levinsky might have experienced, but to fight against those who are holding him down, to “fight and win- for defeat was a thing that could not even be thought of” (Sinclair 84).

After some miserable time spent working in the stockyards, Jurgis is injured and loses his place. Ona has recently had a baby and with Jurgis out of work for six weeks, the family’s hardships grow more severe than ever before. Jurgis is forced to go look for
another job, an endeavor he finds significantly more challenging than when he first came to Chicago. He is no longer strong and healthy looking, and it is only the faces of his wife and son that keep him from succumbing to the numbing power of alcohol. He keeps trying to find work and eventually is forced to take a place at the dreaded fertilizer plant. He takes the stench of the plant home with him, and the entire family suffers because of it.

With all of these hardships befalling them, the Rudkus family has become something completely unlike what they were when they first came to America. They live as if in a dream state, going through the motions of their mindless, back-breaking labor, coming home, eating without tasting, and falling asleep only to do it all again the next day.

Sinclair describes the family as

Beaten; they had lost the game, they were swept aside… they had dreamed of freedom; of a chance to look about them and learn something; to be decent and clean, to see their child grow up to be strong. And now it was all gone- it would never be! They had played the game and they had lost. (113)

This quote, coming so soon after the acknowledgement that “defeat was a thing that could not even be thought of” (Sinclair 84) shows just how dire the family’s situation is. Defeat would mean the utter destruction of their family, and now that they have “lost” the “game,” the remaining core of their family begins to splinter. It is not surprising, then, that a new, more complicated tragedy befalls them at this time. Ona begins disappearing at night, and Jurgis learns that she has been forced into prostitution by her employer. He goes to find the man, beats him, and is sent to jail.

This imprisonment is truly the beginning of the end for the Rudkus family. In jail, Jurgis encounters men who he sees as “the drainage of the great festering ulcer of society” (Sinclair 138), men who take no responsibility for the crimes they have committed, because they view the entire system as being flawed, because, as they see it, “the game had never
been fair, the dice were loaded” (Sinclair 138). To some extent, this belief is actually appropriate for Jurgis, even though it may not apply to those men who subscribe to it. What happened to Ona wasn’t fair, and it wasn’t fair that Jurgis was unable to deliver a “righteous” punishment to her abuser, as he may have been able to do in Europe (or, alternatively, may have been able to do if there had not been such a serious gulf in class status between Jurgis and Ona’s abuser). Nevertheless, Jurgis’s time in jail opens his eyes to the criminal underworld, a world that he will find himself forced to embrace all too soon.

Before Jurgis's foray into the criminal underbelly of Chicago, however, he is forced to witness the complete destruction of his family and of his home life. Coming out of prison, Jurgis is shocked and dismayed to realize that his family has lost their home, that Ona and her cousin Marija have lost their jobs, and that all of his family's children have been forced to work in order to support the others. These monumental changes that have occurred in Jurgis's 30 day absence appear to Jurgis as the family's final defeat by American Capitalism. As Jurgis searches for his family, he weeps and struggles to come to terms with the fate of his kin, lamenting that "they had cast their all into the fight; and they had lost, they had lost!" (Sinclair 148). Again, we have this “game” imagery, with winners and losers on opposite sides. Although it is never stated explicitly, it can be inferred that the “fight” that Jurgis and his family are engaged in is with the capitalist system. With what is perhaps a direct result of influences from his time in jail, Jurgis views himself as a victim of American industry, seeing "himself, through the whole long course of events, the victim of ravenous vultures that had torn into his vitals and devoured him" (Sinclair 148).

Once he is able to locate his family, Jurgis's situation goes from bad to worse. Death surrounds the Rudkus family, and he arrives "home" to find Ona in the midst of premature
labor. Unwilling to trust hospitals and American doctors, the Rudkus women turn to a midwife to assist with Ona's delivery. This decision proves detrimental to Ona’s chances of survival, as they do not have enough funds to pay the midwife the exorbitant rate that she demands, which results in a fatal delay in crucial care. Ona and the baby die, and Jurgis’s spirits and outlook take a decisively negative turn. He finds out he is blacklisted and is forced to enlist the help of a wealthy young women, a “settlement worker,” in order to secure employment. Time goes by, and Jurgis finds solace in his young son, Antanas. As should be unsurprising to readers at this point, tragedy strikes again, and Antanas drowns in the muddy sewer outside of the family’s home.

It is not until after this tragedy that Jurgis actively begins to disassociate himself with American capitalism and gives up trying to work within the system. He is ashamed of the trust he had placed in the American system, he regrets the time and energy spent and, as he sees it, wasted on trying to survive and thrive in America. He makes a vow to fight against the American economic system, although he does not use that terminology:

He had been a fool, a fool! He had wasted his life, he had wrecked himself, with his accursed weakness; and now he was done with it- he would tear it out of him, root and branch! There should be no more tears and no more tenderness; he had had enough of them- they had sold him into slavery! Now he was going to be free, to tear off his shackles, to rise up and fight. (Sinclair 176-177, italics mine)

The emphasized portion here is crucial to an understanding of the issues related to the capitalist/socialist binary operating within the novel. Jurgis does not use the terms capitalist and socialist to describe his feelings and intentions, likely because he is unaware of these terms existing as formalized systems, but the concepts exist within the text nonetheless.

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11 The scene in which this woman comes to speak with Elzbieta is reminiscent of similar scenes in *The House of Mirth*, including the “reversal of fortune” scene in which Lily is forced to seek succor and shelter from a woman she had previously assisted.
Referring to himself as a slave is telling, because it demonstrates that he feels bound and constrained by America and by the capitalist structure that allowed his family and himself to fail. The final line of this section, where Jurgis refers to “tear[ing] off his shackles,” and “ris[ing] up” are important because they resemble socialist rhetoric and propaganda of the period. The socialists at the time (including, notably for this study, Upton Sinclair himself), talked about capitalism as a structure that would place its citizens in bondage and functionally make them slaves to the system. By pulling from socialist and anti-capitalist rhetoric in Jurgis’s ultimate moment of grief, despair, and anguish, Sinclair (and Jurgis, by proxy) is placing at least a portion of the blame for Jurgis and his family’s fate on the capitalist system.

Following his son’s death, Jurgis flees Chicago and begins to “tramp” around the country, working odd jobs when he needs money and occasionally stealing what he can. He has some brief encounters with farmers, some of whom want to offer him permanent or seasonal jobs, but he seems to prefer traveling along. One exchange, in which Jurgis is offered a seasonal job, emphasizes the change in attitude and mindset that he has experienced in his travels away from the city of Chicago. After being told that a job would be offered only for the summer and beginning of fall, Jurgis replies “When you get through working your horses this fall, will you turn them out in the snow?” (Sinclair 179-180). This is followed by a parenthetical aside from Sinclair which reads “(Jurgis was beginning to think for himself nowadays)” (180). Jurgis’s reply to the farmer is again reminiscent of socialist rhetoric, although to this point in the novel, Jurgis has not yet encountered formal socialist arguments. The parenthetical aside from Sinclair is interesting because it is somewhat unique within the text. Sinclair does not often address the reader in this manner,
and by saying that Jurgis is “think[ing] for himself,” Sinclair implicitly endorses Jurgis’s line of thinking.

Once Jurgis returns to Chicago, the novel changes form. Although ostensibly continuing to tell Jurgis’s story and what has befallen his family, there exists a definite shift in tone and characterization that is likely a major factor in what some critics see as a flaw in the novel’s construction. He begins to see America’s capitalist structure as flawed and inherently unfair. As Sinclair puts it, “He saw the world of civilization then more plainly than ever he had seen it before; a world in which nothing counted but brutal might, an order devised by those who possessed it for the subjugation of those who did not” (192). This “world of civilization” that Jurgis witnesses may actually be more accurately described as a “world of capitalism,” at least insofar as Sinclair defines capitalism.

Following a mishap with a wealthy young man and a subsequent fight with a bartender over change for a $100 bill, Jurgis is jailed yet again, and upon his release he begins to dabble in the criminal underworld, which then leads to a foray into the world of politics. Jurgis is employed by the Republican Party to solicit votes and is given a position as a “boss” in the meatpacking district. As mentioned before, Jurgis was a member of the meatpackers’ union when we worked as a laborer at a meatpacking plant. No longer a member of the union, Jurgis’s appointment as a “boss” is made possible in no small part to the strike taking place at this time. Seeing the fate of the strikers is disillusioning to Jurgis, and he becomes aware that “strikers were very often fired and blacklisted, their leaders fined and jailed” (Trachtenberg 40-41). This proves to Jurgis that, although the unions are working to support workers, they may not be doing enough. His disappointment in that brings him a further step away from capitalism, although he does not realize it. It is at this
point in the text where Sinclair first uses the term “socialist.” Jurgis has socialists explained to him as “the enemies of American institutions- [they] could not be bought, and would not combine or make any sort of a ‘dicker’” (Sinclair 217). Jurgis finds it difficult to intellectually understand socialism, and even though he has already “begun to think for himself,” he goes along with his Republican beneficiaries and accepts the opportunity he has been given. Much as the first section of the novel illuminated the hidden and grotesque world of meatpacking, this section of the novel attempts to illuminate the hidden and grotesque world of politics.12

Jurgis’s foray into politics is short-lived, and he soon finds himself poverty stricken, homeless, and in desperate need of help. He finds his cousin Marija working as a prostitute, and is forced to flee shortly after their reunion when the brothel is raided. Searching for shelter and anonymity, Jurgis makes his way into what will turn out to be a socialist rally. The structure and “plot” of the novel completely fall apart at this point, and the remainder of the text is given up to various passages devoted to socialist rhetoric. Jurgis becomes infatuated with socialism after hearing the speaker at the socialist rally. He feels that the words are especially for him, “it seemed as if the speaker had been pointing straight at him, as if he had singled him out particularly for his remarks… to hear it was to be suddenly arrested, to be gripped, transfixed” (Sinclair 253). Indeed, the reader can see many similarities between the struggle that this speaker describes and the struggles that the Rudkus family went through following their immigration to America, which is quite obviously done by design.

12 From a literary standpoint, there are some issues with this format. Jurgis ceases to be a fully fleshed out character and becomes an ‘everyman.’ Any character could fill his place, and some of his defining characteristics disappear or are changed.
Jurgis is hugely affected by this rally. He feels as if he “had been torn out of the jaws of destruction, he had been delivered from the thralldom of despair; the whole world had been changed for him- he was free, he was free!” (Sinclair 258). Jurgis is introduced to “Comrade Ostrinski,” an elderly Polish immigrant who speaks Lithuanian and who explains the finer points of socialist rhetoric to Jurgis. Once his understanding of the concept is complete, Jurgis attempts to convert Marija to socialism and begins to take the conversion of capitalists as his mission. The novel concludes with another socialist stump speech, and the final lines of the novel are a repetition of the phrase “Chicago will be ours!” (Sinclair 297).

At the novel’s end, Jurgis has found his place. Unwilling and unable to support capitalism any longer, Jurgis turns to socialism and the socialist community for emotional support. He finds what might be best deemed as a sort of spiritual fulfillment in the socialist community, but it would be remiss to consider Jurgis’s ending to be a happy one. In his attempts to conform to capitalist society and its structure, Jurgis lost his wife, two children, his father, and various other members of his immediate and extended family. The only relative he has left in contact is his wife’s cousin Marija, who has been forced into prostitution, a capitalist structure, in order to support herself. Even with the support of his new socialist friends, Jurgis is very much alone in America, and although he has the probability of continued employment working for another Socialist Party member, he still lives in poverty, and cannot be said to be financially successful by any definition of the terms.

When we look at the ultimate outcomes for Jurgis and for David Levinsky, it is all too clear that these Naturalist authors are making a statement about surviving in America
as an immigrant. This statement has three disparate elements, the first of which is the inverse relationship between financial success and emotional stability and satisfaction. Levinsky is an objective financial success, but has few friends, no family, and admits his loneliness and depression at the novel’s close. Jurgis is poor, yet he seems to have achieved a sort of peace at the close of the novel and has successfully ingratiated himself into Chicago’s socialist community. He has lost his family, but he appears to be developing an emotional support system nonetheless.

The second element of the Naturalist statement is related to the capitalist/socialist binary and how a decision regarding embracing capitalism relates to the ability to be successful in America. Levinsky wholeheartedly embraces capitalism and eschews socialism, viewing it as a sort of “last resort” for those who have not been able to attain success through “traditional” capitalist means. He is unbothered by unscrupulous business practices, and views cheating his employees and manipulating the system as “good business.” In direct contrast, Jurgis ends the novel abhorring capitalism and fully embracing socialism, seeing it as a way for the common people to take back control over their lives. He dabbles in capitalist practices, but eventually comes to the realization that the system is flawed and needs to be overhauled.

A final element related to the Naturalist statement regarding immigrants is the disavowal of one’s European roots. Levinsky, who arguably has a more culturally disparate background than Jurgis, finds it much easier to reject his European background and assimilate into the American culture. He completely removes himself from his old world religious background, transforming from a pious Talmud scholar to an atheist whose religious is commerce. He learns English and stops speaking Yiddish almost completely,
and he seems to view America as inherently superior to Europe. In Jurgis’s case, he and his family attempt to retain some of their European traditions and roots while living in America. His wedding to Ona is traditionally Lithuanian, and he and his family retain their Lithuanian language, never becoming truly fluent in English. While Levinsky views coming to America as one of the singular achievements of his life, and celebrates the day he disembarked in New York as an anniversary, Jurgis repeatedly mourns the decision to come to America and at many points in the novel regards it as the worst mistake of his life.

In examining these two novels and their protagonists, it is apparent that both Sinclair and Cahan are making statements about America and the capitalist system; that both authors were socialists provides context and explanation to their arguments. Sinclair is quite plainly showing the reader the dangerous and unsatisfactory aspects of the capitalist system, but Cahan’s message might be more difficult to ascertain. Yes, Levinsky is successful because of his embrace of capitalist doctrine, but his characterization is unlikeable and his behavior is at times abhorrent. Therefore, while his journey may appear to be a success story that advocates capitalism, it may be more accurate to consider the novel as a warning of the dangers of capitalism, as the reader can see that Levinsky’s fate is still unsatisfactory. It is generally problematic to ascribe specific authorial intent on novels, as we can never truly know what was going on in an author’s mind as they wrote, but there seems to be a distinct connection between the “messages” that these novels are trying to convey and the doctrine that their authors subscribed to. Additionally, even without delving into issues of authorial intent, the texts appear to be operating as agencies of economic and social rhetoric, passing on a message to readers about how to thrive in an American capitalist society, and what dangers may come from doing so.
CHAPTER V
CONCLUSION

After examining these texts, it is clear that certain themes and implicit conventions exist within American Naturalism as a genre. Naturalism is interested in looking at economic and social systems and how these systems operate on individuals; it is interested in examining social constructs like a financially determined class system and peer enforced social behavior; these are the explicit goals of American Naturalism. What is left implicit are the details that appear again and again in Naturalist fiction regarding socio-economic mobility and the factors that are involved in obtaining financial success.

In the first chapter, I examined the paths to financial success of Martin Eden and Carrie Meeber, and discussed what elements of their dispositions and decisions made a jump in socioeconomic status possible or impossible. What I found was that there was a direct correlation to an individual’s willingness to remove themselves entirely from their former life and devote themselves entirely to the new class that they had climbed to. As I showed in this chapter, economic wealth is not sufficient to be upwardly mobile. An individual must completely reinvent themselves, even down to the most basic features of their being, including their name, in order to successfully move into a higher socioeconomic class. Carrie’s willingness to remove herself from her family’s working-class background allowed her to move in between classes more successfully than Martin, who was unwilling to abandon his working-class family and friends.
The second chapter focused on the factors that led to a complete downfall in socioeconomic status. These factors were examined in the characters Lily Bart, George Hurstwood, and Vandover. By looking at elements including a penchant for card gambling, sexual impropriety or the implication thereof, and issues related to self-determinism and free will, a series of criteria was established. These criteria appeared in all three novels and led to similar fates for the characters including total financial destitution and an emotional and mental collapse, leading to suicide or suicidal thoughts and actions.

In the third chapter, I focused on analyzing the success rates of American immigrants from Eastern Europe as found in David Levinsky and Jurgis Rudkus. This chapter showed that success in America for immigrants was contingent upon a complete disavowal of an individual’s European heritage and near total assimilation into American society. Additionally, this chapter set up a capitalist/socialist binary, with successful immigrants being those who embraced capitalism and unsuccessful immigrants being those who fought against the capitalist system and searched for solace in socialism.

While ascribing these trends across the genre to a direct conversation between the authors involved is tempting, especially given how much we know about the various relationships between authors, it is perhaps more interesting to view these trends and conventions as accidental and unintentional. They create dialogue between texts which is not necessarily related to or reliant on actual interaction between authors. The dialogue between texts and connections that can be seen among various examples of the genre is truly fascinating. The lines between American Realism and American Naturalism have always been blurry, and examining what makes Naturalism what it is can help to cement it as an autonomous genre.
WORKS CITED


