

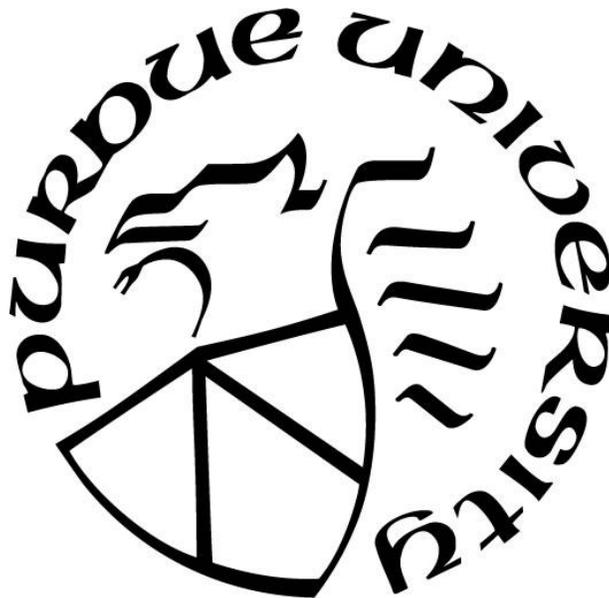
**CRIMINALITY AND CAPITALISM IN THE ANGLO-AMERICAN
NOVEL, 1830-1925**

by
Alex Long

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**THE PURDUE UNIVERSITY GRADUATE SCHOOL
STATEMENT OF COMMITTEE APPROVAL**

Dr. Dino Franco Felluga, Chair

Department of English

Dr. Aparajita Sagar

Department of English

Dr. Bill Mullen

Department of American Studies

Dr. Derek Pacheco

Department of English

Approved by:

Dr. Dorsey Armstrong

For Melissa

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation argues that the boundaries between capitalism and criminality have become increasingly blurred over the past two centuries, and it traces this development through the Victorian era into American modernity. Operating on the premise that popular literature reflects wide-spread concerns and anxieties of a common audience, each chapter focuses on one primary text as a cite for analysis through which we gain a window of insight into the popular perception of criminals and the role of criminality in developing capitalism. In an attempt to provide relevant context and establish a solid foundation on which to work, the dissertation begins with an introduction that outlines major developments in the British literary field, with a particular eye toward bourgeoning popular mediums, beginning in the eighteenth century and leading into the Victorian era. This foundational work establishes urban compression and rapid industrial development as major concerns for a Victorian audience and figures them as the backdrop on which the discourse of criminality will play itself out.

The first half of the dissertation focuses on the Victorian era, whereas the latter half analyzes works of American literature in the early-twentieth century. Chapter one looks to *Oliver Twist* as the preeminent example of Victorian criminality, with particular emphasis on middle-class complicity in reinforcing the social structures and environmental determinism that Dickens identified as major causes of Victorian crime. Chapter two progresses to the late-Victorian era and discusses Anthony Trollope's *The Way We Live Now*. Doing so allows approaching Victorian criminality from the opposite vantage point, seeing the advent of white-collar crime and fraud as now more significant than the formerly dominant concern of petty crimes as seen in *Oliver Twist*. These early chapters mark a progression of criminality that gradually enmeshes itself in the habits of ambitious capitalists, which I argue is paramount to the construction of the discourse of criminality and capitalism. Rather than isolated incidents, I forward these texts as representative of thematic shifts in the literary field and public consciousness.

Such a progression is carried over into American modernism, which constitutes the focus of chapters three and four. In chapter three, systemic violence inherent in laissez-faire capitalism and cronyism become the focus of the discussion, as presented in Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*. This chapter presents Sinclair's didacticism as a necessary and significant progression in popular social-critique literature, and it contends that the gradual shift away from the personalized

narrative of Jurgis to the heightened awareness of his political awakening marks an important development that figures criminality as not only part of, but indeed integral to, capitalism and its smooth functioning. This is contrasted with chapter four which presents *The Great Gatsby* as a misinterpretation of the lessons presented in *The Jungle* and reverts back to individualism as a flawed solution to capitalism's ills. Whereas *The Jungle* was critiqued based on socialist didacticism and so-called lack of artistry, *The Great Gatsby* experienced immense success for its artistry, despite the fact that it falls back into the trap of individualism, romanticizing the criminal and capitalistic success of its protagonist while ultimately slating him for sacrifice to reinforce the status quo.

These four chapters, I argue, constitute four major stages in progression of the discourse on criminality and capitalism, but leave many questions still unanswered, particularly as regards how society should appropriately and adequately engage the issues contained within these texts. An epilogue is included at the end of this project as an attempt to look forward to expansion of this research and continue to trace this progression up to present-day texts of popular culture. In doing so, my research will engage the development of the criminally-capitalist antihero in popular culture and argue that such figures are representative of the crisis of contemporary capitalism that sees no legitimate (nor illegitimate) ways of succeeding in capitalism.

PROLOGUE

Augustus Melmotte was a man whose success was so grand that “his breath was taken for money” (Trollope 325); at the same time, he maintained “a reputation throughout Europe as a gigantic swindler, —as one who in the dishonest pursuit of wealth had stopped at nothing” (68). As Melmotte rises and falls in Victorian society, he manages to acquire even a position in parliament, to say nothing of extreme wealth, before meeting the untimely demise often befallen on those who enjoy the short-lived benefits of ill-gotten gains in Victorian literature. But how does a man who holds a well-known reputation as a swindler achieve such heights to begin with? According to Anthony Trollope’s *The Way We Live Now* (1875), it is a combination of “unanimity” and “commerce” of the highest degree; as stated by his American femme fatale, Mrs. Hurtle, “commerce is not noble unless it rises to great heights,” (246) and no one has risen to greater commercial heights than Augustus Melmotte. Indeed, “it can hardly be said of him that he had intended to play so high a game, but the game that he had intended to play had become thus high of its own accord” (323). The resemblance of Trollope’s charlatan antagonist to the current president of the United States, Donald Trump, is uncanny to say the least. It also illustrates the impeccable ability of *TWWLN* to remain pertinent in representing popular anxieties regarding capitalism’s influence on morality throughout Western culture. It is the ability of literary fiction to express contemporary anxieties related to capitalism and to critique their underlying causes that is of interest to my current project. I look to the historical development of the Anglo-American novel, with a particular eye to the (re)shaping of criminals and their relationship to capitalist exploits, to better understand what has changed and what has remained relatively consistent over the course of nearly two centuries of Western development. I argue that over time the boundaries between criminal activity and supposedly legitimate economic pursuits

have become increasingly blurred in Western culture. We can trace this progression and its public perception by looking at the popular literature of the past two centuries, gaining insight into not only contemporary anxiety related to this convergence, but also the critiques of this social phenomenon from popular literary figures of the time. These critiques range from a mild anxiety about profit-seeking excess to a radical rejection of capitalism as a legitimate economic paradigm, but they all illustrate a continued preoccupation with social mobility and the perverse incentives that arise under capitalism.

Currently, there is a significant body of scholarly work dedicated to the criminal aspects of Victorian culture, and there is also a sizable (though comparatively smaller) set of works dedicated to the emergence of high finance and white-collar crime, both in Victorian society and in the literature that represents it. However, there is little work that combines these concerns into a unified inquiry regarding the relationship of criminality to emerging capitalism. This demarcation between these two themes persists throughout the twentieth century, suggesting a broader acceptance of the notion that lower-class, usually violent crime is distinctly different from upper-class, usually white-collar crime, and that neither need be addressed in the context of the other. My project confronts this scholarly void by combining these two fields of inquiry and explicating the relationship between high and low crime, as well as analyzing the treatment of each in popular Anglo-American novels.

I argue that the representation of criminals in the Anglo-American novel, which expresses contemporary anxieties surrounding the development of capitalism and the changing nature of crime (specifically the progression toward white-collar crime), is the result of a shifting cultural landscape. As industrialization leads to more concentrated production in economic hubs, the literature that represents these environments gradually alters its focus from more

sensationalist themes of robbery and pickpocketing, as seen in the likes of *Oliver Twist* (1839), to the suit-wearing criminals found in *TWWLN*. The increased attention to white-collar crime and the moral perils of higher finance continue to evolve as we progress into the twentieth century and across the Atlantic. Changes in action as well as perception both contribute to the convergence of criminality and capitalism, in life as well as the literature that represents it. For example, throughout nineteenth-century Britain, there were real shifts in the prevalence of highway robbery or pickpocketing due to several factors, which in turn altered the pervasiveness of these crimes in popular fiction. Alternatively, crimes like insider trading were not illegal until significantly later in the development of Western capitalism. In this example, the actions have not changed, but the criminality has increased due to new rules being implemented—this too has leaked onto the pages of popular fiction. As such, looking at the development of representing criminality and capitalism in popular Western literature illustrates the complex relationship between both from the nineteenth century up to the present. The fact that scholarly work tends to limit itself to a particular time and style (e.g., modernism) or place (e.g., American literature) only further necessitates work such as this which aims to emphasize the transhistorical and transatlantic influence the Victorians had on twentieth-century American authors.

Drawing from the work of Clive Emsley in *Crime and Society in England, 1750-1900* (2010), my project acknowledges from the start that “A definition of crime which embraces all of its different perspectives and which satisfies every generalisation and nuance is probably impossible” (2). Emsley suggests “The simplest definition describes crime as behavior which violates criminal law, behavior which if detected, would lead to prosecution in a court of law,” but goes on to assert that “criminal behavior is tied firmly to its historical context” (2). It is this last point which is most salient to my project; the nature of crime is dependent on myriad factors,

and not all of them are related to anti-social behavior or promoting the public good. Emsley's distinction between "real crime" or "anti-social crime," and "those offences which had a degree of community acceptance" (2), which he calls the "social crimes," is especially useful in grappling with the elusive nature of criminal representation in fiction, as it effectively articulates the root of the issue: not all crimes are equivalent, and often the relative severity of punishment for a given offence is based on social stigma, flawed logic, and classist power distributions, rather than the degree of harm it causes a community. The inability of Western culture to benignly integrate capitalist ideology into existing social structures yields the unfair treatment of petty thieves and a general complicity with socially irresponsible actions of capitalists, which in turn produces the literature that is the subject of this study.¹

Because capitalism develops in related but different ways across the Atlantic, my project traces the representation of this development across time and space to the US and into the twentieth (and eventually twenty-first) century. By doing so, I illustrate the continuous, if not always linear, trajectory of literary representation of Western criminals who are increasingly capitalist in their exploits, which in turn mirrors the reality that "successful" criminals eventually learn: that the largest profits are made only when conducting their business at "great heights" (Trollope 246). According to Melmotte's business partner, Lord Nidderdale, "[t]here's nothing like being a robber, if only you can rob enough" (299). Stated another way, the crime is essentially the same for petty thieves and corporate swindlers, but their treatment, both socially and literarily, is subject to change depending on the circumstances. An acute awareness of the relationship between low and high crime is reflected in all the literature analyzed in my project,

¹ This "socially irresponsible" behavior of the capitalists is essentially what will later be characterized as "objective violence." That is to say, this behavior physically, economically, or psychologically harms others in a way that is endemic to the system working as designed, and such harm often goes unnoticed due to its seamless integration into capitalist economies.

but what is most concerning are the developments in how authors engage with the problem of rising capitalist crime and how they offer their own critiques or solutions to it. Dickens, for example, maintains a consistent concern for the wretched poor throughout his career, but often falls prey to the belief that higher finance is largely good for English society, except when taken to extremes of greed (e.g., Ebenezer Scrooge). Trollope moves the needle forward as he takes more direct aim at white-collar crime as a systemic ill, but still perceives that ill as something that can be solved, rather than inherent in the functioning of modern capitalism. These perspectives are revised and questioned by proletarian authors of the American modern period but rarely achieve consensus or stable solutions, which become even more unstable in the postmodern era as authors attempt to understand and grapple with late capitalism and its influence on culture and crime.

The solutions and severity of critique are as varied as the authors who engage the issue of capitalism and its influence on criminality, but the critiques themselves all share a common foundation that perceives capitalism as incentivizing anti-social behavior for individual gain and perceives the criminal justice system as inadequate or even complicit in its role as an instrument of social justice.² Indeed, if the criminal justice system's foremost function is to keep society peaceful and orderly, then it is often the case that it must be complicit with the anti-social behavior of capitalists (often criminal capitalists) to prevent large scale revolt and disorder. By looking to popular fiction, my project illuminates the struggle to balance social justice with peace and order, as presented through the eyes of influential authors who represent the popular

² "Social justice" is, of course, a bit of a slippery term here. Broadly speaking, I mean the promotion of widely accepted notions of fairness as it pertains to the distribution of wealth, resources, opportunity, and power. I acknowledge that it is difficult to obtain complete consensus on what equates to perfect fairness, whether it be in economic distributions or criminal punishments, but I contend the majority of Victorians were largely concerned with similar societal concerns: urban compression, widening economic disparity and exploitation, and increasing crime rates. Determining a way to address these concerns that was generally acceptable to the public is what I consider social justice; that is, justice that serves the interests of the social majority.

consciousness of their time.³ The fact that criminal activity becomes increasingly blurred with so-called good business illustrates the difficulty in moving collectively beyond the capitalist tenet that competition is natural and desirable. If popular fiction represents the culture out of which it arises, then the fiction analyzed in my project shows Western culture to increasingly believe it is more pragmatic to sacrifice one's morals for profit than to question the premise that competition is indeed necessary to begin with. Only by understanding the machinations of this phenomena can we hope to escape it, and I argue that a major function of literature is to put such machinations on display. This position echoes Georg Lukács who argued that "the historical novel in its origin, development, rise and decline follows inevitably upon the great social transformations of modern times [and] demonstrate[s] that its different problems of form are but artistic reflections of these social-historical transformations" (17). Although I am not interested specifically in the historical novel as a genre, I do see a parallel between Lukács' project and my own. That is, we both see the development of literary trends (genre in his case and theme in mine) as reflective of "social-historical transformations," and we each concede that we "[do] not aim at historical completeness" (17). Rather, we argue that our selective approach of analyzing "only those writers whose works are in some respect representative" (17) allow us "to clarify the main lines of historical development" and attempt to answer "the most important questions these have raised" (14).

By increasingly absorbing capitalists and speculators into the category of criminal, the works I have selected for analysis attempt to revise the popular understanding of the "criminal" as social deviant and "businessman" as social and economic exemplar. Indeed, the progression in the treatment of these categories illustrates that neither is a static subject, but rather are

³ D.A. Miller's *The Novel and the Police* (1988) illuminates this topic extensively by arguing that popular novels often reinforce the policing of power structures on their audience, even enacting that policing at times.

dependent on social perception and legal treatment in order to be defined. That is to say, the works I analyze destabilize the notion of criminality by illustrating the relativistic and fluid nature of crime—changes in representation not only reflect shifts in the prevalence and nature of crimes being committed by real people, but also signify the changes in legal definitions and treatment of defendants. In the same way that crime statistics reflect shifts in legal considerations of what constitutes a crime as well as criminal activity itself,⁴ so does the literary production in those times reflect shifts in social perception as much as social (or antisocial) actions. The degree and means of doing so vary from one author to the next, which is why it is necessary to trace this development over time and across nations. Only by perceiving the relative distance between the criminal and the capitalist in the earlier fiction can we appreciate the significance of their substantial convergence over the past two centuries. Additionally, I would note that the very act of reflecting shifts in actions and attitudes of real people is one of interpretation, thereby making these literary works not only artifacts representing history but also active participants in the creation of history, which at its core is always the interpretation of places, events, and people. As these authors chronicle the convergence of criminality and capitalism, they simultaneously participate in the writing of the history of criminality and capitalism.

The overlap between criminal and successful capitalist is the embodiment of the crisis of capitalism, the inherent paradox that is the capitalist ideal. Western culture glorifies those who achieve economic success and rewards them with all forms of Bourdieuan capital, and yet, the most effective and efficient means of achieving significant, upward social mobility are often

⁴ Emsley discusses at length how “the statistical evidence of crime is fraught with dangers and difficulties” (21), not least because “In some instances the fear of increased crime, of itself, may have generated an increase in prosecutions” (25). Emsley goes on to explain how “Changes in the law also affected criminal statistics,” (29) citing new laws and the creation of an income tax as examples of legal actions that impacted the rate of criminal behavior and the statistics that attempt to encapsulate it.

outside the realm of the purely legal and socially responsible. As such, the appearance and relative significance of capitalist criminals in Western fiction provides a barometer for the social climate regarding these figures who show us what exactly the capitalist ideal really is and why it cannot be sustained in a socially responsible way. In the current cultural climate of political antagonism and quasi-apocalyptic predictions for the future of capitalism, it is hard to imagine a more appropriate time to revisit how we got here and why Western culture still seems unable to reconcile socially responsible behavior with upward mobility. Perhaps looking to popular fiction of the past will yield some insight into the most effective way to combat the continued dominance of capitalist ideology and its persistent assault on the lower class.

Methodology

The origins of my line of inquiry and analysis actually reside in my recent work on contemporary popular culture. I have noticed a prevalence of antiheroes in recent popular culture and have been especially interested in how those characters operate within capitalism. Frequently, it seems, a common way to position these characters as antiheroes has been to construct them as intelligent criminals who are also highly capable businesspeople. As such, I began my project with the questions ‘where do these popular culture figures come from’ and ‘what does their popularity say about common perceptions of the issues presented, both contemporarily and historically?’

I began my selection of texts with the requirement that they be “popular,” broadly conceived. That is to say, the texts must have been exposed to a large audience, relative to the sales of the time period, and they must have been written with a common audience in mind. I operate on the premise that the cultural capital to influence wide-spread perception requires a relatively large audience, and, therefore, that these popular texts command a particularly

important role in the historical development of popular perception of criminals and capitalism. In addition to being among the best-selling literature of their times, three out of my four selected texts have been reproduced for a contemporary audience in television or film, and two of them (*Oliver Twist* and *Gatsby*) frequently so. The time of publication was also a relevant factor, as I wished to select texts that more broadly represented shifts in the times and social conditions they engaged. Therefore, there is approximately a thirty-year gap (plus or minus a decade) between texts. The equivalence of chronological spacing was less important to me than the ability to identify some major distinction in the social contexts these novels represent, which I believe each has. Finally, I attempted to select one text that engages capitalism from the bottom up (i.e., from a lower-class perspective), and one from the top down, for both halves of the project. Because I argue Victorian England paved the way for twentieth-century American capitalism, I begin with the Victorians and then mirror the relationship of the first two texts with the next two analyzed. For the purposes of this dissertation, I have elected to stop with *Gatsby* and literary modernism, but I include an epilogue to indicate the necessity of following the lineage of criminal capitalists up to Michael Corleone for the postmodern era and beyond. I thus finish with an analysis of contemporary criminal capitalists (and capitalist criminals). I argue that a significant portion of the contemporary anti-heroes who operate in the criminally capitalist tradition work to some degree off the Corleone prototype, perhaps more than any other model. I intend to complete this analysis immediately following the completion and successful defense of my dissertation.

This dissertation can be aptly characterized as a transatlantic historical materialist analysis of the social-problem novel during the Victorian era and into modernity; that is to say, it

is primarily concerned with social conflicts (as represented in popular fiction) that I believe to be rooted in material needs and the antagonism of social forces which struggle over economic distribution. It largely operates in the tradition of New Historicism, particularly as defined by William J. Palmer who describes New Historicism as,

a dialogic correction of the course of the historical consciousness. It is not revisionist because it does not attempt to recast history from a single point of vantage, economic or otherwise. Rather, New Historicism is an approach to history that attempts to counteract the sorts of omissions and abuses and tunnel visions that Traditional History made. It is an attempt to ‘thicken’ the historical consciousness, to fill out the extant story of history with new, neglected, suppressed voices and to interpret history in terms of the dialogic relationship between these new texts and the extant historical texts (165).⁵

Palmer’s description echoes John Brannigan’s *New Historicism and Cultural Materialism* (1998), which describes how New Historicism maintains a “preoccupation with the relationship between literature and history, [and understands] texts of all kinds as both products and functional components of social and political formations” (3). Importantly, Brannigan argues “Where many previous critical approaches to literary texts assumed that the texts had some universal significance and essential ahistorical truth to impart, new historicist and cultural materialist critics tend to read literary texts as material products of specific historical conditions,” (3) and therefore actively participate in the making of history, rather than existing outside of historical and cultural context.

Palmer claims that Dickens was himself a New Historicist, “a novelist who ‘decenters’ the portrayal of history in his fiction” (4), creating space for the disenfranchised voices of

⁵ I reconcile my use of the terms “historical materialism” and “New Historicism” by locating the epicenter of social issues analyzed (specifically criminality and its relationship to capitalist enterprises) in conflict of material distribution, but I do not attempt to encapsulate all history through that lens. As described by Palmer, I am not attempting to “recast history from a single vantage point,” but “thicken the historical consciousness” by drawing connections between transatlantic and transhistorical texts that share an intellectual heritage in representing crime under capitalism. Therefore, I perceive my analysis as both historically materialist and operating in the tradition of New Historicism.

Victorian Britain and adding depth and texture to a traditionally linear and shallow conception of history. My interest in analyzing Dickens to begin with, and Trollope, Sinclair, and Fitzgerald to follow, derives from a commitment to magnifying those disenfranchised voices and critiques forwarded by all four authors in their respective novels to which I direct my attention. As advocated by Brannigan, I “approach the relationship between text and context with an urgent attention to the political ramifications of literary interpretation” (3) and employ these texts to “[interpret] the significance of the past for the present, paying particular attention to the forms of power which operated in the past and how they are replicated in the present” (6). Each of the selected novels takes a different approach to “dispel[ing] a traditional trust in the supposed ‘objectivity’ of the master text of history” (Palmer 9) and add new voices and layers to the decentered view of history with an attention to the narratives of characters and situations that largely went ignored in the construction of what Palmer calls the “master text of history.” Perhaps most importantly, New Historicism informs my methodology because “[It] is a mode of critical interpretation which privileges *power relations as the most important context* for texts of all kinds. As a critical practice it treats literary texts as a space where *power relations are made visible* (Brannigan 6; italics mine). The ability of these texts to make visible that which is culturally rendered invisible is the foremost contribution of these texts that is of interest to my study. By linking these authors and their novels, I aim to recast history as a multifaceted, non-linear progression influenced by a wide array of people, experiences, and social phenomenon. The development of the criminal capitalist (and the capitalist criminal) in Western society is merely one of many stories which may be said to contribute to the multitude that comprise History—my attempt to disentangle this development as characterized in the realist social novels

of influential authors of the Victorian-Modern era is merely one more voice added to the masses attempting to interpret events of the past to better understand the present.

With that said, the story of the criminal capitalist is an important one in the history of modern capitalism. If crime is a social construct requiring a legal system of social control, and Western culture has managed to create the category of “white-collar crime,” how is it that apparently well-known charlatans and corrupt business continue to dominate the Western world, economically, politically, and otherwise? I argue that the recording and creation of history by these novelists (recalling, of course, that no history is a universal and complete one) illustrates the convoluted nature of so-called progress, which is just as often plagued by compromises and half-measures as it achieves real change of material significance for the general population. I employ the theoretical framework of Pierre Bourdieu as a mechanism for understanding the multitudinous forces at play in the social world Dickens and his successors put on display, allowing the careful reader to perceive how such social inequities and capitalist flaws are able to sustain life far beyond their exposure as a social ill.

If we understand Bourdieu’s concept of the “field” as “a field of forces and struggles for position and legitimate authority, and the logic which orders such struggles is the logic of capital” (Mahar 13), then it becomes clear that the literary field is where authors struggle for the “legitimate authority” to depict reality and represent people. For Bourdieu, the literary field, like all fields, is governed by the “logic of capital,” which makes literary representation the battlefield of capital in its many forms. The victor wins the right to represent and comment on to the degree that they (and their publisher) maintain the power bestowed by capital. For Bourdieu, “the definition of capital is very wide. . . and includes material things (which can have symbolic value), as well as ‘untouchable’ but culturally significant attributes such as prestige, status, and

authority (referred to as symbolic capital), along with cultural capital (defined as culturally-valued taste and consumption patterns)” (Mahar 13). Bourdieu also sees capital as “a basis of domination” and believes that “the various types of capital can be exchanged for other types of capital—that is, capital is ‘convertible’” (Mahar 13). This theorization is, in part, the rationale for analyzing the most popular work of the various periods contained in my study—it is these works and authors who maintain the greatest capital and therefore the most authority and influence over the popular consciousness. Contrary to the Enlightenment view of history which Georg Lukács described as “silent, imperceptible. . . a development of society which is basically stagnation. . . [where] Man’s activity in history is completely ruled out,” (26), the authors I engage operate in a post-Hegelian world, and therefore reflect the “new progressive historicism” of Hegel who “sees man as a product of himself and of his own activity in history” (28); these authors leverage their capital, in its many forms, to actively contribute to the construction of history, both for their contemporary audience but also for generations to come. Furthermore, all four major works analyzed in this study put the habitus of their respective social spaces on display—by doing so, each author redirects the readerly gaze away from the visible and obvious forms of violence often emphasized in crime fiction and toward the invisible modes of systemic violence that often go unnoticed but are embodied in the habitus. For Bourdieu, “The habitus is a system of durable, transposable dispositions which functions as a generative basis of structured, objectively unified practices” (*Distinction* vii). These practices usually “function below the level of consciousness and language” (*Distinction* 466) and include “a person’s own knowledge and understanding of the world, which makes a separate contribution to the reality of that world” (Mahar 11). In effect, the works I engage show the actions of characters to be constitutive of the reality they reinforce and help construct, forcing readers to see their own behaviors and attitudes reflected in the

characters and confront their own contribution to the social space they inhabit and the dynamics of power they reinforce. The juxtaposition of criminal behavior and anti-social but apparently “legitimate” capitalistic behavior magnifies the systemic violence perpetrated by the habitus of bourgeois ideology—this juxtaposition also establishes the commonality of purpose and effect that links these texts.

My argument situates itself alongside Lukács’ work in *The Historical Novel* (1937). I do not restrict my analysis to historical novels in particular, nor do I think it is necessary to do so to achieve my aims. However, in a fashion similar to Lukács who argues that “Through [a] manner of human-historical portrayal [Sir Walter] Scott makes history live” (53), I also claim that Dickens, Trollope, Sinclair, and Fitzgerald all leverage their capital as popular authors to capture, if only briefly, the habitus of their readers’ social space to forward a progressive agenda. Lukács postulated that “if Scott’s main tendency in all his novels. . . is to represent and defend progress, then this progress is for him always a process full of contradictions, the driving force and material basis of which is the living contradiction between conflicting historical forces, the antagonisms of classes and nations” (53). I would argue that this legacy of defending progress, albeit full of contradictions, was further advanced by the social-problem novelists who constitute the focus of this study but was even more effective as a result of their greater commercial availability, particularly to lower- and middle-class readers. Beyond the parallels of seeing progressivism in literary work often critiqued for its conservative attributes, I owe a greater debt to Lukács for providing a larger framework for the present study: in his own words, “I have tried to show that with the historical novel as with all things else it is not a question of concocting something ‘radically new’, but—as Lenin taught us—of assimilating all that is valuable in previous development and adapting it critically” (17). In line with this perspective, I do not

expect my project to be lauded as “radically new,” but do maintain that it is valuable still in its assimilation of works connected by theme and approach to answer the basic questions of how did we get here and where do we go now?

Crime, Capitalism, and Literature in Eighteenth-Century Britain

As stated earlier, my study begins with the advent of the Victorian era, but the major concepts (i.e., criminality, capitalism, and popular literature) have roots that extend back into the eighteenth, and arguably seventeenth, century. Peter Linebaugh’s seminal work, *The London Hanged: Crime and Civil Society in the Eighteenth Century* (1992), was especially useful in establishing the foundation on which my understanding of Victorian crime was built. In his introduction, Linebaugh asserts that “In criminology as in economics there is scarcely a more powerful word than ‘capital.’ In the former discipline it denotes death; in the latter it has designated the ‘substance’ or the ‘stock’ of life: apparently opposite meanings” (xv). According to Linebaugh, his book “explores the relationship between the organized death of living labor (capital punishment) and the oppression of the living by dead labour (the punishment of capital)” (xv). Linebaugh’s attention to the word “capital” in its multiple meanings is one of the reasons I employ Bourdieu throughout my analysis, as his theory of capital seems to account for both meanings identified by Linebaugh and numerous others. Establishing the connection between capital in economic terms and capital as reference to criminal punishment is not an arbitrary action, I argue, but is indicative of the cultural changes taking place in eighteenth-century Britain. This is in line with Linebaugh, who explains that the shift away from hangings as public spectacle was largely because “the meaning of ‘property’ changed,” and because of this change, “questions of making and questions of getting were continually being raised and tested, requiring ever fresh lessons from the ‘triple tree’ [i.e., the hanging scaffold]” (xxi). Linebaugh claims that

“the forms of exploitation pertaining to capitalist relations caused or modified the forms of criminal activity” and “the forms of crime cause major changes in capitalism” (xxi). Both statements constitute the central thesis of *The London Hanged*, and both also identify two major premises of the present study. I perceive the relationship between crime and capitalism as symbiotic, having a mutually impactful influence on one another as times and social circumstances change. Linebaugh argues that “the hanged, like the labouring people in London as a whole, worked with their hands and expended the energies of their bodies to make the civilization of the eighteenth century. That is why we can say that they were of the *labouring poor*” (xxi). This inclusion of the criminals condemned to capital punishment into the working class offers a useful insight as to why popular criminals were increasingly being portrayed in a positive and sympathetic light in the emerging popular fiction of the time.

One particularly famous example of this is “Jack Sheppard, housebreaker and goal-breaker [who apparently] was once [one of] the single most well-known names from eighteenth-century England” (7). According to Linebaugh, despite being “Ignored, not to say disdained, by academic historiography, [Jack Sheppard] has belonged clearly to an ‘other history’ of histories, pantomime and song” (8). He argues further that “Extraordinary, even marvellous, as [Sheppard’s] later actions appeared, they would not have stirred such excitement, such passion, such fundamental discussion, had he not shared in central experiences of his class and generation [i.e., being raised in industrial London, laboring in a workhouse, and serving as an apprentice]” (9). The fact that Sheppard’s commonality of experience with the working class made him both more interesting and more sympathetic to a working-class audience is notable for at least two reasons: first, this is indicative of the fact that an emerging popular audience would prefer literature that represented characters, scenes, and themes that were more familiar to them, and

second, even criminals could be sympathetic if they struggled as the working class struggled and seemed to be resisting classist modes of social control. Both of these notions would prove highly influential on the direction popular literature would take as it progressed into the Victorian era.⁶

Martha Vicinus' *The Industrial Muse* (1974) explores these trends in popular working-class fiction as Britain transitioned from the eighteenth into the nineteenth century. In line with Linebaugh's description of Sheppard belonging to the alternate history of pantomime and song, Vicinus illustrates the importance of broadsides and street ballads as establishing "the foundation of a class culture" (8). She claims that this literature "reflected the needs and aspirations of the urban poor during the years of 1780-1830" (8) and describes how it was "the most widely available reading matter among the urban poor until the rise of penny dreadfuls in the 1820s and '30s" (9).⁷ In accordance with Linebaugh, Vicinus also argues that "Increasingly people wished to hear about themselves—the common man as hero" (9). At times this would take the form of ballads about betrayed cabin boys (e.g., "The Golden Valley") or apprentices in love (e.g., "The Sheffield Apprentice"), but others took a more violent turn toward murder (e.g., "The Miller's Apprentice"). According to Vicinus, "From their origins broadsides had catered to a demand for sensation and scandal. Violence remained one of the most popular subjects throughout their history; in 1850 a street patterer told Henry Mayhew, 'There's nothing beats a stunning good murder, after all'" (10). Such a trend would continue to be the case as penny bloods and penny dreadfuls became popular, basking in the violent sensationalism of Sweeney Todd and the like.⁸

⁶ An obvious and easy example would be the popularity of *Oliver Twist*, the subject of chapter one. This text clearly had autobiographical elements reflecting Dickens' experiences in the workhouse but was also reportedly inspired by the life of Robert Blincoe, a real-life orphan "raised in the St. Pancras workhouse in the 1790s" who had experiences "similar to Sheppard's in Bishopsgate workhouse" (Linebaugh 12). See John Waller's *The Real Oliver Twist* (2005) for a complete history of Blincoe's life.

⁷ I argue that broadsides, street ballads, and penny dreadfuls all constitute the origins of Western popular culture, at least in its literary form.

⁸ See Rosalind Crone's "From Sawney Beane to Sweeney Todd: Murder Machines in the Mid-nineteenth Century Metropolis" for an in-depth discussion of the sensational popularity of murder in penny dreadfuls, most notably

However, themes in literature by and for the working class would not be limited to merely the sensational and physical violence. Rather, such violent themes were merely one aspect of working-class literature and often served a function beyond the simple excitement of horror; as argued by Vicinus, much of this literature has “also provided forms and language for understanding the daily violence of one’s own life” (16). Such a claim makes sense in the context of popular novels like *Oliver Twist*, which I begin my analysis with, as the violence and grime depicted is not present for entertainment’s sake but rather to communicate a social commentary and moral message from the author. Its scenes are not merely spectacle but attempt to articulate social conditions in a way which makes them more present in the public consciousness and also more comprehensible.

According to Vicinus, “Although broadsides were an integral part of popular culture, they contained the seeds of a commodity-based mass entertainment” (21). These seeds would grow into a large body of literary work as the nineteenth century progressed and the popular novel began to dominate not only the national, but also the international, literary market. Concerns for what the literary market desired became increasingly influential for what was published and what degree of success (commercial and otherwise) a given literary work would experience.

Describing the nineteenth-century publisher, Jemmy Catnach, Vicinus claims that “For all of the entrepreneurship of Catnach and his rivals, *they followed rather than led public opinion*” (15; italics mine). If we accept such an assertion, then we can safely assume that much of the popular literature of the nineteenth century was at least strongly influenced, if not dictated, by popular opinion and the preferences of an increasingly working-class audience. Furthermore, Vicinus

Sweeney Todd, as indicative of a working-class fascination with death and specifically death by the consumption of humans in the capitalist profit machine. The representation of the working class literally devouring one another is useful in depicting the trends of early-Victorian sensationalism but will re-emerge in Chapter 3 when I discuss similar themes in Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle*.

argues “The acceptance of the factory system and the changed conditions of life meant a change in the type of literature working people wrote and read” (53). This, in large part, explains why the characters and style of Dickens would resemble but also consciously subvert earlier depictions of criminals and urban environments. It is against the backdrop of sensationalized penny dreadfuls and Newgate novels that Dickens was writing, but he was also operating in the wake of an emerging working-class literary field still determining what genres it was capable of employing and exploring just how influential and representative of working-class lives it could be. In the words of Vicinus, working-class literature in the nineteenth century and beyond “all owe a cultural debt to street literature” (53), but I think she would also agree that with Dickens we see a new era emerge for working-class readers and authors, and a new way to represent criminality and capitalism in the popular culture of Victorian England.

Chapter Summaries

This dissertation is organized into four major chapters, bookended by a prologue and epilogue, and organized in chronological order. The core of my project revolves around the relationship between crime and capitalism as represented in the Anglo-American novel. Because of the immense change both in the form of emerging international capitalism in the early nineteenth century, along with substantial shifts in the British literary market and the work it produced in the same period, I have elected to begin my formal analysis with Dickens’ *Oliver Twist*. This novel was published in 1837, the first year of Queen Victoria’s reign, and therefore serves as one of the first novels, and perhaps most famous, of the early Victorian era. The criminal content of the novel along with its commercial success and chronological overlap with the origins of the Victorian era all make *Oliver Twist* a logical and appropriate starting point for my formal analysis to begin.

That said, it is necessary to build this analysis on an understanding of earlier forms of capitalism and criminality in Britain leading up to the Victorian era. This is why I employ the work of Clive Emsley, Peter Linebaugh, and Martha Vicinus to elucidate the nature of crime and working-class literature in the pre-Victorian capitalist eras. Because various forms of proto-capitalism have existed for centuries leading up to the Victorian era, I chose to limit my introduction to the seventeenth and eighteenth century, as Industrial capitalism didn't emerge until then and Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations*, the most famous work of modern capitalist ideology, wasn't published until 1776. Because the emergence of a middle-class readership and cheaper publishing technology was not developed until the early-Victorian era, I argue that the literature that predates it is distinctly different from the literature that is of interest and concern to this study. That is to say, popular literature (i.e., commercially successful literature that expresses concerns/interests of a broad readership) of the mid-nineteenth century was written for a new audience concerned with different things—therefore, it is significantly different than the major popular work from decades, or centuries, past. However, I cannot adequately hope to unpack the social and historical significance of the work done by Dickens and Trollope if I do not build upon the foundation of pre-Victorian British culture, economy, and law. As such, the introduction identifies the major shifts taking place leading up to the Victorian era and expands on the increasingly intertwined relationship between criminality and capitalism. As argued by Linebaugh in *London Hanged*, “the forms of exploitation pertaining to capitalist relations caused or modified the forms of criminal activity [in eighteenth-century England], and. . . [conversely] the forms of crime caused major changes in capitalism” (xxi). I argue that this mutually implicated influence of crime and capitalism only becomes stronger as England progressed into the Victorian era—I also contend that analyzing *Oliver Twist* and *TWWLN* provides useful case

studies of two highly influential depictions of the relationship between criminality and capitalism, as well as the social consequences that arise as that relationship becomes increasingly intertwined. That is, as capitalism (and eventually international late-capitalism) develops, it increasingly accommodates and assimilates criminal activity into the normal functioning of a capitalist society. This is especially the case for crimes of high finance, but I argue it is also true for traditionally lower-class crimes, as illustrated by Fagin in *Oliver Twist* and his enthusiasm for capital punishment and selfish business—both mechanisms of Victorian utilitarianism intended to reinforce the social hierarchy of capitalist industrialism.

It should be noted that much of my analysis discusses the social influence of literature. This is, of course, a slippery topic as influence is difficult to measure and becomes increasingly so as time passes. However, influence is not only paramount to the aim of my study, but it is also integral to the process of selecting primary texts. I argue that achieving popular success (not to be conflated with commercial success, though they are obviously linked) bestows the author and text with sufficient capital to influence the ideas and behavior of the popular audience. This is predicated on the assumptions that, first, a text can ever impact the audience's behaviors and ideas and, second, these texts in particular accomplish this. To the first issue, there are easily identifiable influences such as Dickens' encouragement of resistance to the New Poor Law and Sinclair's contribution to the implementation of Meat Inspection and Pure Food and Drug Acts. However, I would argue that these easily identifiable contributions are less significant than the more subtle effects—if the habitus is a system of social behavior that goes unnoticed, then it stands to reason that altering this system will also usually go unnoticed, or at least underappreciated. Stated another way, shifting the readerly gaze toward the largely invisible social harm prevalent in society is, I argue, a more significant and enlightening contribution of

these texts than condemning more obvious and visible forms of harm. One may point to legislation as a concrete effect of literature, but how can we gauge the reader's changed feelings regarding poverty or the criminal justice system in a similarly concrete way? I argue that such a concrete measurement is likely impossible, but we can look to reproductions of work and its legacy to gain at least a big-picture view, if not an exact measurement, as to the influence a work or author has had. For Dickens, we may not be able to quantify the impact any particular work had on the perception of criminals, but we can easily appreciate the wide-spread recognition of Fagin and Dodger well over a century since they were first introduced to the public. Similarly, popular reproductions of *The Great Gatsby* (1925) or *TWWLN* imply that there is still a market for these narratives and the stories they tell. Thus, the inherent paradox of discussing the social influence of literature is reconciling the obvious staying power these narratives have, as evidenced by their continued reproduction and familiarity to a contemporary audience, with the significant difficulty in proving any concrete effect on that audience. I would merely suggest that if Western culture has elected to continue engaging these authors and their ideas, there is simply no way they cannot be influential. That is to say, their continued presence is evidence itself that they have been and continue to be significant to a popular audience—it is their very popularity that illustrates their influence. In the same way that we can see the earlier work influencing the ideological positions and narrative approach of later work, so can we continue to see the legacy of all these authors on social-problem-oriented popular culture for decades to follow. I argue that the direct influence on a popular audience combined with the extended influence on other socially-conscious critiques makes the work particularly significant in understanding the legacy of criminality and capitalism in Western fiction and the culture it represents.

In his article “The Historical Novel in the Hands of Lukács,” Edwin Burgum critiques Lukács by saying that, “He believes that all great art is ‘popular’ without ever defining the term” (70). He goes on to address Lukács’ position that great art “expresses genuine problems of the highest possible level and digs down to the deepest root of human suffering, feeling, thought and action,” (71)—Burgum claims this is “a correct definition of ‘great’ literature, but not of ‘popular’” (71). I take an alternative approach to Lukács, not suggesting that great literature must be popular, but doing away with the idea of “greatness” altogether and simply suggesting that popular literature necessarily influences the audience and that its worthiness of critical engagement is linked to its ability to “[express] genuine problems of the highest possible level,” which I argue all my selections do.

Beginning with chapter one, I analyze *Oliver Twist* as a means of establishing what I consider the “traditional criminal” of the nineteenth century; this figure is characterized by low-class origins, amorality, dirtiness, and often physical violence. Working off Linebaugh’s assertion that the history of the condemned is a history of the poor and that the criminal class of Britain constitutes a working class, I argue that Dickens’ novel is most insightful for its ability to elucidate the impact of rapid urban development and capitalist expansion, critiquing the upper class and the legal system simultaneously for its mistreatment and neglect of the lower classes, particularly the children of the lower classes. By packaging his progressive indictment of Victorian values in a seemingly bourgeois narrative of meritocracy, Dickens provides an early example of the popular social-critique novel. Naturally, there are some flaws with Dickens’ critique that need to be addressed, not least of which is the apparent anti-Semitism of Fagin’s portrayal and the relatively conservative position of defending the mistreatment of poor children

while diminishing the plight of the adult poor population. These flaws are not ignored in my analysis, but they also do not preclude the importance in British literary and cultural history constituted by this book. By tracing back the origins of fictional criminals during the rise of modern capitalism, my aim is to open new avenues for understanding the relationship of criminality to capitalism in our current socio-political climate. As stated by Pierre Bourdieu, “there is no more potent tool for rupture than the reconstruction of genesis: by bringing back into view the conflicts and confrontations of the early beginnings and therefore all the discarded possibles, it retrieves the possibility that things could have been (*and still could be*) otherwise” (4; emphasis mine).⁹

As Bourdieu points out, and I agree with him, reconstructing genesis by nature requires rethinking all the steps that led from the beginning to the current state, and by contemplating alternatives we may glean insight into how things might otherwise be. However, such reconstruction requires the acknowledgement that genesis is indeed constructed rather than inherent, and, therefore, there is always more to uncover and deeper levels to explore. I don’t take this to mean that all beginnings are arbitrary, necessarily, but they are imposed, and this creates limitations. Inevitably, one could say that the novel existed before Dickens, that social critique has existed long before the Victorian era, and that capitalism predates the nineteenth century. Though all these statements are valid, I believe acknowledging the limitations of the current study does not preclude the insights I hope it achieves. Similarly, acknowledging the limitations of the literature analyzed does not, in my estimation, preclude its progressive or even

⁹ Such a perspective echoes what Andrew Miller called “the optative” in his article “Lives Unled in Realist Fiction” in which he argues that certain realist authors, Dickens among them, “invite the imagination of alternative lives,” (118) and to understand one’s subjectivity not only by what it has become, but also by the alternatives eschewed in the process. In Bourdieu’s view, as well as my own, looking at subjectivity this way allows us to contemplate what might otherwise have been, but more importantly, what might otherwise still be.

radical potential—that is, limitations do not prohibit the potential to spur social or political change that results in changes to the material conditions of real people. This will be a major position forwarded throughout the dissertation, namely, that intellectually honest work must always recognize its limitations, but doing so should not be read as a surrender of progressive potential.

As indicated earlier, this study is a transatlantic historical materialist analysis. I describe it as such because, firstly, my main concern is with the potential of literature to have a real, material impact on the lives of the population for whom it is written. I argue that such a material impact would necessarily arise from ideological shifts that occur as a result of engaging with influential fiction. This position is accompanied by my belief that fiction always operates as a cultural artifact, being both influenced by and working to influence, the culture out of which it is produced. The fact that all four texts analyzed and the authors who produced them are familiar to both an American and British audience makes the transatlantic approach self-evident. By taking such an approach, I hope to enhance the connection and relevance of the literature to not only historical events and politics, but also the current political climate, which feels especially precarious in both the US and England lately. The desire to tie the literature to the social and political climate is largely the impetus for my reliance on Bourdieu's theoretical work, as he shares my concern with the material and political conditions of society beyond theory.

Employing Bourdieu's framework, I use the concepts of field, habitus, and capital to analyze the social changes being depicted and critiqued in Dickens' novel. The rationale is based on the understanding that capitalism and crime are separate social phenomena that have existed for centuries, that they permeate every facet of the social structure, and that they are always

constantly in flux and mutually influencing each other while simultaneously being acted upon by other forces. Each relies on the habitus of Victorian culture to maintain the status quo of the capitalist field. The complex and fluid nature of both concepts (crime and capitalism) as well as their continual mutual influence can only be adequately addressed if engaged with on a level of depth and complexity achieved by the likes of Bourdieu. His recognition that capital takes many forms and can be exchanged between these forms works particularly well for a cultural moment when the literary market was shifting away from a more static view of capital embodied by aristocratic values; Bourdieu's framework also works nicely for a novel that depicts a lower-class character working his way up and across class boundaries, engaging in numerous forms of capital exchange, in order to discover he truly belongs to the bourgeois class. Oliver's narrative wading through the class structure simultaneously destabilizes some of the aristocratic views of the past while also reinforcing problematic racial and classist assumptions prominent in the early Victorian era. By understanding the field as a place where subjectivities are constantly being influenced by innumerable forces while trying to locate one's place in the field, we can understand Oliver's struggle in the early-Victorian social and economic context, which is notably parallel to the literary situation with Dickens as an author. As Oliver attempts to navigate the social forces to locate his place in the diegesis, Dickens' novel acts as an early representative of the British social novel trying to determine its own place in British culture and history. Bourdieu's theoretical framework proves especially useful for engaging such a novel which attempts to analyze the forces at play in the Victorian social field and occasionally makes visible the habitus practices that often remain unseen in the everyday lives of Victorians.

Chapter 2 analyzes Trollope's *The Way We Live Now* with special attention to the muddling of social class barriers as indicated, at least in part, by titles of nobility. Trollope

himself articulated a concern with the “profligacy of the age” that governs the critical attention of the text, but I argue that much of the moral degradation Trollope perceives is inextricably linked to the move away from traditional hierarchies established by titles of nobility and the category of peerage. Throughout the narrative, the primary antagonist, Augustus Melmotte, buys his way into elite social circles and governs much of the social action around which the narrative revolves. The excessive finance is plagued by bad credit, fraud, and excessive spending to a degree that readers are continually reminded of the corrupting influence that run-away capitalism is having on Victorian England. My chapter engages Trollope’s critique of “commercial profligacy” and excessive consumerism by looking to the issue of fraud and the integral role of the upper class in sustaining fraudulent business. As such, I contend that Trollope offers an early literary theorization of white-collar crime, and he does so in a way that implicates the peerage and nobility as accomplices, thereby marking two major contributions to the development of criminality under capitalism in the popular Western novel.

As I move to American literature in the early-twentieth century, my analysis undergoes a significant shift transitioning to Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle* (1906) and the emergence of the proletarian novel. I argue that Sinclair’s novel represents a distinctly new phase in capitalism (especially American capitalism) which begins to recognize the deeply systemic nature of capitalist violence. Rather than continuing in the tradition of fixing the “bad apples” within an otherwise functioning capitalist system, as we see with Dickens and even Trollope, Sinclair makes a distinctly political turn toward socialism as the necessary answer to capitalism’s violent influence. His didactic writing style marks a new literary form for new social problems, and, despite the common criticism he received on this front, I argue that Sinclair’s style constitutes a major positive contribution to the political possibilities of popular literature in the twentieth

century. Sinclair's insistence on factual accuracy and commitment to indicting capitalism as the root cause of large-scale systemic violence solidly positions this novel as a major step forward in criminal-capitalist literature. Sinclair also manages to significantly alter conceptions of criminality as he illustrates the anti-social behavior (what should rightly be called criminal) of capitalists conducting business as usual, whereas criminal punishments seem reserved entirely for the lower class who often aren't even breaking the law (more often, the law breaks them). In fact, criminal punishments in this novel only occur when a character upsets the status quo and take place entirely independently of the legality of a character's actions. As such, I contend *The Jungle* offers an exemplary window of insight into a period of significant change and re-imagined capitalism in early-twentieth century America, and it does so with a new degree of unabashed honesty and bluntness not seen in earlier social novels.

Almost as a response to the so-called lack of artistry ascribed to Sinclair's *The Jungle*, F. Scott Fitzgerald composed his own social critique of American capitalism in the 1920s. This novel is the subject of analysis for the fourth and final chapter of this dissertation. I argue that *The Great Gatsby* offers an important contrast to a proletarian work like *The Jungle*, both because of the aesthetic differences and the framing of capitalism's lessons. When Jurgis attempted to make his way under capitalism, extreme selfishness seemed the solution, but prosperity ultimately proved impossible. This led to Sinclair's ultimate conclusion that socialism is the only viable option to fixing the violence inherent in capitalism. Fitzgerald appears to take a step backwards, I argue, as he creates one of the most famous (perhaps *the* most famous) capitalist criminal of popular Western literature: Jay Gatsby. I argue that Fitzgerald takes a significant risk in leveraging a glamorous and romantic character to levy a critique against the violence of capitalism. Whereas Sinclair attempted to redirect readers' attention from personal,

physical violence to systemic violence, Fitzgerald seems to go the other direction, at least until the final pages of the novel when it becomes clear Gatsby's story is the story of America. Despite what I consider a regressive trade-off of so-called artistry for the clarity of social critique, I argue that *Gatsby* marks a new and important phase of criminal-capitalist literature through its introduction of the iconic proto-antihero, Gatsby himself. I contend the relative lack of teeth in Fitzgerald's social critique is, to some degree, counterbalanced by the immense and lasting impact his novel would have and the influence Gatsby would exert for decades to come on images of capitalist criminals (especially in the gangster-narrative genre) in Western fiction. Gatsby is the bridge that allows us to trace the lineage of antiheroes in the postmodern era (e.g., Michael Corleone)¹⁰ all the way back to *Oliver Twist* in the early days of criminals learning how to survive and thrive under capitalism. Without him, it would be impossible to complete the story of how we came to our current figurations of criminality and capitalism in contemporary popular culture, which, as I said, is where all this began.

¹⁰ I argue Michael Corleone is the preeminent criminal capitalist of the postmodern era, as well as the foundational figure on whom nearly all capitalist criminals of contemporary popular Western fiction build. See Ashely Donnelly's *Renegade Hero or Faux Rogues* (2014) and "Modern Company, Postmodern Crisis: Representing Moral Ambiguity and Class Warfare in *Peaky Blinders*" for more on this topic.

CHAPTER 1 DICKENS MEETS BOURDIEU: A TWIST IN CRIME FOR CAPITAL REWARDS AND PUNISHMENTS

When it comes to fictional criminals, particularly in Western literature, the characters of Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist* are examples sans pareil. Very few, if any, Western criminal characters have experienced the longevity and widespread recognition of Fagin and the Artful Dodger. It has long been accepted that Dickens' monumental achievement with *Oliver Twist* was its immense importance for critiquing the New Poor Law and emphasizing the problematic mistreatment of the urban poor in the early nineteenth century. However, though most critics agree that Dickens' book was largely about criminals and the immorality of abandoning the working poor to the slums of urban environments and workhouses, I argue there is another, more subtle but also severely underappreciated aspect of Dickens' novel—the indictment of the so-called respectable Victorian middle-and-upper class. Dickens' use of bourgeois, industrial-capitalist language depicts the flaws of urban development during the nineteenth century, but he does more than combat the utilitarian logic of the Victorians and de-romanticize the urban criminal; he also, perhaps somewhat unintentionally, opens the gateway to criminalizing the upper class. This, of course, would not fully come to fruition in Dickens' career, but the establishment of an anti-moral bourgeois villain and frequent commentary on the systemic violence committed against the working-poor, especially their children, significantly pushed forward the potential of popular literature to upset the status quo and hold the dominant class accountable for its crimes (in both the legal and moral sense). In line with Bourdieu's optative approach to reconstructing origins, I allege that considering the "discarded possibles" both within and outside the narrative of *Oliver Twist* sheds light on its progressive potential. That is to say, engaging the idea that Oliver's life could have been different and that Victorian culture itself

could be different, opens the door to reconstructing our view of the past and consequently considering alternatives for the present. The more conservative elements of Dickens' novel, that is, the content which directly pushes Oliver's narrative arc forward, is focused largely on Victorian society's view of the lower class and lower-class criminality. But I see the events and characters that take place on the margins as most useful in advancing a progressive agenda and opening the door to systemic critique more directly aimed at the upper class and the crimes they commit.

Let me be clear: I am not suggesting that Dickens was intentionally theorizing the earliest conceptions of white-collar crime or promoting the idea that large-scale systemic violence was materially and morally worse for society than the traditional petty crimes committed by his largely conservative criminal figures (i.e., Fagin and Sikes). What I am arguing is that intentionally or not, Dickens' novel constitutes a major turning point for literature, especially popular literature for a lower-to-middle class audience, to represent the interests and concerns of the emerging popular audience; he also lays the foundation for later authors to work toward the criminalization of high-class and systemic crime against the lower-class majority. These points are not entirely novel, nor am I the first person to suggest that Dickens promoted a progressive agenda for the middle-and-lower classes. Rather, I attempt in this chapter to clarify my method of engagement with the literature and to establish a perspective on the social novel as one which writes history and creates a dialogue between the past, present, and future. Doing so will be necessary before I turn to Dickens' successors and their respective responses to the crisis of criminality under capitalism.

When I say Dickens' novel represents the concerns of an "emerging popular audience," I do not simply mean that the audience of literate Victorians was expanding, but that it was

specifically expanding to include more and more of the middle and lower classes—this, in turn, makes the audience not only popular in the sense that it begins to be representative of the majority of individuals who compose Victorian society, but also emerging in the sense that they are coming up in terms of political influence and importance (i.e., Reform Acts of 1832, 1867, and 1884). The middle class is largely a product of the industrial revolution and capitalist expansion, but the lower class also took on new shape, characteristics, and residence during the urbanization resultant from industrial-capitalist expansion. In this way, Dickens is not only writing *for* an audience that has never existed before, but writing *about* a culture that has never existed, at least in its current form, before. At its core, my project is about the potential of popular literature to create space for systemic critique and social (potentially radical) change. Dickens' work, and *Oliver Twist* in particular, is significant not only for the content, but also for its popularity with a wide-spread audience and influence on the future of popular Western literature.

It is easy to find examples of authors or people referring to the Artful Dodger when describing a criminal, usually a lower-class child criminal, but it is less obvious that other characters may have had just as significant an impact on the minds of readers and their understanding of antisocial actors in society. Because Dodger's influence on the public perception of criminals has already been explored at length by other scholarly work, I will focus more on excavating the contribution of *Oliver Twist* to promoting systemic critique and the indictment of the upper class for its crimes against society. By emphasizing the dehumanizing effects of industrialization, *Oliver Twist* ultimately expresses the concern of Victorian lower- and middle-class readers that it is the unhindered ambitions of the upper-class that are largely responsible for this dehumanization and that they should be held to account for these actions.

Before engaging with the critique of the novel, however, it is first necessary to establish some important concepts that will be employed in this analysis. The first of these is the distinction between “objective” and “subjective” violence, as theorized by Slavoj Žižek, who describes subjective violence as “violence enacted by social agents, evil individuals, disciplined repressive apparatuses, fanatical crowds” (11) and other easily identifiable forms of violence. Bill Sikes in particular would be a good representative of such violence. Objective violence, by contrast, “is no longer attributable to concrete individuals and their ‘evil’ intentions, but is purely ‘objective,’ systemic, and anonymous” (12). It is this less visible but arguably much more harmful form of violence that concerns me and, I argue, the literary work I engage. Žižek argues that although subjective violence is more visible and easily identifiable as regards the perpetrator, it is the objective violence, which he argues has “[taken] on a new shape with capitalism” (12) which needs to be more “thoroughly historicised” and become the focus of our intellectual inquiry into violence.

Žižek’s modes of violence prove useful in extrapolating the insights and influence of *Oliver Twist* largely because Dickens’ narrative seems to foreground the subjective violence characteristic of a traditional vision of criminality (i.e., Dodger’s pickpocketing and Sikes’ murdering), but the novel also directs the readerly gaze to the margins periodically, which is precisely where the objective violence is found. Not coincidentally, the margins also happen to be where the most progressive aspects of the text can be located, those which Bourdieu might refer to as the “discarded possibles.” Though the progressive content is only marginally radical, it has radical potential nonetheless, particularly because of the influence Dickens, and *Oliver Twist* in particular, would have on the socially concerned literature to follow. The ability to make visible, if only briefly, that which usually remains invisible, the objective violence of capitalism,

is what makes *Oliver Twist* (and the other works analyzed in my project) pertinent and ripe for analysis. Herein lies a major point of this dissertation: no one author or work of literature can be held to too high a standard of radical or revolutionary accomplishment in order to be considered legitimate and influential for social progress. Rather, we should read such literature (that is, popular fiction with a desire to incite positive social change) optimistically and with an eye toward the radical potential it may create for future literary and social work. The conservative and bourgeois aspects of *Oliver Twist* have been analyzed at length, but it is the revolutionary potential to conduct social critique and shift the gaze of the socially concerned popular audience that is of interest to the present study.¹¹ In this light, *Oliver Twist* holds a wealth of content and influence to be excavated.

In grappling with the influence *Oliver Twist* has on popular consciousness there is an inherent conflict that needs to be addressed. This conflict arises from the conundrum of attempting to shift the focus from an easily identifiable culprit of social crimes to a more ambiguous and anonymous one—in effect, this is the problem of shifting our attention from subjective to objective violence. Though more detrimental to the lives of the working class, as I argue, objective violence is also more abstract and therefore more difficult to pin down or employ in a causal argument. This conflict also, in part, explains the complex combination of narrative modes employed by the novel and the numerous subjectivities Dickens’ attempts to engage throughout the text. By attempting to subvert the genre expectations for a popular Victorian novel about common criminals, as well as direct a critique toward various social forces at play which disenfranchise the urban working poor, Dickens necessarily creates a Bourdieuan

¹¹ As mentioned briefly in my introduction, my project owes a debt of gratitude to Lukács’ *The Historical Novel* for paving the way for such a project that attempts to champion the revolutionary potential of literature often critiqued for its so-called conservative elements.

narrative field whereby numerous social and economic forces are constantly at odds, directing the movement of characters and plot alike. Naturally, the attempt to depict things “as they really are” (Dickens vi) creates an impossible challenge, as no fictional narrative could possibly encapsulate all the complexities of social life in any time and place. Furthermore, the narrative necessity of maintaining tension and readerly interest forces Dickens to rely on coincidence and highly unlikely encounters to force the circumstances needed for his commentary to take place. Nevertheless, Dickens maintained that his narrative was “emphatically God’s truth” and although “it is a contradiction, an anomaly, an apparent impossibility” it is still the truth (ix-x). Though Dickens appears to simply be defending realism here, I argue there is no neutral position of representation and, therefore, that an act of representing “reality” is in fact an assertion of one’s perception of how things “really” are.¹² Dickens’ didacticism in critiquing the ill-effects of bourgeois ideology makes his realism a progressive realism, despite the apparent contradictions within the text. And so, paradoxical as it may be, the inherent contradictions of the text and the lack of resemblance to everyday life does not foreclose the insightful or revolutionary potential of the novel for the author, nor does it foreclose that potential for me.

Exploring the Field and Habitus in the Text

Determining the revolutionary potential of *Oliver Twist* can only be understood and appreciated relative to the conservative aspects of the text. And when I say “revolutionary potential,” I mean simply that the text maintains the ability to influence in material ways the lived experience of the culture which reads it. This is of course liable to being criticized for being too low a bar to be considered “revolutionary,” but I maintain the intellectual purism which

¹² I will elaborate on my argument more later when discussing Sinclair’s didacticism where I reference Sinclair’s claim that “all art is propaganda. It is universally and inescapably propaganda” (*Mammonart* 9).

would forward such a critique is doing more to stymie the positive impact of such literature than assist it. That said, I acknowledge that phrases like “revolutionary potential” are by nature abstract and somewhat arbitrary or subjective. To this point, I can only say that having a moderate influence on a large audience is at least as likely to result in a change to real lives as a major impact on a small audience, and therefore Dickens’ ability to balance generic necessities to reach a wide audience with a progressive agenda is deserving of sympathetic readings, even while acknowledging his own limitations as an author and social commentator. My position echoes Lukács’ reading of Sir Walter Scott where he argues,

Scott’s greatness lies in his capacity to give living human embodiment to historical-social types. The typically human terms in which great historical trends become tangible had never before been so superbly, straightforwardly (sic) and pregnantly portrayed. And above all, never before had this kind of portrayal been consciously set at the centre of the representation of reality (35).

I argue that Dickens accomplishes something similar in being the vanguard to place certain “historical-social types” at the “center of the representation of reality,” but also that he does so in way less sensationalized than his predecessors, and without the inherent assumption that a lower-class set of characters is any less useful than a bourgeois cast to relay a moral message. In Dickens’ own words: “I confess I have yet to learn that a lesson of the purest good may not be drawn from the vilest evil. . . I saw no reason, when I wrote this book, why the very dregs of life . . . should not serve the purpose of a moral at least as well as its froth and cream” (v-vi). Such a position may not seem especially progressive by today’s standards, but it nevertheless constitutes a conscious and significant effort on his part to resist the traditional bourgeois values that conflate social class and moral values. The act of drawing the “dregs” into the narrative limelight to communicate a moral is an act of, I argue, forcing the readers to confront the habitus of Victorian culture which maintains the state of their cultural field. The inherent assumptions and judgements that prejudice readers against Dickens’ criminals are the symptoms of a cultural

demeanor that invisibly reinforces bourgeois mythology of meritocracy and the ties of morality to class. The narrative techniques employed by Dickens to put what Žižek calls the “objective violence” of Victorian culture on display might be debatable as to their aesthetic value, but the political ends of such an attempt is nevertheless progressive in its aim.

Though Dickens made conscious attempts to distance himself from Victorian crime-fiction’s generic conventions, he still maintained adherence to some of those conventions out of necessity for publication as well as to meet the needs of the reading public. According to Tamara Wagner’s “The Making of Criminal Children,” “Dickens self-consciously wrote against prevailing representations of crime. . . [describing] criminal lives in all their sordidness. . . [but he] could hardly ignore the genre’s popular paradigms” as “It was simply the standard fictional mode for presenting criminality” (69). Similarly, though he attempted to levy a critique against the New Poor Law specifically, and against overly utilitarian bourgeois ethics more generally, the narrative is still largely told through a bourgeois perspective. That is, the novel champions the offspring of the respectable middle-upper class and condemns the lower-class ruffians who Oliver encounters on his way back to what might be considered his natural station. Leslie Simon’s “The De-orphaned Orphan” says as much when she claims that “the ultimate resolve of the book is to undermine what at first glance seems to be a narrative of sheer potentiality” (306). She revises this assertion slightly by the end of her article when she claims the character of Dick foils Oliver’s confinement to the conservative narrative conclusion, but she nevertheless makes an important critique as to the conservative aspects of the main plot. However, I argue that these conservative elements of the text do not foreclose the revolutionary potential, but instead make its lasting influence possible. I also maintain that the main plot constitutes the more visible areas of the Victorian field and that the progressive effects of the novel only arise when the focus is

shifted away from the subjective violence of Sikes and Fagin toward the objective violence resultant from bourgeois ideology imposed upon the underprivileged.

It is true in the immediate sense that political influence must always operate within the confines of aesthetic programs that are palatable to the masses, as the publication and popularity among the literate population is necessary for the text to reach a wide audience and sphere of influence. But it is also true in the more long-term sense, as the ability to influence future authors and social critics is predicated on having those who maintain substantial social and cultural capital continue to engage with one's work. (Wagner refers to this as the "cultural afterlife" of Dickens' work, which she discusses in "The Making of Criminal Children.") Recognizing these pragmatic concerns, Dickens' ability to balance bourgeois aesthetics and some traditional narrative conventions with progressive techniques of critique and a radical agenda proves even more significant than often expressed by Dickensian scholars.

Establishing what I would consider the conservative surface of the literary field is relatively straightforward in *Oliver Twist*. For starters, the aspects that are perhaps the most famous and most memorable, Oliver's interactions with Fagin and the Artful Dodger, are also some of the most conservative aspects of the text. Fagin in particular has been discussed at length as being evidence of Dickens' antisemitism, and the depiction of his cultural minority status and stereotypical physical characteristics (perhaps deformities) are in-line with traditionally conservative and problematic depictions of minorities, criminals, and the poor in Victorian culture. Susan Meyer writes at length about Fagin in "Antisemitism and Social Commentary in *Oliver Twist*," where she acknowledges that Dickens "emphasizes aspects of [Fagin's] character familiar with the antisemitic tradition," but goes on to argue that Dickens could not entirely eliminate problematic references to Fagin's Jewishness because,

The negative energy in the representation of the Jewish Fagin is, paradoxically, so deeply involved in what is best in the novel. This is true from a literary perspective, as many have remarked: Fagin is certainly far more vivid and fascinating than the good characters. But it is also true from a social perspective. Fagin is inextricably involved, as a Jew, and as a character whom the reader must never forget to be a Jew, in the novel's extended commentary on the English treatment of the poor. That commentary is worked out through a symbolic schema in which the categories "Christian" and "Jew" play interconnected roles (240).

In line with Meyer's position, I do not contest that the antisemitic descriptions of Fagin are troubling, to say the least, but I do perceive them as functioning within a larger narrative framework created to put the uglier side of Victorian culture on display (i.e., to expose the objective violence of Victorian culture). To say that representing Fagin in such a way reinforces antisemitism is a legitimate concern, but it is not mutually exclusive with the claim that Dickens represents Fagin, and the other poor characters, in flawed and unsavory ways specifically because he wishes to forward a progressive agenda that forces readers to confront why those unsavory depictions appear normal in the context in which they arise.

Though not quite as problematic in their depiction, characters like Dodger, Nancy, Noah Claypole, and Sikes also forward a traditional view of criminals as anti-social actors in society who are easily identifiable by their dirty and unsavory appearance, their informal language, and their generally amoral mode of conduct. As stated earlier, however, these characters usually exemplify the subjective violence that often distracts Victorians from greater and more systemic social ills. Their seemingly conservative representation is further exacerbated when they are contrasted with Oliver who, in spite of his impoverished upbringing, maintains his bourgeois speech and an appearance so innocent that numerous characters from every social class and position comment on it. Despite the valid readings of these characters as conservative depictions, I contend that these readings are taking the representation at face value and therefore are unable to see the field in which they operate and the habitus which reinforces their positions within the

field. Whereas the primary plot and characters appear to be largely complicit with conservative bourgeois values, what I view as the more progressive aspects of the text surface through a closer reading of the character interactions, the narrator's voice, and an optative consideration of which paths are taken and which are left to be explored.

Traditional Criminals and Reinforcing Victorian Morals

Oliver Twist is often believed to be a classic rags-to-riches narrative where the protagonist establishes his worthiness of being included in the more respectable circles of society and this eventually comes to fruition, after he has experienced enough adventure and struggle, of course. Constructing the narrative in this way reinforces Victorian ideals of meritocracy and a just hierarchy of social classes. It also promotes the conservative class essentialism that believed those who were in the upper, middle, and lower classes maintained that existence for logical reasons and were destined to find themselves in those circumstances based on inherent traits. Though Dickens famously opposed the New Poor Law and explicitly condemned the treatment of the working poor and the filthy urban environment they were forced into, he still seemingly remained complicit with the class essentialism described. Oliver was a product of middle-upper class parentage (though illegitimate) and therefore he seems to have inherited the manners, speech, and look of a person who does not belong to the lower classes.

The use of traditional signifiers such as physical appearance and speech to identify the characters worthy of bourgeois life (or not) is one of the more often critiqued aspects of the text and has long been seen as one of its major flaws of conservatism. From the start, the narrative describes how Oliver's mother was "a good-looking girl" but he being wrapped in nothing but a blanket "might have been the child of a nobleman or a beggar" and, indeed, "it would have been hard for the haughtiest stranger to have assigned him *his proper station* in society" (25; emphasis

mine). As early as his first chapter, we see Dickens illustrate the direct connection between physical appearance (a common form of symbolic capital in the novel) and social stature. It is also clear from the language used that Victorians believed there to be such a thing as a “proper station,” which of course implies the possibility of improper station. We therefore have a situation in which a person belongs somewhere in society and does not belong elsewhere, and this social placement in the novel is based largely on, or at least indicated by, physical appearance. Even the phrase “social placement” already conjures images of Bourdieu’s social field, whereby the characters leverage physical markers as an indication of where one resides, or at least should reside, in that field. Apparently without even trying, Oliver will be able to exchange this capital manifested in the form of innocent appearance for enhancement to his social station as the narrative progresses.

Importantly, after the death of Oliver’s mother and his inclusion into the parish workhouse, Oliver is given the same treatment, diet, education (or lack thereof), and clothing as his orphaned peers. Despite these misfortunes, Oliver maintains an especially innocent-looking face, polite demeanor, and bourgeois speech; in short, Oliver maintains his bourgeois characteristics (i.e., inherited symbolic capital) despite the fact that there is no environmental reason why he would look, sound, or act the way he does. Notwithstanding Mr. Limbkins’ insistence that “the boy will be hung” (37), Oliver’s appearance is frequently lauded as characteristic of one not belonging to the lower-class. Mr. Sowerberry acknowledges he’s “a very good-looking boy” (59), a description easily recognized as echoing a description just a few chapters earlier of his bourgeois mother. Later, Fagin describes how, “properly managed. . . [he] could do [with Oliver] what he couldn’t with twenty” (181) other boys because “their looks convict ‘em when they get into trouble” (181). This is corroborated by Toby Crackit who admits

“[Oliver’s] mug is a fortun’ to him” (200). Such language illustrates the quantifiable valuations placed on Oliver’s capital inherent in his appearance, and the exchangeability of such capital is proven time and again throughout the narrative. Even in Oliver’s first encounter with Mr. Brownlow, when the former is being charged for stealing a book from the latter, Mr. Brownlow wonders aloud, “Can he be innocent. *He looked like it*” (101; emphasis mine). Oliver’s signifiers of innocence stand out all the more starkly in contrast to the “bow-legs, and little, sharp, ugly eyes” (82) of the Artful Dodger and the “large-headed, smalled-eyed” Noah Claypole with his “superadded. . . personal attractions [of] a red nose and yellow smalls” (57). For the reader, it is clear that Oliver isn’t like these other riff-raff children, with the possible exception of Dick.

Herein lies the first paradox of the text and its relative degree of conservatism or progressivism. Oliver, against all reason, maintains his stature as the Victorian ideal child in spite of the opposed environmental influence. In addition to Oliver’s obvious appearance of innocence and lack of dialect (which appears only with lower-class characters), the narrator also asserts, “The simple fact was that Oliver, instead of possessing too little feeling, possessed rather too much” (51). One could read this description of Oliver as conservative and complicit with bourgeois values, but we can also read his character the other direction as engendering sympathy for the protagonist in order to log an attack at the system which mistreats him throughout the narrative. Ultimately, by creating a sympathetic character to follow (which unfortunately may have necessitated taking on some bourgeois characteristics) and then placing him in disenfranchised circumstances, Dickens mounts an effective critique of the systemic inequities produced by Victorian culture. Aligning Oliver with his friend Dick makes this an especially useful point, as Dick offers the other side to Oliver’s tale, the life literally unled to borrow Andrew Miller’s phrase. By creating a foil to Oliver in Dick, Dickens suggests that Dick might

have been the child that Oliver becomes but was never given the opportunity to do so, and therefore the real tragedy of the story is not the mistreatment of Oliver (i.e., subjective violence), who makes it out alive, but the systemic disadvantages imposed on Dick (i.e., objective violence) who ultimately isn't allowed to explore his narrative potential.¹³

After relaying the unfortunate circumstances of Oliver's birth, chapter two begins by describing how in the first years of Oliver's life he "was the victim of a systematic course of treachery and deception" (27). It goes on to describe how the "system" of waning the food consumption of the parish orphans resulted in the death of "eight and a half cases out of ten" (28). This is one of the earliest moments in the novel when dark humor is used to describe systemic atrocities (how does one kill half an orphan?) but it proves to be a frequent and significant technique throughout the remainder of the narrative. Indeed, Karin Lesnik-Oberstein's entire article "*Oliver Twist*, the Narrator's Tale," discusses the importance of the double-speak in the novel and the role of the narrator in allowing Dickens to subvert and transcend the "language of gentility" (91). I would argue that we just as often see the narrator used to turn the language of gentility back on itself, which of course plays nicely with the sarcastic dark-humor style. Before chapter two concludes, the narrator describes how the New Poor Law "established the rule that all poor people should have the alternative (for [law makers] would compel nobody, not they) of being starved by a gradual process in the house, or by a quick one out of it" (34-35). Similar tongue-in-cheek jabs at the New Poor Law, and the classist laws of Victorian culture more generally, continue to abound as Oliver progresses throughout the novel. The earliest manifestations of this occur in the parish house where Oliver and his peers are often "locked up for atrociously presuming to be hungry" (29), foreshadowing the famous scene

¹³ For more on the Dick/Oliver relationship, see Simon's "The De-Orphaned Orphan."

whereby “the small rebel” admits he “wants some more” gruel (36). This scene spurs Oliver’s transition into working life; he is first considered as a chimney sweep, where the practice of “roasting [the sweeps’] feet. . . to hixtricate theirselves” from a chimney is apparently considered “humane” as long as the apprenticeship “looked well in the accounts” (41). For perhaps narrative as well as pragmatic reasons, this fate does not befall Oliver, and instead he ends up working for an undertaker (though not before being considered as a shiphand where “a skipper would [probably] flog him to death. . . or knock his brains out with an iron bar, both pastimes being. . . very favourite and common recreations among gentlemen of that class”) (47).

The undertaker apprenticeship allows Oliver to not only avoid the likely physical impairments or death much more common in the other professions avoided but also allows Dickens to further explore the theme of death and specifically the commodification of death (particularly of the lower classes) in Victorian culture.¹⁴ Mr. Sowerberry admits “the new system of feeding” the poor has resulted in “the coffins [being] something narrower and more shallow than they used to be, but [he] must have some profit” (48). He elaborates that even if the coffins and burial services are not always as profitable as he might like, he can always “make it up in the long run,” by which Dickens is referencing the newly emergent business of selling corpses of the poor for autopsy, a fate previously reserved for only deceased criminals.¹⁵ Oliver’s first encounter with the other apprentice and charity boy, Noah Claypole, elaborates on the usefulness of the narrator for critique as he describes Noah’s maleficence towards Oliver—the narrator states that Noah’s hatred of Oliver “affords charming food for contemplation. It shows us what a

¹⁴ Annette Federico’s “The Violent Deaths of Oliver Twist” argues that death is among the foremost concerns of the novel, both as a social reality but also a metaphor for the changing of people into commodities under industrial capitalism.

¹⁵ This is an intriguing example of just how deeply ingrained the convergence of poverty and criminality were in the early-Victorian era and constitutes a particularly dark manifestation of the Victorian habitus reinforcing bourgeois prejudices against the poor.

beautiful thing human nature may be made to be, and how impartially the same amiable qualities are developed in the finest lord and the dirtiest charity boy” (58). Again, the scathing critique of Dickens’ sarcasm cannot go unappreciated, and yet, it is likely a major factor for why such a critique could be palatable to a largely middle-class audience despite their being implicated in the critique. As Lesnik-Oberstein suggests, the filtering of this critique through the narratorial voice allows Dickens to distance himself slightly while simultaneously making the novel as much about the narrator’s account of plot events as the events themselves. This perspective is reinforced by Amanda Anderson in *The Powers of Distance* (2001), who argues that “a suspicious and detached view [is] required for mapping hierarchies of power,” though she characterizes Dickens as “ambivalent” regarding the cultivation of distance as he feared it “threaten[ed] to corrode moral character even as it produces the illuminations of critical insight” (21). As I read it, Dickens’ use of double-speak and sarcasm allow him to circumvent, or at least grapple with, that particular qualm and create the necessary distance for such “critical insight.” The commentary comparing Noah to “the finest lord” forces one to contemplate the distinctions, or similarities, of moral shortcomings across class boundaries, which of course has nothing to do with the plot itself and solely functions to direct the reader’s thoughts toward contemporary social issues and away from the novel itself, albeit briefly.

The systemic critique appears to be an attempt at progressivism and a resistance to Victorian logic, but it employs Victorian ideals and class essentialism to achieve that critique. Does the class essentialism and traditionally-Victorian manners inherent in Oliver’s character undermine the critique of the Victorian utilitarian logic that created the New Poor Laws, constructed overcrowded and dirty industrial cities, and forced children and poor people into workhouses? I would argue no, mostly. Though the depiction of Oliver as the ideal Victorian

child does water-down the progressive critique of the system, it also opens the door to extended commentary and depictions of the flaws inherent in the mid-Victorian culture that otherwise could not be expressed to a wide audience spanning class boundaries, nations, and decades (perhaps centuries). Overall, I argue that exposing the objective violence inherent in the systemic ills of Victorian society, even for a brief moment, is progressive, and the fact that it needs to be cloaked in narrative conventions Victorians were at least moderately comfortable with does not negate that position.

As a further complication to the conservative elements of the text, however, one might consider that the novel is more a return to home than a linear progression up the ranks of society. As already mentioned, Leslie Simon argues this when she states that “*Oliver Twist* (1837-39) appears to be a story of social mobility. . . but [it] is not. The ultimate resolve of the book is to undermine what at first glance seems to be a narrative of sheer potentiality” (306). She believes the de-orphaning of Oliver, that is to say the actualization of locating his family and uncovering his parentage, ultimately “nullif[ies] his metamorphic potential: the child comes from, and returns to, bourgeois stock” (307). Though seemingly negative about the transformative potential of the novel, Simon actually presents a much more optimistic view as she asserts that other characters, particularly male children, pose alternatives to what Oliver’s life might have been and therefore still leave a space for what she calls “metamorphic potential.” I find the notion of “metamorphic potential” to be relevant to my discussion of progressivism in the text, as it suggests a capability of the text to transform or affect the mindset and culture that exists beyond the novel. I would even go so far as to suggest the “metamorphic potential” of a character or a text may constitute the positive view of the “discarded possibles” described by Bourdieu’s optative reading of the past.

Simon's insights are useful, particularly in reference to the significance of minor characters of the novel, but I would argue that Oliver cannot exist in a vacuum and therefore the transformative, "metamorphic," or progressive potential of the novel is inextricably tied up with that of all the characters, including Oliver. It is true and important to acknowledge that Oliver comes from "bourgeois stock" and he eventually returns to them, but only in the sense that he returns to a social class; he does not return to his parents, he cannot get back the life he might have had under different circumstances, and he cannot relinquish his experiences. I would also point out that an optative perspective only makes sense in relation to what has actually happened. Ultimately, understanding Oliver's subjectivity and social significance optatively by considering the other children as discarded alternatives only works if we use Oliver as the point of reference. This is especially significant if we accept, as many scholars have asserted, that *Oliver Twist* "express[es] a cultural zeitgeist, as early and mid-Victorians felt themselves cut off—or orphaned—from the agricultural past by the incessant movement of the industrial present, ever in motion, ever unknowable" (Simon 306). We cannot understand Oliver's subjectivity in the context of alternatives without considering him as he exists, and, by extension, we cannot understand Victorian culture optatively without perceiving both what it is and what it might have been simultaneously. Stated another way, Dickens' novel represented the feelings of a culture grappling with rapid change, loss of identity, and growing pains associated with industrial expansion. As such, despite the fact that Oliver reverted to some version of the life his parents might have lived, he is part of a new generation with knowledge of things formerly ignored and without the ability to fully go back to how things used to be. Oliver's loss of his parents in effect mirrors the Victorian loss of its British identity before the Industrial Revolution and the emergence of modern capitalism. Though a conservative perspective might wish for a return to

pastoral England and the days before hyper-competition, urban compression, and international capitalism stole the soul of the nation, that dream (like Oliver's parents) was dead.

Dickens' novel might have packaged the narrative conclusion in terms Victorians were comfortable with, but a careful reader understands that the ending is not quite so comforting as many have imagined. Jonathan Grossman goes so far as to argue that "Dickens might [have been] using the narrator to draw his middle-class readers away from their own perspective and their own happy ending, to a more self-critical perspective and a more ambivalent ending" (44). Though I think this is a distinct possibility, I would also point out that a middle-class audience was not the only one Dickens was writing for, and, additionally, that the text could open up the possibility of reconsidering Victorian ideology without promoting a specifically "self-critical perspective." I am not negating Grossman's claim, merely suggesting that the novel can be influential and progressive merely by opening the door to a more critical perspective by putting the usually invisible mechanisms by which society operates on display. The fact that readers will participate to varying degrees in aspects of the Victorian habitus and benefit disproportionately from the status quo implies that not everyone will see themselves in the same aspects of the texts and therefore will likely take away different lessons from the novel.

Progressivism in the Margins

Though I have already pointed to a number of instances in the novel or aspects of Oliver's narrative that may be read as progressive, this section will more fully unpack the progressive aspects of the narrative, hopefully justifying my argument that the progressive aspects of the novel outweigh some of its more conservative elements. The more conservative aspects of the text (i.e., Oliver's bourgeois heritage, the physical marking of class, the Victorian ideal happy ending) are all, I argue, necessary compromises for the progressive agenda to reach

the desired scope of audience Dickens was striving for. That said, if we approach the text looking for a progressive agenda, I think a careful reader will find more than enough evidence that the text is ultimately progressive in aim and much more idea-driven than it is often given credit for. That is to say, *Oliver Twist* strives for philosophical and political aims well beyond the immediate desire to entertain, and those aims are usually progressive in nature, constantly working to bring awareness to the problematic aspects of Victorian society that often remain hidden.

To take the last point first, the argument that Dickens' novel is one of ideas is not entirely new. The general consensus of scholarship is that Dickens' aesthetic concerns trump social ones and that his early work, especially, lacks the didacticism that would become most obvious in *Hard Times* (1854), published later in his career. Notably, *Hard Times* is often criticized on the grounds that its didacticism gets in the way of its artistry.¹⁶ Regarding Dickens and his ideas, K.J. Fielding claims that "It is true that [Dickens] was not a fictional philosopher in the sense that he often turned to address the reader, expound generalities, and indulge in minor essays" (49). However, Fielding ultimately makes the claim that *Oliver Twist* is a "novel of ideas" because he views it as a direct argument against Benthamite Utilitarianism, and therefore a novel that engages in philosophical debate through narrative. Though Fielding's argument provides a number of useful insights, I argue that Dickens' intent isn't a prerequisite for his novel to be a novel of ideas; it is merely useful to lead our gaze when searching for evidence of those ideas. This is not a full-on death-of-the-author argument. I'm not saying Dickens didn't have some didactic intent for the novel, and I'm not saying his intent doesn't matter. I am saying that he almost certainly achieved unintended results, and this is especially so for literature like *Oliver*

¹⁶ The issue of didacticism versus aesthetics will become a major point of analysis in Chapter 3 during the discussion of *The Jungle*.

Twist that continues to be read, repackaged, and reinterpreted for generations to follow, even well after the author is literally dead. With that said, it is useful to revisit the author's professed ideas as meaningful context which may bring to light various aspects of the text.

Dickens criticized the self-celebratory tendencies of so-called novelists of ideas, saying "I strongly object. . . It is framing and glazing an idea and desiring the ladies and gentleman [sic] to walk up and admire it" (qtd in Fielding, 49). This perspective can be understood as a defense of traditional aesthetics which put philosophical didacticism at odds with form and style, and I believe that is a legitimate interpretation. I would argue, however, that we could also read Dickens' critique as one which realizes that the pretentious nature of so-called philosophical commentary in fiction often strikes the reader as disingenuous and deleterious to the narrative, to say nothing of the philosophical aim itself. Somewhat paradoxically, *Oliver Twist's* narrator takes a relatively direct stance against philosophers in spite of this apparent aversion to overt didacticism.

The earliest example arrives in chapter two: the narrator describes the woman in charge of Oliver's workhouse as "a woman of wisdom and experience. . . she appropriated the greater part of the weekly stipend to her own use, and consigned the rising parochial generation to even a shorter allowance than was originally provided for them. Thereby finding in the lowest depth a deeper still, and proving herself a *very great experimental philosopher*" (27-28; italics mine). Here Dickens' narrator equates workhouse authorities, who systematically starve their charges to the point of reaching the lowest depths of human existence, with philosophers. Given that this criticism, like much of the social criticism of *Oliver Twist*, is cloaked in the language of sarcasm, it is possible that Dickens, or at least his narrator, is not quite so hard on philosophers as he seems to be on Mrs. Mann (the workhouse authority). However, the second reference to

philosophers is more direct still and leaves less room for interpretation. Upon being taken in as an undertaker's apprentice, the significance of which should not be underestimated (he's in the business of death, usually of poor folks), Oliver ravenously "devours" the "plateful of broken victuals" (53) that were originally intended for the dog. The narrator responds to the scene saying,

I wish some well-fed philosopher, whose meat and drink turn to gall within him, whose blood is ice, whose heart is iron, could have seen Oliver Twist clutching at the dainty viands that the dog had neglected. I wish he could have witnessed the horrible avidity with which Oliver tore the bits asunder with all the ferocity of famine. There is only one thing I should like better, and that would be to see the Philosopher making the same sort of meal himself, with the same relish. (53)

This passage is especially important for multiple reasons. First, it shows a legitimate and apparently genuine dislike for the "well-fed philosopher" who the narrator imagines lacks the basic empathy necessary to appreciate Oliver's struggle and the immoral system that allows him to be relegated to such an existence. Though we cannot always read the narrator as a mouthpiece for the author, we can identify themes that appear frequently throughout a text or a body of text and make note of moments when those views are expressed by a narrator. This is one such moment. The text is riddled with moments of philosophical critique and is mirrored by views expressed by Dickens himself outside the text; therefore, we can safely assert that Dickens felt a truly genuine distaste for philosophical commentary that lacks empathy for the real-life struggles of the disenfranchised. This is not a novel idea, but it is important to recognize as we attempt to unpack the progressive potential of a multi-layered text, one which employs character descriptions, omnipotent narrator commentary, and tongue-in-cheek style to communicate its perspective.

The excerpt is also notable for its aggressively direct critique. I have argued and continue to argue that the progressive potential of the novel exists largely in the subtle critique of the text,

often presented through double-speak or through marginal events and characters. And yet, here we have a very direct and didactic criticism. The inclusion of such a passage is important because, firstly, it establishes that Dickens is clearly capable and willing to bestow a very straight-forward critique in his fiction. Secondly, it is significant in its contrast to the relatively obscure and indirect critiques one can extract which implicate bourgeois audiences. The distinction in treatment between the two demographics, an abstract Philosopher on the one hand and a very real middle-class reader on the other, illustrates the rationale for my major claim that Dickens makes calculated decisions about presentation style and degree of didacticism in forwarding a progressive social agenda in *Oliver Twist*. Few readers, if any, will be alienated by the chastising of an out-of-touch philosopher who fails to appreciate the struggle of real citizens in industrial environments. Indeed, many of the newly emergent popular audience will likely identify with this perspective. But those same readers, particularly those in the middle and upper echelons of society, will not take a direct criticism of them and their complicity with irresponsible social policy quite as well. As such, the direct criticism of legal entities, workhouses, and philosophers (what many might call “the establishment”) contrasted with the more subtle critiques of bourgeois society illustrates the conscious attempt of Dickens to forward the most progressive agenda possible while still maintaining the ability to reach a large, popular audience and achieve substantial social influence with his novel. In a sense, we could say that Dickens’ most overtly didactic moments occur when critiquing the social field in which Victorian subjects operate but become more subtle when implicating the Victorian habitus into his critique. The field is merely the system in which Victorians are forced to interact, and therefore they are less likely to take an attack personally. Conversely, the suggestion that one’s actions may serve to uphold such a flawed system makes the critique immediately more personal

and more pointed. To counteract such an effect, Dickens necessarily adjusts his language and narrative distance based on what specifically is the subject of criticism in a given excerpt. In short, the more agency the potential reader may have regarding a particular issue with Victorian society, the more cautiously Dickens approaches his criticism. That is not to say he does not hold the reader accountable for their complicity with the objective violence inherent in Victorian culture, but he does approach his critique in such a way that attempts to maximize positive outcomes rather than haphazardly launch criticism without consideration of the impact it may (or may not) have on the readers themselves. Thus, I argue, Dickens' maintains the maximum radical potential of outcome, even if that means sacrificing the radical appearance of presentation.

Though the indictment of bourgeois Victorian culture is not quite as direct, it still subsists throughout the novel. The critique is most prevalent during scenes where the more respectable bourgeois characters interact with the lower-class ones, especially, but not only, with Oliver. Oliver is the easiest example of illustrating which characters act in laudable ways and which reprehensibly, because he is clearly the sympathetic protagonist and the character with whom the audience is most encouraged to identify with. However, the more insightful and socially significant moments often occur further toward the margins of the narrative. For comparative purposes, we can look to Mr. Brownlow's first interaction with Oliver, where Oliver is being charged for thievery and Mr. Brownlow saves him from the unfair punishment of "three months—hard labour, of course" (105). The matter-of-factness with which a severe punishment is about to be bestowed on Oliver with nothing resembling a fair trial is yet another example of a very direct critique of the Victorian legal system which disproportionately disenfranchises the poor. Only the concerted effort of Mr. Brownlow and the book seller, both representatives of the

bourgeois classes of London, managed to save Oliver. This interaction is, of course, one of the more conservative in the text. Oliver is led astray by his lower-class peers, is saved by the benevolent bourgeois, is taken in and exposed to books and polite manners, and becomes happy. This, in a nutshell, is the bourgeois fantasy of social improvement.

Contrast this with the scene where Nancy meets Rose. Though every servant in the house treats Nancy with suspicion and revulsion, Rose shows kindness and empathy from the start, prompting Nancy to exclaim “Oh, lady, lady! . . . if there was more like you, there would be fewer like me—there would—there would!” (357). It is a brief exchange, but an impactful one. The working lower-middle class characters recognize Nancy for what she is (a lower-class prostitute) and immediately condemn her for it. Rose, by contrast, approaches Nancy with compassion and attempts to help her even beyond what is necessary to get Oliver back. The cliché traditionalism of Rose’s altruism masks the much more progressive critique of the bourgeois culture that reinforces negative responses of characters like the servants in this scene. In effect, the servants display the bourgeois habitus that reinforces the systemic flaws depicted in the scene of Oliver’s near-sentencing to hard labor. The active participation and implication of middle-class subjects is what necessitates the more delicate treatment of this scene. Dickens packages this critique in language that is palatable to a middle-class audience, but it is also clear upon inspection that the scene is at least as critical of bourgeois culture as it is supportive of it. Indeed, Rose is characterized by her substantial compassion for the less fortunate but also her aversion to bourgeois success, as expressed by her refusal to marry Harry Maylie on account of his superior social standing. Granted, her refusal is grounded in the logic that she would diminish his social standing by being a supposedly adopted and illegitimate child, which it turns out is actually false. Nevertheless, the point remains that Rose is championed for her compassion and

maintains her laudable position not despite her supposedly lower social standing but because of her moral consistency irrespective of social class demarcations. Her rejection of the habitus is precisely the reason for her moral superiority. Furthermore, the statement that if there were more people like Rose, there would be less like Nancy is especially significant. It implies direct causation in class relations and argues that the existence of the lower class, particularly of lower-class individuals who might otherwise desire to be respectable, is largely the fault of the bourgeois classes who hold no compassion or sympathy for those in less fortunate circumstances. This, too, is a pointed critique at the bourgeois reader, even if they may not immediately realize it. In this way, the narrative of Oliver Twist's life may appear, on its surface, to be a largely conservative tale championing bourgeois values, but read closely it proves to be consistently critical not only of systemic issues of Victorian culture and the legal system, but also of the bourgeois classes which represent and reinforce those flawed values and social practices.

Bad Policy, Good Business, and Language Games

Thus far, my analysis has focused largely on character interactions for providing the evidence of a progressive agenda. However, I would also be remiss to ignore the substantial insight provided by the language employed in the novel—and I use the word “employed” very consciously here, as Dickens clearly appropriates the language of business and class distinctions to deconstruct the social arrangements they often serve to uphold. Such a function of a language is a clear example of habitus in action, and Dickens' attention to language illustrates his awareness of how linguistic practices serve to uphold the status quo of bourgeois culture. By engaging the language of industrial capitalists and the so-called respectable bourgeois classes, Dickens mounts his social critique not just at the level of plot and character, but down to the very language used to hold down the working class and the impoverished. His reversal of bourgeois

vernacular to implement a critique of that same bourgeois culture works in tandem with his frequent tongue-in-cheek style to simultaneously blur the progressive message while also promoting it. Such a tactic reinforces my claim that Dickens approached his progressive agenda with an eye to the bottom line, or at the very least, that his text maintains the maximum capacity for achieving social change, not in spite of its coy tactics but specifically because of them.

A useful example is the way the narrator describes Fagin and his gang of children criminals. Upon his first appearance in the narrative, Dodger is described as “altogether. . . a roystering and swaggering young gentleman” (83). He is referred to as the “young gentleman” no fewer than six times before it is disclosed that his real name is Jack Dawkins, better known as “the Artful Dodger,” and “he was a peculiar pet and protege of the elderly gentleman” (84) soon to be introduced, Fagin. These descriptions, of course, and many like them seem to be obviously tongue-in-cheek, not to be taken literally, and yet, the commitment to the joke gradually diminishes the obvious inaccuracy and seems to draw the readers’ attention to the question of what distinguishes genuine gentlemen from these imposters. Stated another way, Dickens’ use of language obscures what formerly seemed apparent and makes more apparent what was formerly obscure; this reinforces the same effect that results from directing the reader’s attention away from subjective violence and toward the more systemic but less visible objective violence which maintains the status quo of the Victorian field.

Fagin, in particular, is truly committed to keeping up the farce of employing bourgeois language to describe his own activities, as well as that of his “pupils.” He praises Dodger as “an ingenious workman” (91) who will be “a great man, himself” (93) someday. Fagin admits himself to be considered a “miser,” obsessed with “[his] little property,” but “only a miser, that’s all” (90). A miser is, of course, not a positive term but one that is acceptable to bourgeois

respectability and in many ways begrudgingly admired, and Fagin knows this. Even Oliver marveled at how “very industrious” (92) he found Fagin and his gang to be, in spite of the substantial time they spent on “games” such as the one where they practiced picking Fagin’s pocket. This “game” of pickpocketing soon thereafter translates into the “work” (93) that the boys perform when they go out for the day. Before realizing his peers were training him to be a thief, Oliver wonders “what branch of manufacture he would be instructed in, first” (96). The plethora of examples are overwhelming, and they all point to the fact that Dickens was doing more than playing a language game, just as Fagin’s game was more than mere play; Fagin was preparing the boys for life outside the den, and Dickens was using language to speak to concerns outside the text.

Fagin, again, is especially useful in implicating the upper classes in his own wrongdoing through his manipulation of language. For example, “Whenever Dodger or Charley Bates came home at night empty-handed, he would expatiate with great vehemence on the misery of idle and lazy habits, and would enforce upon them the necessity of an active life by sending them supperless to bed” (95). This description of cruelty to children bears a strong resemblance to the logic and treatment of children in the workhouse. The children, despite their best efforts, are unable to obtain the desired results for the overseer, and hence are reprimanded as “idle and lazy” and sent to bed hungry as encouragement to not fall prey to such vices in the future. The parallel between Fagin’s treatment of the boys, the workhouse treatment of their charges, and the government’s treatment of the poor in general are invoked here as a means of illustrating the close moral relationship, or perhaps immoral relationship, each has to the other. What the text has begun to communicate with these scenes is the similarities by which so-called legitimate and illegitimate businesses operate. The workhouse, the factory, and the criminal’s dens all operate

on hierarchies of power and structures which blame and punish the weak for the endless benefit of those in power. Dickens forges this connection as a means of illustrating the pervasiveness of violence (both objective and subjective) in the Victorian field and displaying the ubiquity with which capitalism's influence promulgates Victorian culture. It is apparent that Fagin and his gang are just as much cogs in the Victorian machine as the ruthless workhouse authorities and the bourgeois legal system that governs them. This is yet another example of the progressive critique forwarded by *Oliver Twist* which isn't apparent on the surface, and indeed may initially be read as traditionally conservative, but upon closer inspection proves strongly progressive.

Fagin further strengthens his own connection to Victorian logic shortly after his first appearance in the text when he mutters aloud: "What a fine thing capital punishment is! Dead men never repent; dead men never bring awkward stories to light. Ah, it's a fine thing for the trade! Five of 'em strung up in a row, and none left to play booty, or turn white-livered!" (89). By introducing Fagin in this way (he first appears only a few pages earlier), Dickens foregrounds the fact that Fagin, rather than being a social outcast, operates seamlessly into the logic of Victorian criminality and punishment. Rather than deterring crime, as capital punishment was professed to do, Fagin clearly illustrates from the outset that it actually encourages illegal activity by eliminating the possibility of reform or implication of other criminals. Indeed, it is commonly understood by historians that a "pickpocket [often] plied his trade within the crowd at the hanging of another pickpocket" (Linebaugh, xx). In Fagin's own words, "it's a fine thing for the trade," yet another indication that, in his mind, the occupation of thief may be illegal, but it is still a legitimate trade. He, therefore, establishes that all his illegal activities are still filtered through the logic of capitalism, even to the point of organizing his gang as a workhouse or factory might be (i.e., supervisor and laborers) and perceiving his "work" as comparable to any

other occupation that one might engage in to meet their material needs. Even upon his incarceration and eventual hanging, Fagin asks “What right have they to butcher me?” (474), calling into question the validity of his punishment and the authority of those who bestow it. When the jailer asks Fagin directly, “Are you a man,” he replies, “I shan’t be one long,” (474) which, in the context of the earlier quotation suggests that he perceives his dehumanization as unjust and a direct consequence of the bourgeois judicial system. From his perspective, Fagin’s participation in subjective violence was forced on him by the forces of objective violence inherent in the Victorian social field, and therefore he should not be punished for behaving exactly as Victorian culture had primed him to.

The importance of Fagin and his gang of criminal children to the impact and staying power of *Oliver Twist* has been addressed at length by Tamara Wagner in “The Making of Criminal Children.” Here Wagner claims “*Oliver Twist* (1837-1838) is arguably the most memorable and influential representation of a Victorian child threatened by the criminal element” but that “The flamboyance of Fagin’s den of juvenile thieves. . . has perhaps done as much to canonize *Oliver Twist* as *the* Victorian novel about criminal children” (68; original italics) as Oliver himself. She goes on to say, “Dickens self-consciously wrote against the prevailing representations of crime” which romanticized the life of criminals like Jack Sheppard, but also concedes that the “morality [of the novel] appears to be particularly bourgeois” (70). This is reinforced by various critics, such as Terry Eagleton who refers to Oliver as “a negative center” whose “nullity is also determined by the novel’s ideological inability to show him as a social *product*” (qtd in Wagner, 70). Wagner complicates this position further by pointing out that more recent scholarship has emphasized the ambiguity and paradoxes of the text are really “the defining elements of Dickens’ fiction” (71). There are many things to take away from

Wagner's reading, but some major points I'd like to focus on are 1) the importance of minor characters, 2) the role and function of seeming inconsistencies, paradox, or illogic in the text, and 3) the "cultural afterlife" (70) of Dickens' criminals.¹⁷

To the first point, Eagleton's critique that Wagner mentions seems reliant on the notion that Oliver himself must bear all the ideological weight of the text and the responsibility for all its social commentary. As expressed by numerous critics, including Wagner, Zlotnick, Simon, myself, and others, the minor characters are often as important, and perhaps more useful, than Oliver himself for communicating ideological critique. Indeed, I would argue Oliver often constitutes the bourgeois-approved protagonist through which the bourgeois audience needs to read the critique if it was going to succeed as such, and that the minor characters' major function is usually to flesh out the more progressive agenda which seeps through the text between scenes of action for our protagonist. Such moments have already been discussed in reference to the workhouse authorities, Nancy and Rose, as well as Fagin and his "pupils." All these aforementioned examples depict scenes where Dickens forces the reader to confront the less visible but nonetheless inherent violence of the system operating in accordance with bourgeois ideology, and he often accomplishes this by counterposing such systemic violence with the subjective and personal violence inflicted on or by minor characters.

Regarding Wagner's second point, I prefer to characterize the so-called paradoxes or ambiguities of the text as a dual-purpose achieved through double-speak, multiple perspectives, and strategic social commentary. In a sense, they are, as I see it, the product of Dickens' attempt to manipulate his social and cultural capital to forward a political agenda. There are undoubtedly practical necessities as well as artistic desires, but each must be weighed against the other to

¹⁷ Wagner is especially interested in the "cultural afterlife" of Dickens' criminal children, but I feel no such obligation to focus solely on the children.

determine the best course of action. Wagner points to this when she claims that “it has been impossible not to take [Dickens’] self-conscious subversion of the [child criminals] genre into account” when engaging with *Oliver Twist*, but also that “Dickens could hardly ignore the genre’s popular paradigms” because “It was simply the standard fictional mode for presenting criminality” (69). In effect, Wagner argues, and I think rightfully so, that there are pragmatic concerns with writing for a popular audience which restrict the decisions an author can make; these often result in less-experimental writing as regards style, content, form, and didacticism. With that said, I do think that Dickens’ work, particularly *Oliver Twist*, shows plenty of evidence that immense effort was put in to ensure the underlying critique of the novel was present throughout the text and available to those who wish to see it. This leads to Wagner’s claim that “the novel’s structure—its uses of opposites and the series of coincidences that have often been dismissed as unrealistic—testifies to Dickens’s awareness of the problem” (69). What others read as flaws or inconsistencies, Wagner reads as the intentional use of opposites. I largely agree with this characterization, as it pushes back against what I consider the misperception that an author of Dickens caliber was simply too lazy or unable to contrive more realistic plot events that would lead Oliver to a happy ending. I would argue that certain improbabilities (e.g., Oliver being forced to break into his relatives’ home, Oliver being framed for stealing a book from his father’s best friend, etc.) are not flaws of the narrative but indicators that Oliver’s progress is not really the point, at least as far as ideological critique is concerned. Yes, the title is *Oliver Twist, A Parish Boy’s Progress*, but in the same way that the text is riddled with double-speak which distinguishes between what is literally said and what is intended, the title foregrounds the bourgeois narrative of an orphan rags-to-riches story, but masks a deeper commentary—the major function is to entertain *while* launching a social critique that implicates every facet of the

legal system and the bourgeois Victorian culture that remains complicit with its inhumane practices. Wagner's third point concerning the "cultural afterlife" of Dickens' characters in *Oliver Twist* is the topic of the final section of this chapter and will be discussed forthwith.

Legacy and Social Influence

Given the transatlantic historical materialist approach of this study, it is important that we always widen the scope beyond the text when determining its social impact. Wagner does this to some degree, but remains within the realm of literary influence. She describes *Oliver Twist* as the vanguard of a literary genre of children criminals (or alleged criminals) and claims this set the standard against which future literature would work to alter or improve upon. She then cites Charlotte Yonge and Frances Hodgson Burnett as two examples of subsequent authors whose "exploited child heroes and heroines are less passive and more capable of defending themselves [than Oliver] without sounding like the Dodger" (70). Though I find it too restrictive to limit an analysis of Dickens' influence to only literary successors, I do think this is an important phenomenon nonetheless. If we accept the premise, as I do, that all literary work has a relative degree of influence which causes a ripple both in the literary field and beyond it into culture in general, then it stands to reason that influencing future works of literature, which have their own ripple effects, would magnify the impact of the original work exponentially. This exponential effect spurs much of the selection rationale for which literary productions are analyzed in the present study. *Oliver Twist* not only had a significant impact on its contemporary literary market, it also influenced contemporary politics regarding the New Poor Law and class relations, it influenced future generations' conception of criminals and especially criminal children, and it continued to be reproduced for the stage, film, and television for decades to come, continuing to reassert its influence on culture. Biographer Jane Smiley goes so far as to claim that "Along with

A Christmas Carol, *Oliver Twist* is probably the best known of Dickens's narratives, *certainly because*. . . it was reworked for the stage” (13; italics mine). Additionally, as suggested by Wagner, *Oliver Twist* also shaped the direction of a literary genre which would continue to influence authors for decades to come as well, and each of those texts would have a ripple effect on both the literary and social field in which they operate. Again, according to Smiley, Dickens “was so popular and so dominant a figure as both author and editor that the other [popular Victorian novelists] would have to create their literary sensibilities more or less in reference to his” (13). This assessment of Dickens’ importance to Victorian literature is shared among many scholars and is widely accepted by the general reading population, but his influence extends far beyond the Victorians. Indeed, one of the major reasons for my selection of *Oliver Twist* to begin my analysis is its immense influence on the relationship between literature and crime beyond the realm of literary study.

In his book *The Novel and the Police*, D.A. Miller dedicates a substantial chunk of his first chapter to analyzing the policing aspects of *Oliver Twist* (not to be confused with the actual police) and its impact on the history of the novel. He begins by claiming that “perhaps no openly fictional form has ever sought to ‘make a difference’ in the world more than the Victorian novel, whose cultural hegemony and diffusion well qualified it to become the primary spiritual exercise of an entire age” (x). This, at the very least, illustrates the position that Victorian literature was in a position to be influential, to “make a difference,” and also suggests that *Oliver Twist*, if it is representative of that time and culture, was also in a position to be highly influential. Miller argues that “the traditional novel. . . remains a vital consideration in our culture. . . because the office that the traditional novel once performed has not disappeared. . . The ‘death of the novel’ . . . has really meant the explosion everywhere of the novelistic. . . freely scattered across

a far greater range of cultural experience” (x). He goes on to suggest that the most successful Victorian literature best illustrates his claims, and that “Practically, the ‘nineteenth-century novel’ here will mean these names: Dickens, Collins, Trollope, Balzac, Stendhal, Zola” (2). As of this writing, Miller’s book has been cited at least 1,814 times on Google Scholar and appears in a wide array of scholarly work analyzing Dickens, Victorian literature, the relationship of literature to modes of social power, and *Oliver Twist* in specific. The immense popularity of Miller’s work in *The Novel and the Police*, combined with his limiting of the ‘nineteenth-century’ novel to a handful of names, including Dickens and Trollope, illustrate the fact that even well over a century after the publication of *Oliver Twist*, Dickens remains the foremost (or certainly one of the foremost) representatives of Victorian literature to the contemporary reader. If the Victorian era produced the modern social-problem novel, and Dickens was its most memorable representative, then it stands to reason that Dickens, in effect, is in many ways the father of the modern social-problem novel in the Anglo tradition.

Unfortunately, Miller’s argument is a bit less rosy than my own. He and I, among many others, both perceive the contradictions of the novel and are concerned with the impact these contradictions have on the reading culture. I argue that Dickens’ contradictions are actually indicative of his struggle to achieve numerous, competing goals simultaneously, and do so with the ultimate effect of forwarding a progressive agenda. Miller, in turn, argues that “the novel’s critical relation to society. . . masks the extent to which modern social organization has made even ‘scandal’ a systematic function of its routine self-maintenance” (xii) and ultimately reinforces “a social order whose totalizing power circulates all the more easily for being pulverized” (xiii). This is not to say that Miller believes Victorian fiction to have had a fully negative impact on society and only reinforces modes of social control and disciplinary

techniques. But he does push back against the position that the Victorian social novel effectively resists the policing institutions it appears to critique, and instead may service the systemic, objective violence I have argued Dickens worked so hard to combat. In his own words, Miller approaches his analyses

with a view less to ‘having it either way’ than to having it neither. Almost as though [he] were thus claiming to embrace an exemplary double bind (of that particular historical moment or formation), [he has] inscribed whatever maneuverability [his] writing supposes within a resistance both to disciplinary order and to an already venerable means of displacing and further developing this order: the notion of our simple “liberation” from it” (xiv).

I have strong respect for this vigorous commitment to resisting contentment with the “simple” acceptance of supposed “liberation,” but I take issue with the willingness to simply “have it neither” way. Despite Miller’s even-handed approach to analyzing the impact of literature and its liberatory potential, I argue that the tendency to say it has merely a neutral function is both too easy and too academic. Literary scholarship is by design an academic endeavor, but the assertion, which I agree with, that “the traditional novel. . . remains a vital consideration in our culture” implies that we must take something away from that, in practical terms, even if we are already aware that we are always working with flawed truths, biases, and agendas. In a post-Foucault, postmodern era where much of the humanities is lumped together as postmodern nihilists, it is a political imperative as well as a professional responsibility, I argue, to forward positive theses regarding the emancipatory potential of fiction. The text does not hold some magical powers to emancipate anyone from anything; it is the treatment of the text and the reaction to it that makes it emancipatory or not. As such, literary scholarship should be seeking to discover, uncover, or even create the emancipatory potential of the fiction we engage with, rather than suffice it to say the literature, like life, is full of contradictions and paradoxes, and therefore we will not have it one way or the other, but merely take it as it is. In the words of

Samuel Beckett, we must try again, fail again, but fail better. A good first step, in my estimation, is to assume that literature maintains at least the potential for liberation and to seek avenues to apply that liberatory potential beyond the field of literary study.

In his influential study on poverty in the US, *The Other America* (1962), Michael Harrington wrote that “The poor can be described statistically; they can be analyzed as a group. But they need a novelist as well as a sociologist if we are to see them. They need an American Dickens to record the smell and texture and quality of their lives” (17). Not only do I agree with Harrington’s assessment of the important role literary authors play in shaping public perception, but I also believe that his act of invoking Dickens’ name here itself illustrates that, well over a century after *Oliver Twist* was published, the influence of Dickens’ writing remains relevant. Clearly, for Harrington at least, Dickens was still the gold standard of writing about the poor to add humanity to the depiction of their struggles. The continued effort to reinsert Dickens’ insights into conversations regarding the history of progressive literature and even to model his attempt to make visible the objective violence of society is paramount to fulfilling the radical potential of his literature but also to effect material changes in the lives of those who Dickens was writing about and for.

Even the ubiquity of the term “Dickensian” is evidence of the staying power Dickens’ influence has had on culture. Beyond the literal definition provided by the OED that Dickensian refers to things “related to. . . belonging to, or created by Charles Dickens,” the term is also used to describe “satirical observation of society” especially in contexts which are “evocative of poor social conditions” (“Dickensian” a2, a3). This latter definition is most interesting to me, as the author has become so popular in a particular genre with a particular thematic focus, that of social critique, that his name is now synonymous with such a critique. The association of the name

Dickens to popular literature and the social-problem novel are in no small part a major reason why I felt he needed to be included in this analysis, and why I wish to illustrate his role in establishing a foundation from which modern social novels can operate. If Dickens influenced the entire literary field of Victorian novelists, and Victorian Britain set the stage for the future of capitalism, then it follows that later novelists critiquing capitalism must work in the wake of Dickens' legacy. The assertion that "with Dickens, the English novel for the first time features a massive thematization of social discipline" (Miller, ix) places Dickens in a position of showing the Anglo-American novelist how one might go about critiquing a system which they are a part of, and which they may necessarily be implicated in. As Miller suggests, "The closed-circuit character of delinquency is, of course, a sign of Dickens's progressive attitude, his willingness to see coercive system where it was traditional only to see bad morals. Yet one should recognize how closing the circuit results in an 'outside' as well as an 'inside,'" (5) meaning that "Though the novel is plainly written as a humane attack on the institutions that help produce the delinquent milieu, the very terms of the attack strengthen the perception of delinquency that upholds the phenomenon" (4). I concur with Miller's assessment of the competing forces at play and the intrinsic contradictions of *Oliver Twist*; I simply disagree that the competing forces add up to a neutral or unintelligible influence. We cannot fall prey to the mushy conclusion that because a work, particularly a work of popular culture (that is to say, a work which is consumed en masse by a diverse and large audience), is fallible or contradictory that it does not still maintain revolutionary potential. Social change is only foreclosed when the audience decides it is, and therefore the only way to ensure that a popular work maintains no more emancipatory potential is to say so and act accordingly. Conversely, as long as literary enthusiasts (note, I do not restrict literary engagement to formal, academic study) maintain a belief that literature can

and has stimulated positive social change, it always maintains the ability to do so. Inspiration is not static and it is not inherent; it is a relationship between author and reader that is always subject to change. As long as we are talking about Dickens' work, he is influencing literature and culture, and if we discuss his work in terms of emancipation and progressive impacts, the terms will dictate the impact of the fiction.

CHAPTER 2 A DEFICIT IN CHARACTER BUT A CREDIT TO HIS CLASS: AUGUSTUS MELMOTTE EXPOSES THE OBJECTIVE VIOLENCE OF FAUX ECONOMIES IN *THE WAY WE LIVE NOW*

If Dickens articulated the objective violence inherent in capitalism from the perspective of the lower classes, then Trollope, in effect, did the same thing from the opposite vantage point. Each author shows concern and disgust for a society they view as increasingly diseased due to capitalist greed and corruption, but one chose to exemplify this by depicting the gritty reality of urban development and the poor whereas the latter depicted how moral rot infiltrated even the poshest social circles of Victorian society. According to Norman Russell in his influential book *The Novelist and Mammon* (1986), “Dickens and Trollope, writing twenty years apart, were responding to different stages of the same commercial stimulus,” (162) in effect comprising two sides of the same proverbial coin. In ways not entirely dissimilar to Dickens’ *Oliver Twist*, Trollope’s *The Way We Live Now* has been subject to a vast array of criticism, much of which charges it with being overly conservative in its portrayal of issues of class and race—such critiques are often rooted in commentary Trollope gives of his personal views in his autobiography, which critics then read into his novels. Rather than become mired in debating the false dichotomy of whether Trollope and his work are progressive or not, I begin by acknowledging that *TWWLN* is a complicated novel with frequent occurrences of mutually competing forces—these forces make it difficult, if not impossible, to accurately categorize the novel as either progressive or conservative in its depiction of class relations.

With that said, I argue that the novel does accomplish a number of significant achievements for the literary theorization of criminality under capitalism and makes at least three major contributions to the present study: first, Trollope’s mammoth text dedicates substantial

space to theorizing criminality, specifically Victorian criminality, as largely characterized by a subversion of classist social expectations rather than simply socially harmful and immoral behavior. That is to say, the foremost criminal of the novel, Augustus Melmotte, receives his harshest treatment *as a criminal* not when he engages in explicitly illegal or immoral behavior, but when he transgresses the social boundaries of etiquette and expects limitless access to credit, a privilege usually reserved for the peerage. Second, perhaps more than any Victorian social novel before it, *TWDLN* depicts upper- and middle-class characters as knowingly complicit in fraud rather than mere standers-by motivated by naive innocence. This constitutes a significant shift away from the more unaware bourgeois and aristocratic characters of Dickens' work. And third, Trollope extends the immoral corruption of capitalist expansion beyond the borders of Britain, illustrating the exported moral and economic influence of the British empire. Most importantly for this study, Trollope makes it clear that the problematic exploitation of credit and speculative greed in Victorian England is taken to even further extremes in the US where the regulations of Old World values (problematic though they may be) are not present to hinder the aggressive and corrupt expansion resultant from capitalist ambitions. Indeed, Trollope's social critique points to a major paradox of the novel—the skewed power dynamics upheld by the Victorian class structure and the titles that mark the aristocracy as exceptional disenfranchise the working-class on whom the wealth of the nation is built. However, attempting to move beyond the limits of class with the ascension of successful bourgeois merchants, bankers, and financiers (the most successful of which I will call “class infiltrators” due to their unwelcome status) creates a void of capital to back the credit that props up the faux economies¹⁸ of the novel. In

¹⁸ When I say “faux economies,” I mean those systematic exchanges of credit that are backed by inadequate capital. These faux economies arise most often in the novel when individuals trade on credit or IOUs and are backed by nothing more than the word and reputation of the man who issues the IOU. However, these become faux economies

point of fact, it is the lack of tangible or social capital to back credit, what I will call empty credit, that constitutes the major crisis and resulting criticism of the novel.

Marx articulates such a concern with money and capital exchanges in “The Critique of Capitalism” where he describes how “As a matter of history, capital, as opposed to landed property, invariably takes the form at first of money; it appears as moneyed wealth, as the capital of the merchant and of the userer” (329). Contrast this with the wealth of the landed aristocracy who maintain city homes and country estates, whose wealth is tangible and physically verifiable at all times. The trouble, for Trollope and for Marx, comes in the transition away from tangible capital and to increased reliance on intangible wealth. Marx describes how “The simplest form of the circulation of commodities is C—M—C, the transformation of commodities into money, and the change of money back again into commodities; or the selling in order to buy. . . . If I purchase 2,000 lbs. of cotton for £100, and resell the 2,000 lbs. of cotton for £110, I have, in fact, exchanged £100 for £110, money for money” (329-330). The trouble comes, of course, when speculators do away with the commodities altogether and financial transactions become limited to merely transferring money for more money. Such an arrangement eliminates the limitations of profit due to finite capital and offers limitless potential for profit. It is this transformation of modern capitalism and speculation that troubles Trollope, and it concerns him all the more so because access to credit (often empty credit) magnifies the exponentiality of such exchanges to unimaginable heights. In short, the novel engages an economy that is growing beyond the control of the aristocracy, who must replace the grounding of credit formerly backed by the land they owned, and now leaves a void. The fact that the US never had any aristocrats and was built on the myth of meritocracy only further exacerbates the degree to which this empty-credit economy

as soon as one’s credit is worthless. That is to say, chronic dishonesty make one’s word worthless and the tangible capital one possesses is outweighed, often severely, by the credit against one’s capital.

is ripe for exploitation across the Atlantic. For this chapter, however, my focus remains on Trollope and the three contributions identified above.

Engaging these three contributions each in turn, I argue that Trollope's *TWWLN* constitutes a major turning point for the Anglo-American social-problem novel and clearly marks the transition from a period in history when London was the economic hub of the global economy to its usurpation by the US (and New York, specifically) in the decades to follow. Ironically, though modern capitalism was born in Britain, the lingering effects of a social structure built on titles of nobility still tied exchanges of capital to the social capital built into the old structure. Because of this, a limit of finitude continued to exist in England in a way that America never experienced. In a sense, the move away from an economy built on the social and economic capital of the landed aristocracy was like a move away from the gold standard: without it, there seemed to be nothing tangible determining or limiting the value of money. Looking to the representative anxieties of Trollope's novel helps us to better understand the transition from the nineteenth to the early-twentieth century, which in turn will articulate why my concern with criminal capitalists logically shifts to American representations in the chapters to follow.

Social Capital and the Importance of Origins

At its core, the story of Augustus Melmotte's meteoric rise and fall is one of origins, or lack thereof. Throughout the novel, Trollope illustrates the Victorian preoccupation with a character's heritage and the origins of wealth. This obsession with origins, more than a mere literary excuse to excavate information about the characters, represents Victorian anxieties concerning wealth and social mobility—as the old guard maintained a persistent distrust of new money, they simultaneously, and necessarily, yielded to its influence to maintain a dominant social position. The selling out of the nobility's social capital is prevalent throughout the

narrative, as everyone from a mere baron (i.e., Sir Felix) to more socially elite dukes (i.e., Lords Alfred and Nidderdale) are regularly engaged in business transactions with Melmotte, even serving as members of the board for his fraudulent railway company. Trollope was not the first author, nor the last, to recognize Victorian anxieties with social mobility and class conflict emerging between new money and old money,¹⁹ but his novel does a particularly good job of establishing just how interconnected and conflictual these anxieties really were. On the one hand, the landed aristocracy had maintained the dominant social position for centuries, owning land, controlling government, and collecting rent produced by the labor of the working class residing on their property. On the other hand, newly emergent economies of international trade and technological development in factory production created a new class of wealth that infiltrated the upper-echelons of society and seemed to be prying not only wealth but social power away from the more historically established old-money families of England. As such, it was not uncommon for old-money families in financial need to find their old-order values at odds with the more immediate financial gains to be had by dealing with the ambitious capitalist ventures and new-money lenders that recently appeared on the Victorian scene. Trollope perceived this social circumstance as one of significant decline for Britain and, as a result, constructed *TWDLN* as a scathing denunciation of the moral corruption he thought increased reliance on credit and aggressive economic expansion brought to Britain. Worse yet, increased reliance on credit-based economies without the grounding in landed wealth pushed the British economy toward the money-for-money exchanges that Marx warned against. The cost of doing business with financiers like Melmotte is trading commodities (i.e., tangible wealth) for a supposedly

¹⁹ Dickens, for example, illustrates this anxiety in *Our Mutual Friend* (1865) when he writes, “traffic in Shares is the one thing to have to do with in this world. Have no antecedents, no established character, no cultivation, no ideas, no manners; have Shares. . . Where does he come from? Shares. Where is he going to? Shares. . . Sufficient answer to all; Shares” (118).

profitable amount of money or credit (i.e., intangible wealth). The easiest examples of this are the numerous properties Melmotte “buys” without ever actually paying for them, all on the assumption that he will eventually, and can, pay a good price for them. In Trollope’s eyes, Victorians were selling the soul of the nation for quick profits. In doing so, Victorians managed to diminish the value of old moral codes to the degree that being a fraud or a criminal would no longer be condemnable, but indeed cause for admiration. If one could only achieve enough financial gain as a result of one’s misdeeds, there was almost no limit to the heights one was allowed to ascend. “Almost” is the operative word here, as Britain wouldn’t allow infinite success in the way we can see in twentieth-century American literature. For the English, you can buy your way up the social ladder, but one must maintain awareness of class origins, lest one be harshly reminded where one belongs.²⁰ Such is the story of Augustus Melmotte.

The role of the financial villain, as some scholars have called him, has been explored in a variety of ways. Tamara Wagner argues that “The exposure of the most celebrated fictional swindlers in Victorian fiction symptomatically hinges on their indeterminacy” and “by carefully distinguishing between trustworthy investors and speculating swindlers, fiction absorbed the changing revaluations of financial speculation to provide manuals for responsible behavior in a rapidly evolving economy” (“Speculators at Home” 24). Though Wagner and I agree that indeterminacy is integral to the creation of the class infiltrator, I contend that she may place too

²⁰ Referring to James Lawrence’s *On the Nobility of British Gentry* (1825), the distinction between the peerage and nobility is essential here, as one could attain a title of nobility (i.e., baron), but one could not achieve the status of peer without having at least four consecutive ancestors of gentility on both the maternal and paternal sides of the family tree (38). In this way, “gentility is superior to nobility; nobility may be acquired: noblemen may be only persons of rank and distinction; but gentlemen must be persons of family and quality” (2-3). For comparative purposes, it was estimated in 1798 that England had approximately 10,000 families “entitled to bear arms” (i.e., noble families), but only around 300 peers (2). In Trollope’s view, the denigration of Britain is largely the result of blurring the boundaries long established by the distinctions of nobility (i.e., gentry; noblemen), gentility (i.e., gentlemen; peerage), and the successful bourgeoisie. In effect, Melmotte confusing the rights of peerage (which he could never access) with the benefits of nobility (which were attainable) is the crime that Trollope cannot allow to go unpunished, as it is the original sin that will yield degradation of Britain.

much emphasis on the role of what she calls the financial villain. If fiction does intend to “provide manuals for responsible behavior,” then it must necessarily do so with characters other than the “stock-market villain.” That is to say, a villain is most useful to illustrate how *not* to act, whereas the function of sympathetic characters is to offer an alternative to socially irresponsible behavior. A swindling Melmotte may prove more narratively intriguing, but the novel makes clear that Roger Carbury and, to a lesser degree, Paul Montague are the models for appropriate behavior.

I argue that *TWWLN*, in particular, does an especially good job of depicting the so-called financial villain as an ideological red herring who distracts society from the real issue, which is the systematic exploitation of greed, credit, and materialism. Melmotte says it best when he attempts to solicit Paul Montague’s complicity in the fraudulent Mexican Railway scheme claiming that “unanimity is the very soul of these things” (I 381). Though substantial scholarship may be, I argue, overly concerned with the role of a particular character or character-type in financial fiction, I support Wagner’s argument that “An enlarged spectrum of crime engendered in new [financial] plots, [created] new opportunities for heroism and failure: a new cultural imaginary” (23). I would simply add that Melmotte’s crimes are not the only crimes being committed, and that the excessive attention paid to the obvious crime of forgery diminishes the much more socially harmful crimes of faux economies conducting business as usual.²¹ These faux economies come in many forms ranging from the gambling exchanges of worthless paper at

²¹ As a periphery note, the novel begins not with Melmotte but with an introduction to Lady Carbury who is attempting to sell her newly written book, *Criminal Queens*. Though a seemingly minor detail, the fact that Trollope had intended *TWWLN* to feature the Carburys more centrally suggests that the theme of upper-class criminality was, at least initially, a major concern of the novel. The book’s title begs the question, if criminality is defined by actions which may be punished by law, is it not oxymoronic to label a queen a criminal? Who can punish a queen in a monarchy besides the king, and if one cannot be punished, can one be accurately described as a criminal? Trollope ultimately moves away from Lady Carbury as the central character, but her contributions to the thematic concerns of the text still linger.

social clubs (i.e., the Beargarden) to the financial sleights-of-hand performed by Melmotte as he buys and sells entire estates and companies without ever actually paying for anything. Perhaps no one would argue for Melmotte's moral virtue, but at least to the reader he is relatively transparent about his unapologetic application of business logic. By comparison, the absolute commitment to self-deception and willful ignorance on the part of the aristocracy and bourgeoisie in the novel is much more concerning and difficult to eradicate as a social ill. In the same way that the gambling and debauchery of the Beargarden is artificially propped up by the reliance on the faux economy of empty credit exchanges, so could the entire world of high finance not operate as it does without innumerable accomplices, both knowing and unknowing, to construct and maintain Melmotte's Ponzi scheme. Indeed, after Melmotte's demise, "Very many men started up with huge claims, asserting that they had been robbed" but "it was hard to ascertain who had been robbed, or who had simply been unsuccessful in their attempts to rob others" (II 400). The difficulty in distinguishing between these two possibilities illustrates how near they are to one another.

According to Wagner, "Whenever fictional financiers turned out to be criminals, they could be expunged from the system and. . . exposed as intruders," (24) seeming to be "exceptions to a general rule of reliable transactions" (Poovey 3). I agree that the text may, on the surface, allow characters such as Melmotte to appear as an aberration of capitalism, or an exception to the rule. However, the novel also clearly reveals the willful participation of the other characters. If Melmotte were indeed the exception, then his existence wouldn't require the unanimous participation of all of society (or at least those at the top of the social hierarchy) in order to maintain both his wealth and his charlatanism—indeed, he could only become the greatest

swindler London has ever seen if London society was willing to bet that they could profit from his illegitimate business.

Melmotte's earliest introduction is one primed with ambiguity and mystery. He is apparently aware of the importance of the social capital that comes with being English, as "he had declared of himself that he had been born in England, and that he was an Englishman. . . [and] spoke his 'native' language fluently, but with an accent which betrayed at least a long expatriation" (I 30). The general consensus accepts it as "an established fact that Mr. Melmotte had made his wealth in France" (I 30), though the means and circumstances of that wealth are less than forthcoming. Some suspect "Melmotte had got his first money with his wife, and had gotten it not very long ago. . . Altogether the mystery was rather pleasant as the money was certain. Of the certainty of the money in daily use there could be no doubt" (I 33), at any rate.

This mysterious introduction of Melmotte illustrates the mix of fascination and distrust that accompanies new wealth and uncertain origins of social status as well as wealth. Trollope also makes it apparent how often signifiers of wealth, or the appearance of financial stability, is conflated with the reality of being wealthy. Indeed,

There was the house. There was the furniture. There were carriages, the horses, the servants with the livery coats and the powdered heads. There were the gems, and the presents and all the nice things that money can buy. . . The tradesmen had learned enough to be quite free of doubt, and in the City (sic) Mr. Melmotte's name was worth *any* money,—though his character was perhaps worth but little. (I 33-34; italics mine)

The explosion of access to credit during the latter portion of the nineteenth century is of particular concern to Trollope and undergirds much of the success, and eventual failure, of Melmotte. The magic of his wealth was that "He could make or mar any company by buying or selling stock, and could make money dear or cheap as he pleased. . . but it was also said that he was regarded in Paris as the most gigantic swindler that had ever lived. . . British freedom would

alone allow him to enjoy, without persecution, the fruits of his industry” (I 31).²² Melmotte embodies everything seductive but also concerning about the nature of high finance in the Victorian era. He manipulates the perception of value and seemingly creates his wealth out of thin air, and he does so at a rapid pace. The allure of fast money proves too enticing for the Victorians to resist, hence his begrudging admittance into high society, and yet, their Victorian sensibilities instill a lingering distrust of anyone whose origins they do not know and whose wealth they cannot trace to its source. In classic con-artist fashion, Melmotte provides vague answers to these questions (i.e., he made his wealth in France, he was born an Englishman), but never produces actual proof as to the legitimacy of his claims. Yet the appearance of substantial wealth alleviates the necessity of such proof. The most salient point, however, is not that Melmotte successfully swindles his Victorian compatriots—it is that these kinds of schemes have wide-spanning negative impacts on society, the violence of which is difficult to sensationalize or quantify but has very real consequences, nonetheless. This chapter argues that the objective violence caused by the reliance on empty credit in high finance is the truly troubling crime of the novel, not the individual forgery that precipitates Melmotte’s eventual downfall.

Contrary to the relatively straight-forward reading of Melmotte as a run-of-the-mill financial villain, I argue that his major function in the novel is to serve as the kingpin of capital exchange, and I illustrate the dependence of late-Victorian economies on fraudulent business and empty credit. As opposed to the traditional depiction of criminals as anti-social outliers, Melmotte is thrust to the center of the narrative, to a degree even against the will of the author²³

²² One might reasonably wonder why the US does not also provide the necessary “freedom” to enjoy the “fruits of his industry,” but it is made clear later in the novel, albeit vaguely, that Melmotte has already been there and seemingly tapped that market to the greatest degree possible before moving on (or escaping) to Europe.

²³ Trollope’s original intention was for the novel to be more about the Carbury family, with Lady Carbury as the main character of the story. Remnants of this original intent still remain, as the novel opens and closes with the Carbury family.

and the character himself, and becomes the foremost representative of the faux economy (i.e., Ponzi scheme) that drives not only the economy of the novel, but the plot as well. J. Jeffrey Franklin makes a similar argument in his article, “Anthony Trollope Meets Pierre Bourdieu: The Conversion of Capital as Plot in the Mid-Victorian English Novel.” Franklin focuses on Trollope’s *The Last Chronicle of Barset* (1867) as the focus of his analysis, but forwards a similar claim that Trollope’s literary work (in his case *The Last Chronicle*, in mine *TWWLN*) represents a fascination in mid-Victorian novels with exchanges of capital, and therefore that we can employ Bourdieu’s theorization of the various forms of capital and their exchangeability to demystify the novels that are constructed around such economies of exchange. Franklin asserts that “Generations of critics have noted that almost every relationship between characters [in mid-Victorian novels] comes with a pound sign attached” (501). This seems corroborated by the discussion of Marie Melmotte throughout *TWWLN*, as it is said that Melmotte “could give a very large fortune indeed” to “any one marrying [Marie] during the present season of his outrageous prosperity” (I 19-20). The language is significant here as it marks an important shift in the role of women in these exchange economies. It is, of course, nothing new in Britain at this time for a woman to be bartered or gifted in a marriage arrangement. However, the reference to the “present season of [Melmotte’s] outrageous prosperity” emphasizes the transient and volatile fluctuations associated with Melmotte’s success and Marie’s inversely correlated price that marrying her would obtain. The emphasis on timing, speculation, and price fluctuation mirror the increasingly volatile and speculative nature of the larger Victorian economy, which has moved away from tangible methods of valuation and become increasingly dependent on speculation of asset appreciation as a means of determining value. Because Marie’s value is linked to the indeterminate and volatile wealth, or perceived wealth, of her father, her exchange value is both

uncertain and a speculative gamble to be undertaken only by suitors awash in social capital (i.e., titles of nobility) but desperately lacking economic capital. Nevertheless, like any early-stage speculative venture, the potential payoff could be very profitable indeed.

Aware of the prospective payoff, Sir Felix Carbury describes his attempted wooing of Marie as a “risky sort of game” (I 23), which lends itself well to his enthusiasm for high-stakes gambling. Indeed, throughout the entirety of the first book and much of the second, Marie is relegated to the position of a commodity Melmotte will trade for prestige and the social capital that comes with having a title. Almost immediately upon the Melmottes’ arrival in England, Marie was put on the market in search of title and social capital:

Lord Nidderdale, the eldest son of the Marquis of Auld Reekie, had offered to take the girl and make her Marchioness in the process of time for half a million down. Melmotte had not objected to the sum,—so it was said,—but had proposed to tie it up. Melmotte had been anxious to secure the Marquis,—very anxious to secure the Marchioness; but at last he had lost his temper, and had asked his lordship’s lawyer whether it was likely that he would entrust such a sum of money to such a man. ‘You are willing to trust your only child to him,’ said the lawyer. . . So that affair was over. . .

Others had tried and had broken down somewhat in the same fashion. Each had treated the girl as an encumbrance he was to undertake,—at a very great price. But as affairs prospered with the Melmottes, as princes and duchesses were obtained by other means, —costly no doubt, but not so ruinously costly,—the immediate disposition of Marie become less necessary, and Melmotte reduced his offers. (I 32-33)

It is evident that Marie is simply another commodity to be traded by her father, and that, for all his faults, he is always keenly aware of the relative value of the commodities at his disposal. The fluctuations in Marie’s apparent exchange value mirrors the uncertainty in the exchange markets, most evidently seen in the change of share prices in the Mexican Railway. Importantly, the dependence of this exchange economy on credit allows Melmotte to swindle London and exploit his daughter in search of profit realized in the form of social capital. Both of these outcomes constitute the objective violence resulting from such an economy, but it is important to realize

that such violence is not solely dependent on Melmotte to occur. He is merely the best at exploiting this speculative and credit-driven market at the current moment.

Upon arrival in London, Melmotte apparently has access to substantial economic capital but lacks the weight provided by social capital that will solidify his position in London society and provide the limitless access to credit he sees as the key to solidifying his success. As such, he engages in bargaining his daughter and a substantial dowry (economic capital) in exchange for the title and family history (social capital) that is reserved for the aristocracy and their well-documented heritage and wealth. This approach to marriage and dowry exchange is a far cry from the gift exchange economy that formerly governed these arrangements as described in Marcel Mauss' *The Gift* (1925). Mauss claims that “we have seen how far [the historical] economy of gift-exchange was from entering into the framework of the so-called natural economy, of utilitarianism” (185), and it is this cold, utilitarian logic that governs the rules of exchange (and marriage) for Melmotte. It is clear from the confusion of Lord Nidderdale's lawyer that the Victorians may still be under the illusion that the marriage arrangements are engaged in accordance to the old rules of gift exchange, but Melmotte knows this is a business transaction like any other—his heightened awareness that the times have changed is what sets him apart from the other characters, it is what allows him to excel, and it is ultimately why he grows to the point of unsustainability.

Franklin argues that “exchanges of capital are not only thematically significant but actually constitute the plot structure of [Trollope's novels]” and, furthermore, that “critical arguments that continue to posit. . . a separation in the nineteenth century of the domains of the novel and of political economy. . . reproduces the Victorian notion of ‘separate spheres’ and underestimates the cultural work of mid-Victorian novels” (502). In line with Franklin's position,

I agree that a major contribution of Trollope's work, and *TWFLN* in particular, is the splicing together of political economy and literary work in the novel to articulate the nature of capital exchange in the mid-to-late nineteenth century. Whereas earlier Victorian authors may have positioned characters endowed with special knowledge regarding political economy as decidedly and obviously antagonistic to the virtues of the novel, Trollope takes a much more convoluted approach, oscillating between demeaning description and begrudgingly admiring characterizations of Melmotte—Trollope instead expands the critique to Victorian society at large, rather than identify one outlier as the source of all evil. Although Trollope describes Melmotte's "countenance and appearance" as "on the whole unpleasant, and. . . untrustworthy," he also acknowledges Melmotte had "a wonderful look of power about his mouth and chin [and] [t]his was so strong as to redeem his face from vulgarity" (I 31). Contrast this with the description of Sir Felix who "was beautiful to look at, ready-witted, and intelligent. . . with that soft olive complexion which so generally gives to young men an appearance of aristocratic breeding" despite his obvious shortcomings of being "not very trustworthy" (I 15) and "becom[ing] a burden on his mother so heavy,—and his sister also,—that their life had become one of unavoidable embarrassments" (I 15). For Trollope, Melmotte may be a "vulgar" class infiltrator, but at least he came by his dishonest money through his own efforts, whereas the lazy nobility exemplified in the highest order by Sir Felix and his friends, content themselves to be mere leeches on their families in the hopes of benefitting from the ill-gotten gains of the likes of Melmotte through various financial schemes and leveraging their good names for capital exchange. Young Lord Nidderdale even acknowledges to Dolly Longstaffe that "You and I are bad enough" but goes on to say, "I don't think we're so heartless as Carbury" (II 434). Dolly complies with this assessment, admitting "Of course he's a bad fellow," but then follows up with

“Most fellows are bad in one way or another” (II 436). The fact that both young aristocrats confess their own complicity in a flawed system they continue to benefit from illustrates Trollope’s desire for readers to realize this understated flaw in the class hierarchy poses much more risk of social harm than the existence of a man like Melmotte. The exchange also allows Trollope to emphasize the problematic complicity of the peerage in cheapening Britain while still distinguishing their begrudging participation with the decidedly worse actions of gentry like Sir Felix. Lord Nidderdale may have gotten pushed into dealing with Melmotte, but he at least conducted himself in the manner of a gentleman, as opposed to the much more “heartless” conduct of Sir Felix. In this way, Trollope not only insists on showing the political economy and social activities that comprise most financial-novel plots as mutually dependent, but articulates his moral disgust as more deserved by the likes of Sir Felix, who is guilty of selling out the soul of Britain for immediate self-gain, than Melmotte, who is merely a symptom of the disease. Stated another way, the financial social-problem novel runs the risk of oversimplifying and misdirecting its social critique by implying, or stating explicitly, that it is the outliers and social deviants who are to blame, not the economic system itself. However, as Trollope makes evident, an individual is not responsible for all the social violence empty credit and selfish pursuit of profit will yield—they are merely the easiest culprits to point to. In the same way that it would be a misreading of Dickens’ *Oliver Twist* to assume criminals like Sikes and Fagin are the social problem that needs fixing, so would readers be remiss to confuse Trollope’s warning of the violence in empty credit exchanges and reckless speculation for a mere indictment of materialism and financial gullibility.

Faux Economies and Empty Credit

The economies of exchange in the novel find further opportunity for exploration in the Beargarden, the social club and gambling room where Sir Felix and his friends spend the majority of their free time, not to mention their families' money and credit. As has been noted in a plethora of critical work, the Victorians were well aware of the significant parallels between the marriage market, speculation in the stock market, and traditional gambling. These parallels were cause for anxiety to many Victorians, including Trollope, and therefore occupy a substantial amount of the novel's content. In her article "Trollope and the Stock Market: Irrational Exuberance and *The Prime Minister*," Audrey Jaffe argues that the connection "between money and the heart" (46) is one that "financial narratives from the Victorian period to the present have spelled out" (46) with long-standing persistence. Specifically, Jaffe claims that "Trollope's *The Prime Minister* (1876) might be said to present an uncontroversial understanding of the way this connection works: one can read a man's character, the novel has it, in the way he manages his money" (46). Naturally, this method of evaluating character extends to how such a character manages his relationships and his credit as well. All three of these are tied up in the web of exchange economies in *TWWLN*.

The Beargarden, for example, is a place where capital exchanges take place on a regular basis as a matter of business, and the economy is backed by nothing but the social capital of the families to whom the young men belong. The problem, of course, is the reliance on outdated rules of conduct and the unacknowledged depletion of economic capital to justify one's credit. Historically, well-established families had land and estates, they had verifiable incomes, and they had a reputation. In the current state of things, the young men continue to trade on credit, but the land, wealth, and good reputations on which that credit was originally extended has now been depleted (in the case of some, entirely eliminated except for the title). The fact that numerous

scenes depict Lords Grasslough and Nidderdale playing cards with Sir Felix and the untitled Paul Montague (not to mention the American Mr. Fisker) illustrates just how degraded and seemingly meaningless the titles and social distinctions of the past have become, along with nearly all notions of propriety and conduct (though the young Lords do occasionally show aversion to “behaving badly”) (I 93). Whereas most respectable clubs “require ready money” (I 23) as a matter of course, the Beargarden is willing to bend the rules:

With the express view of combining parsimony with profligacy. . . This club was not to be opened till three o’clock in the afternoon, before which hour the promoters of the Beargarden thought it improbable that they and their fellows would want a club. There were to be no morning papers taken, no library, no morning-room. Dining-rooms, billiard-rooms, and card-rooms would suffice for the Beargarden. . . Herr Vossner, the purveyor. . . would assist even in smoothing little difficulties as to the settling of card accounts, and had behaved with the greatest tenderness to the drawers of cheques whose bankers had harshly declared them to have ‘no effects.’ (I 24)

Were this description applied to a gathering place of lower-class men, it would likely be called a gambling den. But because the men who belong to the Beargarden come from established families who maintain substantial social capital, it is merely another club for so-called gentlemen, albeit one that operates solely on the vices of such an establishment without “a vestige of propriety, or any beastly rules to be kept” (II 431). It is evident that in this context, class standing dictates moral and social acceptability. More than a mere jab at the young aristocrats, this point is exactly the core of this dissertation chapter and Trollope’s novel as a whole: with sufficient capital, whether it be economic or social, one can essentially pay for misdeeds without further recourse. Worse yet, the increasing reliance on empty credit magnifies the social harm that can result from such exchanges as the bill eventually comes due and somebody must pay for it. Unfortunately, the Victorians are experiencing the results of operating on a new economy but playing by the old rules, which make the peerage (though not necessarily the gentry) beyond reproach. Melmotte realizes this and attempts to leverage his economic

capital to acquire the much more stable social capital that comes with a title in Victorian England and therefore potentially limitless access to credit. Though the Beargarden scamps can't manage money at even the most rudimentary level, the accounts of social capital seem to be beyond reproach or risk of overdrawing for the likes of Lords Nidderdale and Grasslough. When they all lose money to Mr. Fisker, for example, Herr Vosner "[writes] a cheque for the amount due by the lords," (I 93) but cannot (or will not) pay the balance for the other members. The truly concerning aspect of this state of affairs, however, is not that young wealthy men can't pay their bills, but that somebody of lesser means and privilege will likely have to flip the bill or take a loss. Therein lies the conundrum: in an economy built on empty credit, the deficit must be made up at some point, and this disproportionately falls on the backs of those with fewer means and who bear less responsibility for the actions that led to the deficit in the first place. In short, the unmitigated social violence committed by these men, not their susceptibility to ill-advised gambling losses, is what is at stake for the Victorians.

Nevertheless, the lack of economic acumen still resides at the root of much of the aristocracy's problems, as their inability to manage funds, exemplified most strongly in the Beargarden, necessitates them selling (or perhaps lending) their social capital to the likes of Melmotte. The reference to the cheques of "no effects," is merely the tip of the iceberg regarding the issue of credit at the Beargarden. Though Sir Felix and his friends seem to continually be engaged in relatively high-stakes gambling throughout the novel, "very little ready money had passed hands,—very little in proportion to the sums which had been written down on paper" (I 91) in the form of I.O.U.s. And "When I.O.U.'s have for some time passed freely in such a company as that now assembled the sudden introduction of a stranger is very disagreeable" (I 91). This description of the running card game describes the Englishmen's aversion to having the

American Mr. Fisk join their game, but it could just as easily apply to London's general feeling about Mr. Melmotte's arrival (that is, unless Melmotte provides the much needed "ready money" to the local economy). The British economy, particularly at the local level, has become so ingrained with the ledgers of social capital that the aristocracy no longer see the necessity of carrying tangible capital at all, and they seem content to merely trade back and forth on reputation most of the time. Indeed, even when Sir Felix wins and finally has ready money at his disposal, "He never for a moment thought of paying his bills" (I 28). Sir Felix is not alone in this tendency, as his friend Dolly Longstaffe admits openly that he owns five horses but hasn't "paid for any of [them he's] bought this season" (I 26). Trollope shows the reader just how deeply the vice of credit runs in English society, particularly for the upper class, and clearly indicates that the younger generation's willingness to exploit this credit to infinite lengths lies at the heart of what is wrong with their exchange economies without tangible evidence of value.²⁴ It seems they are operating on an honor code where there is no honor, which is of particular concern to Trollope who claims that "the Beargarden followed the world at large" (I 229). The fact that the young men of the Beargarden are rich in social capital but terrible in handling such capital, as well as economic and cultural capital, tells us everything we need to know about their character—namely, that they are operating at a significant deficit. Furthermore, blurring the line between credit and capital may serve the upper-class's needs, but it also presents exponentially more opportunity for fraud and the social harm that follows in its wake. This is evident throughout the narrative as the Mexican Railway's success is predicated on no one knowing

²⁴ It is this very same vice that leads to Melmotte's downfall, as he spreads himself too thin with credit and goes bankrupt as a result. This is especially important as Melmotte's fatal flaw might have seemed to be lack of access to credit, but his true sin was forgetting his place (i.e., social-class position). Young aristocrats are beyond bankruptcy as their credit is seemingly endless, but for the working people of the world, overdrawing one's credit becomes a crime punishable by financial ruin, and in Melmotte's case, death.

precisely how the shares are being priced, therefore allowing any number to seem potentially reasonable and any gains to be seen as success. Even after Melmotte's demise, Fisker considers how "In truth the greater the confusion in the London office [regarding the fate of the railway], the better. . . were the prospects of the Company at San Francisco" (II 400). The British scoundrels may have begun the financial shell game to swindle their investors, but the Americans were going to perfect it.

Notably, all the same men who share the card table at the Beargarden are the potential suitors for Marie Melmotte. The nonchalance with which all these young men treat gambling at the card table carries over into their ability to manage their financial lives, which in turn informs their romantic pursuits. Sir Felix, for example, knows "It was now his business to marry an heiress" due to his complete inability to preserve his own inheritance, and had "already failed with one young lady reputed to have £40,000" (I 19). But, in the same way he would simply shuffle up, deal again, and play another hand at cards, Sir Felix immediately redirects his attention to Marie Melmotte in the hopes that this time he has better luck. Keeping in form with his usual social circle, Sir Felix is competing with the familiar characters, Lords Nidderdale and Grasslough, for Marie's affections between bouts at the card table with a similar degree of enthusiasm and effort.²⁵ In contrast to the aversion the young aristocrats have regarding Mr. Fisker joining their card game on account of his winning and requiring ready money as payment, Melmotte produces the opposite effect: "If it could be arranged that the stranger should certainly lose, no doubt then he would be regarded as a godsend" (I 91). Melmotte has no intention of losing anything, but he does arrive as the bearer of economic capital, which the young

²⁵ The fact that Lords Nidderdale and Grasslough, both members of the peerage, lower themselves to competing with the likes of Sir Felix, a particularly unimpressive member of the gentry without land, money, or personal accomplishment, shows just how far the peerage has fallen in Trollope's view.

aristocrats, and even many of the older ones, find in very short supply as of late. The social capital attached to all the aristocrats of London is for sale, and the game is merely to determine at what price Melmotte will be able to acquire that social capital. The casualties of Melmotte's schemes and the aristocrats' irresponsibility, however, extend far beyond those immoral actors. Ruby Ruggles is jilted and nearly driven to homelessness as a result of Felix's selfishness, John Crumb spends a night in jail when he punishes Felix for his mistreatment of Ruby, and the honest banker Mr. Brehgert takes a substantial loss having loaned money to Melmotte for his ball. These are just a few notable examples that exemplify just how far the web extends to implicate Victorian society into the consequences of irresponsible finance, but even more concerning is the fact that no one from the lower class is even considered in this equation, though they undoubtedly experience negative fallout as well. For such considerations, we will have to wait until chapter three.

Importantly, the fraudulent nature of the novel's exchange economy, which centers on the Ponzi scheme railway, is not presented as a neutral observation in the text. Rather, it forwards a direct indictment of the middle and upper class for their complicity with immorality for the sake of capital exchange and potential financial gain. In his autobiography, Trollope describes how *TWWLN* was written in response to his concern with

a certain class of dishonesty, dishonesty magnificent in its proportions, and climbing into high places, [that] has become at the same time so rampant and so splendid that there seems to be reason for fearing that men and women will be taught to feel that dishonesty, *if it can become splendid, will cease to be abominable*. If dishonesty can live in a gorgeous palace with pictures on all its walls, and gems in all its cupboards, with marble and ivory in all its corners, and can give Apician dinners, and get into Parliament,²⁶ and deal in millions, then

²⁶ Importantly, in the past only men with titles of nobility could be in parliament. The inclusion of class transcenders indicates the changing of the times and also creates new motivation for schemes formerly unattainable. That is to say, buying one's way into politics hasn't always been a historical possibility, and with the newfound opportunity to

dishonesty is not disgraceful, and the man dishonest after such a fashion is not a low scoundrel. . . And as I had ventured to take the whip of the satirist into my hand, I went beyond the iniquities of the great speculator who robs everybody, and made an onslaught also on other vices. (227; italics mine)

There are two aspects of Trollope's self-assessment I find especially pertinent to the present study: first is the awareness that scale has a direct impact on the reception of certain behaviors by society, and second is Trollope's desire to escape the easy scapegoating of the speculator while ignoring the role the rest of society plays in his crimes. The great speculator may "ro[b] everybody," but in the words of Melmotte himself, "unanimity is the very soul of these things" (I 381). This perspective is reiterated by a number of characters throughout the novel in myriad ways. As Lord Nidderdale (the elder) claims, "There's nothing like being a robber, if you can only rob enough" (I 299). The American Mrs. Hurtle expresses similar sentiments to Paul Montague when she claims that "[Melmotte] is bold in breaking those precepts of yours about coveting worldly wealth. . . [He] is a man who boldly says that he recognises no such law; that wealth is power, and that power is good, and that the more a man has of wealth the greater and the stronger and the nobler can he be," for "commerce is not noble unless it rises to great heights" (I 246). Indeed, the only character who seems resistant to the siren song of mammon is Roger Carbury, who, though honest and respectable, tends to relegate himself to the margins of the novel by staying out of the action and in his country estate—his gentry status also positions him as one of those who "had always held up their heads. . . [but] never very high" (I 47). Such temperance was not expected from the upper-class but clearly exemplified the moderation Trollope saw as paramount to saving the dignity of Britain.

gain such power for those who don't already have it comes the newfound risk of charlatans exceeding to a rank that allows their charlatanism to go unpunished. This conundrum of immoral finance paying for legal tolerance will become a major theme in *The Jungle*, analyzed in chapter three.

The complicity with which Victorian society simply ignores Melmotte's suspected misdeeds is enough to condemn them as immoral in itself, but Trollope makes the critique all the more blunt by inserting the language of criminality throughout the novel. Melmotte is not simply "vulgar," he is also a "swindler" and a suspected "thief." He is also, by the end of the novel, a known forger. However, as already stated, I argue that the obviously criminal actions of Melmotte are substantially less insightful or significant than the redirection of the readerly gaze to the systemic and increasingly legitimized ways of doing business in Victorian society, which Trollope wishes to critique. Francis O'Gorman makes a similar case in "Is Trollope's *The Way We Live Now* (1875) About the 'Commercial Profligacy of the Age'?" Here O'Gorman contends that

representing Melmotte's business as criminal allowed the novelist to ask readers for moral judgments that were not very effortful. . . . But it also acts as a diversion from capitalism's far harder question. For what is really demanding is assessing the morality of legal business. What is really tough is to decide between what is right and what is merely lawful in the acquisition of money. (763)

I agree with O'Gorman as to the importance of addressing these questions but argue that Melmotte's representation does not eliminate the possibility of answering them. In line with O'Gorman, one of the major aims of this study is to engage "the ethics of legal capitalism" as a "complicated subject even as it is also one of the most important political topics of the last two centuries" (763), but I disagree that "Trollope declines to tackle it" (763). Rather, I argue that the criminality of Melmotte allows for the forging of the necessary links to implicate the supposedly "legitimate" and legal business of the upper classes with the illegal actions so often condemned in criminal fiction. Dickens leveraged Fagin and Dodger's relationship to Oliver to uncover the mutual influence of Victorian culture and Victorian crime, but Trollope approaches this symbiotic relationship from the other side of the social spectrum. Rather than depicting a lower-class common thief as the result of Victorian disenfranchisement of the poor, *TWWLN* illustrates

the unanimous complicity of Victorians with the very same crimes they condemn the poor for committing but treat as laudable and legal as long as those crimes reach sufficiently high heights.

To say Trollope ignores the greater crimes inherent in capitalism is to entirely ignore the plethora of social interactions and direct commentary that inextricably tie the rest of the characters to Melmotte's crimes. Indeed, though he is often described as a criminal, no actual policing or criminal punishments ever befall Melmotte. He arrives in high-society fashion, wheels-and-deals his way into parliament, and then kills himself when his lack of credit appears to make him insolvent. Contrasted with the likes of characters like Bill Sikes, who was hung in a particularly sensationalist manner against his will, or Fagin who was hung in the traditional way, it is still easier to see Melmotte as closer to Mr. Fisker and the gentry in the Beargarden than those earlier depictions of criminals. Whereas Sikes and Fagin were punished for being poor criminals (and behaving as such), Melmotte was a celebrated rich criminal until society began to doubt his wealth. Despite successfully managing to acquire substantial economic and social capital, he was ultimately punished not for his criminality but for forgetting his class origins and mistakenly believing he had access to the same credit that an upper-class character would have had. His crime, in short, was one of poor accounting; he simply thought he maintained more social capital than he did, and for that, he was relegated to the narrative fate of many criminals, Sikes and Fagin among them. But again, the important concern is not Melmotte's criminality but the fact that his class transcendence implicates the upper class as accomplices in those same crimes. Trollope's critique acquires its teeth when it suggests that lower-class crime and upper-class immorality often result in the same thing, and therefore the upper-class bad actors should be perceived and treated as such. This bears a distinctly different perspective than the likes of Dickens who showed an upper-class person could be criminal (i.e., Monks), whereas Trollope

makes a more concerted and significant effort to implicate a wide-array of characters who are not obviously criminal but still act as accomplices in the crimes responsible for so much systemic violence. Though none of the characters face actual legal repercussions (even Melmotte commits suicide before he is arrested), *TWWLN* clearly argues that the irresponsible actions of speculators and empty credit exchanges cannot proceed unchecked, lest the rest of society continue to bear the burden of the deficits run up by the greedy monied classes.

Victorians on Trial

One could go so far as to treat the novel as a legal document itself, or perhaps documentation of a legal argument. A model for such an approach is suggested in James Boyd White's article "Law as Language: Reading Law and Reading Literature." White argues that "The lawyer and the literary critic, as readers of texts, face difficulties and enjoy opportunities that are far more alike than may seem at first to be the case: in a deep sense. . . they are the same" (415). Much of White's argument relies on the understanding that both literary critics and lawyers "[argue] for one result or another" and by doing so "[maintain] a culture which is "largely a culture of argument" (415). That is to say, both lawyers and critics approach a text as one available for interpretation and do so with the intention of constructing a narrative that creates meaning. This is "by nature a communal activity" (415) and is "always asking and answering the central question: what kind of community shall we be?" (416). Approached from this perspective, it is clear that *TWWLN* offers its own account of precisely how Victorians lived then, but also does so with implications for how readers have continued to live since. According to White, "It is indeed something of a critical truism that the meaning of literary work is not in its message but in the experience it offers its reader" (420). In line with that, I contend that *TWWLN* allows for an experience of critical reflection on how a capitalistic society operates, and it

illustrates the necessity of wide-spread complicity for such fraudulent business as is depicted throughout its narrative to flourish. What verdict we come to as a result of engaging this text is for the readers to determine, though I argue that the novel makes a compelling case that citizens cannot be passive participants in, or victims of, the effects of capitalism, credit manipulation, and high finance. Rather, Trollope indicates that the only appropriate actions are persistent resistance to speculation, as modeled by Roger Carbury, or violent resistance to exploitation, as modeled by John Crumb. These two characters exist in different social strata, but each clearly participates in an economy that values honesty and hard work over exploitation and credit.

If the legal system operates largely as an argument defending certain actions as socially acceptable, or condemning actions as deservedly punishable, then I argue a social-problem novel like *TWDLN* can be read as a legal argument since it serves exactly that function. Through narrative interactions, Trollope depicts the social actions of various characters and attempts to illustrate which behaviors are acceptable and which are not. The language used to describe the likes of Sir Felix (e.g., “thoroughly dishonest” and “ungentlemanlike”) appears much nearer to those descriptors for Melmotte (e.g., “prosperous rogue” and “swindler”) than either is to Roger Carbury who is decidedly “honest” and “never owed a shilling that he could not pay” (I 50). Interestingly, Roger Carbury’s depiction resembles much more closely the working man, John Crumb, who “was afraid of no work. . . was honest. . . [and] knew the value of a clear conscience” (I 308). John Crumb “could [even] earn money” quite well, “and having earned it could spend and keep it in fair proportion” (I 308). Throughout the novel, it is clearly articulated that making, having, and managing money are not inherently condemnable to Trollope, but the means by which one acquires money matters, as does the ways in which one uses it. And so Trollope’s case begins by demarcating the noble characters (i.e., John Crumb and Roger

Carbury) from the ignoble ones (i.e., Sir Felix, Melmotte, and Mr. Fisker). This is a significant shift away from the conventional class structure which would lump Roger together with Felix and John Crumb with Mr. Fisker. According to W.D. Rubinstein's "Wealth, Elites, and the Class Structure of Britain," "Those who write about class structure must avoid equally the Scylla of over-simplification and the Charybdis of excessive complication" (99). Naturally, the transient nature of business and the Victorian economy makes it difficult to easily categorize individuals into precise social classes, particularly as geography and one's business are also complicating factors. This is why Trollope's reimagining of social groups is so significant: it not only points to the blurring boundaries of class structure, but also includes moral values and economic perspectives (which correlate with geographical location) as factors relevant to categorization. Therefore, though John Crumb is a middle-class business owner, he is more like local nobleman Roger Carbury, who despises the speculative greed of the city, than he is like Mr. Fisker, who also claims to be a working businessman. In a sense, Carbury is laudable for Trollope because he maintains an awareness of his place in society and embodies the position of humble-but-dignified gentry rather than an arrogant lack of self-awareness most notable in Sir Felix. Rubinstein claims, "If it was on the commercial or financial side of the Victorian business world that the great fortunes were disproportionately to be found, it would seem to be a corollary that the centre of wealth making in nineteenth-century Britain was London rather than the industrial towns of the North of England" (104). With this in mind, it is clear that Trollope privileges values (usually correlated with geography) and how one handles one's business over titles and wealth ownership as determiners of social categories (again, both Carbury men are barons, but the similarities end with their title). To distinguish men based on their economic and moral perspectives rather than their social or economic standing is to resist traditional social hierarchies

and promote what I consider a new and semi-progressive perspective on society. In short, to adequately address the issue of blurred class boundaries introduced by credit-based economies and a changing body politic, Trollope reimagines social organization and, therefore, intrinsically resists traditional associations with class categories.

After making such distinctions, it becomes clear that class is not the sole determiner of crime, but rather the ways in which one engages in capital exchange, which necessarily has significant implications for those in the middle and upper classes. For someone like John Crumb, his economy of exchange is a simple one. He works, he yields the products of his labor, and he sells those products at a good price. He deals honestly and fairly with people, and he works hard. Therefore, his capital (social and economic) is beyond reproach, as evidenced by his positive reputation with Ruby Ruggles' grandfather and Roger Carbury. Roger, in turn, has a reputation of similar up-standing quality as he too is immovably honest. Though he inherited his money, he does not spend excessively, deals with people fairly, and does not sacrifice his morals to greed. Both men maintain a commitment to the notion that one must earn one's capital, and that the credit one receives as a result must be backed by something tangible. Conversely, the worshippers of mammon, who include the majority of the characters in the novel, find themselves charged with the crimes of greed and fraud continually. Melmotte's fraud is the most obvious, as he seems to engage in capital exchange without ever producing said capital and eventually forges signatures as the apotheosis of his dishonesty—his literal forgery as well as his class transcendence are both examples of him literally and figuratively pretending to be someone he is not. However, by the time Melmotte reaches that point in his narrative arc, the novel has illustrated that most of the Victorian exchange economy is fraudulent (the entire Mexican Railway company is a fraud, none of the Beargarden members produce the ready money to pay

their debts, and almost no one is capable of paying for their property or luxuries they fill it with). It has also been made exceedingly clear that the entirety of Victorian high society seems aware that Melmotte is almost certainly a fraud, a swindler, and a con-artist—yet they attend his balls, buy his shares, and elect him to parliament. If there were a case to be made against upper-class racketeering, Trollope would be making it. But more to the point, the crises of credit and class identity are symptomatic of the fact that old methods of capital exchange are inadequate for the new economy. As modern finance evolves, unbacked credit becomes increasingly available, fostering new heights of fraud, greed, and speculation. As always, and most importantly, the social harm that results extends to all facets of the economy and the victims of this systemic violence become innumerable in their anonymous role in the great game of speculation and credit. Perhaps one of the greatest shortcomings of this text is its willingness to allow these anonymous characters of the lower-class to remain largely anonymous.

However, as White mentions, the text is not the sole arbiter of truth and meaning. It is merely the communal presentation of information, which both author and reader must engage to render a verdict. In the case of John Crumb and Roger Carbury, there seems to be relatively little to take issue with on the part of the reader. As to the more criminal characters, it seems fairly evident that Melmotte is indeed a dishonest and immoral man, and his trial by narrative bestows a rather harsh but all-to-common sentence to punish his misdeeds. I argue, therefore, that what is really on trial in Trollope's novel is neither the lawful Roger Carbury, nor the decidedly unlawful Melmotte, but instead the aristocracy and the theft of British morality they have committed through the perversion and exploitation of an outdated reliance on social capital. Furthermore, I agree with White who contends that, "What is distinctive about legal and literary texts is that they seek to speak to a range of readers, not just one, and to operate across a spectrum of context.

They seek to establish the meaning of terms not merely for one conversation, for the present moment, but for a class of conversations across time” (426). This is especially important for a novel entitled *The Way We Live Now*, lest someone believe the only audience for whom this text was intended was a contemporary one. Rather, I suggest that the indictment of capitalism’s influence on morality is a case for many readers, across class, temporal, and national boundaries. The immediacy of the speculation problem and the tangibility of Melmotte’s forgery may initially appear to be the crime on trial in the novel, but that verdict is already determined. Melmotte has been evaluated, condemned, and punished accordingly. What remains for the reader is to determine what to do with the Victorian accomplices who have yet to be adequately dealt with.

Contrary to O’Gorman’s assessment that Trollope avoids tackling the tough question of how we are to understand the ethics of legal business, I maintain that the nearly 1000-page indictment of Victorian society for its complicity and integral role in supporting the systemic corruption embodied by Augustus Melmotte is directly engaging that exact question. And the answer seems to be a relatively straightforward one: *they are (at least) as bad as he is*. The fact that only one character receives the ultimate punishment doesn’t seem sufficient reason to assume everyone else is off the hook. True, Fisker takes his fraudulent business dealings back to the US, the Beargarden goes bust but the wealthy young gamblers remain relatively unscathed, and the majority of those engaged in business with Melmotte collect on their debt. The fact that more people are not more severely punished for their misdeeds, combined with the fact that Melmotte’s fate was self-inflicted, implies that Trollope saw the amorality and fraud as too deeply ingrained in the system for proper means of regulation to be enforced at the present time. However, drawing attention to such a lack is, I argue, a prerequisite to taking the necessary steps

to punish such wrongdoing in the future. Perhaps Trollope doesn't win his conviction by the end of the novel, but he certainly makes a strong enough case to set precedent for future debates regarding the nature of capitalist business and its dependence on immoral (rightly called criminal, I argue) behavior. Indeed, if Sir Felix is "bad all round" (II 436), as is the popular consensus, then surely we should read his beating and shameful exile as some indication of progressive resistance, particularly if he represents the very worst combination of attributes all found, in some way or another, in many of the other characters. In this way, the fact that Felix is socially inferior to his friends Grasslough and Nidderdale and superior, albeit mildly, to the likes of Melmotte pales in significance compared to the fact that all of them participate in and contribute to the degradation of Victorian values and social organization. Melmotte gets the worst of it, but the upper and middle classes do not retire entirely untainted from their misdeeds. To avoid further moral deterioration, society must heed the cautionary tale of greed and empty credit Trollope conveys. Unfortunately, as chapter three will make abundantly clear, the US went quite the opposite direction of Trollope's warning, and did so with vigor.

Victims and Inheritors of Forces Beyond Our Control

There is an intriguing paradox that lies at the center of this novel. The characters and theme all operate on the logic of meritocracy, which implies that one's success or failure is the result of how one conducts oneself and manages one's affairs. Trollope seems complicit with this position, as his relative treatment of various characters, whether laudable or condemnable, is based on their actions and his feelings regarding those behaviors. Roger Carbury stays home and doesn't spend money unnecessarily; therefore, he deserves, according to the logic of the novel, to be contented and respected. Sir Felix squanders his fortune and mistreats everyone around him for immediate personal gain; therefore, he is shunned and doomed to a life of struggle. And yet,

despite this seemingly universal logic of personal accountability, the novel is also driven by forces beyond the characters' control. Even Melmotte, who is treated almost as a deity of financial manipulations and appears "to be in truth powerful over everything" (I 86), ultimately falls victim to uncontrollable shifts in public perception of his value, market fluctuations in share prices, and access to credit. This is important because it exemplifies how individual actions contribute to large-scale social issues but are inadequate as a remedy. Melmotte no doubt played an important role in the railway swindle, but his death does not stop Fisker from marrying Marie and carrying on with the game across the Atlantic.

Tara McGann's article "Literary Realism in the Wake of Business Cycle Theory: *The Way We Live Now* (1875)" is particularly useful in grappling with this seeming paradox.

McGann argues that,

Not until *The Way We Live Now* does such a reversal become problematic in the British novel rather than preordained because given by a predetermined narrative trajectory: speculative bubbles burst and, more to the point, financial villains reap the wages of sin. With *The Way We Live Now*, however, finance becomes problematic, that is, a phenomenon to be explored rather than one fixed in meaning by literary convention and cultural assumptions. Yet the innovative dimensions of the novel have largely escaped notice, as critics have followed Trollope in regarding it as solely delivering a stern rebuke to 'the commercial profligacy of the age.' (133)

Whereas much of the critical discourse surrounding Trollope's novel focuses on the individual actions of the characters, the 'commercial profligacy,' McGann instead looks to the more systemic and less directly controllable aspects of the text. In a sense, the difference between these two approaches is the difference between subjective and objective violence (i.e., personal versus systemic violence) elaborated on in chapter one. Admittedly, it is much easier to point to subjective violence in a novel like *Oliver Twist*, where the characters, Sikes in particular, commit very physical and obvious forms of violence. The violence perpetrated by characters in *TWWLN* might be less physical in nature, with one or two exceptions, but arguably the harm caused by the

immoral characters is just as problematic and certainly more widespread in *TWWLN* than that of the characters in *Oliver Twist*. Mr. Fisker makes a brief and vague reference to this when he says, “When millions of dollars are at stake,—belonging perhaps to widows and orphans. . . a man was forced to set his own convenience on one side” (I 87). Fisker is, of course, entirely disingenuous in this assertion, but the claim that the money he and the other speculators gamble with might belong to less fortunate souls is nevertheless a concerning and potentially accurate one.²⁷ Indeed, the zero-sum nature of exchanging shares requires that for the Melmottes and Fiskers to make a profit, someone else, most likely a layperson gullible enough to believe a railway is actually being built, must purchase their worthless shares for more than they originally “paid” for them.²⁸

I contend that even Trollope did not realize the degree to which his novel centers on severe forms of violence that extend far beyond the merely moral crisis he claims to be concerned with. The novel champions Roger Carbury as the bastion of old values such as temperance and honesty, and it conveys disgust at the “ungentlemanly” conduct of the likes of Sir Felix and the “vulgar” nature of Melmotte—the truly concerning insight of the novel, however, is not the obviously repugnant conduct of the antagonists, but the severely underrepresented implications that conduct has for the marginal characters. If there is one criticism I support regarding the flaws of *TWWLN* (and there are plenty), it is the relative lack of attention to the impact dishonest financial dealings have on the whole of society, not just the upper and middle classes. For example, there is no mention whatsoever of the impact

²⁷ Western society has surely seen many examples of this play out in reality since then, perhaps most recently during the Great Recession and the era of a Too-Big-to-Fail banking system.

²⁸ I say “paid” in quotations here because neither Fisker nor Melmotte is likely to have paid any hard cash for the shares they’ve arbitrarily decided are worth \$100 a share. When even Melmotte naively asks if they “have to back [the railway] with a certain amount of paid-up capital,” Fisker assures him that “We take care, sir, in the West not to cripple commerce too closely by old fashioned badges (I 83). This attitude will undergird the even more severe crimes of capitalism and high finance in chapter three.

imperialism has on the nations being exploited by the British empire, but that exportation of commerce and immoral business is precisely the logical outcome of the profit-seeking that concerns Trollope.²⁹

With that said, McGann does well to point out that Trollope reconfigures villainy in the financial realist novel of the late-Victorian era and allows readers and critics alike to problematize the systemic ills of high finance in ways that were previously foregone and oversimplified conclusions. Acknowledging Trollope left more to be desired does not negate the positive awareness he accomplishes, perhaps inadvertently at times, by redirecting the readerly gaze to the objective, systemic violence that follows corrupt business dealings and politics for hire.³⁰ Perhaps as an extension of the way McGann sees business cycle theory as a way to map the narrative trajectory of a boom-and-bust character arc, so might we consider the volatile but generally upward trend of the stock market to reflect the critical and literary progress made in grappling with the social harm caused by deifying that same market and its movements. Indeed, the entirety of this dissertation operates on the premise that the social-problem novel evolves to address the continual evolution of capitalism's influence on society, and, as the market becomes increasingly interconnected and complex, so must the literature which seeks to expose it rise to the challenge by working to wade through the complexity to identify the heart of the issue—in Dickens' case, it was Victorians' role in maintaining environmental determinism, in Trollope's case, the issue resides in empty credit and speculation. Both, however, realized the legal system (and the resulting criminality) works hand-in-glove with capitalism to regulate social action in

²⁹ The novel does make passing mention that Melmotte is considering investing in developing foreign nations, but no details are provided as to this potential business venture and, knowing Melmotte, it is far more likely a fiction of international business dealings than a reality of international investment.

³⁰ Both systemic violence and politics for hire will reach new and terrible extremes in *The Jungle*, showing yet again why *TWFLN* is a useful text to lead us across the Atlantic.

exploitative ways, and this occurs in a manner that obscures the mechanisms by which each operate. As we have already seen and will continue to see in future literature, it is easy to become distracted with easily identifiable crimes and focus our critical attention on those individual misdeeds, but the novels that concern this study attempt always to redirect the readerly gaze back to the much more harmful business of what Upton Sinclair called “the system working” (“Introduction” xvii).

Exporting Good Business and Bad Morals

In addition to reframing the financial realist novel, Trollope also makes a meaningful transatlantic connection, which illustrates the transitory stage modern capitalism was experiencing in the late-nineteenth century. Though capitalism developed as an economic system in Great Britain and experienced its earliest success in industrialized England, it would reach new heights economically, and new lows morally, in an American context. Mr. Fisker and Mrs. Hurtle are the most obvious representatives of how the Atlantic divide allows American capitalism to differentiate itself from its European origins. Whereas the Londoners begrudgingly admit Melmotte to their social circles despite the fact that many regard him “as a thief and a scoundrel” (I 299), Mrs. Hurtle compares him to Napoleon and George Washington, claiming he “rises above honesty. . . as a great general rises above humanity when he sacrifices an army to conquer a nation” (I 245). Fisker reinforces the unapologetic glorification of Melmotte, saying he “has got the pluck” and asserting that for “A man who has done what he has by financing in Europe. . . there’s no limit to what he might do with us” (I 76). Importantly, it is Melmotte’s desire for limitlessness that causes his downfall. Such a fate could possibly have been avoided in the US, where Fisker claims they are not beholden to such strict rules of credit. It is clear, then, that, where the English see a risky asset whom they should approach cautiously, the Americans

see a great man whose “universality of. . . commercial genius” (I 277) need know no bounds. Even Lady Carbury seems convinced of Melmotte’s exceptional status, declaring that “One cannot measure such men by the ordinary rule” (I 279), though ultimately the rules of British society do prove too restrictive to allow the infinite success of Melmotte.

As early as chapter 35 of the first volume, Melmotte “recognize[s] it as a fact that he must either domineer over dukes, or else go to the wall” (I 323). As it turns out, he is unable to sustain his domineering and poisons himself in lieu of allowing society to punish him. Notably, following Melmotte’s demise, Fisker seems relatively unperturbed when he says to Paul Montague: “I took him to be a different man, and I feel ashamed of myself because I trusted such a fellow” (II 393). Paul counters that “[Melmotte] was utterly ruined,” but Fisker insists “He wouldn’t have been ruined. . . if he’d known all he ought to know. The South Central would have pulled him through” (II 393). When Paul asserts that “We [Londoners] don’t think much of the South Central here now,” Fisker responds “that’s because you’ve never above half spirit enough for a big thing. You nibble at it instead of swallowing it whole,—and then, of course, folks see that you’re only nibbling. I thought that Melmotte would have had spirit” (II 393). This conversation, perhaps more than any other in the novel, illustrates with immense clarity the important distinction between American and British capitalism. Whereas the latter proceeds with an anxiety to legitimacy of funding, the former merely doubles-down ad infinitum, knowing that as long as the credit continues to be forthcoming, the wheel will keep turning. It is the very resistance to “swallowing it whole,” that prevents the English from reaching even more excessive financial success, and consequently the sacrifices that are required to achieve such heights. One might also suggest that Fisker is mistaken in claiming Melmotte wasn’t “big” enough, but that he was simply too “big” for London to swallow. America might be willing to

allow “the work of robbing mankind in gross by magnificently false representations” (II 394), as is Fisker’s ambition, but England ultimately proved just a bit too timid to continue engaging in such activity with the hopes of being on the profitable end of the scam. The distinction between American and British capitalism, then, is somewhat a matter of degree. The cost of the myth of meritocracy, on which the American dream has been built, is exposure to exponentially greater and more complex fraudulent business. As time passes, we will see how the Americans ultimately perfected the fraudulent business practices and corrupt politics introduced by the Victorians—but that is a topic for another chapter.

A brief but important note is necessary on the significance of the language Fisker uses in this passage: the language of consumption (i.e., “nibbling” as compared to “swallowing it whole”) is a metaphor that appears just a few but important times earlier in the text. Specifically, the first appearance of such a metaphor occurs when the narrator describes Sir Felix as being a leech on his mother and sister, belonging to “men in that rank of life. . . [that] had been born always [to] eat up everything” (I 16). Lady Carbury expresses her concerns in similar language when she tells her daughter, Henrietta, that “[Felix] is eating us both up” (I 109). Though subtle (if for no other reason than because a few appearances of any metaphor in a near-1000 page novel is necessarily obscured), I argue that this language operates in the tradition of sensationalist Victorian fiction, which regularly employs consumption as a metaphor to express anxieties of class relations and exploitation. The import of this metaphor is wonderfully elaborated upon in Rosalind Crone’s article, “From Sawney Beane to Sweeney Todd,” in which she argues that “as the lower classes had become the main supporters of both traditional and new genres of entertainment in popular culture, their experience of and fears and anxieties about urban change became intertwined with myths about serial killing and reflected in a new character

of the public nightmare, Sweeney Todd” (59). Crone goes on to assert that Sweeney Todd is “an articulation of the threat posed by city commercialism to the sanctity and survival of the working-class individual” (60). Specifically, “Sweeney Todd’s murder machine [operates] at the beginning of a sophisticated production line, which transformed unsuspecting customers into a highly marketable product: meat pies” (69). In effect, the story of Sweeney Todd, the demon barber of Fleet Street, is one of a serial killer who embodies all the worst things about capitalism: ruthless efficiency, profit at the expense of morality, and commoditization of every aspect of human life, bodies, and even death. We also saw the commoditization of the corpse make a thematic appearance in the working life of Oliver Twist when he briefly worked for the undertaker, and we will see it again but to a greater degree and on a much larger scale in *The Jungle*. What place, then, does such language have in a high-society novel like *TWWLN*? I would argue that irrespective of whether it was a conscious connection made by Trollope or not, the fact remains that he relies on a historically grounded and contemporarily understood metaphor of the ills of capitalism exemplified through literal human consumption. The fact that Trollope repackages this metaphor and inserts it into a middle-upper class context strikes me as of the utmost importance, as it shows that the anxiety of the lower-class regarding the consumptive nature of capitalism seeps into every facet of society and every level of the class hierarchy.

A major function of this study as a whole is to forge the connection, or rather to show how certain literary figures have forged the connection, between high and low crimes, which ultimately serve the same evil purposes. Whereas we can easily identify the subjective and obviously violent crimes of Sweeney Todd or Bill Sikes, applying the same language of consumption to an aristocratic and attractive character like Felix Carbury (and later the amorphous meat-packing companies) constitutes a rather radical shift in perspective as to the evil

of profit-seeking and excessive consumerism. When discussing the success of Melmotte, Lady Carbury asks her friend Mr. Booker if he “think[s] him honest. . . honest as men can be in such very large transactions” at any rate (I 279). Booker replies that “Perhaps that is the best way of putting it,” (I 279) suggesting that there may be too much sacrificed to achieve the gains of Melmotte, including honesty. When Lady Carbury argues any “expense” might be necessary to achieve such gains, Booker presses her, “You would do evil to produce good?” (I 279). Then Lady Carbury effectively summarizes the moral code, if such a phrase can be appropriately applied here, of capitalist ideology:

I do not call it doing evil. You have to destroy a thousand living creatures every time you drink a glass of water, but you do not think of that when you are athrist. You cannot send a ship to sea without endangering lives. You do send ships to sea though men perish yearly. You tell me this man may perhaps ruin hundreds, but then again he may create a new world in which millions will be rich and happy. (I 279)

It appears as long as people have been exploiting others in the pursuit of profit, they have in turn attempted to justify it through utilitarian arguments presenting the possibility of a greater good being achieved someday as a result of their immoral behavior. Such an argument illustrates the degree to which the boundary between fraud and legitimate business becomes increasingly muddled as the twentieth century approaches. The fact that Lady Carbury’s primary motivation throughout the entirety of the novel is to provide for her son Sir Felix and hopefully manipulate their way to his marrying Marie should not be forgotten. If Sir Felix is the aristocratic inheritor of Sweeney Todd’s legacy, then Lady Carbury, for all her smiles and polite demeanor, appears no morally better than Mrs. Lovett.

Melmotte, as it turns out, isn’t particularly relevant as an individual at all on this front; he is merely the logical result of a society governed by the likes of Sir Felix, Lady Carbury, and the other upper-class sell-outs who compose their social groups. Their moral failings, if we follow

the logic of Trollope's narrative, appear to have severely negative consequences for their environment in much the same way that Victorians had feared capitalist greed would for decades already—but whereas the former anxiety imagined the blood seeping up from below, for Trollope the blood trickles down from above. And make no mistake, there is blood on the hands of Sir Felix as much as there is for Melmotte, or Fagin for that matter. As such, Trollope's major contribution has been to illustrate the fact that the upper class is just as guilty (if not more so) of the social harm so often feared by and from the lower class, and that the objective, systemic violence that results from hyper-consumption and capitalist greed will reach new heights and experience even less resistance in the emerging American economy across the Atlantic. Whereas Melmotte came up short in his schemes because, according to Fisker, he didn't "under[stand] how to play it," Fisker intends to "buy every share in the market. . . so as not to spoil [his] own game" (II 394). Indeed, he claims that "what [Melmotte's] done 'll just be the making of us over there" (II 394). He even has some concerns for Marie because "After the sort of society [she's] been used to here, [he] don't know how [she'll] get on among us Americans. We're a pretty rough lot" (II 398). In the context of everything that has happened up to that point in the narrative (Marie's father has just killed himself after his Ponzi scheme collapsed and his corrupt political career came to a screeching halt), it's particularly concerning that Fisker thinks she isn't ready for how "rough" the Americans are. If Sir Felix was a well-dressed Sweeney Todd, one hates to imagine what an American counterpart might look like. As it turns out, however, when the objective violence of American capitalism comes increasingly into focus (in *The Jungle*, for example), the identities of the capitalist representatives become increasingly obscured. Perhaps that is for the best, lest the reader continue to operate under the false assumption that confronting

an individual or even a particular group will adequately address issues that are much larger and more systemic than any one person or group could hope to combat.

CHAPTER 3 DARK DOPPELGANGERS: SINCLAIR REPACKAGES DICKENSIAN SOCIAL CRITIQUE IN *THE JUNGLE*

In his seminal sociological text, *The Other America*, Michael Harrington famously wrote that in America, “the poor can be described statistically; they can be analyzed as a group. But they need a novelist as well as a sociologist if we are to see them. They need an American Dickens to record the smell and texture and quality of their lives” (17). This chapter argues that Upton Sinclair’s genre-defining novel, *The Jungle*, accomplishes both the sociological observation and artistic viscerality promoted by Harrington in its muckraking critique of American capitalism—it is also considered by many to be the first proletarian novel. Sinclair’s insistence that his book was “written from the inside” (594) and “is as authoritative as if it were a statistical compilation” (“What Life Means” 593) positions it both as a sociological observation of systemic problems as well as an artistic reflection on how to engage those problems. Sinclair “wished to write a piece of literature,” but also wished “to make a popular book, one that would be read by the people and would shake the country out of its slumber” (593). I argue such ambitions make *The Jungle* an ideal case study for the combined efforts of sociology and literature championed by Harrington and, furthermore, that such efforts mirror the work of earlier social novels, most notably Dickens’ *Oliver Twist*. Importantly, *The Jungle* is not the only social-problem novel of its time to address capitalism’s ills through a sociological lens, but, as with all chapters in this dissertation, it does offer a representative text that illustrates major concerns of the contemporary social novelists, as well as developments in the discourses they engage. Furthermore, I argue it is necessary to emphasize the transatlantic and transhistorical connections (i.e., between *The Jungle* and *Oliver Twist*, for instance) because the intellectual lineage that connects them illustrates how deeply ingrained the systemic issues are that these

authors confront. Whereas plenty of work has already been done acknowledging the similarities of purpose between then-contemporary texts, I contend the close relationship of purpose between the Victorians and American modernists is still woefully underrepresented in scholarship. Analyzing the shared ideological positions of proletarian authors like Sinclair and Frank Norris (and later Mike Gold, John Dos Passos, and numerous others) is necessary to illustrate the ubiquity of the American modernists' concern with capitalism run amuck, but connecting such work to Victorians yields a deeper flaw rooted in capitalism as a dominant mode of economic arrangement, without the possibility of pretending minor political shifts might alleviate the social problems identified.

If *Oliver Twist* and *The Way We Live Now* constitute two sides of the same ideological coin for British literature in the nineteenth century, as this dissertation argues, then *The Jungle* and *The Great Gatsby* provide a parallel relationship in an American context for the new century. The similarities are obvious, in that *Oliver Twist* and *The Jungle* both share a commitment to displaying the “truth,” as espoused by both authors in prefaces to their respective novels. Both also resist bourgeois aesthetics which limit the scope of the novel to images and language that do not disgust or offend the audience. Indeed, Dickens and Sinclair each prove in his own way the efficacy of relying on the repugnance and filth that accompany lower-class existence to log their critique of the social arrangements on display in their novels.³¹ Conversely, systemic concerns with the ills of capitalism in both *TWWLN* and *The Great Gatsby* direct our gaze toward the upper class and their severely removed existence from the laboring classes. This transatlantic mirror relationship constitutes one of the major reasons for the selection of these particular texts,

³¹ See William Ian Miller's *The Anatomy of Disgust* (1997) for more on this. Miller claims that “except for the highest-toned discourses of moral philosophers, moral judgement seems almost to demand the idiom of disgust” (p. xi).

as well as the rationale for their arrangement in the analysis. With that said, it is not only the similarities but the differences that make the following chapters both necessary and important to furthering the present study.

Dickens' work may have been notable for its achievements in reaching a popular audience and doing so while refusing to avoid "the vilest evil" that characterizes the "very coarse and shocking circumstance[s]" ("Preface" v) out of which the narrative is produced. He may also be commended for his desire to depict "what [he] often saw and read of in actual life around [him]," claiming "It is emphatically God's truth" (ix). But no one would go so far as to claim that the subtle indication of Nancy's prostitution or the filth of Fagin's hideout is remotely on par with the vivid description of the morphine-laden brothel Marija lives in or the rat-infested, blood-soaked, rancid meat-packing factories of Packingtown. The difference, then, is to some extent a matter of degree, as Sinclair's project echoes much of Dickens', but to a degree which Dickens and his readers would have almost certainly turned away from in revulsion—*The Jungle*, then, is in some sense a darker doppelganger of *Oliver Twist*. Nevertheless, in the same way that Dickens wrote "God's truth," Sinclair insisted he "had to make [*The Jungle*] true" ("What Life Means" 593).

Beyond matters of magnitude, there is another important aspect of *The Jungle* which necessitates its inclusion in the present study—Sinclair's novel not only initiates the category of the proletarian novel, but in doing so also reimagines the relationship between the police, big business, and politics as all intertwined and interdependent. This strong aversion to and critique of systemic corruption could be seen as a logical progression from the social-critiques already analyzed in this study, but no work of popular literature up to that point, in the US or abroad, had condemned the corrupt industrial-political complex with the vigor and directness that we see in

The Jungle. Whereas the police were conspicuously absent in both *Oliver Twist* and *TWWLN*,³² despite each novel revolving around plots built on criminality, *The Jungle* makes frequent and specific reference to the police and their function in the capitalist machine of Packingtown throughout the novel. This is no mere coincidence, I argue, but marks the distinct transition being made by the proletarian novel, and Sinclair in particular, as the popular novel is now weaponized to expose widespread corruption and its systemic exploitation of the working poor through economic, legal, and political means. The linking of the legal system, the police, and politicians to the corrupt practices of big business makes *The Jungle* ripe for exploration by a study such as this and allows for a renewed theorization of criminality under capitalism that turns popular notions of crime on its head.³³ Not only does Sinclair reiterate the Dickensian point that lower-class crime is essential to the smooth functioning of capitalism, but he also expands that concern to implicate the most powerful in society as the *most* criminally liable and corrupt. Thrusting the police and the politicians together into the same criminal conspiracy exposes capitalism's incentives for corruption, and it also forces the reader to the socialist conclusion that the system cannot be marginally altered to be fixed—it must be drastically and collectively altered if the root of the issue is to be addressed. In Sinclair's view, the root of the issue is the profit-driven corruption which incentivizes organized exploitation and mass harm to the working poor. Sinclair wished to write a book that “[would] show the system working” (xvii), but I argue its most notable contribution was making clear who the system works *for* and *how*.

³² The police do make a few brief appearances in *Oliver Twist*, but, as they do nearly nothing to forward the plot and even less to engage the problematic elements of policing during the nineteenth century, they are, I argue, not relevant in the way that the corrupt police of Packingtown are in *The Jungle*.

³³ Incidentally, Sinclair's condemnation of the police and legal system could be read backwards as an endorsement of the legitimacy of criminality. Such a misreading is in part, I argue, what we see in *The Great Gatsby*, which romanticizes Gatsby's criminality without adequately acknowledging his participation in capitalist corruption.

New Terrains in the Proletarian Novel

Though the most significant contributions of *The Jungle* to the present study arise with the inclusion of the police and politicians in the capitalist profit-machine, it is impossible to understand the novel without beginning with its generic and ideological origins. It is no accident that the novel generally follows a chronological narrative trajectory but begins in medias res with the wedding of protagonist, Jurgis, and his wife Ona. Chronologically speaking, this event takes place early-to-midway through the family's time in Packingtown, but Sinclair thought it best to begin the story here because it foregrounds one of the major concerns of the novel: the loss of immigrant identity and the painful process of assimilating to American culture. This is significant for at least two reasons: first, the discrepancy between the old-world values of Europe and new-world values of urban America is imperative to illustrating the extensive and unnecessary exploitation of working-class immigrants. And second, Sinclair's novel illustrates that one way to emphasize and combat the erasure of identity when capitalism processes and consumes working immigrants is to exemplify the difference between what was and what is, in order to lead us to what might still be. In effect, showing the erasure of national identity by becoming another cog in the machine necessarily opens up the possibility of becoming something beyond a mere cog and finding a new identity, one for Sinclair that exists in the socialist collective; such a case is made by numerous scholars. Michael Morris, for example, argues that Sinclair embodies a "leftist literature which. . . is in some measure bound to emphasize the impersonal or suprapersonal conditions of collective action" over the "personal development" of individuals (51). A similar case is made by Orm Øverland who argues "This story of an immigrant is a passage from a secure Old World identity, through the loss of identity, and to the achievement of a new identity" (7) rooted in collectivist social action. The loss of identity opens a space for a new one, and it is the filling of this void which characterizes the

major aim of the novel. Sinclair's emphasis on immigrant identity loss also necessitates a transatlantic and transhistorical analysis such as this to show capitalism as a cultural force that dominates space and time. Whereas comparing contemporary texts illustrates the ubiquity of capitalism's corrupting influence in a particular time and place, pairing a Victorian novel with *The Jungle* magnifies the resilience of capitalism in resisting calls for systemic change despite its obvious flaws.

The issue of identity loss and renewed purpose also sheds light on one of the most discussed aspects of the novel, its generic and structural arrangement. In line with literary naturalism, *The Jungle* initially appears to be a plot-of-decline narrative, mapping the trajectory of Jurgis' life as generally downward and marked by periodic loss of family members and other related misfortunes. However, the second half of the novel takes a turn toward apparent incline, though it is debatable if we can consider Jurgis' "progress" in these chapters as an improvement—this will be explored further in the pages to follow. Nevertheless, I argue that what many consider the weaker portion of the novel (i.e., the didactic second half) is actually the most important for constructing a new identity for Jurgis and America rooted in socialism. The transition from plot-of-decline to a didactic exploration of available subject positions and identities also marks the transition from what seemed to be a naturalist novel to what many consider, myself included, the first proletarian novel (e.g., Folsom). This new genre is characterized not only by a privileging of ideologically didactic purpose over earlier genre expectations and bourgeois aesthetics, but a narrative shift away from the personal plight of individual characters toward more collective and societal issues. The relationship between form and ideology illustrates how critiques of Sinclair's artistry are in fact examples of tacit complicity with the bourgeois values and aesthetic programs that suppress overt didacticism,

particularly of the kind which resists the status quo and champions any alternative to capitalist competition and individualism. Chris Bachelder reflects this position when he claims, “*The Jungle* just isn’t artful,” but then follows up by saying “No propaganda goes over particularly well in an American novel these days, and particularly not Sinclair’s sort.” According to Bachelder, Sinclair’s “portrayal of the powerlessness of the individual within a ruthless system is antithetical to the American belief in self-determination and class mobility.” Though I agree Sinclair’s novel openly resists the misguided American worshipping of supposed “self-determination and class mobility,” I reiterate my contention that a conscious articulation of ideological critique does not automatically make one’s work less “artful.” Or, perhaps better stated, the value of art need not be relegated to only subjective assessments on aesthetic grounds. To make such a claim is to simply ignore the ideological and aesthetic critique being made outright. The premise that one must hide the intentions behind their art is one that supports homogeneity in artistic representation and knowingly reinforces the status quo—to resist this status quo, Sinclair necessarily had to write in opposition to this ideological suppression.

The mutually implicated issues of narrative structure, identity struggles, and landscapes within the text are elaborated upon quite usefully in Matthew Morris’ “Two Lives of Jurgis Rudkus.” In this article, Morris suggests that the concepts of “mapping” may be applied to a literary “realism that discloses the underlying structure of events” (50), which I argue is precisely what Sinclair does in *The Jungle*. This comes in direct contrast to the perspective of traditional literary realism perhaps best expressed by William Dean Howells, who argued that “When realism becomes false to itself, when it heaps up facts merely, and maps life instead of picturing it, realism will perish” (qtd in Morris 50). I argue that this struggle over the proper approach to

realism is actually a struggle over reality itself and that the position of Howells, which insists on more than merely “heap[ing] up facts,” is representative of the bourgeois desire to sugar-coat, or indeed deny entirely, the truly horrific nature of working-class existence in Sinclair’s *Packertown*. As such, the debate over Sinclair’s artistry puts the stakes much higher than simple personal preference of style and artistic license with representation. Instead, it constitutes the very struggle for existence in the collective consciousness of society at large and therefore cannot be allowed to be pushed aside.³⁴ Sinclair knew the risks with his generic experimentation, but he also realized the importance of not compromising his values in achieving his aims. In his own words, Sinclair claimed that he “was warned. . . that the sheer horror of ‘The Jungle’ [sic] would kill it; but [he] could only answer that [he] had to make it *true*” (“What Life Means” 593; original italics). In blatant disregard for the criticisms of Howells and his fear of heaping up facts, Sinclair claimed that he “spared no pains to get every detail exact” and that he “know[s] that in this respect ‘The Jungle’ [sic] will stand the severest test—it is as authoritative as if it were a statistical compilation” (593). More than just a shortcoming of artistic ability, it is imperative that readers acknowledge the deliberate approach that led Sinclair to the didactic construction and resistance to both naturalism and Howellsian realism that characterizes his proletarian novel. In this way the content and narrative structure operate cohesively as a unified effort toward resistance and revolution, which I argue is laudable for its socio-political insight, despite the supposed diminishment of artistry. In reaction to criticisms of his lack of so-called artistry in the novel, Sinclair argued “that when artists or art critics make the assertion that art excludes propaganda, what they are saying is that their kind of propaganda is art, and other kinds

³⁴ Janet Zandy “argues for an alternative history of *struggle* as a critical element of American literary formation,” and contends that “struggle [is] a shaping force in the formation of American working-class literature” (42; original italics).

of propaganda are not art. Orthodoxy is my doxy, and heterodoxy is the other fellow's doxy" (*Mammonart* 9). This assertion encapsulates both the narrative structure that extends beyond the plot-of-decline naturalism, as well as the grotesque descriptions of the filthy environment in which the working class live and work; it also, in my view, justifies the didactic political transformation that characterizes the final chapters of the novel, which has often come under fire.

Having established the deliberate decisions that determined the arrangement of Sinclair's novel and its subject matter, it is evident that the supposed "formless of [the novel's] plot" (Morris 51) is actually very consciously formed, but simply done so while "violat[ing] the canons of Howellsian realism" (Morris 51). According to Morris, Sinclair "sets out to restore 'mapping' to its sense," which is to say "he uses spatial layouts as figures for complex social relations. When he describes how factories process meat, his description also functions as a diagram of how the ruling class corrupts democratic institutions" (51). J. Michael Duvall employs a similar approach in "Processes of Elimination," using the body's waste management systems as a metaphor for diagraming the consumptive exploitation that takes place in the novel. At their core, both approaches illustrate the conscious links Sinclair forges to connect ideological concerns with physical phenomena more familiar to a common readership.

We see this as early as chapter three, when the family is given a guided tour of the meat-packing industry by their friend and countryman, Jokubas. As a local small-business owner who has lived in Chicago for an extended period, Jokubas is the ideal guide for this introduction to the city and its machinations. The fact that he is a fellow Lithuanian immigrant only enhances his ability to act as a guide and to bridge the cultural gap for the newcomers. Jokubas shows them the meat-packing plant where "ten million living creatures [were] turned into food every year. . . little by little [they] caught the drift of the tide, as it set in the direction of the packing houses. . .

all unsuspecting” as they wade through “a very river of death” (42). According to Sinclair’s narrator, “Our friends were not poetical, and the sight suggested to them no metaphors of human destiny; they thought only of the wonderful efficiency of it all” (42). The heavy-handedness of this passage and the many like it to follow does not alter the fact that Sinclair clearly wishes it to be understood that there is a parallel between the arrangement and treatment of the livestock in the Packing industry and the workers who make the running of the great machine possible. In fact, I contend that such heavy-handedness is preferable to nuanced insinuation when communicating a blunt and important social reality.

If Morris is right, as I argue, and “the spatial layouts” mirror the “complex social arrangements,” then the tour through the meat-packing plant is also a tour through capitalism’s inner-workings. Most notably, the factories work through a dis-assembly line (i.e., the animals are literally broken down to sellable parts) where every man has a specific job and a specific place in the great machine. Much like the animals they remorselessly and systematically slaughter, the men remain isolated and participate willingly in their own destruction. Like the animals, they “went up by the power of their own legs” (42) before being turned into pork; “They were so very innocent, they came so very trustingly; and they were so very human in their protests. . . They had done nothing to deserve it” (44), and yet they remain “buried out of sight and of memory” (45). The panoptic arrangement of both workers and animals is both intentional and appropriate, given capitalism’s reliance on individualization to keep bodies docile.³⁵ Neither the men nor the animals are accustomed to being penned up (or imprisoned) quite like they are at the factories, and it is this ruthlessly efficient arrangement, which the workers joke “uses

³⁵ Foucault’s famous *Discipline and Punish* (1977) elaborates on what he calls the “mechanics of power” that produces “the great ‘confinement’ of vagabonds and paupers” (141) but also applies to schools, the military, and, of course, the factories. All of these spaces act as panoptic mechanisms for control—as Foucault argues, “discipline proceeds from the distribution of individuals in space” in very methodical and hierarchical ways (141).

everything about the hog except the squeal,” (42) that allows men and animals to be processed and consumed en masse without anyone to hear their protests and “without a pretense [of] apology” (44). Such an environment is reminiscent of the story of *Sweeney Todd*, which Rosalind Crone argues “was a reflection of fears about the vulnerability of urban foodstuffs, corporeal contamination and the detrimental effects of the production line” (60). Approached with this in mind, Jurgis’ introduction to the meatpacking factory reads as eerily similar to the capitalist consumption operation of *Sweeney Todd*, described as “the creation of a sophisticated machine for the murder of urban dwellers and its concealment” (70). It is clear that Sinclair continues to operate in the wake of socially-concerned popular literature, but in the same way that *Oliver Twist* wasn’t dark enough, *Sweeney Todd* wasn’t big enough. Where *Todd* embodied fears of urban consumption and corrupted morality, Sinclair exposes similar themes on a much greater and more systemic scale. The killing machine is no longer one thing hidden amongst us; it is everywhere, and everyone contributes to its ruthless efficiency and organization.

Of course, the efficiency and organization of the factory is merely a small piece of the larger capitalist landscape. In the same way that no body, no space, and no resource is wasted in the factory which could be commodified, so does all of Chicago follow the same profit-driven logic. In a very real sense, the entire city is arranged as one great profit machine. Upon purchasing a home for the family, Jurgis and Ona “take a walk and look about them, to see more of this district which was to be their home” (35). In doing so, they realize the “ghastly odor” (36) that plagues their nostrils is the result of them living on “‘made’ land” which “had been ‘made’ by using it as a dumping ground for the city garbage” (36). Not far from their landfill homestead resides “another great hole, which. . . [was] not yet filled up” (37). This great hole “held water, and all summer it stood there, with the near-by soil draining into it, festering and stewing in the

sun; and then, when winter came, somebody cut the ice on it, and sold it to the people of the city” (37). The ingenuity of commodifying even the most disturbing refuse of society “seemed to the newcomers an economical arrangement; for they did not read the newspapers, and their heads were not full of troublesome thoughts about ‘germs’” (37). Throughout the narrative Sinclair continues to refer to the spatial arrangement of Chicago and the various class boundaries that exist both socially and physically. More than mere happenstance, the arrangement of all people and products is undertaken with the utmost attention to efficiency and the preservation of profit-making potential. According to Sinclair, “The bourgeois civilization is, in one word, an organized system of repression. In the physical world it has the police and the militia, the bludgeon, the bullet, and the jail; in the world of ideas it has the political platform, the school, the college, the press, the church—and literature” (qtd in Morris 55). To this, I would add that the workplace is the most obvious and immediately applicable organized form of repression, along with the home, both of which are given significant attention in *The Jungle* as structural mechanisms for control and repression. In contrast to Morris’ claim, however, that “Everybody agrees that the first half of the novel. . . is more compelling than the second half” (52), I argue such a position relegates literature to mere entertainment and believes a novel is only “compelling” if it engages our subjective, aesthetic preferences. Rather than become mired in debating Sinclair’s aesthetic achievements (or lack thereof), I contend that it is more productive to shift the terms of engagement and argue the second half of the novel is innovative (and therefore useful to analyze) because it confronts the question of what it might look like to attempt escaping the limitations, spatially and socially, of capitalist repression. The first half of the novel is characterized by the naturalistic plot-of-decline and is limited to obviously capitalistic spaces; I argue *The Jungle* would be a very different sort of novel, and much less

relevant to the present study, if it didn't attempt to engage narrative and social spaces beyond capitalism and Packingtown. In effect, I argue it is the latter portion of the novel that justifies, and indeed necessitates, its inclusion in this study.

Capital Punishments and Capitalist Prisons

If the first half of the novel is more in line with characteristics associated with literary naturalism, it is because the plot of decline aligns with the genre characteristics of social determinism and a generally pessimistic world-view.³⁶ This narrative approach, naturally, culminates in the death of numerous characters as well as the cultural identity they signify for Jurgis. I contend that the determinism of the plot constitutes a kind of capitalist prison for the working-class, and the second half of the novel pushes to escape the boundaries established by this prison of economic and social determinism. Furthermore, I argue that much like Foucault's depiction of panopticism in his highly influential *Discipline and Punish*, the social determinism that plagues Jurgis and the working-class he represents relies heavily on individualization and various forms of confinement. Engaging the text holistically from this perspective, we may begin to understand why the novel can be called the first proletarian novel, which I argue requires a possibility for escape, rather than merely another example of literary naturalism.³⁷ This distinction is important because the need for a new literary categorization signifies the new cultural and political moment being marked by the publication and ensuing popularity of Sinclair's muckraking social critique.

³⁶ See June Howard's *Form and History in American Literary Naturalism* (1985) for a full account of the characteristics and forms which can be associated with the genre.

³⁷ Emphasizing the possibility for escape or reform echoes Marx's eleventh thesis on Feuerbach which claims, "The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to *change* it" (145; original italics).

To begin with, we must first establish the many forms a prison may take and the effects of such confinement in Sinclair's historical moment. June Howard argues that many American authors of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries "felt themselves living in a perilous time, a period of change and uncertainty, of dislocations and disorders" and that "Naturalism is a literary form that struggles to accommodate that sense of discomfort and danger, a form that unremittingly attends to the large social questions of its period" (ix). From that perspective, it is easy to see how the term "literary naturalism" could fairly be applied to *The Jungle*. The novel clearly attempts to engage the new problems of the recently arrived working poor, and I argue that Sinclair's observations of the struggles of the proletariat begin with confinement and exploitation of power hierarchies—in effect, Sinclair's first half of the novel argues that urban capitalism is a prison for working immigrants.

A prison, by definition, is a "condition of being kept in captivity or confinement" or "forcible deprivation of personal liberty" ("prison, n1"). It is useful to consider the essence of imprisonment as being a "condition" rather than a place, particularly in the context of Sinclair's social analysis. Though arrangement in physical and geographical spaces is a useful proxy for locating subjects on the social hierarchy, ultimately the inescapability of the prison of capitalism is rooted in its essence as a condition. Whereas Jurgis and his family naively believe that if they can merely get a job, buy a home, or attend school (if they're children) they can live the American dream of freedom and prosperity, in actuality, all these circumstances operate as various cells in the prison complex that is American urban capitalism in the early-twentieth century. The first half of the novel is littered with misplaced enthusiasm as Jurgis acquires "a sense of pride" when he "become[s] a sharer in all this activity, a cog in this marvelous machine" (41). The inability of Jurgis to realize he is in a prison, in the same way that the pigs may not

realize immediately when they are being led to slaughter, resides at the center of his problems. Jurgis' initial enthusiasm is followed immediately by descriptions of the factory where the hogs "came so very trustingly" and "were so very innocent" (44) as they are led to their systematic slaughter. Here "the creatures were prisoned, each in a separate pen. . . with no room to turn around" (48); "It was like some horrible crime committed in a dungeon, all unseen and unheeded, buried out of sight and memory" (45). Notably, this "crime" that takes place is committed by the capitalists who own the factories, and yet it is entirely legal. Sinclair's insistence that such exploitation is still a crime requires a reassessment of what it means to be criminal and what criteria should be used to determine criminality. At this early stage in his development, however, Jurgis does not perceive the injustices around him and instead embodies the common desire to keep his head down and merely make a living. Indeed, Jurgis finds substantial pride in being able to acquire a well-paying job and provide for his family. Despite his pride in being a part of this amazing massacre machine, however, Jurgis acknowledges "[he is] glad [he is] not a hog" (45). Of course, he later learns from his Socialist mentor that "a hog was just what he had been—one of the packers' hogs" (376).

The isolating nature of the factory appears continually in the description of the packing process as "all highly specialized labour, each man having his own task to do" (49). Sinclair's observations about the domineering strategy of organization anticipates Foucault, who claimed that "At the emergence of large-scale industry, one finds, beneath the division of the production process, the individualizing fragmentation of labor power" (145), which allows for the disciplining of bodies who compose the collective work force. In line with Foucault's claim that "In discipline, the elements are interchangeable" (145), Sinclair presents his working immigrants as interchangeable "cog[s] in this marvellous machine" (41). In the same way that the animals,

whether fit for consumption or not, were “carefully scattered here and there so that they could not be identified” (78), so are the workers who operate this mass killing machine processed in the same way, with merciless efficiency and complete anonymity.

In addition to physical arrangements of isolation, the social hierarchies in place also ensure the compliance of working bodies with the smooth functioning of the profit machine.

According to Sinclair, Durham’s was owned

by a man who was trying to make as much money out of it as he could, and he did not care in the least how he did it; and underneath him, ranged in ranks and grades like an army, were managers and superintendents and foremen, each one driving the man next below him and trying to squeeze out of him as much work as possible. All the men of the same rank were pitted against each other; the accounts of each were kept separately, and every man lived in terror of losing his job. . . there was no loyalty or decency anywhere about it, there was no place in it where a man counted for anything against a dollar. (74)

Sinclair’s depiction of the working environment mirrors Foucault, who claims: “By walking up and down the central aisle of the workshop, it was possible to carry out a supervision that was both general and individual,” allowing an overseer to “compare workers with one another, to classify them according to skill and speed” (145). Such a competitive environment clearly supports the capitalist notion that competition yields the highest productivity, but it shows no interest or concern with the detrimental effects such an arrangement has on individuals or social relations. Even Jurgis, in all his naivete and lack of education, “saw how they managed it; there were portions of the work which determined the rest, and for these they picked men whom they paid high wages, and whom they changed frequently” (71). These men are unwittingly being employed to maximize the exploitation of their fellow workers by pushing the pace to unsustainable speeds and then being discarded when they can no longer maintain such break-neck speed. The systematic consumption and disposal of human bodies should reasonably be

labeled a crime, as Sinclair often does, but as the novel makes all too clear, a crime is not really a crime unless the law is enforced.

Although the factory is an easily identifiable panoptic prison, readers would be remiss to ignore the important insight that such prisons exist outside of work; indeed, I argue that the major insight of the novel is not that exploitation takes place in the workplace, but that such exploitation is systemic and inescapable under the current regime of capitalism. The packers certainly arrange their factories in ways that will maximize profit, eliminate (or commoditize) waste, and drain workers of their productive value. But just as concerning is the seamless way this structural arrangement of systemic exploitation works hand-in-glove with every other facet of workers' lives.

The role of housing is one such example of prisons outside the workplace. Upon arrival in the city, Jurgis and his family realize the effect of purchase power and the downside of currency exchange. Though they had what would have been considered a moderate sum of money in Lithuania, the family soon becomes aware of “the cruel fact that [America] was also the land of high prices” (34) in addition to being the land of high wages, and that “they were spending, at American prices, money which they had earned at home rates of wage—and so were really being cheated by the world!” (34). In such a predicament, the family is forced to seek the most cost-effective housing available, which turns out to be “unthinkably filthy” (34). Residing in these flats, “There would be an average of half a dozen borders to each room—sometimes there were thirteen or fourteen to one room” (34). In Mrs. Jukniene’s flat, where Jurgis’ family is

forced to stay, they must also share space with the chickens she keeps for additional income.³⁸ Apparently, “there was nothing better to be had” (35), which illustrates the simultaneous push-and-pull mechanism that drives this immigrant family into the housing trap. The obvious risks incurred by taking on home loan debt is counterbalanced by the assurance of lost income and inhabitable living spaces if they continue to rent: “If they paid rent, of course, they might pay for ever, and be no better off; whereas, if they could only meet the extra expense in the beginning, there would at last come a time when they would not have any rent to pay for the rest of their lives” (57). Therefore, although it was an acknowledged risk, the family clearly has no other choice than to take their chances on buying a house. In this way, debt becomes a policing force, in that it requires complete complicity with workplace exploitation to meet the continuous needs of debt obligations to survive. Any defiance from the workers would risk unemployment, which for working-class families was synonymous with homelessness and likely starvation.

The nature of the home purchase experience illustrates the naturalist determinism of the novel. Though we follow the family methodically every step of the way, it is impossible to know precisely where they went wrong or how they could have avoided their fate. I argue this is intentional on Sinclair’s part as the moral of the story, that only collective political action can dismantle the capitalist profit machine that consumes them all, requires the elimination of blame for the victims. The reader must first understand that it is not the workers’ fault they are exploited before they can fully comprehend the systemic nature of the problem.

Additionally, the roles of class and language cannot be overlooked in the home-purchase family crisis. Although the entire immigration experience has been plagued by lack of linguistic

³⁸ The penning up of renters with chickens only further blurs the boundary between animals and the working class in *Packertown*. The implications of such dehumanization receive extensive treatment in Michael Lundblad’s *The Birth of a Jungle: Animality in Progressive-era U.S. Literature and Culture* (2013).

accommodation for the Lithuanians, almost by magic the salesman pushing “new” homes happens to “[speak] their language freely, which gave him a great advantage dealing with them” (59). Notably, the only other time the Lithuanian language is employed by someone who isn’t an immigrant is on the tavern signs marketing meals and drinks. More than mere happenstance, these two examples illustrate the nature of capitalism in that it only accommodates cultural identity when it is profitable to do so. Stated another way, in Packingtown, cultural identity is relegated to the category of commodity and exists solely as another means of extrapolating value and capital from workers. When the family questions the “elegantly dressed” salesman as to the state of the home and neighborhood, he brushes off their questions as matters of indifference. The family allows him to escape their inquiry because “press[ing] 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 ‘gentlemen’ except with deference and humility” (59). Here we see how language and class intersect to create a recipe for maximum exploitation of the working-class immigrants trying to make their way in the world. Notably, the function of class distinction is somewhat lost in translation, culturally speaking, for Jurgis’ family. Whereas their notions of class superiority are imported from the old country and dictate deference to those who are socially above them, in the US survival is dependent on treating these so-called “gentlemen” of business with skepticism and stubborn persistence. As it happens, these businessmen exploit the benefits of social deference immigrants maintain for the educated classes, but they have no qualms violating the traditional expectations of conduct previously designated as ungentlemanly (e.g., lying, swindling, and cheating). Because of this cultural discrepancy, urban American cities proved to be the ideal environment for exploitation of uninitiated immigrants. The efficient and

wide-spread nature of these tactics illustrates the systemic means by which such exploitation is carried out on a regular basis and as a matter of business.

Only after the paperwork is signed and the down-payment money handed over does the family hear from a friend how many people “had been done to death in this ‘buying a home’ swindle” (60). According to family friend Szedvilas, “It was all nothing but robbery, and there was no safety but in keeping out of it” (61). When Jurgis points out that the only alternative is renting, Szedvilas admits, “Ah, yes, to be sure. . . that too was robbery. It was all robbery, *for a poor man*” (61; italics mine). There are two aspects of this exchange I find most important. First is the inescapability of exploitation. As Szedvilas points out, the family will be robbed either way, and so the only “choice” in the matter is how they would like to be robbed. This, according to Sinclair, is life under capitalism. It’s a jungle of competition and the only so-called freedom one attains is the ability to exploit others or, alternatively, choose how you will be exploited instead. The deterministic quality of this configuration of capitalism makes clear that the answers to the problems of the working class seem to lie not in “succeeding” under capitalism, but in escaping it (or dismantling it) altogether. The other element of the exchange that warrants discussion is the class-caveat that all this home buying and renting business is “robbery. . . for a poor man.” The necessity of specifying class here illustrates that home buying and renting are institutions of the upper and middle classes. The fact that it is openly acknowledged “robbery” but isn’t formally criminal illustrates that punishable crime is only that which doesn’t support the status quo and is usually reserved for the lower class. Ironically, the capital punishment (i.e., being “done to death”) for the crime is applied to the working-class victims of the swindle, not the upper-class perpetrators. Here again Sinclair emphasizes the criminal injustice of the legal system. Occasionally, the middle class may find a way to beat the game by surviving their

exploitation, thereby convincing them of their own worthiness (Jurgis himself holds such fantasies for much of the first half of the novel). The upper class, however, are the only true beneficiaries of such arrangements, as one must own capital to truly win out in capitalism. For the owners to profit, everyone else must pay the difference between the value and the total proceeds of every economic exchange. Stated another way, profit is the dollar amount with which we may measure the exploitation of the working class. In the case of lower-class immigrants, the odds are simply stacked against them to a degree that makes them exponentially more profitable—their economic and cultural vulnerability is directly correlated with the profitability of their exploitation.

Eventually, the family realizes the capitalist prison they are in and “They felt that all was lost; they sat like prisoners summoned to hear the reading of their death warrant. There was nothing more they could do—they were trapped!” (63). Between the factory-prison and the house-prison, Jurgis’ life becomes one of total confinement and exploitation. All personal liberty is sacrificed to the debt burden of capital exchange and, because of the crimes of capitalism, his family receives the punishment of confinement and ultimately death. Importantly, this crime-and-punishment narrative of the first half of the novel exists largely to illustrate the blamelessness of Jurgis and the working class he represents. Once that is achieved, Sinclair engages the possibilities of escaping capitalism. Such a dialectical approach is necessary for him to achieve his true aim of spurring collective action resisting capitalism. The fact that Jurgis mistakenly believes he has escaped when he leaves the Packingtown factories is what ties the first half of the novel, the naturalistic section, to the second half, the portion that makes it a true proletarian novel. Only by fully illustrating the truly interconnected and inescapable nature of

capitalism's influence can Sinclair then rightly assert that collective action of resistance is the only viable solution.

Fantasies of Freedom

Ironically, the tramping phase is when Jurgis finally realizes the inescapability of his confinement, which ultimately leads him back to Chicago. This section is rife with language of emancipation and freedom, which becomes especially notable when Jurgis realizes his lifestyle is unsustainable. I argue the critical consensus that the first half of the novel is “better”³⁹ than the latter is too concerned with aesthetics and ignores the fact that the first half serves largely to give the latter meaning. In the context of Jurgis' tramping, and the misadventures to follow, every stage is marked by an inability to contend with the problems introduced in the first stage of Jurgis' development. There are certain narrative conveniences that come with him returning to Chicago, but the message is clear nonetheless: there is no escape, so he's going to give the game another try, but by going it alone this time and with his eyes open. Before this realization takes place, Jurgis must first comprehend the expansive nature of capitalism, whose arms reach to every corner of the US.⁴⁰

Importantly, the series of phases that follow the disintegration of Jurgis' family help articulate the lessons capitalist exploitation has taught him. This begins in the tramping phase when Jurgis reflects that his “tears” and “tenderness” had “sold him into slavery! Now he was going to be free, to tear off his shackles, to rise up and fight” (254). The lesson is obvious: there is no place for compassion in a competitive world such as this, and the only way a man can

³⁹ Morris, for example, claims “Sinclair would have written a better novel in every way if he had forgotten about conversions and their motives” (52).

⁴⁰ This same realization creates the metaphor around which Frank Norris' *The Octopus* (1901) is built.

succeed is by being absolutely selfish and devoid of emotional attachment. And so, “he was going to think of himself, he was going to fight for himself, against the world that had baffled him and tortured him!” (255). This turn toward individualization is precisely in line with the logic of capitalist ideology, which mythologizes individual achievement while underplaying the confining and harmful effects of isolation. Whereas the communal identity Jurgis had in his family and cultural heritage allowed for the organization of capital toward a common goal, the dislocation and isolation of Jurgis’ identity make him more vulnerable to the forces of discipline and with no capital to leverage for his own benefit. In short, the shield against objective, systemic violence imposed by capitalism found in collective identity is lost when Jurgis decides to go it alone and “fight for himself.” In line with Michael Morris who claims “Jurgis’ second life” begins when he abandons what is left of his family and becomes a tramp, I argue his relinquishing of cultural identity marks the beginning of a new era for Jurgis. During the “second life,” Morris argues, “a new spatial system prevails, now divided among various places where organized crime and political corruption block, deflect, or poison the flow of goods and information necessary to the well-being of society” (54). As Morris acknowledges, “This spatial coding of social forces. . . are implicit even in the first part of the novel” and, therefore, “The two halves of Sinclair’s plot thus reflect two aspects of a single problem” (54). Though this point is useful, I argue that a binary division is not necessary (oversimplified even) and that Jurgis’ trajectory is best viewed as a series of stages through which he engages alternative means of attempting to survive, and perhaps thrive, under capitalism. The turn to individualization at the onset of the tramping phase is a direct result of the lesson he has learned: there is no place for family or cultural heritage in capitalism, except as commodities and mechanisms for

exploitation. This is by no means, however, the final lesson he learns and therefore should not be read as one half of a two-part plot.

Although the lesson Jurgis internalizes at this point in the narrative may be misapplied, there is still a logic to it that should make sense to the reader, given everything we know about Jurgis' life in America thus far. He was systematically exploited and disposed of, as was his family. No amount of enthusiasm or hard work saved him from this ill fate, and so he learns selfishness and resistance. According to the novel, "from now on he was fighting, and the man who hit him would get all that he gave every time" (257). Such a response is understandable, and even encouraged by Sinclair, but Jurgis' perspective is still too personal and not yet political. This is evidenced by his first encounter with a farmer outside the city. When he begs for food, the farmer scolds him and tells him "We don't feed tramps here. Get out!" (257). In response, Jurgis leaves but yanks up an entire row of trees in a freshly plowed field on the way out. I contend this brief passage marks a significant stage in Jurgis' development for Sinclair, as he has learned the necessity of resistance but has not yet figured out where or how to direct his anger. Whereas the socialist conclusion will yield a focused and political passion for change, Jurgis still sees life through a highly personal and individualized lens.⁴¹

That said, the second farmer Jurgis encounters offers him a job, to which Jurgis points out that the farmer will only employ him for the summer (i.e., the busy season) and then abandon him to his fate in the winter. According to the novel, "Jurgis was beginning to think for himself nowadays" (258). Such an encounter illustrates yet again Jurgis' intellectual growth, despite the fact that his social awareness is still incomplete. Meeting other tramps along the way, Jurgis realizes "the vast majority of them had been working men, had fought the long fight as Jurgis

⁴¹ This brief scene also illustrates why the middle class might fear lower class mobilization. Jurgis' anger might be caused by capitalists, but in this particular scene, he takes it out on a rural farmer who refuses to help him.

had, and found that it was a losing fight, and given up” (261). Among these men are a group of nomadic workers known as “the huge surplus labour army of society; called into being under the stern system of Nature to do the casual work of the world⁴². . . They did not know they were such, of course; they only knew that they sought the job, and that the job was fleeting” (261). Jurgis is described as “stronger at the business” (260) of tramping, but he knows enough to understand working for the profit of others is a losing game.

Importantly, the class-awareness that prompts Jurgis’ tramping is also accompanied by an animalization of him and his fellow tramps. Shortly after making some tramping acquaintances, Jurgis learns of some lucrative seasonal work in the fields. He worked “for two weeks without a break [and] then he had a sum of money that would have been a fortune to him in the old days of misery” (262). Unfortunately, without the sense of purpose that a family gave him, Jurgis had nothing to do with his money but find ways to spend it. Indeed, “If he carried the money about with him, he would surely be robbed in the end; and so what was there for him to do but enjoy it while he could?” (262). And so, Jurgis and his friends promptly engage in a binge of debauchery where Jurgis drinks to excess and fraternizes with a prostitute. In this scene, “the wild beast rose up within him and screamed, as it has screamed in the jungle from the dawn of time. . . Jurgis was still a creature of impulse, and his pleasures had not yet become business” (262-263). The language here is significant on two fronts. First, the de-humanizing language promotes a problematic and class-essentialist image of the lower class as subject to base instincts and not significantly removed from the animals they so efficiently slaughter when they are in the factories. And secondly, Jurgis’ shortcomings are presented not as his loss of his emotions (one could say his humanity) but his inability to perceive all aspects of life as a matter of “business.”

⁴² As noted by Michael Lundblad, naturalizing the objective violence of capitalism is one of the many mechanisms by which it achieves legitimacy and social acceptance despite the obvious harm it causes.

He didn't know his business when he began work at the factory, he didn't attend to business when he fell prey to the housing scam, and now he doesn't know his business as a tramping man of pleasure. In the capitalist wild west of the novel, there are only two driving forces that push men forward: the pursuit of pleasure and the pursuit of profit. According to the logic of the novel, the former is merely a trap for the working class that prevents them from achieving the latter.

The function of animalization in Progressive-era literature receives extensive and in-depth treatment in Michael Lundblad's *The Birth of a Jungle* (2013). In it, Lundblad argues that the "discourse of the jungle" is actually much more complex than the simple idea that man is wolf to man. He also claims that the "corporate exploitation" that occupies the pages of *The Octopus* and *The Jungle* "is more monstrous than animalized," arguing that there is nothing particularly natural or resembling natural habits that explains the "distorted evolutionary hierarchies" often employed to justify large-scale social harm against both humans and animals (5). In a sense, the discourse of the jungle and of nature has been co-opted by capitalist ideology and repackaged to justify the decidedly unnatural violence that propels capitalist endeavors. Writing with awareness of this fact, Lundblad's insights are significant because they draw attention to the complicity with which people accept the supposed law of the jungle (i.e., ruthless competition) as natural and inevitable, which allows such violence to continue unchecked. Sinclair realized that for the system to be changed, he must first establish the fact that the system of violent exploitation is neither necessary nor inevitable.

With that said, Lundblad does well to confront the naturalism of the novel, particularly in relation to what June Howards calls "slumming in determinism." For Sinclair to fully articulate the environmental and social hazards of the immigrant working class, he employs substantial

sections of the novel elaborating on factory conditions. However, Sinclair “presents us with questions [regarding the systemic violence of capitalism]. . . [r]ather than epitomizing a ‘survival of the fittest’ confrontation between predator and prey” (110). Whereas some critics perceive the novel as merely a muckraking criticism of capitalism, Lundblad and I read the novel as much more active in its championing of the rights of the working class.⁴³ Lundblad argues the “ability to label horrific acts as malicious rather than natural, suggests a framework for condemning unnecessary violence without simultaneously constructing ‘animal instincts’ as a way to justify or even expand corporate violence” (111). According to Lundblad’s argument, both Sinclair and Frank Norris present the middle class as “left between two agents of violence: the people and the octopus [i.e., Norris’ metaphor for capitalism’s influence]” (108). What is significant, then, about Jurgis’ tramping stage is the embodiment of that specific violence which makes the working class suddenly appear as a threat to the middle class. The octopus (i.e., capitalist profit machine) may churn out human bodies in a systemically violent way, but it also appears, according to the tramping phase of Jurgis’ life, that the working class poses a violent threat to the middle class, as exemplified first by Jurgis’ attack of the boss who rapes Ona and later by his destruction of the farmer’s property. However, I argue that Sinclair’s novel confronts this supposed bourgeois dilemma first by explaining why Jurgis reacts the way he does and then allowing him to progress beyond his “animal instincts.” The desire for debauchery appears to align Jurgis with the stereotype of working-class animality, but everything that leads to this stage in Jurgis’ life makes

⁴³ Importantly, Lundblad argues that “The logic of progressive reform,” and the literature which champions it (e.g., *The Jungle*), “can actually help produce the discourse of the jungle, rather than simply responding to it” (93). Producing this discourse allows authors like Sinclair to illustrate the decidedly unnatural motivations that lead to capitalist exploitation and excessive violence as mechanisms for control. By employing these observations in my analysis of criminality under capitalism, I take the observation that such violence is not natural a step further by then analyzing the rationale and functioning of socially constructed laws (as opposed to the law of the jungle) which are created and reinforced by capitalists for their own benefit. Stated more briefly, Lundblad points to awareness of the problem, but the solution requires engagement in the politics of the novel.

it clear that his so-called animality is not a natural predisposition, but rather a result of the corporate mistreatment of him throughout the novel—in effect, the packers made him an animal (or more accurately a monster, if we adhere to Lundblad’s distinction) by treating him like one.

Importantly, the freedom Jurgis achieves in tramping is not legitimate freedom, but a surface-level and fleeting illusion of freedom. According to the narrator, “All the joy went out of tramping as soon as a man could not keep warm in the hay” (266). This realization ultimately brings Jurgis back to the only life he knows anymore, being a working man in Chicago. Since he is unfettered by the burden of family and aware of the exploitation game he is about to re-enter, Jurgis believes he has a better chance of success this time around. Ultimately, however, Sinclair uses this period of Jurgis’ life to illustrate the misperception that familial burden was in any way the cause of Jurgis’ downfall. One of the more significant aspects of Jurgis’ return to the city is the inclusion of actual time in prison. The novel thrives on metaphors of confinement, prisons, and punishment, but only briefly during the first half of the novel does Jurgis spend any time incarcerated. The return to the city marks a more committed engagement to the discourse of incarceration by Sinclair and ultimately introduces the notion that the prison system is not only metaphorically representative of the workings of capitalism, it is also literally a mechanism in the larger profit machine.

Against the odds, Jurgis manages to achieve brief employment when he returns to Chicago digging a tunnel underneath the city. Though he is told this tunnel is dug to “construct telephone conduits under the city streets,” it turns out there was actually “a tremendous scandal” as “it was found that the city records had been falsified and other crimes committed” to use these tunnels for a subterranean railway to break strikes (268). For these “crimes committed. . . some

of Chicago's big capitalists got into gaol—figuratively speaking" (268). I argue this brief stint of employment serves only one function in the narrative: to illustrate that crimes committed by capitalists, particularly very large ones, are not punishable in the same way small crimes are. Even for Jurgis, who inadvertently participates in the high crimes of fraud and public endangerment, it is unsuccessful beggary that leads to his incarceration. The corrupt capitalists behind the underground railway scandal, of course, face no such consequences. Sinclair could simply have allowed Jurgis to transition directly to homelessness and incarceration, but the inclusion of the railway scheme first introduces the classist element to the discourse of incarceration and illustrates the very important point that capitalist crimes are not treated the same way that lower-class crime is. Naturally, this foreshadows the forthcoming events, which lead Jurgis to gaol.

During his time as a homeless beggar, "all outdoors, all life, was to [Jurgis] one colossal prison" (278). It becomes increasingly clear to Jurgis that "He had lost in the fierce battle of greed, and so was doomed to be exterminated; and all society was busied to see that he did not escape the sentence. Everywhere that he turned there were prison bars, and hostile eyes followed him" (278). The panoptic imagery saturates the post-tramping chapters as Jurgis is reminded again that there is no escape from the prison of capitalism. Such language allows Sinclair to emphasize the confining nature of capitalist mechanisms of social control, but also heightens the reader's awareness of the integral role the actual legal system plays in creating what Foucault called "docile bodies." Jurgis eventually embraces his pessimistic docility when "in his desperation [he was] half hoping to be arrested" (279) for fear of starvation and exposure to the elements. Ironically, at this point in the narrative, "Jurgis had never committed a crime in his life" (282), which prevented him from shaking down a drunken young man who turns out to be

the heir to Durham's meatpacking industry. When this man unwittingly (and unconcernedly) gives Jurgis a one-hundred-dollar bill, it becomes inevitable Jurgis will end up in jail. What should have been a substantial sum of windfall money, perhaps enough to get him through the winter in relative comfort, ends up being the very reason Jurgis is arrested. Jurgis attempts to change the bill at a local tavern and the bartender shorts him ninety-nine dollars on the false premise that Jurgis had merely given him a one-dollar bill. Not prepared for such an injustice, "the wild-beast frenzy. . . blazed in [Jurgis]" (295) and he fights with the bartender until the police arrive. Though Jurgis tries to explain how he was robbed, "there was no one to hear him" (296). And so Jurgis apparently commits his first crime by holding wealth that can't belong to him specifically because he is lower class. In a manner not entirely dissimilar, though certainly not identical, to Augustus Melmotte, Jurgis forgot his place and society promptly reminded him of where he belonged. This is, of course, diametrically opposed to *Oliver Twist*, who was destined for bourgeois life from birth and therefore is not denied his social ascension. I argue this "one adventure of [Jurgis'] life" (279) is included specifically to articulate the reality that society is structured so that it is literally impossible for the working class to transcend their impoverished condition; even when Jurgis is handed one hundred dollars outright from the heir to the Durham fortune, it is immediately stolen from him and leads to his imprisonment. Such social determinism is ironic given that America claims to be "the land of opportunity." Despite the fact that the British class system seems to impose a more rigid social structure, there are examples of effective altruism in British literature that acknowledge the possibility of improved standards of living coming to the lower class (e.g., *Oliver* is adopted by his well-to-do grandfather, and Paul Montague inherits Carbury Manor). Of course, such fantasies of social mobility exist in an American context as well, but it is the abandonment, even outright rejection,

of this fantasy that makes *The Jungle* innovative and insightful. For Jurgis and the America he represents, no such deliverance is possible, as illustrated numerous times throughout his misadventures. How could Sinclair have been any clearer or more blunt in expressing that society actively doesn't want Jurgis to survive?

Learning the Game

After his arrest, Jurgis goes to jail and learns to be a proper criminal. Coincidentally, Jurgis meets an old acquaintance from his first experience in jail, Jack Duane, who guides Jurgis down the path of criminality and shows him how to make his way in the world of selfish criminality and vice. In many ways, Jack Duane serves a similar function to Jurgis that The Artful Dodger served for young Oliver Twist.⁴⁴ In the same way that Dodger and Fagin taught Oliver the “game” of pickpocketing, so does Duane show Jurgis the error of his naive ways and how to survive in a world that consumes the weak and punishes honesty. Immediately upon Jurgis' arrival in gaol, he relays his hard-luck story, to which Duane responds, “maybe it's taught you a lesson” (299). I argue that such a lesson (i.e., to look out for one's self first) is the same lesson capitalism has been teaching Jurgis since he arrived in America. However, it is also a misguided lesson predicated on the false assumption that being selfish will somehow yield better results. This may be true in the short term, as we see in Jurgis' brief “success” as a criminal, but ultimately Sinclair dismantles this myth in the same way he dismantled the myth of meritocracy, hard work, and family values under laissez-faire capitalism.

⁴⁴ Notably, Dodger's real name was Jack Dawkins, which seems unusually similar to Jack Duane. I have been unable to locate any evidence that Sinclair was intentionally nodding to the criminal-guide predecessor, but the parallels of name, character, and narrative function seem too similar to be mere coincidence. Whether conscious or not, Jack Duane can easily be read as operating in the literary tradition of criminal guides going back to Dodger.

Whether Jurgis learned his lesson or not, he was about to learn many things during his time in prison. Whereas Jurgis' first stint was dominated by concern for his family, this time around "he was free to listen to these men, and to realize that he was one of them—that their point of view was his point of view, and that the way they kept themselves alive in the world was the way he meant to do it in future" (299). And so, when Jurgis is eventually released from prison, "he went straight to Jack Duane. . . for Duane was a gentleman, and a man with a profession" (299). The language again is remarkable in its similarity to the language used to describe the "gentlemanly" nature of Dodger and the "industrial efficiency" of Fagin's working children. One of the major differences between Oliver and Jurgis (as well as the novels they represent), however, is the degree to which they accept unwholesome realities. Dickens wanted to emphasize the ill-influence a poor environment could have on lower-class morality and then linked it to bourgeois complicity. That was a noble attempt at social critique, but it pales in force compared to the ruthless honesty that occupies the ground-up narrative of Jurgis' life. Where Oliver was an unwitting and resistant participant, Jurgis realizes that this is the only way for him to survive in the jungle.

When Jurgis learns that his first strong-arm robbery resulted in a man having a concussion and losing three fingers to frostbite, Duane "laugh[s] it off coolly" and explains that "it was the way of the game" (302). He also assures Jurgis that "It's a case of us or the other fellow, and I say the other fellow every time. . . He was doing it to somebody as hard as he could, you can be sure of that" (302). The fact that Sinclair thought it prudent to identify the "victim" as an insurance agent who had money stolen "that did not belong to him" (302) seems to at least potentially reinforce Duane's claim. The important points to note here are twofold: first, Jurgis' criminal experience acts as a dark doppelganger to his Twistian predecessor.

Whereas earlier protagonists, and most notably *Oliver Twist*, show signs of remorse and resist criminality to maintain their sympathy as the protagonist, Jurgis doesn't require this moral anchor to maintain his position as the sympathetic hero. We have watched Jurgis be run through the mill every step of the way, and, therefore, we can understand, if not entirely condone, his actions as a criminal.⁴⁵ As Duane says, the other men are likely doing the same thing whenever they get the chance. Secondly, Jurgis' criminal life is notable in that its relative morality is either on par with or exceeding so-called legitimate lifestyles of being a working man. Indeed, Duane wanted to work with Jurgis in the first place because Jurgis was a man "who could be trusted to stand by anyone who was kind to him— [which] was as rare among criminals as among any other class of men" (299). The ordering of the comparison here is important, as the criminals are being labeled as *just as* untrustworthy as other men, as opposed to the other way around. The everyday working men, businessmen, and politicians are the standard of dishonesty and disloyalty, and criminals are presented as merely no better, rather than obviously worse. After their first successful robbery, Duane stays true to his word and splits the proceeds fifty-fifty, an act of honesty which causes Jurgis to "protest" for excessive generosity.

The strong-arm robbery is merely an introductory lesson for Jurgis, however. The truly enlightening aspect of this phase in Jurgis' development occurs in relation to politics and the police. Duane explains to Jurgis that "if a man of their trade were known he would have to work all the time to satisfy the demands of the police" (302). Note Duane makes no mention of being arrested, merely that a thief would incur higher overhead cost of doing business if the police were aware of his activities, as they would then need to be given their cut of the profits to allow

⁴⁵ This phenomenon of viewing increasingly immoral characters through a sympathetic lens becomes much more common during the latter part of the twentieth century with the rise of postmodernism and increased cultural attention to anti-heroes. For more on this topic, see the anti-hero work of Margarethe Vaage.

business to run as usual. This is another element of *The Jungle* that departs from the tradition of *Oliver Twist*. The legal system was complicit in holding down the lower class in the latter novel, but it did not directly profit from illegal activities in the same way nor to the same degree that it does in *The Jungle*. In this way, Sinclair shows the act of policing can occur by force (i.e., imprisonment or brutality) or coercion (i.e., demanding payment for allowing criminal business to be conducted), but both carrot and stick approaches ultimately yield the same result: the preservation of the status quo and the smooth functioning of capitalism.

After convincing Duane to let him fully enter the social circles of criminality,

Jurgis got a glimpse of the high-class criminal world of Chicago. The city, which was owned by an oligarchy of businessmen, being nominally ruled by the people, a huge army of graft was necessary for the purpose of effecting the transfer of power (sic). . . The leaders and organizers were maintained by the businessmen directly— aldermen and legislators by means of bribes, party officials out of the campaign funds, lobbyists and corporation jobs, labour union leaders by subsidies, and newspaper proprietors and editors by advertisements. The rank and file, however, were either foisted upon the city, or else lived off the populace directly. There was the police department, and the fire and water departments, and the whole balance of the civil list, from the meanest office boy to the head of a city department; and *for the horde who could find no room in these, there was the world of vice and crime.*” (303; italics mine)

This section illustrates the overt didacticism that spurred criticism of Sinclair’s artistry. Such didacticism occupies increasing amounts of space and narrative attention as the novel progresses, but I argue these moments also constitute the narrative peak of the novel. Clearly, Sinclair is building up to a moment of socio-political awareness where Jurgis discovers socialism is the answer to the many collective issues he perceives around him, but that awareness is predicated on the recognition that those very problems are systemic and endemic to the smooth functioning of capitalism. This point is impossible to over-emphasize: The meatpackers, the capitalists, the police, and the criminals are not individually responsible for the violence of capitalism. Obviously, they all commit such violence, but eliminating one head of the hydra (or arm of the

octopus if you're Frank Norris) does not address the root issue. The only conclusion to be drawn, and the only solution to pursue, is to address the very foundation on which such systemic corruption is built.

As Sinclair argues in the above excerpt, the system is maintained at all levels by every kind of social position, “from the meanest office boy to the head of a city department,” from the petty criminal to the chief of police, and from the low-level foreman to the billionaire business owner. To revert back to the demonization of an individual or a particular group is to forget the more important realization that such a system is not upheld by an individual or a group. It is in the very blood and bones of capitalism that such corruption and violence reside. In the words of Sinclair,

the green-goods man and the highwayman, the pickpocket and the sneak-thief, and the receiver of stolen goods, the seller of adulterated milk, of stale fruit and diseased meat, the proprietor of unsanitary tenements, the fake doctor and the usurer, the beggar and the ‘push-cart man’, the prize-fighter and the professional slugger, the race-track ‘tout’, the procurer, the white-slave agent, and the expert seducer of young girls. All of these agencies of corruption were banded together, and leagued in blood brotherhood with the politician and the police. (304)

Although Sinclair’s condemning diatribe presents this profound interconnectivity as clearly problematic, and even evil, he also acknowledges that “suddenly, as by the gift of a magic key, [Jurgis] had entered into a world where money and all the good things in life came freely” (304). It is then obvious how such corruption and large-scale violence can continue to operate so seamlessly in the capitalist profit-machine. In effect, it is one large system of capital exchange where it makes no difference if said capital is achieved by one’s own labor, the theft of others’ labor, or graft for participating in someone else’s theft—under capitalism operating “freely,”

capital is capital.⁴⁶ And it just so happens that ill-gotten capital is acquired much faster and in greater quantities than the legitimate earning by one's own labor.

Appropriately, Jurgis' realization of the corrupt nature of capitalism is accompanied by "his discovery of the meaning of 'pull' [i.e., social capital]" (305) and his introduction to Buck Halloran, a political organizer and a man who was "on the inside of things" (304). If life in America had been one long stint of confinement in a capitalist prison, then Jurgis' introduction to Halloran came as a "gift of a magic key" that seemed to free him of his working-class shackles. This is, of course, a cursory illusion of freedom and success, but it is apparent nonetheless that social capital appears to be the means by which one thrives in capitalism. Jurgis' seamless transition from petty criminal to political "worker" illustrates the corrupt nature of politics in Packingtown and emphasizes the fact that the line between legal and illegal activity depends more on capital exchanges than it does a set code of moral or socially responsible conduct. It is the judges, politicians, and police who determine and enforce the law, and therefore it is their corrupt business interests that dictate the rules by which everyone else must live.

Though apparently minor in the scope of the larger narrative, I contend that Jurgis' time as a petty criminal, then a political worker, and then a scab worker accounts for a disproportionate amount of the theoretical work accomplished by the novel. This section takes place in the span of only a few chapters, but it illustrates the interconnected and deeply rooted corruption that exists in a system predicated on the right to pursue profit above all else. At the time when Jurgis made his career move to politics, "there was a tremendous uproar being raised concerning the alliance between the criminals and the police" (309). As mentioned earlier, *The Jungle* is especially noteworthy for the direct aim it takes at the police, as many of the

⁴⁶ As opposed to the British scene, particularly as one goes back in time, where class distinctions (and the cultural and social capital they entail) count differently in the ledgers of social standing.

criminally-concerned social novels that came before it tend to diminish or ignore altogether the role of the actual police in the modern capitalist cities.⁴⁷ Rather than protecting the rights of citizens, the police are exposed by Sinclair as largely preserving the rights of capital accumulation and exchange, first and foremost. The impetus for Jurgis joining political corruption arises from a public uproar about police working with criminals, not merely because this alliance seems to undermine the alleged function of the police, but also because “the criminal graft was one in which the businessmen had no direct part—it was what is called a ‘sideline,’ carried by the police. ‘Wide-open’ gambling and debauchery made the city pleasing to ‘trade,’ but burglaries and hold-ups did not” (309). It is therefore clear that criminality is theorized by Sinclair as the transgression of approved capital exchange by those who maintain the most power. Jurgis and Jack Duane defy capitalism’s golden rule, that he who has the gold makes the rules, and this results in “Duane [being] slated for a sacrifice” (309) to assuage public perception of police corruption but also to send a message to the criminals of the city: always make sure the capitalists get their cut.

Realizing capitalists and politicians are merely the thieves with the most “pull,” Jurgis does the only logical thing and joins them. The important thing to realize is that although Jurgis’ living standard seems to be improving based on his enhanced ability to engage in capital exchange, he is still ultimately doomed. He works hard enough to become acquainted with, and eventually employed by, Mike Scully, “the ‘biggest’ man he had ever met” (312).⁴⁸ Scully was

⁴⁷ D.A. Miller goes so far in *The Novel and the Police* as to argue that such novels not only obscure the role of actual police but enact policing themselves by reinforcing “a social order whose totalizing power circulates all the more easily for being pulverized” (xiii).

⁴⁸ Recall that Melmotte was referred to as a “big man” in *TWWLN* as well. The lineage of this size metaphor being indicative of the amount of “pull,” or capital, one maintains reinforces the rationale for the selection of these particular texts as it embodies the relationship between them; each is concerned with capital and “big” capitalists. The quote to follow illustrates the immense, negative impact such men have—in effect, Jurgis’ experiences show the broader impact of men like Melmotte.

“the political lord of the district [and] the boss of Chicago’s mayor,” but he was also “to blame for the unpaved street in which Jurgis’s child had been drowned; it was Scully who had put into office the magistrate who had sent Jurgis to gaol; it was Scully who was principal stock-holder in the company which had sold him the ramshackle tenement, and then robbed him of it” (312). Mike Scully, in short, was at the head of most schemes that precipitated the demise of Jurgis’ family and livelihood. The fact that Jurgis’ greatest economic success comes from working for Scully exemplifies the moral (and often literal) prostitution that is required for one to survive in such a ruthlessly capitalistic environment. Sinclair makes it clear that for someone to thrive in such circumstances, everything must be for sale. Notably, this theme of selling one’s self goes all the way back to *Oliver Twist*, as Fagin and Sikes sacrificed their humanity and Nancy was a literal prostitute. All three eventually paid with their lives as well, which continued to be the narrative default treatment for lower-class criminal characters up through the nineteenth century (and even beyond if we consider *Gatsby*’s demise). Jurgis isn’t allowed such an easy narrative finish, as Sinclair needed him to carry on to follow the social critique to its logical conclusion. And so, rather than be entirely consumed by the factories, Jurgis is merely churned out and reused, eventually being sent back to the very factories which began his decline in the first place—only this time, Jurgis returns as a scab and a political shill.

The narrative circling back to the factories, and Chicago more broadly, indicates a sense of unfinished business on Sinclair’s part with the value to be extracted from certain places. According to Michael Brewster Folsom, “At his best, Sinclair was able to ask the reader to cope with the squalor of industrial civilization as its victims do, often with equanimity. At the same time, Sinclair sought to turn the representation of squalor into a persuasive argument for revolutionary action which would abolish that same squalor” (240). Building on Folsom’s claim,

I argue that Sinclair returns to the factories when Jurgis becomes a scab because the myriad mechanisms of exploitation in the factories requires a similarly multifaceted perspective of critique. The poor working conditions which systemically mangle and murder factory workers is one obvious issue that needed exploration; Sinclair tackles this head-on in the early chapters, showing Jurgis and multiple family members become physically consumed by the factory. However, the issue of worker divisions and leveraging culture and capital to isolate workers is a separate issue that requires further exploration. By having Jurgis return to the meatpacking factories under different circumstances, Sinclair effectively allows himself two points of entry through which he may launch his attack on the corrupt dealings of Chicago's big businesses. Folsom claims that "Sinclair's intention was to write a book that would be realistic, not just in its representation of the character, nature, and relations of people, their institutions and scenery, but also true to the situation he himself had observed" (244). I argue that one manifestation of that goal is the acknowledgement that workers are often employed to reinforce their own exploitation, the common example of which is scab labor and strike breaking.

During his time as a strike breaker, "Jurgis became one of the new 'American heroes'" (320). He was "safe from all peril of life and limb, save only in the case that a desire for beer should lead him to venture outside of the stockyards gates. And even in the exercise of this privilege he was not left unprotected; a good part of the inadequate police force of Chicago was suddenly diverted from its work of hunting criminals, and rushed to serve him" (320). The use of the word "serve" is especially interesting here, as Jurgis' relationship to the police has undergone severe alterations in just a few chapters. When a working man, a tramp, and a homeless beggar, the police plagued Jurgis at every turn and provided the stick to beat him down at every stage of his life. When he was a criminal, they became amenable accomplices, often even business

partners. Now that Jurgis was in league with the packers and politicians, men of the greatest “pull,” the same police who would crack Jurgis’ skull and drag him to prison are now at his service to ensure he can comfortably treat himself to a cold beer after a hard (though not so hard as it used to be) day’s work at the factory. The major point, I argue, that Sinclair makes with Jurgis’ insight into the corrupt big business of politics is that it is easy to fall into the trap of the if-you-can’t-beat-them-join-them mentality. However, the nature of capitalist competition requires that for there to be winners, there must also be losers. This is not to say Sinclair insists on an absolute zero-sum economy (though that is also possible), but he does create a vision of society that is inherently antagonistic, and it is that antagonism that prompts competition, violence, and eventually fear of both which keeps most bodies docile.

Carving Out Space for Socialist Awakenings

Herein lies the most differentiating element of Sinclair’s social-problem novel, at least in the context of this study. For Dickens, Oliver is reintroduced to bourgeois society and thrives as a result. Those who were not admitted (i.e., Dodger and Fagin) and those who were unable to adhere to bourgeois codes of conduct (i.e., Monks) were ultimately banished or killed off. Similarly, Melmotte was given familiar treatment, albeit by his own hand, when he was narratively executed for his crimes. And in the following chapter of this study, we will see a similar fate befall Gatsby. Jurgis is the only main character who manages to persist through the end of the novel while still resisting bourgeois values. This is because Sinclair wrote with an agenda that was specifically anti-bourgeois in nature, but it also points to the larger issue of popular and critical reception which has dogged the novel since its earliest publication. Whereas many critics have argued that *The Jungle* was an important but poorly written novel, I argue that their critique is either a direct attack on the Socialist agenda or a misunderstanding of the

ultimate goal of the novel. Contrast this with the popular and critical reception of the other three novels analyzed in this project, and it becomes clear that *The Jungle* is special specifically because it pushes beyond the boundaries of bourgeois aesthetics and morals that were previously unattainable and would prove to be difficult to maintain moving forward.

With that said, it is a fairly straightforward endeavor reading the final chapters of the novel where Jurgis truly discovers and becomes enmeshed in socialism. Jurgis can't help but attack Connor (the man who raped his wife) when he encounters him, and unfortunately, Connor has even more pull (i.e., social capital) than Jurgis does. And so, even when Jurgis feels he has learned to succeed in the game of capitalism, his natural human reaction to mistreatment ultimately condemns him to being cast out of the "inner circle" forever. Only once it is evident that Jurgis has no chance of succeeding under capitalism is he finally free to commit to learning about and supporting socialism. However, it is also during this final stage in the novel that Jurgis gradually recedes into the background of the text. I argue that this seeming narrative unraveling is not a shortcoming of the novel, but an indication of the ideological core around which the entire narrative was constructed.

In the same way that grotesque descriptions of industrial exploitation were paramount to achieving the desired effect in the novel, I contend that the assimilation of Jurgis into the larger movement of socialism was absolutely necessary for Sinclair to achieve his ideological ends. I also argue that in some ways Jurgis' assimilation into an ideological agenda serves a parallel, though importantly distinct, narrative function to the fates of the aforementioned main characters. Every narrative conclusion carries with it a meaning, and Jurgis' unusual fate is the result of the unusual agenda of the author, not necessarily, as others have argued, a symptom of artistic shortcomings. For Dickens, the death of Sikes and Fagin, as well as the ascension of

Oliver, all support the same conclusion that bourgeois values are the antidote to industrial-city crime. A similar message is conveyed in the conclusion of *TWWLN* when Paul, Hetta, and Roger all live happily in the country estate, whereas Melmotte is sentenced to death and Sir Felix, Mr. Fisker, and Marie are all banished from England, narratively speaking. The fact that Sinclair substitutes political awakening and assimilation into the socialist cause for either a narrative punishment of death or banishment, or the reward of a happy bourgeois existence, is a conscious rejection of the myth of the American dream and of the bourgeois values that promote it. Such a position may be uncommon amongst popular literature, but it must still be acknowledged as valid and intentional and therefore cannot be fairly critiqued on the grounds of artistry. In such a criticism, “artistry” is merely a stand-in for promoting bourgeois values in the ways we see in *Oliver Twist*, *TWWLN*, and eventually *The Great Gatsby*.⁴⁹

Sinclair’s famous regret for his novel’s success was that he “aimed for the public’s heart, and by accident hit it in the stomach” (“What Life Means” 594). I argue that both the stomach and the heart were necessary for achieving the desired impact of the novel. For the purposes of this study, however, it is sufficient to say Sinclair achieved a number of important things relative to exposing corruption, articulating insurmountable flaws with capitalist competition, and illustrating the “interdependence of urban politics and urban crime” (“Introduction” xxv). Sinclair offers an important milestone in the tradition of popular literature concerned with criminality and capitalism as he blurs the genres of journalism, naturalism, and manifesto to simultaneously expose large-scale social ills and offer what he sees as the only viable solution. The explicit implication of the police and the politicians in maintaining the smooth functioning of the devouring capitalist machine marks a new phase in the Western social novel and will help

⁴⁹ See Sinclair’s *Mammonart* for a comprehensive discussion of this issue.

spur an entire movement of proletarian literature in the decades to follow. The publication of *King Coal* (1917) and *Oil!* (1927) show a continued preoccupation of Sinclair with the dangers of big business and the corrupt exploitation they produce, which in turn would add to the discourse of critiquing capitalism from a variety of vantage points. According to Ronald Gottesman, the publication of *Oil!* was “the first time [Sinclair]. . . created multidimensional characters whose actions and thoughts manifest their individual natures rather than illustrate ideological positions” (“Introduction” xxx). Furthermore, he claims “*Oil!* was as close as Sinclair was to come to the poetic power of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* (1925), which explores a similar theme” (xxx). Although I do not perceive such a fixation on “individual natures” over “ideological positions” as an obvious improvement, I do believe Sinclair’s progression toward such “poetic power” illustrates his awareness that a text is only as useful as its ability to meet its audience’s needs. With that said, it may also constitute a surrender of the ideological fortitude that separates *The Jungle* from the other texts mentioned in this section. Nevertheless, it is clear, at least to some degree, Fitzgerald is adding to the thematic discourses which concerned Sinclair for decades prior to the publication of *The Great Gatsby*. Unfortunately, I believe Fitzgerald may have sacrificed ideological strength for “poetic power”—in effect, I argue that *The Great Gatsby* overturns the decision of Sinclair to break narrative convention by substituting ideological assimilation for narrative conclusion, perhaps to the detriment of the novel’s politics, if not for its artistry. Nevertheless, *Gatsby* does mark an important progression in the criminal-capitalist vein as he embodies what I consider the foremost and potentially first major romanticized criminal-capitalist (and even proto-antihero). Though his romanticization comes as an ideological step backwards from Sinclair’s progressivism, *Gatsby* still ushers in a new era of popular literary criminals.

CHAPTER 4 SPECTERS OF THE PAST AND THE SPECTACULAR PRESENT: FITZGERALD CRIMINALIZES THE AMERICAN DREAM IN *THE GREAT GATSBY*

If *The Jungle* was a dark doppelganger of *Oliver Twist*, in that it repackaged many of the same literary elements for a similar purpose in a new American context, then a similar relationship could be applied to the resemblance of *The Great Gatsby* to *The Way We Live Now*. In many ways, the core elements of the plot remain the same: a man with a mysterious background finds his way into the upper-class epicenter of finance and culture (London and New York, respectively) only to be exposed as a liar and conman, ultimately leading to his death. In the interim of the meteoric rise-and-fall narrative, the man of mystery displays excessive wealth and spends lavishly to entertain people for whom he harbors no intimacy or personal connection, all in the hope of ascending to an ultimately unsustainable social position. When approached with this wide-scope perspective, one could be forgiven in thinking these two novels are generally the same, and, indeed, it is this surface resemblance that constitutes a major reason for the inclusion of each in this analysis. However, additional scrutiny illustrates the significant differences in both approach and social implication that exist between these two social novels. Not even the haziest of memories for literary characters could confuse the “gorgeous” Jay Gatsby and all his wit and charm with the “vulgar” and “untrustworthy” Augustus Melmotte. Where Melmotte was received in London with begrudging tolerance and skeptical association, Gatsby didn’t even need to bother inviting people to his parties, they simply came of their own accord. The surface similarities between the character arcs of these two charlatans contrasted with the near polar-opposite characterization of them exemplifies simultaneously the intellectual heritage of Gatsby as well as the significant shifts that have taken place in the half-century

between their publication—the contrast also illustrates the differing perspectives of the US and Britain. Like a mirror image, there are stark similarities in the shape and color of these narratives, but the general perception also seems to be one of opposites.

I argue that the reworking of the rags-to-riches conman narrative in *The Great Gatsby* highlights the distinction between the twentieth-century American and Victorian Britain's relationship to the past and its influence on the present. That is to say, each narrative ultimately revolves around the uncertain origins of the main character (if we can accurately call Melmotte and Gatsby “main” characters), and the dominant narrative tension arises out of the other characters’ ability to manage their relationships with those main characters despite their lack of tangible origins. This tension, of course, has broader implications for society, as Victorians were trying to determine how best to transition into modernity and a modern economy without losing the national identity embodied, at least for Trollope, in the social distinctions marked by class and title. For Fitzgerald, the US did not have a national history quite as deeply rooted to anchor its development, and yet Gatsby’s narrative arc is nevertheless driven by his desire to re-invent himself by reclaiming the past. This, in turn, mirrors the American identity crisis, which must come to terms with the fact that our origin story doesn’t quite match reality. Whereas American mythology promotes a vision of freedom seekers forging a new world of opportunity where everyone can succeed, the truth is America is a nation built on mass exploitation and extensive suffering for the benefit of a small percentage of the population. The American obsession with individual freedom is, therefore, paradoxical, as it is this very individualization that allows for the continued suppression of the freedom of the masses.⁵⁰ Not coincidentally, I argue, the

⁵⁰ See my article “Calling-out the Bullshit: The Paradox of Neoliberal Critique in *The Big Short*” for more discussion connecting this paradox to neoliberalism. There is, of course, a large body of work on neoliberalism that informs such a discussion and gives greater insight into the connections between the market economy and the push for individualism. See David Harvey’s *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* for a primer on the topic and David

character who pulls back the curtain on this American illusion is also the one who refuses to give up on it, and he also happens to be a gangster. I contend that the decision to refigure the criminal businessman as also a kind of American hero (or proto-antihero) constitutes a major transition into modernity in this literary tradition and, though problematic in many ways, still marks the beginning of a distinctly new era for criminally-capitalist literary figures. This figuration also allows for the duality of character necessary to express the individualism paradox where the hero is romanticized to bolster the myth of meritocracy but whose punishment ultimately reinforces the rigid class structure that holds down the class from which he hoped to escape in the first place.

Rewriting History and Reimagining the Past

One of the things that Gatsby inherited from *TWWLN* is an anxiety regarding origins and the implications for trustworthiness. This relationship, in turn, mirrors Britain's influence on the US and the Victorians' influence on the twentieth century. Though the US doesn't have the same lengthy history and signifying system of titles as Britain, it still maintained some awareness of the importance of reputation and credibility as it adjusted to modernity. The struggle to redefine American's relationship to the past resides at the core of modernity and the crisis of American identity, but it also finds expression in the personal trials of America's tainted hero, Jay Gatsby.

Much of Gatsby's romantic allure resides in the mystery that surrounds him during his time at West Egg. Indeed, Nick's earliest introductions to Gatsby are chronically uninformative. On first mention, Jordan Baker tells Nick he "must know Gatsby" (19) if he lives in West Egg, but when he inquires as to any details she may know about Gatsby, she cuts him off to better

Newheiser's "Foucault, Gary Becker and the Critique of Neoliberalism" for more specific commentary on theoretical criticism.

eavesdrop on an argument between Daisy and Tom. The first time Nick sees Gatsby is later that evening when his mysterious neighbor “emerged from the shadow” of his mansion, seemingly to “determine what share was his of our local heavens” (29). Such speculation as to Gatsby’s mindset is odd considering how little Nick knows about him but foregrounds a major aspect of Gatsby’s nature (i.e., his ambition) that will continue to intrigue both Nick and his readers. Even when Nick is finally invited to one of Gatsby’s famous parties (and he was “one of the few guests who had actually been invited” [49]), the invitation was bestowed by a chauffeur, not Gatsby himself. At the party, rumors abound regarding Gatsby’s history: “he killed a man once,” he “grew up. . . in Germany,” and he may even have been “a German spy during the war” (52). The fact that one of the young ladies claims “He’s a bootlegger,” but then follows up by saying “he killed a man who had found out that he was a nephew to Von Hindenburg and second cousin to the devil” (69) illustrates the degree of difficulty for these characters in distinguishing between nefarious reality and stirring fiction. More than mild attempts at humor, Fitzgerald’s careful attention to the mystery of Gatsby is paramount to his function as the romantic proto-antihero of the novel. I argue that true antiheroes do not become dominant figures in popular Western fiction until the approach and advent of postmodernism—indeed, I argue this rise to prominence is one of the major defining characteristics of postmodern fiction as it ensures a significant amount of moral ambiguity. However, I also contend that Gatsby marks a new kind of character that is more mysterious and morally convoluted than we have seen in the earlier works analyzed in this study, as well as the broader literary trends they represent. This romantic figure of the proto-antihero is, I argue, one of the major steps forward taken in popular modernist literature concerned with criminal capitalists and allows for a new angle of critique that has not yet been explored.

When Nick finally meets Gatsby, he doesn't even realize who he is speaking to. And, notably, as Nick becomes increasingly acquainted with the details of Gatsby's past and how he makes a living, he is increasingly beset by mixed feelings of admiration and revulsion. According to Nick, Gatsby had an understanding smile with "eternal reassurance in it" (56) and "an extraordinary gift for hope" (10), but he also "represented everything for which [Nick had] an unaffected scorn" (10). I argue that readers are meant to see Nick's perspective as emblematic of the American crisis of identity that is playing itself out during the height of modernity. Figures like Gatsby give shape and substance to the image of the new American (anti)hero, one who has pulled himself up by his bootstraps and seemingly created success out of thin air, but also resists existing power structures and attempts to play by his own rules. Importantly, this success and the origin story that accompanies it are falsehoods. The fact that Nick cannot fully escape the romantic allure of Gatsby's image is symptomatic of an America that wishes deeply to believe in the story of American prosperity while also knowing it may very well all be a pipe dream. Anecdotes of successful individuals abound in the American mythology of prosperity, but the paradox of individualism resides in the fact that for these individuals to succeed, most people must not—that is the nature of capitalist competition. Such a conclusion leaves Nick, and the America he represents, at a loss for what to do next, and so they proceed with conflicted but willful ignorance in the hopes that the illusion persists.

My analysis coincides with that of Barbara Will who argues that the ending of *The Great Gatsby* "famously turns [Fitzgerald's] main character's story into the story of all Americans," and "To identify with this story and its protagonist requires that we grapple with its dark lesson" (342). Specifically, Will refers to the famous closing lines:

Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that's no matter—to-morrow (sic) we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther. . . . And one fine morning—

So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.
(191)

The shift from third-person language to first person opens the door for numerous scholars, Will among them, to assert that the story of *Gatsby* is “the story of all Americans.” In a general sense, I agree that Fitzgerald’s magnum opus “[spoke] across generations” while also “capturing the details of his historical moment” (343), but I think what remains unsaid in this passage receives far too little treatment in criticism that chooses to focus on it. As with Will’s analysis, many others cite the shift to first-person language as the most important aspect of this passage. I agree the language shift indicates a “dark lesson” for America, but I argue the spaces of silence are where the lesson itself resides. As written, the passage seems to leave the conclusion open-ended, accommodating the romanticized optimism for the future so strongly represented in *Gatsby*. But if we truly learn the lessons of the text, what comes next? One fine morning. . . we finally make it and acquire the object of our desire (i.e., Daisy)? We don’t even need that scenario to play out to know Gatsby’s image of Daisy was a fiction that already began to dissipate before his death. Perhaps one fine morning. . . we realize the error of our ways, reform, and commit to strictly legal business? Not likely. *Gatsby* shows no remorse for his illegal activities nor any interest in engaging in so-called legitimate business. In fact, I argue that much of his allure and success is predicated on him not playing by the rules of society. Maybe one fine morning. . . we wake up to the awareness that everything we worked for was based on a paradox of individualism and eventually are destroyed to appease the structural tension caused by the very success we managed to achieve. That is the real ending of *Gatsby*’s narrative, and, if he is supposed to represent America, as the consensus seems to be among critics, then I contend the

most important lesson learned is that it was all a lie—not only Gatsby’s romantic past and the legitimacy he pretends to maintain (which I argue are the lesser crimes), but also the myths of meritocracy, social mobility, and the American dream he invests his heart and soul in throughout his life. The delusion of Gatsby is simply that a man can forge success out of nothing in America, the supposed land of opportunity—the reality is that such men are illusions first promoted to champion American individualism and legitimize competition, and then promptly destroyed to re-establish the status quo. Stated another way, Gatsby’s success and demise effectively legitimizes and reinforces the system and class hierarchy that holds him (and the working class he represents) down to begin with, thereby ensuring the continued dominance of the very forces he works so hard to overcome.

Such a lesson bears some resemblance to the disillusionment that characterized *TWWLN*, but whereas the Victorians, as represented by Trollope, were still beholden to the notion that losing the past was the root of their problems, Fitzgerald seems aware that the mythology of the past was a farce to begin with. Sarah Churchwell’s *Careless People: Murder, Mayhem, and the Invention of The Great Gatsby* (2013) is useful in addressing the scope of *Gatsby*, as she claims Fitzgerald’s depiction of the US “is not a specific nation but a human capacity. . . for hope, for wonder, for discovery. It represents the corruption of that capacity into a faith in the material world, rather than the ideal one. And it reminds us, too, of our careless habit of losing our paradises” (338). Churchwell’s position allows for an expansion of *Gatsby*’s significance even beyond the bounds of the US and the 1920s, but I would add that the phrase “losing our paradises” implies the possibility of having such “paradises” to begin with. In the present-day US where nearly half the nation promotes the agenda to “make America great again,” one has to wonder what imaginary past it is that these people wish to return to. As to Churchill’s claim for

Gatsby, it does indeed show the corruptive capacity of humans and illustrates the role faith and hope play in making us susceptible to manipulation, but I argue it is a critical error to lose sight of the profound reality that our visions of the past are a delusion. The desire to achieve the American Dream (i.e., individually-achieved material prosperity as reward for one's own labor) motivates Gatsby's life, but the lack of awareness that such efforts reinforce the system that necessitates his efforts to begin with is the truly important lesson of *Gatsby* for the United States. By committing to the false dream that individual prosperity is achievable for everyone who works hard enough for it, the ambitious working-class ultimately ensure the continued exploitation of the class position they strive to escape. In short, Gatsby's romanticized hopefulness is the very thing that ensures his continued exploitation.

Churchill, nevertheless, makes a compelling point as to the role of carelessness in the novel, which she argues applies across temporal boundaries. She identifies "recklessness and greed, waste and profligacy. . . irresponsible bankers and bad investments, cronyism and corruption. . . Ponzi schemes. . . violence. . . and a frantic search for the values we keep losing" (338-39) as major thematic concerns of the novel, which, I argue not coincidentally, apply equally well to our current moment, as well as the past represented in *TWWLN*.⁵¹ The transhistorical and transatlantic nature of these concerns further enhances my resolve that modern Western capitalism has had a profound influence on culture and the literature which seeks to represent it. Churchill may have seen carelessness as the main driving force behind the tension of *The Great Gatsby*, and indeed it is one major issue with the characters: Nick's passive observations are foreshadowed by his last name, Carraway; Jordan Baker openly admits she is careless when driving, but other people "keep out of [her] way" (67); and the reckless conduct of

⁵¹ Trollope himself identified the "profligacy of the age" as a major concern of *TWWLN*, and Melmotte's American railway was the Ponzi scheme around which the novel revolved.

Daisy and Tom can be directly linked to the deaths of George, Myrtle, and Gatsby himself. But with that acknowledged, I argue the immense care given by Gatsby, George, and Myrtle (i.e., the lower class) also reinforces the problems of the text. George's love for his wife drives him to homicide and eventually suicide. Myrtle's excessive concern with class and money lead her to adultery, which puts her directly in harm's way throughout the text. And Gatsby's famously attentive care to self-improvement and the wooing of Daisy are, of course, inarguably prerequisites for the story to take place. And so, although I agree that carelessness on the part of the upper class is indeed a problem that needs addressing, I contend it is the myth of America (one that pretends prosperity is predicated on individual merit rather than the mass exploitation of others) that is the true root of the issue—the relative care or carelessness we see in the characters is merely the result of each internalizing the same ideological myth that America is the land of opportunity, and, therefore, that each of them deserves what they get.

It is useful to view Gatsby as a representative of the misplaced faith of everyday Americans in meritocracy, and therefore the novel as a whole is a treatise that forces readers to engage the past as a mechanism for understanding the present. According to Churchill, "One of the reasons we remain so interested in 'Fitzgerald's world' is because Fitzgerald himself understood this world in terms of a larger temporal and ideological trajectory, a distinctly American path. Fitzgerald's own narratives are embedded in critical evaluations of the past with an eye on the present" (345). Though I don't necessarily agree America is or ever has been on a completely different path than much of the Western world (this really depends on how detailed one wishes to be in the comparison), I do agree that the relationship of the past to the present, and then, of course, to the future, is paramount to approaching the text on its own terms. That is to say, the text's preoccupation with illusions of the past necessitates a reassessment of the

behaviors and beliefs that constitute American life—such a reassessment of life-as-usual in light of everyday behaviors reinforcing the status quo allows for an imagining of alternative ways of being that lead to meaningful change in social arrangements. Stated explicitly, realizing the paradox of individualism and its supporting role in the American myth of meritocracy leads to the conclusion that collectivism and anti-competitive social arrangements are a necessary first step to effectively combating the self-reinforcing objective, systemic violence of American capitalism.

The relationship between past and present receives extensive treatment in Niklas Salmose’s “Reading Nostalgia: Textual Memory in *The Great Gatsby*.” Salmose argues *Gatsby* is about nostalgia, but it “is also a *nostalgic novel*” (67; original italics). For Salmose, drawing on the work of Paul Ricoeur, there is an important “distinction between a *novel about time* and a *time novel*,” (67; original italics) but *Gatsby* occupies both positions. Salmose claims this dual effect is achieved through both content and style, suggesting that the plot details introduce nostalgia as a major thematic concern, but the stylistic components of narratological order, romantic conventions, and homodiegetic perspective (i.e., when the narrator is part of the story he tells) solicit a nostalgic response in the reader. This nostalgic impact is of particular concern to me, as I view it as the main reason the novel relies so heavily on romanticized images and scenes to depict what is ultimately a flawed and corrupt reality. Stated another way, by using the glamorous face of American high capitalism to depict its flaws, Fitzgerald risks losing his audience to the romance before communicating the ugly truth that mass exploitation props up so-called American prosperity and the myth of meritocracy.⁵²

⁵² In reference to Fitzgerald’s later novel, *Tender is the Night*, fellow social-critic and author, John Dos Passos, commends the novel for depicting “the collapse of one of the great. . . imperial illusions” and claims “The way [Fitzgerald] first lay[s] in the pretty picture and then start[s] digging under the surface is immense” (qtd in Donaldson). According to Scott Donaldson, Dos Passos’ optimism was not shared by the “more doctrinaire

With that said, there is still value in considering the role of textual memory in creating a nostalgic effect, and perhaps undermining it as well. Salmose claims “the use of the reader’s textual memory in order to create a nostalgic experience within the text [can act] as an enhancement of the novel’s nostalgic themes” (68). He goes on to say that “reading is dependent on remembering what came before the present sentence—the past events of the reading—and assessing this memory in the present reading situation. . . . Reading does not merely flow forward, but the recalled segments also have a retroactive effect, with the present transforming the past” (68). Salmose is thinking within the boundaries of the text, but I argue this phenomenon of textual memory works intertextually as well. In the case of *Gatsby*, there is a whole lineage of Western heroes who have worked their way up in the world and succeeded (supposedly) on the merits of their own abilities and ambition. However, there are also textual memories of charlatans and con artists (Melmotte and Mr. Fisker among them) who open up the possibility that *Gatsby* may be a descendent of the wrong sort of literary forebears. Of course, this concern is mirrored by *Gatsby*’s actual family history and the mystery that surrounds it throughout much of the text. I contend that reading *Gatsby* through textual memories of *Oliver Twist* and *The Way We Live Now* displays *Gatsby* in a slightly different light and allows the reader to grapple with the contradictions of his character more aptly. In a sense, deciding whether *Gatsby* is laudable or condemnable is deciding whether he is a descendant of Oliver or of Melmotte—I argue he bears some resemblance to both, and yet is not synonymous with either. One might suggest that Victorian literary figures are not the most obvious textual memories that immediately spring to mind when reading *Gatsby*, but to this I would counter with two points: first, that this entire

communist” Philip Rahv who “was afraid that the careless reader might float on the surface and fail to gauge ‘the horror underneath’” (192). I argue the “enormous” power for critique Dos Passos perceived applies to *The Great Gatsby* as well, but I fear Rahv’s concern applies equally.

dissertation is predicated on the assertion that popular Western literature is mutually influential, regardless of which side of the Atlantic it comes from, as supported by a transatlantic audience that would read the most popular works from nineteenth century authors, whether they be British or American. Therefore, even lacking familiarity with a specific character or text, a literate audience would be familiar with common tropes influenced by popular authors, such as Dickens or Trollope.⁵³ And secondly, there are, of course, American literary figures who also contributed to the formation of Gatsby, the man, and *Gatsby* the novel. It is not my intention to suggest Fitzgerald was specifically thinking about *Oliver Twist* or *TWWLN* when composing his great American novel; I simply argue that a well-read Western author of the early-twentieth century could not help but be familiar with the character types that were formulated and re-shaped for a new world during the decades preceding his work.⁵⁴ Understanding Gatsby as an inheritor of the literary traditions of *Oliver Twist* and *TWWLN* allows readers not only to appreciate his rags-to-riches story as praiseworthy, as established by *Oliver Twist*, but also to treat his lack of origins and new excess of money skeptically, as readers learned in *TWWLN*. The fact that Gatsby does not map cleanly onto either of those texts illustrates that he is merely operating in their wake, not reproducing the figures and lessons of the past. Instead, Gatsby is a new man of the new century, and with him comes new circumstances to the systemic issues all three texts engage related to the blooming capitalist economy within which all three authors operated.

One text that has been argued to have a direct and conscious link to *Gatsby* is Joseph Conrad's *Lord Jim* (1900). Jessica Martell and Zackary Vernon argue that "Fitzgerald fashions

⁵³ Indeed, the number of people who understand *Oliver Twist* is the quintessential Victorian orphan is certainly greater than the number of people who have read the novel. Similarly, one does not need to be familiar specifically with *TWWLN* to recognize the gruff, foreign financier as a character worthy of suspicion and mild resentment.

⁵⁴ Fitzgerald's familiarity with and appreciation of Dicken's work, for example, is established in Peter Hays' "What the Dickens?: *Great Expectations* and *The Great Gatsby*." Though direct reference to Anthony Trollope is harder to locate, the similarity in themes of social ascension, class barriers, and corrupt business clearly links the authors, which is further enhanced by their shared literary heritage in Dickens.

Gatsby in the image of Jim” and “utilizes Conrad and his protagonist as a model for how to place a conventionally romantic character within a text that is otherwise preoccupied with modernist forms and themes” (56). Though I prefer to avoid dwelling too long on direct and conscious intertextual influences, lest social-problem inquiry take a back seat to literary Easter-egg hunting, Marell and Vernon do well to illustrate how “*Gatsby* is explicitly summoning Conrad’s trope of the romantic dreamer who cannot survive in the modern world” (57). By establishing this connection, Marell and Vernon do the necessary work to show both Fitzgerald and Conrad are engaging and representing a major problem of literary modernity and each has come to a similar conclusion, that the old virtues no longer suffice for a modern context. It is paramount to this project that the works analyzed are not anomalies but representative of larger trends taking place during tectonic cultural and literary shifts, which I argue is evidenced in their very popularity. That is to say, the nature of being popular requires that a text speak to the interests of a relatively large audience and, therefore, by definition, represents the cultural preferences of its time. The experimental or innovative aspects of these works indicate that the popular preference aligns with particular developments in fiction which, in Fitzgerald’s case, includes the development of morally complicated protagonists who splice romantic allure with dark insights for social critique. For Conrad and Fitzgerald, the romantic figure still lingers and holds a place in the literary imagination of a Western audience. He still commands some respect for his commitment to the virtues of self-improvement on which the myth of meritocracy relies. And yet, both authors found it important to “acknowledge the limited cultural capacity for romantic wonder. . . [they] feared was an unavoidable product of postromantic modernity” (58). If textual memory (re)shapes the reader’s perception of both the present and the past, which in turn has implications for their expectations of the future, then the diminishing of the romantic past and its heroes

implies, indeed requires, a revised understanding of the romantic hero whose mystery and aptitude used to be sufficient currency to mark him for success. In modern America, a character can no longer expect to make their way in the world simply by self-discipline, hard work, and ambition. Indeed, the fact that Gatsby ultimately proves to be a criminal shows that he has internalized the contradictions of the system he has ascended and realized that only by operating outside the bounds of the so-called rules of legitimacy (i.e., the law) does one actually achieve upward mobility. Interestingly, it is not his illegal activities that lead to Gatsby's demise, but his insistence on holding onto the past through his obsession with Daisy. In the same way that Gatsby's success was predicated on transcending the illusion of social mobility through legitimate means, so does his commitment to the mirage of the past lead to his untimely death. The lesson then is clear: one needs to see things as they truly are if one is to survive and thrive under modern capitalism.

The Spectacle, the Criminal, and the Big Con

The theme of optics has always been recognized as significant in *The Great Gatsby*. Gatsby's longing gaze toward the green light at the end of the Buchanans' dock, the circus-like parties Gatsby puts on, and, of course, the ever-watchful eyes of T.J. Eckleburg's advertisement continually reinforce the concept of looking and being watched. It is useful to engage this theme through the lens of Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967). I argue that the notion of the spectacle lies at the heart of Gatsby's problems and, in turn, represents the crisis of American identity which seems to have lost sight of its origins. I say "seems to" in this case because I also contend that such visions of the romantic past as promoted and held by Gatsby are, in fact, an illusion. The recognition of both the imaginary past and the illusory present it has allowed to develop are both paramount in exposing the spectacle of the present for what it is, a big con.

Confronting this reality is a potentially traumatic experience that may result in social upheaval, but I contend it is also the only way to alter the future and escape the consumption machine of capitalism.

Debord poses the question: “How can the poor be made to work once their illusions have been shattered, and once force has been defeated?” (“Preface”). This question anticipates the insight of the novel if we follow it to its logical conclusion, but it also requires that we assess the validity of its initial premise. That is to say, the poor are already being made to work based on the illusions they hold and the force such illusions maintain. In its simplest form, I argue the foremost illusion of the poor is the notion of meritocracy and the possibility of upward social mobility. Both Gatsby and Myrtle are drawn to the upper class under the assumption that they may be allowed entry to such social circles if they simply behave in the proper way and associate with the right people.⁵⁵ Myrtle is quite transparent, though not altogether accurate, in her assessment of how to behave as if she belonged to a higher class—her first action is to insist on buying a puppy for an apartment she doesn’t reside in, which she seems pleased to have Tom grossly overpay for. Upon arrival in the city apartment, she promptly “changed her costume” and “With the influence of the dress her personality had also undergone a change” (38). Her formerly “intense vitality” is suddenly “converted into impressive hauteur” as she “disdain[fully]” rejects a compliment on her dress, claiming “It’s just a crazy old thing” she just “slip[s] on sometimes when [she doesn’t] care what [she] looks like” (39). Of course, this is entirely disingenuous, but clearly Myrtle is attempting to perform the kind of conspicuous consumption and indifferent (or careless) wastefulness she perceives as endemic to the upper class.

⁵⁵ I omit George Wilson because he seems less concerned with social ascension than mere survival, but for an extensive analysis of George’s illusions related to surviving (and perhaps thriving) under capitalism, see Matthew Little’s “‘I Could Make Some Money’: Cars and Currency in *The Great Gatsby*.”

According to early-twentieth century economist and social critic, Thorstein Veblen, “High-bred manners and ways of living are items of conformity to the norm of conspicuous leisure and conspicuous consumption” (64). For him, the term “conspicuous consumption” identifies the tendency in the upper class to acquire and put on display “valuable goods [as] a means of reputability” (64) and as a signifier of wealth and status which allows them to consume haphazardly. The combination of excessive leisure and consumption, for Veblen, was the mark of the economically and socially prestigious at the turn of the twentieth century. His identification of this class also coincides nicely with my reading of Sarah Churchwell’s analysis of carelessness in the novel. I argue that what Churchwell identified as central to the upper-class characters (i.e., being careless) overlaps significantly with the careless consumption and displays of wealth Veblen found so condemnable in the upper class. Notably, in both cases, I am directing the terms “careless” and “conspicuous consumption” toward only those who are actually upper class. It is important to distinguish this sort of “careless” and “conspicuous consumption” from the feigned carelessness of those who are merely performing social prestige and economic excess, such as Myrtle Wilson. Veblen argued that “Closely related to the requirement that the gentleman must consume freely and of the right kind of goods, there is the requirement that he must know how to consume them in a seemly manner” (64). This additional requirement proves difficult for Gatsby, who oscillates between looking entirely natural in his charisma, and awkwardly practiced in his manners. It is even more so a challenge for Myrtle, who mistakes haughtiness for confidence and believes overpaying for a street-vendor puppy is somehow comparable to the consumptive habits of the truly wealthy. She even goes so far as to complain about room service, “despair[ing] at the shiftlessness of the lower orders” and claiming, “you have to keep after [these people] all the time” (40). Her condescension is inspired, but her

performance is so over the top that it more effectively solidifies her as out of place than it convinces Nick of Myrtle's superior social status. It is the inability to manipulate appearances, to create a believable facade, that marks Myrtle and, to a lesser extent, Gatsby, as not really belonging to the upper class.⁵⁶

Despite Myrtle's inability to perform upper-classness, she still maintains evidence of perceptiveness, as she inherently seems to recognize the requisite elements of such a performance. Appearing flashy and pretentious may seem obvious to a contemporary audience, but Myrtle's performance actually suggests a number of important insights regarding the cultural moment she represents. Whereas propriety and restraint remained core values of the upper class in the nineteenth century, particularly in Britain, the modern era would be characterized by an increased acceptance of formerly "vulgar" displays of wealth and excess (i.e., conspicuous consumption). Myrtle internalizes this lesson as she simultaneously draws attention to her flashy outfits while dismissively acknowledging their quality and cost. Though she may appear "artificial" (44) and haughty in her "elaborate afternoon dress" (38) to Nick, Myrtle also represents a broader cultural expectation of what it means to be upper class. Though her speech and demeanor betray her (she tells her friend "most of these *fellas* will cheat you every time. All they think of is money" [39; italics mine]) she accurately identifies the fascination with artificiality and spectacle that was so fashionable in the 1920s. Myrtle's obsession with appearing wealthy and careless mirrors the popular perception of the wealthy *as* careless, and her disdain for her husband, Mr. Wilson, in turn mirrors the antagonism that is popularly understood that the wealthy would have for the working poor. Myrtle claims she "thought he was a

⁵⁶ As a point of contrast, Nick lives in a small bungalow neighboring Gatsby's mansion and shows no signs of excessive wealth, but still maintains a solidly middle-upper class status due to his Yale connections, well-to-do family, and ability to convincingly perform bourgeois habits of respectability and moderate indifference (extreme indifference is reserved for only the very wealthy and social elite).

gentleman. . . [that] he knew something about breeding, but he wasn't fit to lick [her] shoe" (42).⁵⁷ Such aggressive hatred of a man who has seemingly done nothing but tried to provide for his wife seems odd, but her position is clear: Myrtle prefers the illusion of superiority and fine treatment (i.e., the affair with Tom) to the honest but humble reality of a loving marriage to George Wilson. According to Debord, "The whole life of those societies in which modern conditions of production prevail presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. All that once was directly lived has become mere representation" ("Thesis 1"). Myrtle is a clear representative of this crisis, as her modern existence is encapsulated by the continual aversion to reality while she waits for opportunities to play out the representation of wealth and love with Tom. The illusion has supplanted reality for Myrtle, making her life solely about the spectacle.

Notably, one could argue that whereas Myrtle is decidedly attracted to wealth and prestige, Gatsby could be seen as genuinely motivated by more noble endeavors such as love and self-improvement. He does, after all, have a history of obsession with self-improvement and he does seemingly engage in (very) conspicuous consumption solely for the purpose of getting Daisy's attention (or so he says). To this, I would counter that Gatsby has always been interested in class ascension, even prior to meeting Daisy, and that for him the elements of self-improvement solely serve the function of social mobility. This is evidenced by his abandoning of his home and identity "at the specific moment that witnessed the beginning of his career—when he saw Dan Cody's yacht drop anchor" (106) at the age of seventeen. He does this because he "never really accepted" his "shiftless and unsuccessful" parents as his own, and instead considered himself "a son of God" (106). Such "overwhelming self-absorption" led him to the

⁵⁷ Importantly, Myrtle's hatred of George begins when she realizes he had to borrow his suit for her wedding. It was, therefore, only the illusion of wealth, the spectacle, that drew Myrtle to George in the first place. George's inability to keep up the facade is ultimately the cause of her hatred and the disintegration of their relationship.

conclusion “he must be about his father’s business, the service of a vast, vulgar, and meretricious beauty” (106). The conflation of serving God and serving an emblem of the upper class in the hopes of making his way in the world (economically and socially) implies the greater truth that for Gatsby, and Americans in the 1920s more broadly, the pursuit of wealth and prestige had attained divine status.⁵⁸

If Debord was correct that the spectacle is “a social relationship between people mediated by images” (“Thesis 4”), then Gatsby’s success can largely be credited to his awareness of that fact and his ability to manipulate these images to his benefit. Nick describes Gatsby’s fantasies for himself (delusions of grandeur even) as “a satisfactory hint of the unreality of reality, a promise that the rock of the world was founded securely on a fairy’s wing” (107). I argue that Gatsby’s critical insight, and that of Fitzgerald by extension, is the nature of the American dream of prosperity which is “founded securely on a fairy’s wing”—in other words, it is decidedly insecure and based on a fantasy. Such a depiction of ambitious hopefulness might appear romantic to our bourgeois narrator, Nick Carraway, but a skeptical reader should perceive this surface-level shimmer as merely a facade designed to hide the ugly fact that American capitalism is not designed to reward honest, hard work; instead, the lesson Gatsby internalizes and makes clear to all of us is that success is determined by mediating images of success, not working to achieve something tangible. Naturally, such circumstances lend themselves well to the skill set of conmen and charlatans who deal more in manipulation than actual production. Whereas Nick presents Gatsby’s parties as evidence of his obvious merit, readers with the benefit of hindsight (knowing of Gatsby’s ultimate demise) should realize the obsession with glamorous parties and

⁵⁸ Note in *TWWLN*, numerous characters defended Melmotte’s “vulgarity” as permissible because he was above other men, based on his perceived wealth accumulation abilities (e.g., Mrs. Hurtle claims great men “rise above humanity”). It is then not so outrageous to claim this perception had evolved to near-godliness as we progress into Fitzgerald’s Roaring Twenties.

conspicuous displays of wealth are not reasons to believe in American capitalism but instead cause for skepticism. Debord claimed “In form as in content the spectacle serves as total justification for the conditions and aims of the existing system” (“Thesis 6”). Such spectacular visions of wealth and success as are seen at Gatsby’s parties may at first glance appear to reinforce the fantasy of American prosperity and bootstrapped success, but ultimately all it amounts to is a fantasy built on a long series of cons and illegal business.

Parallels between the text and real historical figures from the early-twentieth century only serve to further exaggerate the punch of Fitzgerald’s critique. Myths of American idealism and bootstrapped success may have been fictional, but the depiction of gangsters blurring the lines between high finance, so-called legitimate business, and criminality was all too real during the high point of American capitalism.⁵⁹ It is well understood, for example, that Meyer Wolfsheim’s “real-life counterpart [was] Arnold Rothstein” (329 Boyer). This is made apparent right away when Nick is first introduced to Wolfsheim, who Gatsby describes as “a gambler” and “the man who fixed the World Series back in 1919” (81). According to Allen Boyer’s “*The Great Gatsby, the Black Sox, High Finance, and American Law*,” Arnold Rothstein “was the first great financier of organized crime” in the US (329). He served as “the contact man between Tammany Hall [the notoriously corrupt political organization] and the New York City underworld” and was integrally involved in “union labor racketeering” (330). He was also suspected of being the

⁵⁹ Many consider the post-WWII era to be the Golden Age of Capitalism, but given that half of the top ten richest people in human history (i.e., Rockefeller, Carnegie, Vanderbilt, Astor, and Ford) were American contemporaries, or nearly so, during the transition from the nineteenth to twentieth century, I consider that era to be the high point of capitalism “working.” This is especially true in the case of Carnegie, Rockefeller, and Ford, as their fortunes were amassed in one generation through ruthless but highly profitable entrepreneurship.

“mastermind. . . [behind] the Liberty Bond thefts of 1918-1920” (330)⁶⁰ and fixing the World Series during the Black Sox scandal. The fact that Fitzgerald was personally acquainted with Rothstein (to the point that he described their first meeting as “a small focal point that impressed [him]” (332)) and that Wolfsheim bears such a close resemblance to his real-life counterpart indicates that Fitzgerald wished to represent contemporary realities in his novel—specifically the reality that corrupt business was a burgeoning enterprise.

All of my literary analysis to this point indicates criminal business was (and is) a cornerstone of Western capitalism, but I argue the cultural moment Fitzgerald puts on display marks an entirely new and concerning development when the criminal element of big business had become so enmeshed in everyday life as to even be romanticized (in some contexts) in the popular mindset. Perhaps someone of Wolfsheim’s appearance, being a “small, flat-nosed Jew” (77), would not quite appeal to readers’ ideal notion of the romantic criminal, but someone as “Handsome to look at and a perfect gentleman” (80) as Gatsby very much fulfills such a role, and Wolfsheim knew it.⁶¹ I argue Nick’s observations of Wolfsheim and his relationship to Gatsby sheds significant light on the critical insights of the novel, particularly as regards social mobility and the business of success under American capitalism.

Upon hearing Wolfsheim fixed the World Series, Nick recalls that,

The idea staggered [him]. [He] remembered, of course, that the World’s [sic] Series had been fixed in 1919, but if [he] had thought of it at all [he] would have thought of it as a thing that merely *happened*, the end of some inevitable chain. It never occurred to [him] that one man could start to play with the faith of fifty

⁶⁰ Not coincidentally, Gatsby is discovered to have been involved in illegal bond sales, which he attempts to involve Nick in earlier in the novel, as bond sales is Nick’s business.

⁶¹ It should not be lost on the reader that the anti-Semitic depiction of Wolfsheim is not only a clear reference to the real-life Rothstein, who was a Jewish gangster, but also to literary predecessors such as Augustus Melmotte and Fagin, both of whom embody the Jewish-criminal tradition in Western popular fiction. The fact that Rothstein was famously well-kept in appearance suggests that figuring Wolfsheim as an unattractive villain intentionally splices together the real figure of Rothstein with the more traditional and less flattering literary representations of the past.

million people—with the single-mindedness of a burglar blowing a safe. (81-82; original italics)

Such a description is fascinating. Far from being a unique perspective, I contend that Nick's response is actually highly indicative of the common mindset for such experiences (i.e., understanding large crimes) and in large part offers an implicit explanation as to how large crimes can be perceived and treated so differently than their smaller counterparts. Nick acknowledges that though he was aware of the World Series scandal, it never occurred to him that someone could be responsible, and instead he assumed these things “merely happened.” Such a thought process explains why large-scale, systemic violence (i.e., objective violence) can regularly be allowed to proceed as usual without the hindrance one would expect in comparable situations of more immediate and direct harm (i.e., subjective violence). When a culprit is easily identified, it is easier to direct one's anger at the villain. But when criminal injustices take place on a large scale, seemingly removed from the pedestrian experiences of most people's everyday lives, then it becomes much easier for the common person to tacitly accept such injustice as merely how things happen, without a direct cause and without a possibility for a solution. The fact that Nick has now been given a face (and not an attractive face at that) to put with the crime brings the high crime all the way down to the personal, which allows Nick to reimagine the formerly incomprehensible high-crime as comparable to “a burglar blowing a safe,” despite the fact that he is still “play[ing] with the faith of fifty million people” (82). The necessity of Nick comprehending the high crime of fraud on the national scale only through the lens of a commonplace burglary indicates that the popular mindset is not equipped to engage injustice on

a large scale, and therefore can only understand such injustice if it is repackaged in more manageable terms.⁶²

The choice of referencing the World Series scandal is also significant and serves at least two major functions: first, as already discussed, it makes the connection between the fictional Meyer Wolfsheim and the real Arnold Rothstein. Second, it illustrates just how deeply embedded the business of criminality is in the American way of life. In line with Boyer's assessment, I agree that "during the Progressive Era, [baseball] had become more than a game. It had become emblematic of America's social structure. . . it taught America's traditional values to successive waves of immigrants; and it served as an annual ritual which united cities behind their teams" (332). Baseball truly was America's pastime and it was also an excellent representation of the crisis of identity America was experiencing at the time. In the same way that it appeared on the surface to embody traditional values of fair play and teamwork, in reality it operated as a corrupt profit machine that was liable to fixes and high-stakes gambling for the benefit of a few. This, of course, is almost exactly how the American economy operated (and continues to operate), and it is no coincidence that gangsters were equally interested in fixing baseball games as they were running illegal gambling operations, stealing bonds, or selling bootleg liquor. No opportunity for making a profit was left unexplored, and that, I argue, is the real lesson of America Fitzgerald shows us in *Gatsby*. The so-called "traditional values" baseball was supposed to embody and the America it claimed to represent is a facade—in reality, it was always tainted by corrupt profit seeking. The gangsters and businessmen just came to that realization faster than the American public.

⁶² I argue this phenomenon explains the inherent struggle in *The Jungle*, which attempts to leverage a personal narrative to adequately redirect readers' concern to large-scale, systemic injustice. The difficulty in achieving this transference is, in my opinion, largely to blame for critics' aversion to the novel's concluding chapters.

The Tragedy of American Ambition

It is important to recognize that despite the generally positive sheen of *The Great Gatsby*'s narrative, the story is ultimately built on the foundation of tragedy. Between the delights of West (and East) Egg and the sensual pleasures of New York City resides the Valley of the Ashes. Behind the glamour of Gatsby's mansion and magnificent parties resides a tainted history and an ugly truth about how he makes his wealth. The beauty of the Buchanan's leisurely lifestyle exists only through the exploitation and oppression of others. In short, the success story of capitalism is actually a tragedy in disguise. The most obvious support of this fact is the deaths of Myrtle and Tom Wilson and, most importantly, the murder of Gatsby himself. Gatsby's untimely and violent death comes in the traditional form seen earlier with Fagin and Melmotte (i.e., the narrative conclusion is capital punishment for the criminals), and I argue it is largely for the same reason: these figures are the sacrificial offerings to appease the myth of social mobility under capitalism.⁶³

According to Rene Gerard's *Violence and the Sacred* (1977), "In many rituals the sacrificial act assumes two opposing aspects, appearing at times as a sacred obligation to be neglected at grave peril, at other times a sort of criminal activity entailing perils of equal gravity" (1). The duality described by Gerard maps directly onto Fitzgerald's novel, as I indicated earlier in the ubiquitous reliance on the duality between spectacle and reality as the major concern of the novel and its characters. The law requires Gatsby's illegal actions be punished lest society become disorderly (i.e., an "obligation to be neglected at grave peril"), but George's murder of

⁶³ One could argue that *The Jungle* is the only major text analyzed in this study that does not make use of the sacrificial death of the story's main criminal, but I argue, instead, that *The Jungle* reads very differently because it is a tragedy with a progressive, rather than traditional, solution. That is to say, killing off the main criminal of the text ultimately reinforces the status quo (i.e., fixes the "bad apple" problem) whereas Jurgis' political awakening forces the recognition that the problem is systemic and therefore requires systemic solutions. This is, I believe, the most important element of the novel but is also the reason for its harshest criticisms, which should not be overlooked.

Gatsby appears worse than the original crimes (i.e., “criminal activity entailing perils” of its own). Though Girard’s theorization relies heavily on sacrifice as it appears in classical texts dating back to the Bible and Greek tragedies, the social function and psychological undergirding of the sacrificial act remains largely similar in a contemporary context as its roots in classical work. For Girard, the ultimate function of sacrifice is to serve as “a deliberate act of collective substitution performed at the expense of the victim and absorbing all the internal tensions, feuds, and rivalries pent up within the community” (7)—in short, ritual sacrifice offers a release valve to violence and restores (or maintains) social order. I argue that the deaths of Myrtle and George (and Nancy in *Oliver Twist*, for that matter) embody the tragedy of their story, but the murder of Gatsby himself is the ritual sacrifice of capitalism. That is to say, the death of Gatsby reflects a social reality that requires figures of ambition to be held up as exemplars of capitalist enterprise, while also being occasionally sacrificed for supposed wrongdoing to exert the pent-up desire for violence that emerges in a competitive society while also reinforcing the current social order.

Despite the fact that Gatsby appears on the surface to resist the social hierarchies around him, it is clear by the end that his role is to uphold the status quo—I argue this is one of Fitzgerald’s most important insights, while also being the potential greatest vulnerability of the text. Nick’s first, and characteristically romantic, description of Gatsby shows him standing in the moonlight, “come out to determine what share was his of our local heavens” (29). Little do Nick or Gatsby realize, the answer is none of it. Gatsby may be allowed to rent a place in the upper class momentarily, but getting too close to the object of his desire will ultimately lead to his downfall. Looking to the heavens, in particular, is an interesting position in which to introduce Gatsby, since we learn eventually that he is actually longing for Daisy, who in turn is focalized in the green light at the end of her dock. The linking of desire for Daisy, the desire for

upward social mobility, and the deity status assigned to both places Gatsby firmly and immediately in the role of the sacrificial figure. According to Girard, “Sacrifice has often been described as an act of mediation between a sacrificer and a ‘deity’ . . . [But] the very concept of a deity . . . has little reality in this day and age, [and] the entire institution of sacrifice is relegated by most modern theorists to the realm of the imagination” (6). However, I argue capitalism and the American Dream had, at the time of Fitzgerald’s writing, supplanted the function of God as an all-encompassing and inescapable will of the universe. If things like the World Series scandal “merely happened,” it was just as likely to have been the will of the incomprehensible but all-knowing market as it could have been the will of God in an earlier time. Girard claims “It is the god who supposedly demands the victims” (7), and such a reading would not only explain how systemic violence endemic to capitalism could not only be tacitly accepted by the masses, but actually be perceived as a good thing more often than not. As stated by Tom, if Gatsby gets shot in his pool, he most likely “had it coming to him” (189) anyway. The fact that he is shot by George for the affair Tom is having with Myrtle (at Tom’s instruction no less), is ultimately irrelevant. The function of ritual sacrifice is to contain violence and protect the status quo. Nick condemns the Buchanans as “careless people. . . [who] smash up things and creatures and then retrea[t] back into their money or their vast carelessness, or whatever it was that kept them together” (189), but Nick doesn’t realize this “carelessness” is actually willful participation in the ritual sacrifice that keeps everything together. Without such ritual sacrifices, the violent longings of exploited men like George Wilson would need to find satisfaction elsewhere, and that could potentially result in a much larger cycle of violence and reaction.⁶⁴

⁶⁴ To be clear, I am not claiming this would be worse; I am merely engaging the logic of sacrifice as embodied by Gatsby. To be sure, such large-scale violent eruptions could be read as describing the ending of *The Jungle*, which Sinclair saw as necessary and paramount to the social awakening of the proletariat.

Girard claims “the sacrificial process requires a certain degree of misunderstanding [and the] celebrants do not and must not comprehend the true role of the sacrificial act” (7). I would not describe Nick as a “celebrant,” but I would argue he is a beneficiary of this act as it ultimately reinforces a social structure that benefits the bourgeois class to which he belongs. It also sustains the “well to do” life of being a bonds salesman that he has chosen for himself. This is yet another example of the relationship between duality and ritual sacrifice that allows capitalist ideology to carry on largely unhindered. Even the elements or characters that seem to be on Gatsby’s side are ultimately complicit with, or directly contribute to, the violence which ultimately victimizes him as a sacrificial figure. After Gatsby’s death, Nick claims “there was nothing” left of him in his mansion, “only the picture of Dan Cody, a token of forgotten violence, staring down from the wall” (175). Here the motif of being watched by all-seeing eyes makes one final appearance in Gatsby’s narrative and reflects on the “forgotten violence” involved in his introduction to, and serving of, Dan Cody. The fact that the original description of Cody was as a kind of savior and guide to the world of the upper class for Gatsby makes the retrospective description of “forgotten violence” resonate even more strongly—apparently what seemed like a favor in allowing Gatsby to enter the upper class was actually the beginning of his demise as the tragic hero.⁶⁵ I argue this misunderstanding, as Girard calls it, stems from the inability to distinguish between spectacle and reality, which of course is a theme that pervades the novel and indicates the major issue of America’s identity crisis at the advent of the twentieth century.

⁶⁵ The notion that Gatsby’s relationship with Cody, and by extension to the upper-class in general, is one of violent exploitation receives extensive treatment in “Gatsby’s Mentors: Queer Relations Between Love and Money in *The Great Gatsby*.” Here Maggie Gordon Froehlich reads the Gatsby-Cody relationship as one of homosexual attraction, whereby the young Gatsby is sexually exploited and possessed by Cody in exchange for mentoring and adventure (not to mention social and economic capital) that accompanies his introduction to the world of wealth. Whether one agrees with the reading of sexuality in the novel or not, it is evident that Gatsby is ultimately used, consumed, and discarded by the system he wants so desperately to succeed in.

An important scene in the novel that receives relatively little treatment in the critical discourse occurs during Nick's first party at Gatsby's mansion—though brief and seemingly out of place, this scene articulates America's major identity crisis with surprising efficiency and insight, and it occurs early enough in the narrative to foreshadow the larger significance of Gatsby's rise and fall. After hearing a number of sensationalist rumors about Gatsby's origins and how he acquired his wealth, Nick and Jordan take it upon themselves to go explore his mansion in the hopes of locating the host. Instead of finding Gatsby, however, they find themselves walking through "an important looking door" which leads them to "a high Gothic library, panelled with carved English oak, and probably transported complete from some ruin overseas" (53). The language indicates the significance of the scene, marking the entrance as "important looking" and showing the transatlantic influence in "carved English oak" decor and the Gothic architecture. It seems the entire room, and the cultural heritage it represents, was "transported complete[ly] from. . . overseas" (53). In the context of this dissertation, such a connection is especially important, as I see the literary and cultural linkage between Victorian Britain and early-twentieth century America as a direct and semi-causal link. In this room of the past, Jordan and Nick find "A stout, middle-aged man, with enormous owl-eyed spectacles. . . staring with unsteady concentration at the shelves of books" (53). "What do you think?" he immediately inquires, "About that. As a matter of fact you needn't bother to ascertain. I ascertained. They're real," referring, of course, to the books (53). The man's fascination with the realness of the books is jarring first because it identifies a skepticism that neither Nick or Jordan had upon arrival, and secondly because, upon retrospection, it seems entirely possible that they could have been fake. The man exclaims the books are "Absolutely real—have pages and everything. [He] thought they'd be a nice durable cardboard. Matter of fact, they're absolutely

real. . . It's a triumph. What thoroughness! What realism! Knew when to stop, too" (53-54). After his monologue, the man "snatched [a] book from [Nick] and replaced it hastily on its shelf, muttering that if one brick was removed the whole library was liable to collapse" (54). The man's owl-eyed spectacles mark him as a significant figure, in that he aligns with the larger motif of eyes always watching and judging the events of the times. The significance of the scene is also magnified by the fact that it is seemingly entirely disconnected from everything that happens immediately before and after it in the plot. Therefore, I contend the sole significance of this scene is for Fitzgerald to introduce and dwell on the then-contemporary American identity crisis which doesn't know what is real and what is fake, and furthermore, doesn't acknowledge as legitimate even those things that are real. In the case of Gatsby's library, the books are surprisingly (to a skeptic) real, and yet the man lauds them not for their realness but their ability to appear real and then describes this spectacle as "a triumph." For books to actually be books, and in a library no less, should not be especially surprising or exceptional. The impressiveness of the feat is only comprehensible when approached with the understanding that their sole purpose is to *appear* to be books rather than actually be books. That is to say, they are a means of manipulating perception and images; the books are not there to actually be read (presumably knowing "when to stop" indicates that they, in fact, aren't being read). The triumph, then, is the ability to successfully manage perceptions of guests and therefore reinforce the spectacle of the "great" Gatsby. Notably, the man is quick to return the books to their place as "one brick removed" may cause the entire library to "collapse." The message is clear: Gatsby's mansion, cars, and even his books are all signifiers of things that he does not actually possess (i.e.,

prestige, wealth, and education)—what is important is that the charade be convincing, not that it be legitimate.⁶⁶

Though seemingly out of place and nonsensical if read through Nick's perspective, the library scene and Owl-eyes gain clarity and significance in retrospect after the conclusion of the novel. Owl-eyes makes one other appearance in the novel, being the only person besides Nick to attend Gatsby's funeral. This is intriguing, as the man who seemingly had no significance now has some undefined importance in the story of Gatsby that is never fully explained. Notably, all the man says is he couldn't get to the house (i.e., Gatsby's mansion) and then briefly admonishes the people who used "to go there by the hundreds," before lamenting Gatsby as a "poor son-of-a-bitch" (185). Like much of the narrative, this line comes with double meaning—on the surface, the "poor son-of-a-bitch" is simply someone who deserves sympathy, but there is also a subtler abrasiveness that could be read with negative affect. Gatsby was indeed from impoverished origins (i.e., poor) and his downfall in effect ended the party for everyone, a party for which he was the host. Therefore, it is possible to imagine an annoyed disappointment in, or even anger toward, Gatsby's failure to maintain his success. In this way, Owl-eyes manages to succinctly but emphatically express the contradictory emotional response Gatsby solicits in others, a contradiction it takes Nick the entire novel to articulate while still remaining unresolved. People celebrated Gatsby as an exemplar of success while the party lasted, but they can't help but begrudge him his downfall when it all comes apart (the fact that his demise isn't necessarily his fault is irrelevant). I argue this contradiction lies at the heart of Fitzgerald's social critique and relates directly to the objective (i.e., systemic) violence of sacrificial rituals endemic to American

⁶⁶ It is debatable that Gatsby does actually maintain these things, but they are not considered legitimate by the existing structures of authority and therefore will eventually be taken from him. What remains unchanged is the infatuation with maintaining the appearance of legitimacy, rather than actually attaining it.

capitalism. In a society where mass exploitation takes place as a matter of daily business, some hope for improvement and logic of justice must exist for the systemic violence to be tolerated. As such, the myth of meritocracy serves as a mechanism by which the masses content themselves believing one's place is earned and success is possible if one merely takes the appropriate steps and proves to be exceptional. Rags-to-riches figures like Gatsby reinforce such fallacies as they are conspicuously put on display as evidence of success and opportunity, but they also serve as the sacrificial victims upon which violent desires (resulting from systemic exploitation) are exercised in order to contain such violence and maintain social order. Stated another way, the criminal and de-legitimized ways of doing business are the only available means for lower-class characters to achieve substantial wealth quickly, and it is that rapidity of success that allows for both the reinforcement of the fantasy of social mobility while also justifying the punishment of that same success.

Ultimately, it is questionable that Fitzgerald's social observations led to any improvement in the problems he identifies, even more so than the supposed failure of a more didactic novel like *The Jungle*. Whereas Sinclair lamented his inability to spur mass political engagement as much as isolated action of regulation, Fitzgerald's aims and effects were significantly more dichotomous. The story of Gatsby has maintained a significant position in the American psyche since its publication a century ago and has greatly influenced the development of the American anti-hero, particularly in the gangster-hero genre—but the same romanization that makes Gatsby appealing to his audience also reinforces the problematic fascination with surface-level appearances over complex realities that undergirded the novel's insights to begin with. My concern is that in addressing the critique of so-called artistry that Sinclair supposedly lacked, Fitzgerald managed to capture his readers' interest and imaginations more effectively but lost

their socio-political awareness in the process. The novel's lingering impact on popular culture in the US illustrates its continued relevance to the American mindset and fascination with the gangster anti-hero figure (who I contend Gatsby is an exemplary prototype), but ultimately the spectacle may have continued to overshadow the reality of the crisis the novel depicts. In the same way that the Great Depression would supply an abrupt awakening to the less-glamorous reality of American life after the Roaring Twenties, so would the literature to follow depart from the sensationalized and romantic depictions of new rags-to-riches figures like Gatsby.

Nevertheless, *The Great Gatsby's* depiction of the American crisis of identity in the twentieth century, the role of sacrificial ritual under capitalism, and the introduction of the American anti-hero gangster to popular culture would all prove monumental contributions to the American social-commentary landscape in literature and culture that still directs our gaze in the twenty-first century. The fact that we are still dealing with many of the same social ills Fitzgerald described (politically, socially, economically, and otherwise) implies that some of the more important lessons have yet to be learned, and solutions remain to be found—but one must first engage the developments of the criminal capitalists through postmodernity if we have any hope to locate such possible solutions.

EPILOGUE

Before concluding this study, I wish to acknowledge some obvious shortcomings of the work I have undertaken thus far. A brief glance over the major texts of this dissertation immediately yields an awareness that the novels are dominated by white men, generally from bourgeois backgrounds. Dickens was raised in poor houses as a result of his father's inability to pay debts, Trollope came from a humble offshoot of a titled family, but both men were relatively educated for their time and managed to experience substantial financial success in their lifetimes. Similarly, Upton Sinclair, for all his Socialist enthusiasm, was decedent from a rich family on his mother's side. He personally experienced little of this wealth growing up, as his father was a liquor salesman and alcoholic, but he was exposed to how the upper-class lived and was educated at Colombia, making him a less-than-representative spokesperson for the working-class. Finally, F. Scott Fitzgerald was born into a relatively well-to-do family in the Midwest and studied at Princeton. It is clear, then, that although these men had some experiences of struggle that may have given them insight into the trials of the working-class, they still generally wrote from a somewhat privileged and formally educated position. This is one inherent paradox in looking to historically popular literature to speak to social issues of the time—those who were able to speak to such issues were often disproportionately selected from a more privileged class than those whose struggles were more direct and most pressing.

The nature of the publishing industry, in addition to being classist, was also racist and sexist for the entirety of the nineteenth and most of the twentieth century (arguably, this is still the case, though perhaps in less obvious ways). As such, looking to popular fiction of the time is an inherently biased endeavor because the publication, dissemination, and legacy of cultural artifacts has historically been biased. This is not to suggest such bias is acceptable—it isn't. But

looking to the repressed voices of the marginalized is a somewhat different (though not less important) endeavor than looking to texts that experienced the most popularity and longest staying power in the popular consciousness. As such, the chapters of this dissertation problematically, though I argue accurately, reflect the biases of the past which linger in the present.

In addition to severe limitations regarding the authors who are discussed in this study, the medium is also intentionally restricted to the popular social-problem novel. I do not see this as a problematic limitation in the same way the limited experiences of the authors are, but it is important to acknowledge limitations where they exist. There is important work to be done looking to other popular culture artifacts of these time periods (i.e., music, theater productions, poetry, etc.), but no one study can encapsulate all forms of popular culture, and so I do not attempt it. Looking to these other, arguably less prestigious, mediums may actually be a good way to address the issue of authorial representation described above, as the “high” art of novel writing, specifically the realist novel, was historically biased toward white men of formal education, whereas more “low brow” art forms would have been more accessible to people of more marginalized status.

Finally, the restriction of national boundaries inevitably ignores, or glosses over, the role of imperialism in propping up the development of capitalism since its inception. Works such as *Mansfield Park* (1814), *Jane Eyre* (1847), *Heart of Darkness* (1899) or *Burmese Days* (1934), for example, offer some opportunity to discuss the imperial influence of colonialism on capitalism for Britain, and any such analysis would be a useful addition to the issues discussed in this dissertation. However, the international influence of capitalism and its relationship to imperialism is largely omitted from this dissertation for two reasons. First, the scope of the

analysis already borders on excessive as I attempt to engage a century's worth of social development across two nations, and opening the door to international exploitation, though extremely important, would all but guarantee overextending the analytic capacity of one work. With that acknowledged, I perhaps contradict myself with my second reason for this omission, which is that the international component of capitalist exploitation and its relationship to criminality is, I argue, at its highest point during the postmodern era, and therefore I am saving that discussion for texts with more explicit attention to international business that arise more frequently in the later-twentieth and early-twenty-first centuries. Broadly summarized, there are significant and important omissions in this analysis which should be addressed in other work, perhaps even by myself. But for the purposes of this dissertation, limitations must necessarily be set, even while acknowledging that such limitations will necessarily omit issues of immense import and significant relevance to the topics at hand.

I originally set out to write this dissertation in an attempt to trace development of the criminally-capitalist antihero in popular culture back to its origins. Naturally, it seems odd that I would conclude my analysis prior to the Great Depression. Though I intend to carry this analysis up to the present day in the relatively near future, for the purposes of this dissertation, I have opted to close my analysis prior to the Great Depression for two specific reasons. First, the symmetry of having two major texts from the Victorian period and two from American modernity feels like a good balance of transatlantic work that gives near-equal attention to both sides of the Atlantic, as well as the two major time periods of interest. I have divided the dissertation into two parts based on this distinction, but the final book-length project I desire will likely be a four-part work that delimits the first half to close literary analysis of a specific,

representative text (i.e., the contents of this dissertation). The latter portion of my work will necessarily become broader in scope and potentially more convoluted in its approach. That is to say, analyzing popular culture during late capitalism will require attention to more variety of texts than merely the popular novel (i.e., film and television), but it will also require looking to texts that are inherently international. Whereas the texts analyzed in my dissertation represent a specific time and place, postmodernity is characterized by the breaking down of formerly established boundaries and hyper-connectivity of the world across time and space. Therefore, the analysis of these later chapters will reflect such new arrangements by moving away from the novel and toward popular-culture artifacts that represent international capitalism and the crime that accompanies it as business traverses national boundaries in order to survive and thrive.

Of course, the transition from modernity to postmodernity is not a clear cut and immediate transition, and, therefore, my analysis will proceed in a similar fashion, identifying popular texts that mark major points of cultural transition and engaging the new contributions of these texts. While I acknowledge every act of writing is initially a leap of faith, hoping the direction of one's thoughts leads to something productive, I say with reasonable confidence that future chapters will encapsulate major eras with particular themes attached to them, in much the same way my earlier chapters have. For example, just a few years after the publication of *The Great Gatsby*, the Great Depression forced a severe reassessment of the risks inherent in capitalism and the function of the legal system in regulating big business. Therefore, the extension of this work will begin with Great Depression before eventually moving into postmodernity proper and then eventually proceeding to popular, contemporary television and film.

Capitalism Stumbles into The Great Depression

For a study predicated on the ills of capitalism, one would think the Great Depression would be an ideal time period to produce literature of interest. And, indeed, there are myriad examples of famous works that engage the fallout of irresponsible business practices that led to the Great Depression and mass suffering of the common person who knew nothing of the stock market or high finance. In relationship to criminality, however, popular culture entered a transitory, seemingly regressive, phase. During Prohibition, popular culture presented bootlegging gangsters as Robin-Hood-esque heroes fighting against a corrupt system that promoted unfair laws and corruption. However, in 1934, Prohibition ended, and gangsters had to rely on other sources of income that weren't quite as easy to romanticize for the general population. Whereas hit films like *Little Caesar* (1931) and *The Public Enemy* (1931)⁶⁷ would promote romanticized versions of famous criminals, the imprisonment of Al Capone, the killing of Bonnie and Clyde, and the Kansas City Massacre of 1933 all seemed to mark the end of an era and a transition back to widespread resentment for common criminals.

With all of that in mind, I intend to analyze John Steinbeck's monumental *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) as the best transitional text to get us from modernity to postmodernity. One could argue that the anti-capitalist leanings of the text, along with its bottom-up depiction of class warfare, overlaps a bit too much with Sinclair's *The Jungle* to offer new insight to this continued analysis of criminality under capitalism in American popular culture. However, I contend this text has a place in this study for two reasons. First, I argued earlier that Fitzgerald's introduction

⁶⁷ Notably, both these films were based on novels. This continues to be a popular approach to filmmaking (repackaging novels as films) for decades to come, and, I argue, the moment when film overtakes the novel as the primary cultural representative occurs when popular films become almost entirely reliant on new content, rather than visually representing the novel. This transition will be reflected in my final chapters as I will begin to reference film during the Great Depression chapter, give film equal weight during the advent of postmodernity with *The Godfather*, and then transition entirely to film and television following that up to the present day.

of the proto-antihero gangster required, or at least entailed, a sacrifice of political fortitude to create his iconic American criminal businessman. Therefore, a move back toward didactic indictment of the systemic violence in capitalism is both necessary and important to putting the trajectory of the analysis back on track—my foremost motivation, after all, is the political and social ramifications of these popular works, not dwelling on their artistic accomplishments. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly in this particular case, *The Grapes of Wrath* constitutes one of the earliest versions of an American popular culture text that appeared in multiple formats, novel and film, with substantial success in both mediums very closely together (the novel was published in 1939 and the film appeared in 1940). Though *Oliver Twist*, *TWDLN*, and *The Great Gatsby* would all appear in later film or television reproductions, the large time gaps between publication and cinematic production make these works distinctly different than the closer release of novel and film as seen in *The Grapes of Wrath* (and later in *The Godfather* [1969 and 1972]). Whereas the former examples allow for a retrospective reflection and repackaging of popular culture from the past, the latter example shows how different mediums could be leveraged to communicate a similar message to an ever-changing audience. The dual function of literature and film during The Great Depression and into postmodernity also illustrates the transitional nature of popular culture during these decades, as film and eventually television would supersede the novel as the medium most likely to reach a wide and common audience.

Because medium is an important element of the era ushered in by *The Grapes of Wrath*, this section will reference both the novel and film as a tandem effort of social commentary by Steinbeck and Ford. The move toward analyzing multiple texts allows me to illustrate that the socio-political importance of these texts, in my view, exists beyond the creators themselves—

that is to say, the authors are significant but not the primary factor in determining the social impact and insight of important cultural artifacts. This is a but a slight step in the direction that will become increasingly important once I reach the final section of my study and engage a variety of popular culture texts from contemporary television and film. These texts are the products of many contributors and operate in a field of texts working on similar issues, and, therefore, I consider it paramount that I move the emphasis away from textual authorship as the opportunity presents itself so as to effect a smooth transition to this new perspective.

Importantly, I am not promoting a thinly veiled death-of-the-author position, merely suggesting that the notion of authorship becomes increasingly complicated in new mediums, such as film and television, and my foremost concern is not with determining who deserves sole credit for the commentary of these texts. Rather, I am interested in what these texts' popularity and the similarities of their representation of criminals under capitalism suggests about popular perception of these themes (and more importantly, how we may leverage such perceptions to promote real-life social change).

The Advent of the Criminally-Capitalist Gangster Antihero in Postmodernism

In the same way that it is difficult, perhaps impossible, to talk about fictional criminals in Victorian England without discussing *Oliver Twist*, so is it seemingly inevitable that any discussion of fictional criminals in twentieth-century America will refer to *The Godfather* and Michael Corleone at some point. Having already published on anti-heroes in Western fiction, I have yet to make a claim about new developments in these characters that does not yield some reviewer comment about *The Godfather*, and Michael Corleone in specific. Rather than ignore or resist the similarities between contemporary anti-heroes and Michael Corleone, I find it more intellectually productive to engage the relationship head on, hence the initial motivation and

rationale for this dissertation. It is my contention that *The Godfather* offers the single most influential criminally-capitalist fictional anti-hero of the late-twentieth century and, therefore, is paramount to any discussion of the development of these figures in Western fiction.

The timing of *The Godfather's* arrival (1969 for the novel and 1972 for the film) conveniently aligns with the advent of postmodernity, which is often said to begin in the 1970s. The moral ambiguity and disruption of socially accepted norms often associated with postmodern fiction appears on full display in *The Godfather*, and it, in turn, represents a larger cultural trend toward characters of more questionable morality who still maintain some degree of admiration from an international audience. The other character that is frequently referenced in anti-hero discussions from this time period is Clint Eastwood's Dirty Harry. Though he represents the other side of the criminal world as a hard-boiled detective, Harry embodies the morally questionable position of the postmodern anti-hero who destabilizes audiences' perception of right and wrong, even while seemingly promoting the general welfare of his community. I argue Corleone serves a similar function in his texts, both novel and film, as he embodies his own sense of morality and social arrangement. Corleone may be a criminal who appears beholden to no set of rules but his own, and yet, he still maintains a code of conduct that directs his actions and motivations. This characterization of a gangster who plays by his own rules clearly has roots in the romanticized figures of the Roaring Twenties, but Corleone promotes ruthless business expansion, moral ambiguity, and international finance to a degree that can no longer be adequately understood through the paradigms of the past. The ability to traverse national, economic, and social boundaries is what makes Michael Corleone the ideal representative of the postmodern anti-hero, and his position as an ambitious gangster capitalist situates him nicely to connect the immorality of low crimes usually associated with common

criminals to that of the businessmen who tend to distance themselves from the social harm they cause.

Notably, the original *Godfather* novel and movie are the primary examples of popular success, but the entire trilogy is necessary to encapsulate all that the series has to offer this discussion. The first film constructs Michael as an initially resistant, criminally-capitalist anti-hero (he originally was a war hero), but the latter two are required to fully engage the degree to which he has been morally compromised by business dealings and ambition. Part two and three of the series also involve the expansion to international business dealings and increasing involvement with government officials—both of these work in tandem with the moral ambiguity that pervades the series and characterizes it as the exemplar early-postmodern fiction. Notably, I argue that Corleone’s moral ambiguity often results from becoming increasingly reliant on the paradoxical rules of capitalist enterprise, which often come into direct contrast with his own moral code. That is to say, the practice of conducting “good business” increasingly requires Corleone to sacrifice his familial values and virtues of honesty, loyalty, and hard work. Naturally, these conclusions are still in their early stages of formation, as this chapter has not been written yet, and, therefore, any conclusions presented here are to be read as merely exploratory rather than final.

Returning to Criminal Capitalists in the 21st Century

As one born in the middle of the Millennial generation, I have lived through the Dot-Com Bubble, the Great Recession of 2008, the election of a corrupt billionaire celebrity to the presidency, and now a global pandemic. My working-class upbringing has not sheltered me from the awareness that big business is arguably the greatest threat to modern civilization, at least in the humanitarian sense. Being a scholar of literature, film, and television, I have always been

drawn, both personally and professionally, to narratives of struggle and economic mobility. The mixed feelings of admiration for upwardly mobile characters but apprehension for the implications of their actions do not seem specific to me, but instead representative of a larger feeling of anxiety felt by many, likely most, of my generation. I operate on the assumption that these stories not only reflect contemporary anxieties that speak to mass audiences, myself included, but also that they direct our attention to elements of the human experience that may not always be immediately obvious to us. In a sense, I treat all fiction as a thought experiment that imagines what life is or may be like under certain conditions, for certain people. As such, my attention has lately been directed at fiction that dwells on social mobility and financial maneuvering, because I find that particular issue (how to survive under increasingly difficult material conditions) to be one of the foremost concerns of everyday Americans who have lived through, and even experienced directly, the impact of the economic and social crises I mention above.

My earliest published article was on *The Big Short* (2015) and emphasized the importance of resisting intellectual purism in favor of acknowledging the limited but useful social critiques of films (or any fiction) that benefit from the very system they criticize. I see this as a foundational premise of my scholarly philosophy and try to reinforce this position throughout all of my work. Although the topic of the *Big Short* analysis was critiquing neoliberalism, my larger concern is advocating a more positivist attitude toward the potential impact of fiction to spur social awareness and perhaps political change. It is, of course, extremely difficult to definitively prove that literature, film, or television actually result in measurable impacts in society and politics, but such an attempt seems beyond the realm of literary analysis. Perhaps one day I will participate in an interdisciplinary study that engages these issues in a

more scientific and quantifiable manner, but I argue inductive reasoning is sufficient to justify asking the question, even if it doesn't provide a definitive answer. If literature, film, and television depicting social critiques or cultural alternatives weren't broadly assumed to have a cultural influence, then why would authoritarian regimes be so adamant about censorship? Why do people get upset when a new and controversial element is introduced to popular culture? Every voice that cries out in outrage when a so-called "liberal agenda" is being advanced in fiction tells me that we intrinsically know fiction shapes perception of reality, and fiction that advocates change, at the very least, reminds us things don't have to stay the way they are.

After the *Big Short* analysis, I proceeded with a line of research that inadvertently centered on anti-heroes. I originally intended to simply analyze class representation in the BBC series *Peaky Blinders* (2013-present), which I have an immense personal appreciation for. However, as is often the case, deeper inquiry led me to the realization that my penchant for this particular series mirrored a larger preference for certain kinds of characters, which I now call the criminally-capitalist anti-hero. Furthermore, the immense popularity of series that depicted such characters, particularly in the last decade or so, also struck me as decidedly important for popular culture studies. Shortly after the Great Recession of 2008, there was a plethora of movies directed at the corrupt nature of big business and Wall Street investment banks (e.g., *Margin Call* (2011), *The Big Short*, *Too Big to Fail* (2011), etc.). After this trend died down, the proliferation of anti-heroes, many of whom are blatantly criminal, seems to have taken center stage. Series like *Game of Thrones* (2011-2019) or *Vikings* (2013-present) are notable for their immense emphasis of anti-hero amorality, and others such as *The Punisher* (2017-2019), *Sherlock* (2010-2017), and *Luther* (2010-present) promote slightly less morally-convoluted anti-heroes, but do so with more emphasis on criminality. But the most engaging examples to me involve anti-heroes

who operate in both the criminal and capitalist fields: *Peaky Blinders*, *Boardwalk Empire* (2010-2014), *Sons of Anarchy* (2008-2014), *Narcos* (2015-2017), *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013). All of these, and plenty more, revolve around anti-heroes whose sole purpose seems to be social mobility through illegal means while leveraging intelligence and business acumen to escape the consequences of illegal actions. Rather than see this as an isolated phenomenon, I argue it is important to look at this development in the context of a post-2008 world and consider why such narratives have so much appeal in the current cultural climate. Furthermore, I contend that the potential answers to such a question lead us to the logical follow-up: do these narratives imply a desire for overcoming the current state of social crisis or reflect a pessimistic acceptance of social determinism? Do audiences believe bad men inevitably rule the world, and so the best we can hope for is they eventually get their comeuppance before the season finale? Is this simply an exercise in catharsis and distraction?

The implications for the answers to such questions strike me as especially relevant to the current political climate in the US, which, of course, has global implications, given the nature of international finance, globalization, and climate change. Was the election of Donald Trump, a man increasingly recognized as a charlatan and corrupt businessman, the result of mistaking him for one of the hyper-capable anti-heroes we so often romanticize in fiction, or is he rather the inevitable result of a pessimistic world-view that believes social hierarchies are ultimately too deeply ingrained in our social structure to be significantly changed? Do the increasingly regular scandals that plague the American political system indicate that we need to implement severe social change, or do they simply mirror the fictional worlds that present such corruption as business as usual? I do not expect that any amount of analysis of popular culture artifacts will yield adequate solutions to these issues, but I do argue they shed light on the psychological state

of the masses. And, furthermore, I contend that achieving a better understanding of the nature and history of fiction that engages cultural anxieties will only aid in contemplating the questions that lead to social change. Criminally-capitalist characters may not be the solution to the problems they present, but I believe they may be a necessary step toward the revolutionary characters and stories we need to champion to redirect the political consciousness toward change rather than begrudging acceptance.

Ultimately, I argue the major insight in such a line of inquiry as this is the continued recognition that those in positions of power are decidedly, and often times measurably, worse for society than the lower criminals so often demonized in popular discourses regarding criminality. It is not the place of literary or film analysis to quantify such claims; we have sociologists and economists for that. Rather, I contend the function of cultural analysis is to ask questions like ‘why do we allow this to persist’ and ‘is there any way out of this?’ Characters like Michael Corleone or Tommy Shelby are useful because they openly acknowledge their wrongdoing, at least in moments of close confidence with the audience, but they also illustrate that the people (most often men in those contexts) who hold the most power in society are also the most harmful. Claiming that politicians are corrupt, that big business is exploitative, or that capitalist competition ultimately harms people more than it uplifts them may not appear to be especially novel ideas. But why must something be novel to be important? Any issue boiled down to its simplest expression will inevitably seem obvious, but the aim of this study and its future offshoots is to wade into the weeds and attempt to wallow in the complexity of the details, even while acknowledging the overarching insight remains the same: the sins of those in power will always be worse than those who reside in the exploited masses. This is perhaps best expressed by my favorite criminally-capitalist gangster, Tommy Shelby: “I’ve learnt something in the last few

days. Those bastards. Those bastards are worse than us. Politicians, fucking judges, lords and ladies. They're worse than us, and they will never admit us to their palaces, no matter how legitimate we become because of who we are." The major difference between Tommy's perspective and mine is he wants admittance to the palaces, and I think we should do away with them altogether. The only thing left to determine, then, is how.

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