

THE SMITHY OF TRUTH?—FRANK NORRIS, EDITH WHARTON, AND THE

WORKING-CLASS CONCEPT IN

AMERICAN LITERARY NATURALISM

BY JOSEPH P. SCHAFFNER

A thesis to be submitted to the

Graduate School-Camden

Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Masters of Arts

Graduate Program in English

Written under the direction of

Professor (name)

and approved by

Dr. Carol J. Singley (thesis advisor)

Dr. Christopher Fitter (second reader)

Camden, New Jersey

January, 2010

Table of Contents

Introduction: Revisiting the Working-Class Concept	3
Chapter 1: Got No Class—Proximity and the Obscuration of Class Antagonisms	14
Chapter 2: The Naturalistic Bank of Savings and Debt	20
Chapter 3: Solidification/Solidarity—A Matter of Setting	28
Conclusion: History, Theory, and the American Working Class—A Conceptual Problem	33
Works Cited	40

Introduction: Revisiting the Working-Class Concept

Working-class culture in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America cohered around a budding tradition that influenced radical politics for generations to come. In *A People's History of the United States*, Howard Zinn claims that “[t]here were writers of the early twentieth century who spoke for socialism or criticized the capitalist system harshly—not obscure pamphleteers, but among the most famous of American literary figures, whose books were read by millions: Upton Sinclair, Jack London, Theodore Dreiser, Frank Norris” (322). Zinn correctly interprets American literary naturalism’s thematic concerns with working-class life and engagement with contemporary class relations. Still, Zinn misfires when he assumes that fictional representations of working-class life indicate an author’s advocacy for social change. While Zinn undoubtedly refers to *The Octopus*, a novel which recounts the struggle of Californian farmers against railroad monopolies, *McTeague* complicates his case that Frank Norris fits into the radical literature of the period. For Norris, naturalism, the movement to which the authors in Zinn’s list roughly belong, is romantic, rather than realistic, in derivation and essence. He says in his weekly letter to the *Chicago American* on August 3, 1901, “[t]he romanticist aims at the broad truth of the thing—puts into people’s mouths the words they would have spoken if only they could have given expression to his thoughts” (Norris 277). The Norrisian naturalist, then, denies the social reality of his subject to assert a truth which transcends the fray of common life; his novels show ahistorical, universal verities which purport to embody values common to the human experience.

Norris's revised definition of romanticism, an aesthetic movement originally associated with revolutionary politics and thought, sifts out its radical content but retains its philosophical position on the identification of a definable human nature, a maneuver which predisposes his work to conservative tendencies; if there is an essential human nature that can be observed and measured, then it can assume the privileged position of scientific truth. Norris's own disclosure of the ideology informing his fiction thus contradicts Zinn's perspective that Norris was a mainstream writer who criticized society. If such an assertion were made about Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*, however, Zinn would approach a more accurate representation of the period's class-conscious literature. While it remains to be seen why Zinn overlooks Wharton, who has arguably enjoyed far more critical attention than Norris in recent decades, *The House of Mirth* makes a strong case for Wharton's position as an advocate for the American working class. Rather than pursuing Norris's belletristic tack of refashioning antecedent literary movements to explain reality, Wharton's fiction foregrounds contemporary history and culture to enrich her characters with sympathetic qualities, regardless of class. Instead of staking her authorial claim to romanticism, realism, or naturalism, Wharton finds her inspiration in the social conditions of her period, which gives her writing radical potential.

Zinn's generalization about radical literature inspires the following analysis. In it, I propose that *McTeague* strategically ruptures the link between human behavior and its sociological causes, thus denying the social reality of working-class Americans. Several years later, *The House of Mirth* repairs this rupture by re-humanizing poverty through sympathetic characters. These novels represent a transition in the development from a

fashionable brand of 1890s social Darwinism to a socially conscious moral indignation over class inequality that manifests in an emphasis on charity. Both novels indicate a shift in American culture from apologetic bourgeois self-legitimization to a heightened understanding of class relations in America. *McTeague* presents a dehumanizing perspective on poverty which implicitly claims that the working-class are genetically bound to devolve into bestial caricatures of human beings; in this way, Norris fictionalizes the doctrine of social Darwinism, reducing it to a logical conclusion of dissolved social bonds within the working class. *The House of Mirth* then disrupts *McTeague*'s conceptualization of poverty, showing it to be a threat common to all members of society, not just those who are genetically ill-equipped. In so doing, Wharton illuminates the problems inherent in traditional naturalism's consolidation of middle-class values; by disengaging social Darwinism from fiction, she underscores the mutable nature of class relations. While not directly related to the early-twentieth century working-class radical tradition, *The House of Mirth* recalls this movement's concern for working-class political empowerment through the class inclusivity that Lily's descent signifies. Thus Zinn's assessment overlooks the strategies deployed in the fiction to which he refers, an interpretative problem brought to light through a Marxist approach to the period's literature.

McTeague calls into question Zinn's ideas on literary history. Even a cursory glance at the novel reveals that Norris largely ignores the advances gained by the working-class during his era. As the novel divests its working-class characters of sympathetic qualities through animalized reductions of human behavior, the concept of truth to which Norris tethers his philosophy of writing exposes itself as a form of social

cement, one which seeks to preserve, not dismantle, the fractured class relations of the 1890s. Émile Zola's theory of the experimental novel, a transposition of Claude Bernard's treatise on medical experimentation onto fiction writing, helps Norris define his truth-concept: "All experimental reasoning is based on doubt, for the experimentalist should have no preconceived idea, in the face of nature, and should always retain his liberty of thought. He simply accepts the phenomena which are produced, when they are proved" (Zola 3). Such a methodological approach begs the question—how did Norris discover his truth for *McTeague*?

Norris only bases a small portion of his novel on real events. A 1893 report published in the *San Francisco Examiner* entitled "Twenty-Nine Fatal Wounds" gave Norris inspiration for the scene in which McTeague murders Trina as she works in a kindergarten classroom. The report says that a man named Pat Collins, "an iron-worker [who] soon gave up his trade [] and [had] been a common laborer ever since," murdered his wife Sarah, a "janitress of the Occidental Kindergarten as well as others" (250), over a financial dispute. References to Pat Collins's drunkenness and overall degeneracy abound, while Sarah appears as a victim of poverty and a broken home. Norris strips the story of its sentimental language and polarizing morality when he adapts it for *McTeague*, a strategy which implicates Trina as the cause of her own murder by legitimating McTeague's revenge motive.¹ From a methodological perspective, the report does little more than grant Norris skimpy evidence for his ideas about degeneracy in the working

¹ Maria F. Brandt's "For Her Own Satisfaction: Eliminating the New Woman Figure in *McTeague*" [*ATQ* 18.1 (2004): 5-23.] discusses the traditional critical consensus that Trina's miserliness justifies her violent death. She quotes George Spangler's "The Structure of *McTeague*" (*Critical Essays on Frank Norris*, Ed Don Graham. Boston: Hall, 1980) to illustrate this view of Trina's murder: "[The novel's] conclusion . . . gives the reader further cause to excuse McTeague's physical brutality and place the burden of responsibility on Trina. . . . Even the murder is presented in a way that shifts responsibility from murderer to victim" [(94-5) 6].

class; it is but a single step in what should have been an inductive chain leading to his supposedly conclusive representation of working-class Americans. To leap thus, Norris had to discount evidence which suggests the opposite—that the working class did possess attributes which counteract the stereotyped criminal behavior found in *McTeague*. Among these attributes, the well-documented literacy of the working class during Norris's time gives critics the necessary counterevidence to call into question the accuracy of his novel.

According to the U.S. Census Report of 1890, the rate of literacy in the United States was astronomical: out of a population of 47, 413, 559 Americans ten years of age and older, only 6, 324, 702, or 13.34 percent, were illiterate. The report notes that the number of people who could read but not write was higher than those who could write but not read—1,167,853, or 18.46 of the total number of illiterate Americans, compared with 5,156,840, or 81.54 percent (xxx). As for occupational statistics, the report shows that only 944, 333 of Americans were employed in professional service, while 12,777,962 Americans worked in lower-wage positions: 4,360,577 in the domestic and personal services, 3,326,112 in trade and transportation, and 5,091, 263 in manufacture and mechanical industries (303). These statistics suggest that a working-class majority would have had the requisite literacy skills to read and comprehend *McTeague*, especially when considered alongside the 1880s rate of illiteracy, which reveals an upward swing in nationwide literacy (xxx). The unsympathetic portrayal of working-class characters in *McTeague*, then, would have alienated a large portion of the general reading public, especially those of a radical political bent.

The Collins murder notwithstanding, the U.S. Census Report of 1890 reveals Norris's infidelity to true Zolaesque experimentation. His true commitment lies not with accuracy, for, as he says in his 1903 letter, "Accuracy is not necessarily Truth" (276), but with social Darwinism, the dominant ideology of the period. June Howard explains Norris's characteristically social-Darwinist maneuver—the assertion of truth in matters which are highly contested, such as the essential nature of a social group— as an ideological feature of naturalism: "a claim to represent reality . . . entails not only a descriptive but a prescriptive power . . . an account of what *is* exerts considerable influence over what one thinks *can* be and *ought* to be done" (12, emphasis added). Norris's concept of truth, which conflates description and prescription, encodes the social-Darwinist ideology with verisimilitude; accuracy, then, would be, in Norris's view, a raw representation of life as it is, one which is not mediated through the writer, the consummate arbiter of truth, however defined. Ultimately, accuracy is categorically anti-verisimilar in the Norrisian sense. Social Darwinism, on the other hand, catalyses the process of recognizing truth, hence it is verisimilar.

Consolidating establishment interests, the social Darwinism popularized by Herbert Spencer and Hippolyte Taine envisages a world of unremitting competition. In *The Philosophy of Sociology*, Spencer does not equivocate about what he views as humankind's essentially competitive nature: "As carried on throughout the animate world at large, the struggle for existence has been an indispensable means to evolution. . . . Similarly for social organisms. We must recognize the truth that the struggles for existence between societies have been instrumental to their evolution" (39-40). Taine's *The History of English Literature* establishes the predispositions for successful

competition around three criteria—race, moment, and milieu. He avers that “[t]here is a system of human sentiments and ideas; and this system has for its motive power certain general traits, certain marks of the intellect and the heart common to men of one race, age, and country” (47). These sociological theories, which were popularly accepted by the time Norris wrote *McTeague*, influence the broadly drawn working-class characters in the novel; however, these theories are based on generalities, not empirical observation. Once again, Norris’s affinity for social-Darwinist thought glosses over historical reality; moreover, Spencer’s and Taine’s ideas justify class tensions through their affirmation of natural competition—people are poor not because of an economic system that provides them with little hope of advancement, but because they are ill-equipped for competition.

Norris’s choice of sociological theories thus indicates his commitments to maintaining class hierarchies. Of the other theories of his day, those of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels staunchly contradict the social-Darwinist view. In *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Marx writes, “[t]he mode of production of material life conditions the social, political, and intellectual life process in general. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness” (4). If one accepts Marx’s position on the origin of ideology, then it must be the case that social Darwinism, as an ideology of fierce competition, supports capitalism; this support, moreover, legitimates a vicious strain of capitalism, one which bespeaks the intractable nature of this economic mode of production in late nineteenth-century America. How then could an author who neglects historical reality and bases his assumptions about the working class on social Darwinism fit into Zinn’s category of radical writers?

The problem of categorization lies not with Frank Norris directly; despite his denial of the historical American working class, it would be too severe to chastise him specifically. Rather, the conventions of American literary naturalism establish the norm to which Norris aspired. In particular, the naturalistic novel has within it formal restrictions that prevent it from achieving a radical status. Twentieth-century literary theorists note the inherent deficiencies of the naturalistic novel that occlude its radical potential. In *A Grammar of Motives*, Kenneth Burke, explaining the scene-agent ratio, whereby a fictional setting dictates the qualities of a character, says:

He [the naturalistic novelist] may choose to “indict” some scene (such as bad working conditions under capitalism) by showing that it has a “brutalizing” effect upon the people who are indigenous to this scene. But the scene-agent ratio, if strictly observed here, would require that the “brutalizing” situation contain “brutalized” characters as its dialectical counterpart. And thereby, in his humanitarian zeal to save mankind, the novelist portrays characters which, being as brutal as their scene, are not worth saving. (9)

Prefiguring Zinn’s misinterpretation of Norris, Burke generously, if inaccurately, attributes a consciousness-arousing motive to naturalism. Still, such retrofitting of ingrained, post-nineteenth-century perspectives on radicalism in literature does not wholly disqualify his claim. Even if one is not absolutely committed to a Burkean interpretation of literature, one still cannot deny the useful way in which Burke attempts to claim that the formal features of naturalism are immanently limiting in the realm of radical discourse.

Explaining why the contradiction between form and content in naturalism situates this genre outside radical discourse, Terry Eagleton, in *Marxism and Literary Criticism*, summarizes Georg Lukács’s argument against naturalism’s radical potential, which appears in *The Theory of the Novel*: “It [naturalism] is an alienated version of reality,

transforming the writer from active participant in history to a clinical observer. Lacking an understanding of the typical, naturalism can create no significant totality from its materials” (32). This explanation for the failure of naturalism to participate in late nineteenth- and early-twentieth century working-class culture identifies the movement’s ahistorical perspective; what Norris calls truth appears now as a misapplication of social theory to historical phenomena. Thus, at the turn of the century, the naturalistic novel needed to undergo considerable re-conceptualization before it could serve a progressive end. If truth trumped accuracy in the late-nineteenth century naturalistic view, then a new truth needed to assert itself as the dominant ideology in naturalism for the twentieth century’s changing political landscape. The beginning of the twentieth century, which witnessed the growth of American labor politics and the increasing radicalization of workers through organizations like the International Workers of the World (I.W.W.) (Zinn 329), required a fiction which expressed the period’s endemic class consciousness. With naturalists like Norris on the wane, the genre’s preoccupation with social Darwinism and pessimism was in decline. Nevertheless, the realistic content of naturalistic fiction—abject living conditions for the poor and working-class—persisted in America as a formidable social problem. Sensitive to this, Edith Wharton recasts the naturalist novel’s ideological commitments, its concept of truth, in *The House of Mirth*.

In 1905, six years after the publication of *McTeague*, *The House of Mirth* entered the American literary scene. Wharton’s novel builds on the conventions of American literary naturalism and its preoccupation with class relations; however, *The House of Mirth* diverges from the social Darwinism of its predecessors through its sympathetic representation of the poor and working class. Foregrounding the hypocrisy of elite New

York society, Wharton depicts the economic rise and fall of Lily Bart to emphasize the possibility of social instability. She condenses this message in Lily's social descent to revise the traditional naturalistic conception of poverty—no longer a phenomenon to be observed from a distance, poverty now presents itself as an object of terror and an actual condition of life for a character whose breeding and good graces would suggest her class stability, according to social Darwinism.

Donald Pizer, in "The Naturalism of Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*," teases out the tension between Wharton's use of naturalistic conventions and her perspective on class relations: "She [Wharton] . . . depicts very different levels of society than those present in *Maggie*, *McTeague*, and even *Sister Carrie*, and she even renders social conditioning with greater attentions to codes and conventions of belief than to such physical states as extreme poverty or alcoholism" (247). One of the ways in which Wharton expands the realm of human behavior beyond the traditional limitations of naturalistic fiction is through the concept of charity. In Book I, Chapter 10, urged by her budding identification with indigent women, Lily donates a small sum to Gerty Farrish's charity: "The satisfaction derived from this act was all that the most ardent moralist could have desired. Lily felt a new interest in herself as a person with charitable *instincts*" (Wharton 88, emphasis mine). As an instinct, charity deforms the naturalistic assumption that instinctual behavior necessarily breeds disintegrative, anti-social relations between human beings. Thus Wharton's deformation of naturalistic conventions signals a break from the atomizing effects of social Darwinism.

In terms of its deformation of naturalistic conventions, *The House of Mirth* presages the ideas forwarded by Roman Jakobson's "On Realism and Art" (1921).

Jakobson claims that the problem in defining realism and naturalism by a set of conventions arises from the imprecise language used by traditional critics to identify unifying ideas in these movements. For Jakobson, realism traditionally has had two competing definitions: “the tendency to deform given artistic norms conceived of as an approximation of reality,” and “the conservative tendency to remain within the limits of a given artistic tradition, conceived of as faithfulness to reality” (Jakobson 3). Naturalism, then, is a special case of the first definition, as it understands itself to be a form of “genuine realism” (Jakobson 4), which is to say that, by undoing the conventions of realism—what Norris refers to as “the drama of the broken teacup” in “A Plea for Romantic Fiction” (277)—, the naturalists achieve true verisimilitude. As has been established above, the truth to which the naturalists adhere is that of social Darwinism. Thus Wharton deforms the conventions of American literary naturalism by dispensing with social Darwinism and replacing it with a new definition of human behavior, one which recalls Marx’s claim about ideology—that economic class determines one’s actions and beliefs. This definition includes charity as the operative force unifying humanity. In *The House of Mirth*, charity’s cohesive power thus undoes the socially repulsive, disintegrative effects of competition found in *McTeague*.

Chapter 1: Got No Class—Proximity and the Obscuration of Class Antagonisms

A protagonist's proximity to the working-class, both spatial and economic, determines to the extent to which *McTeague* and *The House of Mirth* initiate their thematization of class relations. Doctor McTeague's precarious position on the cusp of class divisions, as a dentist whose training consisted of lessons from a "charlatan" traveling dentist (Norris 6), locates his character within the cultural signs which mark Norris's opinion of the rampant philistinism of working-class life: "These were his only pleasures—to eat, to smoke, to sleep, and to play upon his concertina" (Norris 5). The narrator's commentary indicts McTeague's lack of culture; the narrative tone established thus, the reader perceives the unsympathetic manner in which Norris introduces his characters and claims license to judge them. To emphasize this perspective, the narrator says that "McTeague's mind was as his body, heavy, slow to act, sluggish. . . . Altogether he suggested the draught horse, immensely strong, stupid, docile, obedient" (Norris 6). The one-to-one correlation between taste and physiology, then, brands McTeague with working-class features from the novel's outset—he is proletarian, according to Norris, in character, if not in profession.

Lily Bart's qualities, both physical and aesthetic, appear in stark contrast to McTeague's. Mediated through Lawrence Selden, the consummate spectator of class relations in *The House of Mirth*, Lily's characterization begins with a generous encomium of her peculiar beauty: "Her vivid head, relieved against the dull tints of the crowd, made her more conspicuous than in a ball-room, and under her dark hat and veil she regained the girlish smoothness, the purity of tint, that she was beginning to lose after eleven years of late hours and indefatigable dancing" (Wharton 5-6). Through extended

repartee with Lily in his apartment at the Benedick, Selden must revise his sorely inadequate definition of femininity to include the exceptional case of Lily Bart: “Was it possible that she belonged to the same race? The dinginess, the crudity of the average section of womanhood made him feel how specialized she was” (Wharton 6). This praise of Lily’s rarity indirectly communicates the narrator’s perspective on her personal value; however, it also implies her precarious class position, as revealed when Selden and Lily’s conversation turns to the subject of marriage. Selden critically assumes that, due to his comparative lack of wealth in the context of elite New York society, Lily would not “waste her powder on such small game” as himself (Wharton 9). Because Selden’s judgments are so closely bound up with the narrator’s, it is difficult, at first, to determine exactly where such criticism of Lily’s supposedly mercenary motives lies. This uncertainty plays a strategic role throughout the novel, one which assumes profound importance when Lily’s fortune turns downward. Still, as an introduction, Lily’s characterization, unlike McTeague’s, suggests that she is closely aligned with the upper class, although the cultural signs which mark her thus are in fact manifestations of her precarious class position, for she must cultivate her beauty and aesthetic sense as enticements directed towards a wealthy suitor, such as Percy Gryce.

To better interpret the complexity of Lily’s class position, one must carefully consider the concept of labor-power as it functions in *The House of Mirth*. Critical attention to Lily’s commodification recasts Marx’s theory of labor-power.² In *Capital*, Marx defines labor-power as “the aggregate of those mental and physical capabilities existing in a human being, which he exercises whenever he produces a use-value of any

² Wai Chee Dimock’s “Debasing Exchange: Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth* [PMLA 100 (October 1985): 783-92] analyzes economic tropes in the novel.

description” (164). Lily’s use-value, because she has yet to find a husband upon which to bestow her feminine graces, remains only partial, for “[u]se-values become a reality only by use or consumption” (Marx 44). As for its exchange-value, which is the “exchange relation of commodities” (Marx 54), Lily’s femininity depreciates with age. Thus Lily’s position in relation to her wealthy friends symbolically replicates the condition of the working class: “Within the limits of what is strictly necessary, the individual consumption of the working class is . . . a reconversion of the means of subsistence given by capital in exchange for labor-power, into fresh labor-power at the disposal of the capital for exploitation” (Marx 537). The terms by which exchange functions break down in *The House of Mirth* because Lily’s diminished funds make it difficult for her to reproduce her labor-power, which in the novel manifest as her rarity—the confluence of beauty, grace, linguistic sophistication, social skills, and developed interiority. Whereas McTeague’s labor-power takes on a conventional aspect, for it can be easily reproduced provided that he has patients, Lily’s rarity cannot withstand the vicissitudes of the market; no one wishes to contribute to her labor-power because she cannot afford the symbolic wealth that her peculiarity confers upon its potential consumer, which in the novel appears as the wealthy male suitor.

The galvanization of conventional labor-power in *McTeague* occurs during a detailed passage in which the dentist looks outside his window on a quiet Sunday afternoon. The passage’s organization around the types of laborers that appear over the course of an average weekday morning hierarchally parses out sub-levels of proletarians:

It [Polk Street] woke to its work about seven o’clock. . . . The laborers went trudging past in a straggling file—plumbers’ apprentices . . . carpenters . . . gangs of street workers . . . plasterers. This little army of workers, trampling steadily in in one direction, met and mingled with other toilers of a different description—

conductors and “swing men” of the cable company going to duty; heavy-eyed night clerks from the drugstores on their way home to sleep; roundsmen returning to the precinct police station to make their night report, and Chinese market gardeners teetering past under their heavy baskets. (Norris 7-8)

The view from McTeague’s dental parlors grants him an Olympian perspective of Polk Street’s laborers; his elevation and spatial detachment from the hum of proletariat life relieves him of direct relationship to the working class. The diction in the passage evokes the diminutive status—both in size and class—that these laborers have in McTeague’s perspective. Significantly, it is not until later in the morning that the managerial class makes its way to work: “Their employers followed about an hour or so later—on the cable cars for the most part—whiskered gentlemen with huge stomachs, reading the morning papers with great gravity; bank cashiers and insurance clerks with flowers in their button holes” (Norris 8). Class cues—obesity, literacy, and vanity—place these men in the “mollycoddled” category against which Theodore Roosevelt declaimed, the qualities of which Tom Lutz describes as “the civilized races becoming soft, flabby, and feminized.” Although the trenchant masculinity of *McTeague* suggests that he would agree with Roosevelt’s corrective for cultural emasculation, that “[t]he cure for such deterioration . . . was the exercise of strength and the cultivation of manliness” (Lutz 81-2), it would be hasty to read this description as an indictment of wealth, for Norris does not impute the feminizing effects of professionalization on the middle class beyond making this suggestion.

The absence of class antagonisms in *McTeague* confounds Zinn’s argument for Norris’s working-class sympathies. Without a representation of such tensions between employers and employees, the mechanism of exploitation, the conflict between the working and middle classes, remains unaddressed. This absence initiates the rupture

between human behavior and sociological causes in *McTeague*, which in turn allows Norris to explain away abject social conditions through social Darwinism.

The House of Mirth, conversely, complicates class relations to create an air of disquiet between classes. Upon leaving the Benedick, Lily crosses paths with a charwoman who has “a broad sallow face, slightly pitted with small-pox, and thin straw-coloured hair through which her scalp show[s] unpleasantly.” This unflattering description, at first, places Lily in an upper-class role through the exercise of judgment, as apparently emphasized through the free indirect discourse concluding the scene: “What did the creature suppose? Could one never do the simplest, the most harmless thing, without subjecting one’s self to some odious conjecture?” (Wharton 13). The cause of Lily’s suspicion, to which she herself attributes the charwoman’s working-class insubordination, lingers open-ended, without the narrator’s direct commentary. Unmodified thus, Lily’s judgment evinces an anxiety over her own class position, as the passage invites the reader to assess Lily’s critique as a sign of weak faith in her own ability to marry for money, which is analogous to the charwoman’s labor-power. Through subtle means, Wharton registers class antagonisms in Lily’s internalization of her interaction with the char-woman. The personal dimension of this encounter courses through *The House of Mirth* and receives heightened poignancy as Lily finds herself progressively unable to achieve her upper-class aspirations.

Inter-class encounters, the critical point at which *McTeague* and *The House of Mirth* diverge in their depiction of working-class life, offer a means of locating Norris’s and Wharton’s political commitments. Amy Kaplan’s claim that “realism works to construct a social world out of the raw materials of unreality, conflict, and change”

underscores the conceptual purpose of naturalism as well (14), for in the naturalistic novel there exists a tendency toward solidification. For Norris, this tendency manifests concretely as an interactive social scene in which class position can be reduced to a biological explanation; when characters relate, their purpose is not cooperative, but competitive, a phenomenon which undergirds the ideological prerogatives of social Darwinism. A construct legitimated thus solidifies the events in *McTeague* as verisimilar, and in so doing offers brutality and competition as a replication of reality. *The House of Mirth*, however, troubles Kaplan's assertion, for Wharton's attention to class relations indicates a deformation of both naturalistic convention and class position. Wharton's understanding of class antagonisms reveals that she does not seek the Norrisian "truth." Neither does Wharton seek anti-Norrisian "accuracy"—she is concerned with giving a pictorial account of life not as it is, but as it ought to be.

Chapter 2: The Naturalistic Bank of Savings and Debt

The de-circulation of money in *McTeague* and *The House of Mirth* takes on two distinct forms—savings and debt. Imbued with a transcendent character, money in these novels carries with it a promise of security; however, the exact nature of security differs greatly between both. After winning five thousand dollars in a lottery, Trina, whose frugality brooks no interference, undergoes a drastic psychological transformation—a pathological need to save—once she and McTeague suffer a reversal of fortune at the hands of the envious Marcus Schouler. Lily Bart's fluctuating economic status, *in media res* and on the downturn from the very first chapter of *The House of Mirth*, compels her to accrue considerable debt for the maintenance of her lifestyle and pursuit of marriage prospects, as established by her private conversation with Selden in Book I, Chapter 1. While the palpable fear of poverty lurks beneath Trina's and Lily's actions, the etiology of poverty, its social causes, differ in these novels. Norris maps the financial descent of McTeague and Trina with another sense of the word—genetic causation. But for Wharton, the interface of social and economic forces impinging upon Lily's need to preserve her rarity evinces the centrality of variability in class positions: one can climb, but one may also fall. The difference, then, between *McTeague* and *The House of Mirth* originates in the function of instinct in each: while limited in *McTeague*, instinct in *The House of Mirth* receives a much fuller treatment, one which includes implicit claims about morality's essential place in human nature.

In *McTeague*, money and the social problems surrounding it create fundamental misinterpretations about how poverty and wealth exist in dialectical terms which indicate the basic antagonisms perpetuating both economic states. With biting sarcasm, the

narrator of *McTeague* summarizes the lottery representative's stories of winners who have enjoyed the lottery's bounty prior to Trina's so doing: "Invariably it was the needy who won, the destitute and starving woke to wealth and plenty, the virtuous toiler suddenly found his reward in a ticket bought at a hazard; the lottery was a great charity, the friend of the people, a vast beneficent machine that recognized neither rank nor wealth nor station" (Norris 68). Although a cursory reading of this passage might suggest that is an invective against parasitic gambling, the pessimism over an individual's agency in social change in *McTeague* directs the criticism towards the lottery's participants, not its source. For instance, Marcus Schouler's nebulous political rhetoric indirectly mocks activism, as when he pontificates to McTeague, "[i]t's the capitalists that's ruining the cause of labor . . . white-livered drones, traitors with their livers as white as snow, eatun the bread of widows and orphuns; there's where the evil lies'" (Norris 12). Without an acute understanding of political institutions, the characters in *McTeague* inhabit a world where the nature of social formation exists only as a vague notion remotely connected with their lives. The irredeemable ignorance of these characters grants the narrator license to mock them as he sees fit; moreover, the tone of pessimism which colors the representations of working-class characters explains Trina's later misunderstanding of how money can grow through investment.

The House of Mirth shows an opposite development of interpretation, for the novel foregrounds the dearth of wealth, not its sudden appearance, as the primary conflict. Lily's introduction to money's transcendent value comes once she experiences its absence from her life. At the age of nineteen, Lily witnesses her father's financial ruin. The narrator gives a telling preface to his event: while voicing her desire for expensive

flowers to her mother, Lily's request, met with refusal, leads to the narrational remark that "[s]he [Lily] knew very little of the value of money" (Wharton 27). Her mother's detestation of appearing poor after the death of her father consolidates Lily's view on class: "To be poor seemed to her such a confession of failure that it amounted to disgrace; and she [Lily's mother] detected a note of condescension in the friendliest advances." Establishing her repugnance of charity, Lily's mother refuses to accept her diminished financial status, and this denial breeds within Lily a reifying notion of her own beauty: "It was the last asset in their fortunes, the nucleus around which their life was to be rebuilt" (Wharton 29). Nevertheless, a contradiction arises for Lily, for although she begins to understand the power of money, she also "would not indeed have cared to marry a man who was merely rich: she was secretly ashamed of her mother's crude passion for money" (Wharton 30). To adapt, Lily learns to accept the fluctuating nature of class: "Misfortune had made Lily supple instead of hardening her, and a pliable substance is less easy to break than a stiff one" (Wharton 31). The origins of Lily's drive to preserve her rarity as her only commodity, even through debt, is the product of social conditioning, which implies that the social reality of the novel admits the possibility of change, not determinism, as in *McTeague*.

Whereas overspending and obligation play a major role in *The House of Mirth*, debt factors marginally in *McTeague*, at least explicitly. In Chapter 5, Marcus lends McTeague money so that he may enter Schuetzen Park for his planned picnic with the Sieppe's. Marcus, angered by McTeague's good fortune of having been engaged to Trina prior to her winning the lottery, calls upon McTeague to collect this debt while drinking one evening at Joe Frenna's saloon. Before tossing a knife at McTeague and missing,

Marcus says to McTeague, “[i]f it had been me . . . you wouldn’t have had a cent of it—no, not a cent. Where’s my share, I’d like to know? Where do I come in? No, I ain’t in it no more. I’ve been played for a sucker, an’ now that you’ve got all you can out of me, now that you’ve done me out of my girl and out of my money, you give me the go-by” (Norris 83). This dispute refers to Marcus’s ceremonious handing-over of Trina to McTeague in Chapter 5. Magnanimously, Marcus proclaims, “[n]ever mind, old man. Never mind me. Go, be happy. I forgive you” (Norris 48), thus reducing Trina to a commodity, which does not appreciate in value until she wins the lottery. Here perceived, not actual, debt fractures McTeague and Marcus’s relationship, signaling its change from a mutually beneficial friendship to bloody competition. Thus debt, the monetary embodiment of instinctual competition, carries the social-Darwinist ideology throughout *McTeague*; the inherent selfishness of humanity finds its actualized form in a financial relation.

Debt descends upon the unassuming Lily as she rides with Gus Trenor from the train station to Bellomont in Book I, Chapter 7 of *The House of Mirth*. By promising to handle Lily’s investments in the stock market, an economic mechanism about which “[s]he understood only that her modest investments were to be mysteriously multiplied without risk to herself” (Wharton 68), Trenor obscures the terms of the debt by phrasing it as a business transaction, all the while knowing that the money he gives to her will come from his own resources. Similar to the McTeague-Marcus debacle, Lily’s debt to Trenor stems from an earlier, relatively minor debt: while staying at Bellomont, she lost three hundred dollars at playing bridge. She tells Trenor that she is “so ignorant of money” (Wharton 67), an admission which invites him to offer her his knowledge of the

stock exchange: “[H]e had tried, with some show if success, to prove to her that, if she would only trust him, he could make a handsome sum of money for her without endangering the small amount she possessed. She was too genuinely ignorant of the manipulations of the stock-market to understand his technical explanations” (Wharton 67-68). Trenor’s botched explanation of investment shows how he “misleads through omission” (Goldner 295), an act which betrays his own ignorance of the stock market’s inner workings to the reader, if not to Lily. By enlisting Lily’s trust through the promise of sustaining her quality of life, Trenor is at liberty to make overtures toward Lily, which she begrudgingly accepts as “part of the game to make him [Trenor] feel that her appeal had been an uncalculated impulse, provoked by the liking he inspired” (Wharton 68). Thus Lily misleads Trenor as well, for she allows him to entertain notions of physical intimacy in which she will not actually engage, a maneuver that exemplifies Dimock’s claim that the “the actual wielders of power in the book are not men but women” (784). The prospect of maintaining her rarity offsets, at least initially, the financial and physical risk Lily takes by soliciting Trenor’s assistance; unlike Trina, she understands that money can grow insofar as one is willing to make and sustain an investment.

After Marcus Schouler reports McTeague for not having a license to practice dentistry, Trina and McTeague find that they must immediately move to cheaper accommodations. Tensions arise as McTeague begins to suggest that he and Trina use the five thousand dollars she won to sustain their accustomed way of life. In response to McTeague’s intimation that they jointly own the five thousand dollars, Trina says, “‘It’s all mine, mine. There’s not a penny of it belongs to anybody else. . . . We’re not going to touch a penny of my five thousand dollars’” (Norris 151). Before McTeague lost his

practice, Trina had invested her lottery winnings in her Uncle Oelbermann's toy store: "Invested in this fashion, Trina's winnings would bring in twenty-five dollars a month" (Norris 78). Now that the McTeagues are reduced to poverty, this money has become the one stable sources of income they have, save for Trina's work as a toymaker for her uncle's store. Trina's sensitivity to their household finances places her in a position of power over McTeague, and he responds with heavy drinking and physical abuse. Trina retreats into her savings, exhibiting abnormal behavior³: "[S]he would draw the heap lovingly toward her and bury her face in it, delighted at the smell of it and the feel of the smooth, cool metal on her cheeks. She even put the smaller gold pieces in her mouth, and jingled them there" (Norris 170). The physical intimacy Trina discovers illustrates her preoccupation with money's transcendent value; through bodily integration and hoarding, however, she seeks to invent a use-value—a sensuous fetishization for what is the very embodiment of exchange-value, and, ironically, due to her profound fear of poverty, she dispenses with the advanced mode of capitalist accumulation—investment. The absurdity of this behavior reinforces naturalistic stereotypes about the working class—namely, that their overly literal understanding of money results from their degenerative, instinctual behavior and lack of ability to plan or think abstractly.

The terms of Lily's investment in her rarity grow increasingly steep as she refuses to capitulate to Trenor's advances. After dismissing him at the opera, Lily unwittingly finds herself his unlucky guest. He lures Lily to meet him at his home under a false pretense—posing as his wife Judy, Gus sends Lily a card requesting a visit. She complies, and the events which transpire in the Trenor household thereafter decidedly tip

³ Karen F. Jacobson's "'Who's the Boss?' *McTeague*, Naturalism, and Obsessive Compulsive-Disorder" [*Mosaic* 32.2 (1999): 27-42] argues that Trina's behavior is one of the earliest novelized accounts of obsessive-compulsive disorder.

the balance in Gus's favor. As his captive audience, Lily must endure Gus's indignation over his rejected advances: "[A] man's got feelings, and you've played with mine too long. I didn't begin this business—kept out of the way, and left the track clear for the other chaps, till you rummaged me out and set to work to make an ass of me" (Wharton 114). Dale Bauer argues that this restoration of masculine authority is the tipping point in the novel's inauguration of debt-bred poverty: "Because she [Lily] is alienated from her desires, she is unable to enter into any economy but the dominant sexual/economic one. In this economy of exchange, she must renounce her desire for a powerful sense of self in order to participate in the market" (94). No longer can Lily stave off her fear of poverty by cultivating her rarity, for, as the Trenor incident attests, rarity can be expropriated, stripped of its use-value once accruing debt forces one to sell it at a reduced cost; in the case of Lily Bart, this cost takes on the symbolic value of her virtue, which she cannot allow herself to give freely to Trenor.

Like Lily, Trina can no longer manage her investment; however, mismanagement through a fixation on money's material qualities, not debt, precipitates Trina's exit from the market. The several visits she makes to her Uncle Oelbermann, each time to withdraw incrementally from her initial investment, leave him no choice, as a business owner, but to give Trina an ultimatum: "If you wish to draw out the whole amount let's have some understanding. Draw it in monthly installments of, say, five hundred dollars, or else . . . draw it all at once, now, today" (Norris 197). Trina cannot resist, her appreciation of money being so literal, and the complete withdrawal results in her final susceptibility to McTeague's violence when, after visiting Uncle Oelbermann's store, McTeague discovers that Trina has ended her investment, murders Trina, and escapes to Placer

County with the five thousand dollars. Thus McTeague re-circulates the money, and Trina, punished for her misunderstanding of how money works in an economy, suffers a violent death.

Although Lily suffers from the same misunderstanding of capitalism as Trina, Wharton's emphasis on Lily's rarity, particularly her natural intelligence, saves her from the animalized reductions Trina suffers in *McTeague*. For example, the shadowy dealings of the stock exchange form the backdrop of Simon Rosedale's suggestion to Lily that she should use the correspondence between Bertha Dorset and Lawrence Selden for monetary gain, through blackmail. Lily's initial distaste for Rosedale's advice leads to an insight which recalls her refusal of Trenor's advances. Referring to Lily's awareness of the intimations of dishonesty that speculation carries, the narrator says, "[t]his glimpse of his [Rosedale's] inner mind seemed to present the whole transaction in a new aspect, and she saw that the essential baseness of the act lay in its freedom from risk" (Wharton 203). Thus the novel indicates Lily's shift from a woman who is self-aware of her rarity's monetary value to a person who places an ethical value on honesty. Although this quality of Lily's character arguably has been present throughout *The House of Mirth*, she cannot actualize it until her class position diminishes. Rather than being punished for her nonparticipation in parasitic business practices, Lily, because she understands how the market works, can muster the courage to deny its enticements.

Chapter 3: Solidification/Solidarity—A Matter of Setting

The concluding settings of *McTeague* and *The House of Mirth* dovetail and thematize the economic conditions in each novel. The primeval austerity of Placer County extends the competitive imperative that *McTeague* champions to a natural landscape, while Nettie Struther's kitchen, a comparatively modest environment when set against the grandeur of Bellomont, exudes *The House of Mirth's* emphasis on charity, as Gerty Farrish's charity has made Nettie's renovation possible. Competition and charity ameliorate the problems introduced by saving and debt, respectively, for each signifies a form of re-circulation in these novels. As both concepts offer hope to their participants—of survival and transcendence—they codify a particular worldview, one based on action, not passivity. Nevertheless, *McTeague's* concerns for competition insinuate that only those best equipped to survive will transcend the struggle in which they may find themselves, while charity in *The House of Mirth* implies that society, not the individual, is responsible for the wellbeing of all its members, not just the strongest. Coursing through *McTeague* and *The House of Mirth*, the contradictory states of repulsion and cohesion inscribe upon these novels a conceptual scaffolding that aligns each with contradictory ideologies—social Darwinism and sympathetic charity.

Nature's feral magnitude legitimates competition in *McTeague*. Chapter 20 opens with what can only be described as a naturalistic appropriation of the sublime, about which the narrator says, "[i]n some places east of the Mississippi nature is cosey, intimate, small, and homelike, like a good-natured housewife. In Placer County, California, she is a vast, unconquered brute of the Pliocene epoch, savage, sullen, and magnificently indifferent to man" (Norris 208-9). Such a place is not made for effete,

civilized men, a point about which the narrator does not equivocate: “[t]here were men in these mountains, like lice on mammoths’ hides, fighting them stubbornly, now with hydraulic ‘monitors,’ now with drill and dynamite, boring into the vitals of them, or tearing away great yellow gravelly scars in the flanks of them, sucking their blood, extracting gold” (Norris 209). The overwrought personification of this passage implies that the struggle for survival in Placer County requires an intimate relationship with the landscape, as the mechanized tools appear as surrogates for tactility. The simile recalls the novel’s opening scene in which McTeague observes Polk-Street life from his dental parlors; however, the scale from man to nature magnifies the perspective, which reveals that the hierarchical structure of class society has a natural analogue. Under such conditions, competition is essential, as there is only a limited amount of gold to be had. Thus the description of Placer County hyperbolically exemplifies the social-Darwinist view of struggle as the rudimentary condition of existence.

A recipient of Gerty Farrish’s charity, Nettie Struther, through her sheer affirmation of life’s worth even in the midst of abject poverty, charismatically transforms the meagerness of her kitchen. The afflicted Lily, exhausted from her descent into poverty, finds in Nettie a form of simple, disinterested human kindness that reinvigorates her hope, if only for a moment: “Nettie Struther’s frail envelope was now alive with hope and energy: whatever fate the future reserved for her, she would not be cast into the refuse heap without a struggle” (Wharton 243). The generative presence of Nettie’s daughter ironically answers her comment to Lily, “‘I only wish I could help *you*—but I suppose there’s nothing on earth I could do’” (Wharton 245), for interaction with the child replenishes Lily’s desiccated self-worth. “As she held Nettie Struther’s child in her

arms,” the narrator relates, “the frozen currents of youth had loosed themselves and run warm in her veins: the old-life hunger possessed her, and all her being clamoured for its share of personal happiness” (Wharton 249). Nettie’s kindness, her genuine concern for Lily’s wellbeing, effectively de-institutionalizes charity; Lily must now admit that giving without the possibility of monetary repayment is not a mere hobby for the Gerty Farrishes of the world, but an actual condition of survival, one which instills in the recipient values that replicate the initial charitable act in various ways, however small or seemingly insignificant.

The struggle between Marcus and McTeague in *Death Valley* forecloses the possibility of cooperation even when it presents itself under dire circumstances. As a bounty hunter on a personal mission of revenge, Marcus sees the opportunity to capture McTeague as a means of reclaiming the five thousand dollars which he still regards as his. A problem arises, however, during his much-anticipated retribution: McTeague’s mule, attached to which the bag containing the five thousand dollars dangles tantalizingly, has escaped from its tether. McTeague and Marcus are forced to work together, and “[a]lready the sense of enmity between the two had weakened in the face of common peril” (Norris 241). Marcus shoots the mule, spending his round. Once this moment of cooperation passes, the competitive imperative returns: “In an instant the eyes of the two doomed men had met as the same thought simultaneously rose in their minds” (Norris 242). Their ensuing fight echoes the intimacy with which the laborers of Placer County extract gold from the earth, and the closing irony of Marcus clasping a handcuff around McTeague’s wrist as his final act materializes their mutual hatred and struggle against one another, since the novel’s opening chapters, as an indissoluble link

bonding them together unto death. Thus the only connection between the only two people in Death Valley is that of competition.

Lily's death reconnects her to Selden; however, unlike McTeague and Marcus, this connection originates from love, not hatred. Selden's return to Lily signifies the failure of cooperation, which he acknowledges through his lamentation, even though he still neglects to admit his complicity in the matter: "He saw that all the conditions of life had conspired to keep them apart; since his very detachment from the external influences which swayed her had increased his spiritual fastidiousness, and made it more difficult for him to live and love uncritically" (Wharton 255). As spectator *par excellence* in *The House of Mirth*, Selden occupies the privileged role of never having to partake in the society against which he casts his judgments. Unlike Nettie, a recipient of and participant in charity, Selden is a self-appointed outcast; he can point out the problems but cannot offer solutions, which turns his tardy sincerity into an indictment not of the society he so vocally opposes, but of his own oblivion to the material causes of injustice. The novel reveals that, through his passivity, he upholds the very institutions he decries.

Neither *McTeague* nor *The House of Mirth* resolves the attendant social questions each raises. McTeague, cast out of the society against which his essential nature rebelled, represents for Donald Pizer the idea "that man's attempt to achieve an ordered world is constantly thwarted by man himself" (310). This tragic view of McTeague seeks to imbue his actions with an ahistorical character; without attending to the social causes of events in *McTeague*, Pizer effectively evades the kind of critical apparatus needed to explore how this novel uses social Darwinism to forward assumptions about human nature without reference to the formative conditions of this nature. Likewise, Lily's death

assumes a tragic hue, for her demise serves as a metonymy for the *déclassé* heroine of traditional naturalism. Nevertheless, the generative quality of Lily's death, contrasted by the exposure of Selden as an impotent and callous character, its symbolic injunction against social-Darwinist-bred complacency, interpolates the reader into a historical role. *The House of Mirth*'s rending of the social-Darwinist ideological perspective, an event which humanizes Lily's descent, shows how this ideology itself is a fiction in a double-maneuver of charitable cohesion and irresolution. If charity is the model Wharton wants her reader to follow, then Lily's death exemplifies the mistakes she wants her reader to avoid. In this way, irresolution in *The House of Mirth*, its vexing ending, solidifies its role as a cautionary tale, whereas *McTeague*'s conclusion reinforces the truth-claims of social Darwinism, offering fiction for truth, as defined by Norris.

Conclusion: History, Theory, and the American Working Class—A Conceptual Problem

McTeague and *The House of Mirth* were written and published during a time of massive social upheaval in America. Howard Zinn notes that “[a]round the turn of the century, strike struggles were multiplying—in the 1890s there had been about a thousand strikes a year; by 1904 there were four thousand strikes a year” (339). These numbers indicate that an increasingly self-aware American working class had found the means to seek change outside conventional American politics. The upper classes could not have remained ignorant of the growing unrest that threatened life as they had come to know it. Naturalism, it appears, was an upper-class attempt to interpret this instability.

McTeague’s social Darwinism displays a conservative tendency to contain the working class; by invoking the working class as instinctually base, Norris gives an implicit apology for the class to which he belonged and for which he wrote. *The House of Mirth*’s reformist message of charity, on the contrary, seeks to elevate the working class within the capitalist system, a strategy which legitimates this mode of production even as the novel censures its excesses. Still, the significance of Wharton’s contribution to class-conscious literature reveals the profound extent to which she registered the actual historical events surrounding the composition of *The House of Mirth*, which in turn aligns the novel with her period’s radical political activity.

The millinery section in *The House of Mirth* illustrates Wharton’s heightened awareness of class inequality. In Book II, Chapter 10, Lily’s penury compels her to take up work as a milliner. The narrator explains Lily’s semi-altered consciousness through a comparison of her pre-and-post decline views of the working class: “[S]he had felt an enlightened interest in the working-classes; but that was because she looked down on

them from above, from the happy altitude of her grace and her beneficence. Now that she was on a level with them, the point of view was less interesting” (Wharton 224). This disclosure of Lily’s changed class consciousness, rather than expressing her distaste for the working class, suggests that the condescension of upper-class self-interest has become for her an estranged sentiment. To better interpret this dissonance in Lily’s understanding, one may look to Antonio Gramsci’s “The Formation of the Intellectuals.” Gramsci illuminates the potential for Lily’s transformation of her natural intelligence when he says, “[e]very social group . . . creates together with itself, organically, one or more strata of intellectuals which give it homogeneity and an awareness of its own function not only in the economic but also in the social or political fields” (5). But because Lily never fully integrates herself into the working class culturally, she does not become one of its organic intellectuals. Without full integration, Lily cannot partake in the radicalization of this class, and she must depend on charity to survive. Her rarity, once standing as her labor-power, must now succumb to a concrete, directed form of labor-power, one which she is unequipped to successfully execute. Although Lily’s problem with accepting her new class position would suggest otherwise, the similarities between 1980s class-conscious nonfiction and *The House of Mirth*, particularly in the latter’s description of working conditions, demonstrates Wharton’s awareness of the historical working class and its fundamental problems.

Wharton’s description of the milliner’s workshop recalls descriptions of working conditions in Jacob A. Riis’s *How the Other Half Lives*, a detailed piece of investigative photojournalism that exposes the squalid living and working conditions in New York City’s tenement district during the 1890s. In “The Sweaters of Jewtown,” Riis explains

that “[t]he bulk of the sweater’s work is done in the tenements, which the law that regulates factory labor does not reach. . . . The tenement shops serve as a supplement through which the law is successfully evaded” (95). The milliners in *The House of Mirth*, just like the sweater workers, suffered overcrowded, unhealthy working conditions: “There were exactly twenty of them in the work-room. . . . Their own faces were sallow with the unwholesomeness of hot air and sedentary toil” (Wharton 219). The location that both fictional and historical laborers inhabit physically contains each group as a complete, undifferentiated unit; even if Lily cannot identify with her fellow milliners, they are still categorical of the same group, as Wharton’s deft use of setting communicates.

The communal organization of Wharton’s milliners, a historically accurate portrayal, serves as a counterpoint to Norris’s choice to isolate Trina as she labors in her apartment. Norris attributes Trina’s lack of personal care to this isolation in work: “Trina was not so scrupulously tidy now as in the old days. At one time while whittling the Noah’s ark animals she had worn gloves. She never wore them now” (160). Over time, this lack of care, combined with McTeague’s abuse, leads to the loss of Trina’s fingers: “The fingers of her right hand had swollen as never before, aching and discolored. Cruelly lacerated by McTeague’s brutality as they were, she had nevertheless gone on about her work on the Noah’s ark animals” (Norris 193). By losing her fingers, the lack of care suggesting her sole responsibility in the matter, Trina loses her labor-power and must seek out employment as a scrubwoman, which is another form of solitary labor. These choices on Norris’s part deny Trina the possibility of solidarity; without fellow workers to share in her struggle, Trina must survive alone. Like Wharton, Norris uses

setting as a repository for his views on the working class; however, he does so without consideration for the working class as a cohesive social group, effectively undermining the historical reality of their unification under working conditions.

If Lily cannot become an organic intellectual by *The House of Mirth*'s conclusion, the reader is not made to believe that this incomplete growth is any fault of her own, for the society in which she was brought up has conditioned her to maintain a class distinction even when one does not actually exist. Trina, on the contrary, is consistently presented as having some complicity in her decline, an idea perpetuated through *McTeague*'s emphasis on individuality over collectivity. These two divergent perspectives on class replicate emergent attitudes toward class politics in the late nineteenth- and early-twentieth centuries. The fear of working-class political power that Norris would have witnessed in his later lifetime came to its climax in the early-twentieth century. At this time, the Socialist Party in America had earned much recognition and political success with Eugene Debs as its five-time presidential candidate and party spokesperson (Zinn 340). Debs's incendiary remarks in the journal *Appeal to Reason* underscore the vibrant radicalism of the period: "Capitalist courts never have done, and never will do, anything for the working class . . ." (qtd. in Zinn 341). This statement caught the attention of Theodore Roosevelt, who said in a letter to his Attorney General W.H. Moody, "Is it possible to proceed against Debs and the proprietor of this paper criminally?" (Zinn 341). As an organic intellectual, Debs represented the extreme radical end of the early-twentieth century American political climate. Lily, in relation to these historical events, reveals Wharton's sympathy with, if not her full commitment to, working-class unrest. Conversely, Trina is pure fiction, and her isolation as a working-

class character in *McTeague* seeks to stymie, or at least divert attention from, the achievements of early American radical politics.

The above assertions require a discussion about intentionality in Norris's and Wharton's novels. Is it safe to assume that either *McTeague* or *The House of Mirth* were conceived for propagandistic ends? What evidence suggests the accuracy of these claims? Louis Althusser's "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" engages the question of intentionality by offering a theory of ideological dissemination which complicates the concept of authorial intention. "I shall call Ideological State Apparatuses," Althusser asserts, "a certain number of realities which present themselves to the observer in the form of distinct and specialized institutions. . . . the cultural ISA[s] [are] Literature, the Arts, sports, etc." (1489). The use of ISAs to maintain political control is problematic because they may be "the *site* of class struggle, and often bitter forms of class struggle. . . . the resistance of the exploited classes is able to find means and occasions to express itself there" (1491, emphasis added). Literature, then, provides a tool for the working class in its struggle for power, for this ISA can be expropriated to serve its ends, just as it can also serve ruling-class ends. If Frank Norris participates in the latter activity, it is of no consequence that he does so consciously, for, according to Slavoj Žižek, "the ideological injunction is hidden" (xiii); Norris chooses to obey the ideological injunction of social Darwinism because he views it as truth. As for Wharton, her awareness of the ideological imperatives of naturalism—its promulgation of social Darwinism—supports Althusser's claim about expropriating ISAs. Whereas Norris's intentions are not directly political, Wharton's are because she acknowledges the historical reality denied by social-Darwinist thought.

Althusser's theory, while explaining the authorial choice to support or critique a dominant ideology, does not sufficiently address the conceptualization of poverty and class in literature and criticism. In "Poverty and the Limitations of Literary Criticism," Gavin Jones analyzes the perennial conceptual problem poverty presents for literary criticism: "The critical logic of indeterminacy, the implication that social positions are always plural, might seem troubled by a definition of poverty as a substantive condition of relative socioeconomic deprivation that can harm individuals physically, frustrate them emotionally, and hinder in some form of their social agency" (769). The problem a novel like *McTeague* presents for contemporary critics is its denial of plurality, a feature endemic to social Darwinism. As for *The House of Mirth*, Lily's rarity and class mobility admit analyses of identity—race and gender—while affording the critic a means of evading underlying class issues in the novel. Even while critics have well-developed theories of ideology with which to explain the paradigms of oppression in these novels, these theories can assist a complete critical understanding only insofar as they account for the historical conditions in which these works were composed. Without such a critical perspective, *McTeague* and *The House of Mirth* risk losing their value as illustrative novels of American class relations.

Returning to Zinn, the historical model of analysis alone cannot withstand the reductions that arise from the absence of a theoretical framework. Interpreting the socio-historical conditions of literature alone, such a purely historical perspective neglects the ideology of a given work, categorizing it in grand, sweeping catalogues with key features such as the absence or presence of working-class characters. As Terry Eagleton notes, this approach merely offers a "sociology of literature," which "concerns itself chiefly

with what might be called the means of literary production, distribution, and exchange in a particular society” (2). The role of the ideologically perceptive literary critic, when dealing with any literary work, not just those of American literary naturalism, is to draw from historical and theoretical resources to discover the interplay of contemporary society, its historically transformative events, and larger conceptual categories, past and present, which help readers interpret the social forces that inform literary composition. *McTeague* and *The House of Mirth*, due to their place in American literary history at the beginning of the twentieth century, provide indispensable models for this method of criticism.

Works Cited

- Althusser, Louis. "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)." Trans. Ben Brewster. The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism. Ed. Vincent B. Leitch. New York: Norton, 2001. 1483-1509.
- Bauer, Dale M. Feminist Dialogics: A Theory of Failed Community. Albany: State U of New York P, 1988.
- Brandt, Maria F. "For His Own Satisfaction": Eliminating the New Woman Figure in *McTeague*." ATQ 18.1 (2004): 5-23.
- Burke, Kenneth. A Grammar of Motives. Berkeley: U of California P, 1969.
- Dimock, Wai Chee. "Debasing Exchange: Wharton's *The House of Mirth*." PMLA 100 (October 1985): 783-92.
- Eagleton, Terry. Marxism and Literary Criticism. Berkeley: U of California P, 1976.
- Goldner, Ellen J. "The Lying Woman and the Cause of Social Anxiety: Interdependence and the Woman's Body in *The House of Mirth*." Women's Studies 21.3 (1992): 285-305.
- Gramsci, Antonio. "The Formation of the Intellectuals." Selections from the Prison Notebooks. Trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith. New York: International, 1971.
- Howard, June. Form and History in American Literary Naturalism. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1985.
- Jacobson, Karen F. "'Who's the Boss?' *McTeague*, Naturalism, and Obsessive Compulsive-Disorder." Mosaic 32.2 (1999): 27-42.
- Jakobson, Roman. "On Realism and Art." Readings in Russian Poetics. Ed. Ladislav

Matejka and Krystyna Pomorska. Urbana: Dalkey, 2002. 1-6.

Jones, Gavin. "Poverty and the Limits of Literary Criticism." American Literary History 15.4 (2003): 765-792.

Kaplan, Amy. The Social Construction of American Realism. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1998.

Lutz, Tom. American Nervousness: An Anecdotal History. 1903 Ed. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1991.

Marx, Karl. Preface. A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy. By Marx. The Marx-Engels Reader. Ed. Robert C. Tucker. 2nd ed. New York: Norton, 1978. 3-6.

--Capital, Vol. 1. Trans. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling. Ed. Friedrich Engels. 3rd Ed. New York: International, 2003.

Norris, Frank. "A Plea for Romantic Fiction." McTeague. Ed. Donald Pizer. 2nd ed. New York: Norton, 1996. 277-80.

--"Frank Norris' Weekly Letter to the Chicago American." 3 August 1901. McTeague. Ed. Donald Pizer. 2nd ed. New York: Norton, 1996. 275-7.

--McTeague. Ed. Donald Pizer. 2nd ed. New York: Norton, 1996. 275-7.

Pizer, Donald. "Late Nineteenth-Century American Naturalism." McTeague. Ed. Donald Pizer. 2nd ed. New York: Norton, 1996. 306-311.

--"The Naturalism of Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*." Twentieth-Century Literature 41.2 (Summer 1995): 241-8.

Riis, Jacob A. How the Other Half Lives. New York: Penguin, 1997.

Spencer, Herbert. "The Principles of Sociology." What Was Naturalism? Materials for an

Answer. Ed. Edward Stone. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1959. 39-40.

Taine, Hippolyte. "History of English Literature." What Was Naturalism? Materials for

an Answer. Ed. Edward Stone. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1959. 46-51.

"Twenty-Nine Fatal Wounds." The San Francisco Examiner. 10 October 1893.

McTeague. Ed. Donald Pizer. 2nd ed. New York: Norton, 1996. 250-3.

United States Bureau of the Census. Eleventh Census: 1890. Washington: GPO, 1895.

University of Texas Library Online. 7 October 2009. <http://www.lib.utexas.edu/government/census/census_1890.html>.

Wharton, Edith. The House of Mirth. Ed. Elizabeth Ammons. New York: Norton, 1990.

Zinn, Howard. A People's History of the United States: 1492-Present. Perennial: New York, 2003.

Žižek, Slavoj. The Plague of the Fantasies. 2nd ed. New York: Verso, 2008.

Zola, Émile. The Experimental Novel and Other Essays. Trans. Belle M. Sherman. New York: Haskell, 1964. 1-54.