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MAKING AND UNMAKING MASCULINITY: PARADIGMS OF SUCCESS AND
FAILURE IN THE LATE NINETEENTH AND EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURIES

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MAKING AND UNMAKING MASCULINITY: PARADIGMS OF SUCCESS AND
FAILURE IN THE LATE NINETEENTH AND EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURIES

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Abstract

This project focuses on the late-nineteenth and early twentieth century depictions of success and failure in prominent fiction and addresses how these concepts played a vital role in the construction of masculinity during that period. While I highlight how the idolization of popular fictional success narratives under American corporate capitalism served to standardize hegemonic forms of masculinity, I also detail how certain authors redefined failure in order to challenge standards of masculinity. I begin by considering how William Dean Howells uses ethical challenges to self-made manhood to challenge the meaning of male failure. In contrast, I argue that Frank Norris wanted to legitimize reactive male violence to stave off fears about failure; despite the fact that he clearly evolved in his thinking about violence throughout his career, his essential verdict about failure itself and the gender-bound obligation to avoid it did not change. I then turn to Jack London to examine the marked contrast between the depiction of success in his early writing career and his late career by examining two novels in each period. I assert that while the early London thought obtaining success was essential for obtaining a sense of meaning, his later novels did not retain the same trust in the popular conventions about success. I follow London by turning to Willa Cather, who, I argue, destabilized popular conventions like success and failure through her construction of gender. Finally, I conclude by considering how popular, gender-bound conventions about success and failure still determine our narratives in television, film and fiction in different ways.

Introduction

In the third volume of his *History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault analyzes “Artemidorous,” a second-century Greek thinker preoccupied with dreams. According to Foucault, Artemidorous “sees the sexual act” in dreams as “first and foremost... a game of superiority and inferiority: penetration places the two partners in a relationship of domination and submission. It is victory on one side, defeat on the other; it is a right that is exercised for one of the partners, a necessity that is imposed on the other” (30). Artemidorous, Foucault further notes, “sees [sex] as an ‘economic’ game of expenditure and profit: profit, the pleasure one takes, the agreeable sensations that one experiences; expenditure, the energy necessary for the act, the loss of semen—that precious vital substance—and the fatigue that ensues” (30). According to Foucault, the male subject’s dreams are greatly concerned with “success or failure in business, enrichment or impoverishment, a family’s prosperity or reverse of fortune, [and] an advantageous or disadvantageous undertaking” (27). Thus, sexual dreams that centered on the symbolic act of “penetration” comprised most of Artemidorous’s focus (29). Foucault reads Artemidorous’s treatment of semen as a substance that “gathers up all that is powerful in life and transmits it...it is in the male that it reaches its greatest strength and its highest perfection. And it is this substance that gives him his superiority” (112). Similarly, when Foucault discusses the symbolic import of sexual impotence in the Greek text, he observes that the lack of semen bears the “appearance of emasculation” (116). The dream logic limned by Foucault reveals the prevalence of gendered metaphors in monetary and bodily economies and positions a successful male as the “penetrator” of

women, of subordinate men, and financial rivals alike. All conceptions of sexuality and the multitude of ways in which the term can be defined--as an erotic drive or orientation, as a bodily act, as a personal identity--are laced up with each other and with economics in Foucault's analysis, in that the "active or passive" role in which a dreamer is depicted also determines the dreamer's status as "dominant or dominated, winner or loser, 'on top' or 'on the bottom,' profit-taker or spender" (33).

Scott Sandage, author of the influential *Born Losers: A History of Failure in America*, thinks similarly about sexual and fiduciary economies when he examines the nineteenth-century "loser." While describing what he called the "go-ahead spirit" of the period's individualism, a disposition characterized by the will to seek marketplace opportunity, Sandage describes the innumerable intersections between libidinal and business drives in the letters of men determined to find financial prosperity. Such men were obsessed with having enough "spunk" to "go-ahead" with ventures in the unpredictable, harsh economic landscape (87). Echoing Ben Barker-Benfield's phrase, Sandage observes, "to waste manly vitality, in the so-called 'spermatic economy' of the time ensured failure despite hard work."¹ Like Foucault, Sandage also notes the ways in which fiduciary semiotics became gendered and how they informed the brutal economic lifestyle of anxious men.

The purpose of the present study is to trace the gendered understandings of success and failure within the fiction of the turbulent American *fin de siècle*. In this

¹ See Sandage, 87. The inspiration for the phrase "spermatic economy" comes from Ben Barker-Benfield's 1972 article, "The Spermatic Economy: A Nineteenth Century View of Sexuality." Barker-Benfield explores the intersections between an anxious nineteenth-century manhood and the symbolic demands of an individualistic economy, thereby accounting for the rhetoric of "self-making" in a gendered sense (46).

dissertation, I argue that the fiction of the period reveals contradiction, disjunction, and disharmony within the dominant logics of gendered success and failure and subsequently invites the critical re-appraisal of some of the most myopic assumptions about masculinity. I recognize that success has been studied extensively to the detriment of its undervalued other half and that neither concept can be understood without appealing to both. Success and failure are arbitrary signs in Ferdinand de Saussure's sense of the term, in that their meanings are circumstantially generated through their difference.² In other words, context generates the meaning of the terms, so an accurate portrait of how either one functions is only possible by grasping how they differ. I thus expose the ways in which success and failure overlap in relation to the imperfect, unattainable pursuit of an ultimately illusory gender norm, thereby revealing their mutual dependence. Any idealized discourse about gender, any perceived definition of gendered success, is a culturally constructed, elusive fiction; success is thus unavoidably and inextricably linked with (and often outright becomes) its maligned twin--failure. The present study thus invites us to see success where we might normally see failure, failure where we might see success. It encourages us to see vulnerability

² See the excerpt of Ferdinand de Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics* in the *Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, p. 854-55. "The link between signal and signification is arbitrary," Saussure states. "Since we are treating a sign as the combination in which a signal is associated with a signification, we can express this more simply as: *the linguistic sign is arbitrary*" (854, author emphasis). Arbitrariness, he continues, "must not be taken to imply that a signal depends on the free choice of the speaker...the term implies simply that the signal is unmotivated: that is to say arbitrary in relation to its signification, with which it has no natural connexion in reality" (854, author emphasis). Saussure goes on to assert, "a difference generally implies positive terms between which the difference is set up; but in language there are only differences *without positive terms*. Whether we take the signified or signifier, language has neither ideas nor sounds that existed before the linguistic system, but only conceptual and phonic differences that have issued from the system" (862, author emphasis).

even when we also see expressions of power, or a yearning for deeper human connections even where we see competitiveness.

The ancient symbolisms that Foucault chronicled in relation to gender and paradigms of success crop up throughout history, but the four decades that comprise what most historians call the Gilded Age or The Progressive Era reveal the birth of our contemporary understanding of their relationship. Technological and fast-paced economic change introduced a newly mechanized industrial era based on assembly-line mass production and electrification. An era of unprecedented prosperity followed for a select few self-made men, while at the same time inequality rates skyrocketed. The haves and have-nots often violently clashed during strikes and other protests. This second Industrial Revolution, as it was later called,³ corresponded with a revolution in thought about human gender identity that persists today. Elaine Showalter uses the term “sexual anarchy” to describe the turbulent, radical shifts in thinking about sex and sexuality during the period; the term homosexuality was introduced, and figures like the New Woman were seen as threats by an entrenched masculine order. Comforting binaries began to slip and shift as traditions that favored paternalism began to be questioned.⁴ Like most historical events, these changes found their way into the period’s fiction. Some novelists depicted men pursuing dominance in this new industrial

³ See Charles Perrow’s *Organizing America*, p. 115. “The railroad revolution is said to have brought about the second industrial revolution; it was followed by three more “revolutions”: electric power, at the end of the century; the substitution of oil for coal from about 1930 to the present; and the current transistor and computer revolution” (115).

⁴ See Showalter, pp. 3-5. “In periods of cultural insecurity,” Showalter explains, “when there are fears of regression and degeneration, the longing for strict border controls around the definition of gender, as well as race, class, and nationality, becomes especially intense” (4).

order as a way of compensating for a perceived shift in gender power relations. In both fiction and society, men felt that epitomizing their society's perception of success was a way to re-assert authority and re-establish stable boundaries. Others, however, challenged the basis of such anxieties and invited critical public discourse about sex and sexuality, often through their critique of the economic standards that produced such rigid boundaries.

In other words, like other gender theorists, I disavow the notion that gender is innate or unchanging. The scholarly bias toward success within historical and literary studies of gender and economics is perhaps ideological-- a byproduct of a Western culture that believes it is second nature to link men with success, as if the gender and the concept are inextricable. I believe this habit of thought induces us to uncritically regurgitate a popular portrait of masculinity that, I argue, deserves more cautious appraisal. I do not claim that subjects who end up in positions of "success" also somehow end up epitomizing masculinity in some ideal form; rather, I argue that gender normativity is something every modern subject, by necessity, perpetually chases but never attains because of its illusory, ephemeral nature. I believe our conceptions of gender morph along with the deployment of knowledge and power in a particular era, which certainly includes the popular understanding of economics. What we identify as "gender," to invoke Judith Butler, is performed in a resulting sequence of acts, habits, and gestures (187). However, Butler clarifies, this does not mean that a performing subject makes a "willful and arbitrary choice" to exhibit such characteristics or that the subject has a clear sense of self distinct from the "historicity of discourse" (187). Rather, an individual is "addressed and produced by such a norm" like gender (187).

The gender performance is then a product of the discourse within a given age. My theoretical and methodological assumptions therefore arise from masculinity studies and cultural studies more broadly. I use a Foucauldian reading of a historical period's reliance on certain gender-specific discourses about success and failure (Foucault 34). As Gail Bederman aptly defines it, a discourse is a "set of ideas and practices which, taken together, organize both the way a society defines certain truths about itself and the way it deploys social power."⁵ I borrow from Bederman's definition of discourse to show how certain literary works conceptualize success and failure in relation to gender and illustrate how these texts either adopt or critique the popular deployment of these constructs.

To elaborate, the story of success or failure is often the story of what constitutes a "meaningful" human life, and, unsurprisingly, the definition of what is meaningful has often corresponded with values central to personal economic progress and social stability, but also, perhaps especially, to gender identity. Indeed, the rhetoric of failure and success at the turn of the century often served to police gender dichotomies and define or restrict the period's ideal portrait of either gender. Such ideological pressures induced men to either succeed in the workplace or lose their manhood altogether, and women were called failures when they refused marriage or wanted to pursue nondomestic labor. Indeed, the malleability and ambiguity of the term "success" is itself a tool for the maintenance of power. As James V. Catano notes in his rhetorical analysis

⁵ See Foucault's "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," republished in *The Foucault Reader*, p.78, as well as Bederman, 24. Under the genealogical process, which Foucault developed from Nietzsche, the historian or critic "listens to history" and eventually "finds that there is 'something altogether different' behind things: not a timeless and essential secret, but the secret that they have no essence or that their essence was fabricated in a piecemeal fashion from alien forms."

of self-made manhood, “the dominant rhetoric of success and/or its means of achievement would threaten the myth” of self-made manhood because “fully characterizing the complex manipulations required to achieve institutional power...would demonstrate restrictions on and possible alternative means for attaining masculinity—some of which would hint at possibly nonindividualistic, possibly even non masculine—behaviors” (70). This revelation is, as Catano points out, somewhat ironic, for masculinity relies on its appearance as something natural and therefore transparent in meaning, but such an illusion quickly falls apart when its values are interrogated. It is therefore useful to locate the dominant forms of gender expectations within this historical period and trace the degree to which they were bound up with the discourses of success and failure so that both mutually dependent paradigms can be exposed.

The field of masculinity studies, especially within the social sciences, locates various paradigmatic or “hegemonic” forms of masculinity in a typical period by examining performances in multiple historical and fictional texts. R.W. Connell has argued that hegemonic masculinities are those identities that claim positions of economic and political control (78-79). Connell thus reworks the Marxist, Gramscian concept of hegemony and applies it to masculinity in order to emphasize the hierarchical nature of gender norms. He furthermore stresses the role of politics and economic relations in any understanding of an historical period’s dominant gender ideal. Though the “hegemonic masculinities” term itself has not been used without controversy, since many see such an attempt at defining male power as a totalizing endeavor, I think the plural form of the word helps to mitigate such concerns. It allows

us to conceive of a plane of hierarchies, or types of masculinities that are located in positions of power, without necessarily negating subtypes or alternate forms. I also think it is helpful to point out that the term, like hegemony itself, defines an idealized concept of personhood that no historical figure ever literally embodied. The hegemonic form is a kind of fantasy of male power delineated in various texts and evident in a range of political energies contained within a historical period, all of which add up to a loose working portrait of the gendered identity that those who identified as “masculine” sought to embody.⁶ It is a kind of gender goal mapped out in the discourse of power, the dictates of cultural prescriptions, a fantasy of perfection changing along with the norms of the time in which it was used.⁷ Thus, parsing out the values inherent within self-definitions of hegemonic masculinities allows us to glimpse a portrait of a culture’s definition of success or failure. Thus, we might conclude that texts, which critique paradigms of success as part of a normative system of values, also critique the implicit gender norms that help define such concepts. Likewise, some texts propose alternate forms of gender along with alternate understandings of success and failure.

There were many competing discourses of hegemonic masculinity during the *fin de siècle*, but scholars have located a few dominant models. I intend to explore

⁶ See Raymond Williams’ entry on “hegemony” in *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, p. 145. Hegemony, Williams states, “is not limited matters of direct political control but seeks to describe a more general predominance which includes, as one of its key features, a particular way of seeing the world and human nature and relationships...The idea of hegemony, in its wide sense, is then especially important in societies in which electoral politics and public opinion are significant factors, and in which social practice is seen to depend on consent to certain dominant ideas which in fact express the needs of a dominant class” (145).

⁷ See Ibid, 145-46. “Except in extreme versions of economic determinism...the struggle for hegemony is seen as a necessary or as the decisive factor in radical change of any kind, including many kinds of change in the *base*” (146, author emphasis).

numerous models of masculinity throughout this work, and the characteristics that other scholars have used to define particular forms of hegemonic masculinities are not autonomous by any means. As I will make clear, particularly through my analysis of William Dean Howells, these forms of masculinity intersect and overlap in this period, just like any other component of gendered discourse. Many forms of hegemonic masculinity presided in these four decades. Each have distinguishing, if not always entirely separate, characteristics that can therefore help us understand what kinds of success people in this period deemed most valuable.

Success, Failure and Masculinity in Nineteenth Century American Capitalism

As mentioned, the turn of the century is important for a study about the gendering of success and failure, since so many presumptions about gender roles were under public scrutiny. Due to this gender “anarchy,” some critics have argued that the period is characterized by a “crisis” of masculinity.⁸ Such a phrase is intended to denote the prevalent defensive posturing by powerful men against encroachment, but Gail Bederman has rightly questioned this terminology. The word “crisis,” Bederman argues,

⁸ It is worth noting how I will use “manhood” and “masculinity” in the dissertation. “Manhood,” was originally used to reference males who had “the capacity for autonomy and responsibility” and it thus denoted maturity (Kimmel 119). However, the term “masculinity” gradually replaced “manhood” around the turn of the century by people who wanted a way to emphasize “a set of behavioral traits and attitudes that were contrasted now with a new opposite, *femininity*” (Kimmel 120, author emphasis). It was, in short, a characterization to be “earned” at this time period and “constantly demonstrated” to other men (Kimmel 120). I use the terms interchangeably throughout, as we presently understand them as similar in meaning even if they had different historical meanings (indeed, most masculinity studies scholars do the same, presumably for the sake of comprehension).

presumes sudden change to inviolable, previously unchanging gender ideals.⁹ While it is certainly true that men in this period decided that changing gender roles meant a threat to patriarchy, all men are products of the cultural changes within their time. Some turn-of-the-century men suddenly felt that their path to success was threatened by the ascendancy of New Womanhood and the possibility that minorities might enter the corporate world. The anxieties of the time naturally crept their way into fiction. While some authors in this period depict characters that perceive failure as a threat to a gender identity so firmly linked to success, others saw an opportunity to question assumptions about success, failure, and gender.

However, the vast majority of male authors and citizens in the late nineteenth century held fast to traditional beliefs about masculinity and success. Indeed, in her exhaustive review of nineteenth-century success manuals, Judy Hilkey argues that men in the period “defined character and manhood not only as the *means* to success, but as *success itself*” (5, author emphasis). It is therefore essential to provide a general overview of dominant masculinities in this period and identify how they defined success and, correspondingly, how they determined failure. I limit my analysis of success, failure and masculinity to the United States from 1880 to 1915, but I do acknowledge some important ideological influences on American capitalism from earlier periods.¹⁰ Within this period, two prevailing models of masculinity asserted themselves: “self-

⁹ See Bederman, pp. 6-7.

¹⁰ See Raymond Williams’s *Keynotes*, pp. 50-52. He notes that an early form of the word was used as a noun to describe “moneyed men,” from the late eighteenth century on; Marx took the term and used it to describe the “formal economic category” distinguished by its “centralized ownership of the means of production” and the “wage-labour” system (51). Political economy or Smith’s term “commercial society” was then called capitalism after the appearance of Marx.

made” manhood and “passionate” manhood.¹¹ While these models are not strictly autonomous, in that they shared many similar beliefs about gender roles, emotional expression, and paths to financial prosperity, they nevertheless bore some differing ideological tenets. In essence, the “self-made” variety of manhood prevailed from approximately 1791 to 1885,¹² and the “passionate” variety predominated from about 1880 to the 1920s.¹³ However, some historians of masculinity argue that both models continue to characterize contemporary varieties of hegemonic masculinities.¹⁴

¹¹ I choose these two labels and the rough outlines scholars provide for them merely to attempt definitional and historical consistency. My primary historians do not always use the same terminology, but they usually define these sub-types of hegemonic masculinity in similar ways. One should also note that, as with any historical phenomena, the beginnings and endings regarding patterns of gender expression are filled with uncertainty. There is no universal agreement among historians, and many historians are indeed vague about their own timelines for various models of hegemonic masculinities—and for good reason, since, as they are manifestations of patriarchy, it is tough to demarcate where one sub-form of hegemony begins and another ends.

¹² Michael Kimmel notes that various forms of masculinities were present during the time of the revolution, but that the ideological backbone for “self-made” manhood began in earnest in 1791 with the publication of Benjamin Franklin’s *Autobiography*. Franklin, Kimmel states, was “perhaps the first American prototype of the Self-Made Man” (20). When it ends for Kimmel is harder to firmly locate, but he identifies a passage from Henry James’s *The Bostonians*, first published in 1885, as an expression of a “powerful current of malaise and resentment [of] turn-of-the-century American men, railing against what they perceived as the feminization of American culture” (118). However, he also argues that the values that made up self-made manhood continued in some form throughout the twentieth century; in his epilogue, for instance, he states that “Self-Made manhood is our legacy from nearly two centuries of American history” but has various historical iterations (333). In this sense, Kimmel would probably not agree with Rotundo that “passionate” masculinity was another sub-type of hegemonic masculinity, but rather simply conclude it is another version of self-made manhood.

¹³ Again, though a specific starting point for “passionate” manhood is not explicitly given, Anthony Rotundo notes “these changes” in popular perceptions of masculinity “did not happen overnight” and “some” version of passionate manhood “began as early as the 1850s...[but] the moment of greatest change came in the 1880s and 1890s” (223). This mindset began to soften, but not entirely diminish, by “the early twentieth century” when “certain uses of leisure time and certain consumer tastes became marks of

Michael Kimmel has defined “self-made manhood,” as “a model of manhood that derives identity from a man’s activities in the public sphere, measured by accumulated wealth and status, by geographic and social mobility” (16-17). The Enlightenment emphasis on rational self-interest as a model for economic as well as moral discourse held great appeal for many Americans, and the self-interest principle joined with the general Lockean emphasis on individual reason to form what many American men deemed the principle gateway to self-improvement and prosperity.¹⁵ While ostensibly confident and “aggressive in business,” Kimmel notes that the self-made man was “also temperamentally restless, chronically insecure, and desperate to achieve a solid grounding for a masculine identity” (17). In an earlier essay Kimmel calls this variety of masculinity “Marketplace Manhood,” which more emphatically emphasizes this model of masculinity’s insecurity about financial matters. According to

manliness” and while “individualism remained central to manhood,” he continues, “self-expression” also “colored manhood’s meaning and changed its aspect” (283).

¹⁴ John Pettegrew is especially persuasive on this point when he argues that the “modern origins” of contemporary masculinity “began in the late nineteenth-and early twentieth-century masculinity” and the Darwinian emphasis on “reflexive aggressiveness...[that] has enjoyed normative psychological status” (1). I am sympathetic to this viewpoint, and I will elaborate on what I think characterizes a kind of contemporary passionate manhood in the conclusion to this dissertation.

¹⁵ Historian Jerry Muller locates, in particular, Adam Smith and Voltaire as perhaps the most influential thinkers on rational self-interest in his *The Mind and the Market: Capitalism and Western Thought*, pp. 20-23 and 60-61. Muller usefully analyses Smith’s logic: “self-interest leads to market exchange, leading to the greater division of labor, leading in turn to specialization, expertise, dexterity, and invention, and, as a result, to greater wealth” (61). The assumption that humans are inherently self-interested and that moral benefits could ostensibly result from self-interest forms the basis for later economic thinking. Indeed, the belief in innate self-interestedness would later take the surface-level appearance of a scientific law, especially when John Stewart Mill called self-interest a fundamental, natural element of human nature, and coined the Latinate term *homo economicus*, or “economic man.” See John Stewart Mill’s “On the Definition of Political Economy, and on the Method of Philosophical Investigation in that Science,” printed in *The London and Westminster Review*, p. 12.

Kimmel, the self-made man “required the acquisition of tangible goods as evidence of success” and strove for “impossible ideals of success” in order to avoid the “chronic terrors of emasculation, emotional emptiness, and...gendered rage that [left] a wide swath of destruction in its wake” (124). In my own use of “self-made” masculinity, I maintain Kimmel’s emphasis on the projection of certitude and physical energy as a compensation for buried insecurity, as the rough, hardy exterior these men cultivated often belied inner fragility.

Two historical figures are perhaps most associated with the values that made up self-made manhood: Benjamin Franklin and Horatio Alger. The edicts of Franklin and what later comprised the Alger “myth” of upward mobility became omnipresent components of later success manuals directed at young men, which insisted the path to achievement chiefly depended on personal discipline.¹⁶ In particular, Benjamin Franklin’s autobiography was devoured by aspiring businessmen eager to make a name for themselves. In chronicling his path from being a youth of modest means to a renowned polymath, Franklin observes that he spent his youth avoiding distractions. Instead, he remained committed to self-improvement through reading and thinking, which for him were the “means of obtaining wealth and distinction” (62). He listed thirteen values—temperance, resolution, industry, and moderation—that he considered essential for every young man who wished to become notable. His conception of successful individual manhood thus corresponded with many Enlightenment views

¹⁶ See Judy Hilkey, 3, 13, 116, and 127. Franklin and Alger are mentioned throughout the book, and she repeatedly indicates their important influence on nineteenth century success manuals. As mentioned, Kimmel also argues that Franklin was the “prototype” for self-made manhood (20).

about individual progress, including the cultivation of values with distinct utility.¹⁷ Max Weber, in laying out his now famous assertion that Americans abided by a Protestant work ethic, said Franklin's virtues were strictly utilitarian. "The 'summum bonum' of [his] 'ethic,'" Weber states, "is the making of money and yet more money, coupled with a strict avoidance of all uninhibited enjoyment" (12). Weber argues that Franklin exemplifies the American "spirit of capitalism," or the "pursuit of a calling" that "strives systematically for profit for its own sake" (19).

However, American self-made men saw success under capitalism as something more than just financial security. While it was most often defined by the acquisition of profit, it also entailed the attainment of personal property, and the cultivation of an overall *appearance* of success-- the presentation of self, through dress, speech, bearing and physicality, as someone who literally appeared successful. A word that Horatio Alger used to define success, "respectability," captures the essence of this self-presentation. Alger depicts a poor boy named Ragged Dick's ascent to prosperity; Ragged Dick was determined not only to change his circumstances, but his identity--an achievement reflected in the novel when he chooses his new name upon attaining sufficient wealth: "Richard Hunter, Esq." (132). Alger wrote literature that featured young male protagonists that were introduced to the corporate world at the behest of an elder patron, a benefactor that saw potential in a younger man. Such was the portrayal

¹⁷ Evoking the prevailing Weberian view that working was a product of moral duty and a product of Puritanism, Daniel T. Rogers argues in his *The Work Ethic in Industrial America* that Franklin has just as much to do with their attitude toward work ethic: "In a land reared on Franklin's Poor Richard aphorisms and the busy bee of Isaac Watts's poem—a land of railroads and heady ambitions, poised on the edge of a thoroughgoing experiment with industrialization—to doubt the moral preeminence of work was the act of a conscious heretic" (1).

of success within the tales of Horatio Alger, which emphasized “pluck,” ambition, determination, and “luck,” or the chance to get noticed. Alger’s emphasis on pluck and luck acknowledges that, as Alan Trachtenberg puts it, “the route to success required some magical outside assistance” (81) rather than mere willpower and individual skill. It is important to note that the later concept of “upward mobility” was indebted to Alger’s depiction, but the “Horatio Alger myth” itself does not gel easily with Alger’s actual works, in that the later popular iteration of the “myth” combined hyper-individualism and a Protestant drive for work that often negated the role of good fortune and the benefit of circumstance that Alger repeatedly emphasized.¹⁸ Thus, the Horatio Alger myth took on a life of its own, and became one with the period’s portrait of successful masculinity.

Other hallmark traits of self-made manhood, like strength of will, physical drive, and keen intellect were put to use within the larger bureaucracy in postbellum America. In the span of just three decades after the Civil War—the second Industrial Revolution, which introduced mass production and bureaucratic models of efficiency-- the nation reorganized its labor relations and hierarchies.¹⁹ A working man was expected to heed his bosses for the good of the company while using the entrenched values of self-made

¹⁸ According to Richard Weiss, while Alger often depicts heroes guided by the “established litany of hard work, frugality, and prudence,” they were also “kind and helpful to those in need” (53-54). Indeed, critics often miss Alger’s emphasis on the cultivation of moral character above all other qualities, even success, in his young readership. Weiss, also notes that “Alger’s failures were not wicked boys either. Lack of ambition, energy, or physical strength often retard the upward movement of his characters, who, while virtuous, will never ‘make it.’” (54).

¹⁹ See Perrow, p. 115.

manhood to steadily climb the corporate ladder.²⁰ Prominent figures like Frederick Jackson Turner declared the Western frontier had been “closed”; nonetheless, he and other figures argued that contemporary American selfhood was inspired by the wilds of the West and retained its emphasis on “dominant individualism” (37). For Turner, the legacy of the frontier left an indelible impression on the American mind that could be used in the corporate world: “That coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and inquisitiveness; that practical, inventive turn of mind, quick to find expedients...that restless, nervous energy...working for good and for evil,” were all “intellectual traits of profound importance” for the future.²¹

The second primary subtype of hegemonic masculinity in the nineteenth century has been called “passionate” manhood, by Anthony Rotundo. It is important to reiterate that while “self-made” and “passionate” hegemonic masculinities are not completely autonomous, each takes a slightly different ideological trajectory, which can be linked to the shifts in popular assumptions about identity throughout the nineteenth century. “Passionate” manhood was a form of masculinity, Rotundo asserts, that began to appear by the 1880s. It understood virility in a purportedly more honest, unrepressed fashion by channeling the animalistic rage that all men supposedly had buried inside them:

“manly passions were revalued in a favorable light; men began to look at the ‘primitive’

²⁰ See Kimmel, 187 and Perrow, 160. Perrow notes that “it was the railroad the led the way to achieving control and action at a distance through delegation—that led the way to modern bureaucracy” (160). Regarding the way “self-made” men used the new beureaucracy, Kimmel notes that many men “sought to preserve their workplaces as sites of self-making” and “shaped their bodies as disciplined instruments” while saving “their sons from feminization” (187-88).

²¹ See Turner, p. 37. Others, however, felt that the birth of bureaucracy signaled the end of the individual. John D. Rockefeller, for instance, exaggeratedly declared, “The day of combination is here to stay. Individualism has gone, never to return” (Nevins 169).

sources of manhood with new regard; the martial virtues attracted admiration; and competitive impulses were transformed into male virtues” (Rotundo 222).

In particular, passionate manhood’s idealization of violence was something of a departure from previous models, including Kimmel’s version of self-made manhood. Popular scientific interpretations of Darwinism were partially to blame, as it led people to make a host of connections between male psychology and the animal kingdom. It is this ideological milieu that gave rise to many of the characteristics that defined passionate manhood. Popular readings of male psychology saw retributive violence as a natural byproduct of genetic prerogatives to defend mates and territory. This evolutionary psychology began with Darwin’s *Descent of Man* (1871), which read male combativeness against other men as a consequence of the self-interested search for suitable mates. Males gained a superior musculature to females, Darwin states, because it enabled them to “prevent the escape of the female” during sexual intercourse “before the arrival of other males.”²² Due to his “inheritance from his half-human ancestors,” Darwin argues, the male human thus “delights in competition, and this leads to ambition which passes too easily into selfishness” (234). Though misinterpretations as well as unfair extensions of Darwinian thought-- the sociological and economic work of the likes of Herbert Spencer and William Graham Sumner, for instance-- are probably more

²² See Darwin, 231. Additionally, Darwin had plenty to say about women who sought careers. Darwin stated that women seeking endeavors beyond the home were violating their own “maternal instincts” (234). These instincts, Darwin wrote, render women, by nature, an emotionally vulnerable caretaker of home and hearth rather than ambitious social climbers. Darwin argued women lacked certain features that would enable them to be successful in other endeavors: “The chief distinction in the intellectual powers of the two sexes is shewn [sic] by man’s attaining to a higher eminence in whatever he takes up, than can woman—whether requiring deep thought, reason, or imagination, or merely the use of the senses and hands” (234).

responsible for legitimizing a certain pop-scientific narratives of male violence, these passages from *Descent* makes it apparent that Darwin himself was not blameless.²³ As John Pettegrew has argued, Darwin's theories cannot be stripped from their historical context: "Darwin wrote Victorian gender stereotypes into his theory of sexual selection...[it] has not simply been an autonomous, value-neutral endeavor uncovering the biological sources of sexual difference but an active cultural agent in the ideological formation of gender, including the essentialization of masculine brutishness" (3). Pettegrew asserts that the consequences of imputing this ostensibly "natural" psychology of the "brute," or the atavistic, aggressive male seeking biological harmony with mate-striving ancestors was profound, impacting our understanding of gender roles even today. The "passionate" manhood model thus not only impacts conceptions of male violence, but also dominates notions of capitalism as an economic system in close harmony with nature, requiring the aggressive instincts of individuals in order to function.²⁴

²³ Masculinity studies theorists have challenged this popular conception of "inevitable" or "natural" male brutishness in the midst of economic competition. In Darwin's place, they commonly point to other scientific conclusions that suggest that any species, human or not, is just as reliant on cooperation or "mutual aid" as on individualistic assertions of superiority. Peter Kropotkin's "Mutual Aid" was published, in part, as counterpoint to pop-evolutionary readings of capitalism. Observing life amidst nature in Siberian outposts, Kropotkin concluded that "when animals have to struggle against scarcity of food...the whole of that portion of the species is affected by the calamity, comes out of the ordeal so much impoverished in vigor and health, that *no progressive evolution of the species can be based upon such periods of keen competition*" (399, author's emphasis). More contemporary sources have verified his conclusions; See, for just one example, Nowak, May and Sigmund's *The Artithmetics of Mutual Help*.

²⁴ Pettegrew's reading is credible upon closer inspection of Darwin's work. Though laced with the rhetorical objectivism that seems to come only after careful inspection of empirical evidence, Darwin is not free from subjective, contextual proclamations on gender. Darwin credits, for instance, the human male's "greater courage and pugnacity" to the "inheritance from his half-human male ancestors" (234, 240).

Property ownership was another important marker of success for both self-made and passionate masculinities. Owning land became one of the quintessential symbols of male achievement, as well as a marker for a white individual's ability to vote or run for public office. This connection between successful manhood and property was evident from the very beginning of American history. As historian Jeffrey Sklansy puts it, "To be propertyless in Revolutionary America was to be essentially without political-economic identity" (22). "For white men," he continues, "the great majority of whom could expect to own their own farms or shops by their early 30s...property represented self-rule" (23). Though subjective values and emotional expressions changed with later models of masculinity and success, this emphasis on land ownership did not change.²⁵ A man's maintenance of his household and land demonstrated to others that he was capable, efficient, and worthy of respect. Indeed, control over the house itself and being able to provide for those family members within it often suggests, as I explore in my chapter on the work of Frank Norris and William Dean Howells, both a stable career and family environment. In the latter aspect, control of a household meant the strict assertion of male leadership through a salary, or being a "breadwinner." Since the term's inception in the 1820s, Michael Kimmel notes "The breadwinner ideal would remain one of the central characteristics of American manhood until the present day" (20). Indeed, this conception of a male-headed family lording over his wife and children was often literal, a byproduct of its etymology. By about 1821, English-speaking cultures defined breadwinner as a person who provides for one's family.²⁶ Interestingly

²⁵ See Kimmel, 20.

²⁶ See *The Encyclopedia of Women and Gender: Sex Similarities and Differences and the Impact of Society on Gender*'s entry on "Changing Family Patterns and Roles," p. 414.

enough, the term “breadwinner” is etymologically similar to the word “lord.” “Lord” is derived from the mid thirteenth-century Old English term *hlaford*, which meant “master of a household, ruler, superior.”²⁷ *Hlaford* come from an even older term *hlafweard*, which literally meant “one who guards the loaves.” By contrast, the word “lady” was derived from the eleventh-century word *hlæfidge*, or the “one who kneads bread.”²⁸ The term *hlafæta*, which meant “household servant,” or, literally, “bread-eater” is also associated with the other gendered terms.²⁹ Thus, gender roles are inscribed in the very root of the word itself. To be a breadwinner was not to literally knead the bread or serve it to the family, but to be the lordly master of the household who purchases the means for his wife to do so. The ideological roots of this word and its resulting connotations become especially important in my chapter concerning financial failure and its subsequent role in gender-coded forms of violence in the work of Frank Norris.

Failure was the hidden anxiety of the self-made and passionate versions of masculinity. As one might expect, few men who chronicled their lives at the time outwardly admitted this fear. Indeed, in tracing the subject, historian Scott Sandage argues that a consideration of failure was anathema to a national psyche that worshipped the “rational pursuit of profit, the perpetual increase of capital as end in itself, the development of an acquisitive personality, and the belief that ceaseless work is a necessity of life” (5). The “losers” are, even today, left at the margins of capitalist history, despite their indelible impact on that history. Sandage’s historical evidence suggests that, for most of the men he examines, failure “bespoke a way of life—failure

²⁷ See “lord,” *Online Etymology Dictionary*.

²⁸ See “lady,” *Online Etymology Dictionary*. The term is derived from *dige*, or “maid,” which was related to *dæge*, which meant “maker of dough.”

²⁹ See “bread,” *Online Etymology Dictionary*.

as identity, not calamity” (71). Of course, Sandage takes pains to investigate the causes of nineteenth-century failure, suggesting that many misfortunes resulted from unfortunate circumstances and a lack of social support or resources rather than a lack of willpower or manly determination. Many ostensibly failed endeavors were, Sandage observes, just temporary setbacks experienced by those who were later successful. His work thus reveals two important implications: 1) failure was ubiquitous, but rarely discussed, and 2) even the successful experienced repeated bouts of failure. Throughout, Sandage suggests that failure is not only normative, but often a crucial, yet unacknowledged part of the success narratives that others celebrate. Similarly, In *A Nation of Deadbeats*, Scott Nelson argues that the story of debt, Wall Street crashes, and “deadbeats” is ultimately the unacknowledged “story of American history” (viii). He too concludes that when historians examine failure, they often focus on “big personalities or New York institutions” while tending to “ignore the farmers, artisans, slaveholders, shopkeepers, and wholesalers whose borrowing had fueled the booms and busts” (ix). Nelson’s thorough exploration of what he deems “crash politics,” or the examination of the political rhetoric that surrounded financial busts, make it evident that failure was very much a norm rather than an aberration.

In terms of its impact on masculinity, Anthony Rotundo argues that failure was something to be denied and overcome by whatever means necessary in order to retain one’s status as a man: “Failure was a want of achievement where achievement measured manhood. Moreover, failure was viewed as a sign of poor character” (179). These “deficiencies of character” were thought to be twofold: “laziness” and “a tendency to vice and debauchery” (179). Though there was “some sense that factors

beyond a man's control could affect his fate in the workplace" (180), Rotundo notes there was also a popular condemnation of those who took to drink or appeared to be lazy, since these behaviors were individual choices, and thus indicative of insufficient discipline and focus. It was thus popularly understood that failure is defined as the antithesis of Benjamin Franklin's admired virtues. Failure was also linked with new sexualities cropping up on the horizon. Namely, the newly coined term "homosexual" encapsulated failure because it was deemed unnatural, beyond the scope of all sexual boundaries and thus a human representative of the strange possibilities that exist beyond contemporary notions of ambition.³⁰

Such "deficiencies of character" were felt to be omnipresent in an age of new sexual and leisure temptations. Specifically, male bodies became increasingly scrutinized, and deficiencies of mind were often perceived on the corporeal surface. As Elizabeth Grosz argues, "all the effects of subjectivity, all the significant facets and complexities of subjects, can be as adequately explained using the subject's corporeality as a framework as it would be using consciousness or the unconscious. All the effects of depth and interiority can be explained in terms of the inscriptions and transformations of the subject's corporeal surface. Bodies have all the explanatory powers of minds."³¹

³⁰ In the first volume of his *History of Sexuality*, Foucault yet again articulates the period's understanding of homosexuality in the clearest way: "The nineteenth-century homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life, a form, and a morphology, with an indiscreet anatomy and possibly mysterious physiology" (43).

³¹ See Grosz's introduction to *Volatile Bodies*, p. vii. Grosz acknowledges that she was inspired by Foucault's conception of "biopolitics," which also acknowledges the reading of the body as a locus of control through the discourses of power/knowledge. In the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, for instance, Foucault argues that sexuality was a privileged site for the operations of power discourses: "[Sex] fitted in both" the "disciplines of the body" and "the regulation of populations," which led to

Thus, anxiety and weakness was associated with fragility of body, which translated into a less-productive workforce and effeminacy. Generally, then, the scrutiny of financial failure was often carried out through the scrutiny of the body, and many concluded that the slovenly, imperfect male bodies they observed were gateways to an inferior state of mind. Bodily critique became especially prominent when George Miller Beard coined the term “neurasthenia” in 1869 to describe what he felt was a pervasive condition of nervous weakness in certain men that resulted from the under-utilization of bodily functions, resulting in a “lack of nerveforce” (5). It was characterized by those traits considered anathema to successful masculinity: anxiety, weakness, and depression. Later, Max Nordau’s *Degeneration* (1892) was popularly received in America perhaps because it also validated popular fears about the effete, navel-gazing artists Beard chronicled. Nordau’s text also had a racial tinge: immigrant populations contaminated valuable genetic influences, he said, corroding the Anglo-Saxon spirit that the nation believed was one of the essential reasons why American industry thrived.

Perhaps the most commonly evoked metaphor for the productive male body under industrial capitalism is that of the machine. Emphasizing the American workforce in one of his lectures at the Collège de France, Michel Foucault observed that the individual “skill” of an industrial American worker was bound up in what he called the “machine/stream” complex (225). “The ability to do something,” Foucault argued, “cannot be separated from the person who is skilled and who can do this particular thing. In other words, the worker’s skill really is a machine, but a machine which cannot

“infinitesimal surveillances, permanent controls, [the] extremely meticulous ordering of space, indeterminate medical or psychological examination, to an entire micro-power concerned with the body.” “Sex, he states, “was a means of access both to the life of the body and the life of the species” (145-46).

be separated from the worker himself” (224). The “skill is thus united with the worker” and the worker is envisioned as “a machine that produces an earnings stream” or wage (225). When the machine worker “begins to be used,” the stream of income “will rise,” but will correspondingly fall upon the “obsolescence or the ageing of the worker.”³² It is not hard, then, to point out the intersections with these observations about the nineteenth-century American working male and Foucault’s “seminal” reading of Artemidorous’s Greek male. Both portraits intertwine economic and sexual psychodynamics: the (seminal) “stream” of income becoming spent with the breakdown of the individual machine---here a kind of oil, fuel, or lubricant. The characterization of the male laborer’s body as a machine symbolizes the perhaps clichéd notions of the male as the sexual and economic “performer,” the actor and doer in more than one sense, who, upon malfunction, simply ceases to be the greased arm of production for his managers and instead becomes the metal scrap thrown on the industrial trash heap. Male bodies that cease to perform and to earn money thus lose their masculine status.

There have, of course, been nineteenth-century critics of American capitalism and industrialism who not only lambasted the version of success associated with masculinity in their time, but actually viewed *failure* in a positive light, reworking normative patterns of thought about success and gender in the process. Henry David Thoreau, whom Scott Sandage invokes in his introduction as an example of the paradoxically productive failure, is perhaps America’s most famous slacker, a

³² See Foucault, 225. Scott Sandage observes a similar connection between broader economic values and perceptions of self-worth as an instrument for both labor and an exemplary model masculinity: “To call a man ‘a complete failure’ tallied both the economics of capitalism and the economics of selfhood; that is, the external and internal transactions that reckon how we see ourselves and how others see us” (12).

deliberate ne'er-do-well who eschewed the conventions of his society in order to make pointed sociopolitical statements.³³ As Michael Myer puts it, "Thoreau was fond of pointing out that his views were antithetical to Benjamin Franklin's when it came to getting an honest living. Franklin's frugal industry led the way to wealth, but Thoreau was less interested in the self-made man than he was in the self-made soul."³⁴ Thoreau indeed is illustrative of the kind of conversation about failure, success and masculinity I want to have in this dissertation, in that no one living today would label one of the greatest writers of his generation a failure by any means. Yet, he *was* called a failure within his own time because of his refusal to be a responsible male citizen to pay taxes, to hold a regular job, or to seek wealth. Presciently, Thoreau seemed to recognize that his defiance of the rhetoric about "proper" masculinity illustrates that success and failure were arbitrary constructs. Thoreau even felt there was room for leisure in his re-configuration of masculinity: "Most men...are so occupied with the factitious cares and superfluously coarse labors of life that its finer fruits cannot be plucked by them. Their fingers, from excessive toil, are too clumsy and tremble too much for that...he has no time to be any thing but a machine" (48). "The mass of men," Thoreau additionally declared, "lead lives of quiet desperation...There is no play for them, for this comes after work" (50). Deciding a man's value on these traits--values not reflective of nature,

³³ See Sandage, 1-2. Noting Thoreau's funeral attendance, Sandage postulates that those who attended were curious about the thinker, a man who spent all his intellectual energy brazenly attacking all the values his society held dear instead of abiding by them: "Townfolk and visiting notables crowded in to hear the eulogist admit what many had thought all along: the dearly departed [Thoreau] had wasted his gifts. Neither a deadbeat nor a drunkard, he was the worst kind of failure: a dreamer" (1).

³⁴ See Myers's introduction to *Walden and Civil Disobedience*, p. 22. Myers asserts that what Thoreau deemed the "self-made soul" consisted of "individual discipline, intellectual growth, and spiritual development" (13).

but inculcated in the populace for the survival of an economic system--is a myopic standard on which to judge a person's worth. Thoreau's transcendentalist companions mirrored the philosophic trend of European romantics by turning to the power of the inner spirit as a way of critiquing mechanized (and imperialistic) cultures, and Thoreau's implicit critique of masculinity is perhaps a natural extension of this worldview. As a result, Thoreau inspired many nineteenth- and twentieth-century thinkers to approach failure and success in the same critical light. Likewise, many of the authors I use throughout this dissertation elaborate on Thoreau's insight, which I touch upon most extensively in my examination of William Dean Howells and Willa Cather.

In a similar vein, Judith Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011) uses queer theory to validate "failure" as a site of resistance in the face of industrial capitalism and its monolithic standards. Like Sandage, she thinks that unexamined social values perpetuate the myth of self-willed ascendancy, or the belief that "success depends upon one's attitude" rather than on "the outcome of the tilted scales of race, class, and gender" (3). Halberstam uses queerness as one example of radical "failure," or states of identity that disturb this social order, generating vitalities and livelihoods that create and celebrate alternate value systems: "Under certain circumstances...failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, [and] not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world" (3). One example of such an alternate persona, the "butch" lesbian, exposes the performative nature of gender, revealing that gender ideals, because of their illusive nature, invite failure (96). Thus, every human will necessarily "fail" to perform ideal gender because of its amorphous nature. With Halberstam, I also approach failure

as a potential space for locating rebellious new trajectories, or even new ontologies, for fictional subjects, especially in my examination of the works of Willa Cather.

Indeed, ideologies about success itself may reflect mainstream thinking so perfectly that it could be said that those who do succeed, depending upon their positions and gender performances, remain confined within an expected life-pattern. Certainly, “successful” women, for instance, regardless of their intellectual acumen, were expected to pursue marriage and then become moral and spiritual guides for their husbands and children. In certain ways, for the repressed and marginal subjects throughout history (women, nonwhite men, children in certain classes, those with certain medical ailments or disabilities) success can be defined as conformity and failure as rebellion or self-reconstruction in the face of repressive ideology. Failing is indeed a kind of label, a naming of the rebellious non-conformist who questions the identities dispensed by power and capital. In contemporary parlance, “failures” are deemed losers or “slackers”—terms that we have seen become re-appropriated and used as markers of pride in some subcultures. It is no accident, for instance, that elder groups call younger generations “slackers” for failing to abide by social expectations; the Greatest Generation’s attitude toward the Baby Boomers is perhaps the most prominent example of such generational rifts. The Boomers gladly revised failure in the midst of their revolutionary social critiques, as did subsequent generations. However, I also recognize that the entrenched nature of success under capitalism—so entrenched, perhaps, because the continuance of the market itself depends upon individual agents thinking in acquisitive, competitive, and self-interested ways—makes the failure label so powerful that any potential for a rebellious reclamation of dignity is an impossibility.

For those predisposed to see failure in this light, such a status becomes shameful, and it becomes an excuse for rage, bitterness, depression, and violence against the society that they feel has wronged them.

Dissertation Overview

The literary texts analyzed in this dissertation emblemize these historical economic and gender tensions. The novels I analyze depict success in an era obsessed with it, but in doing so, come to terms with the ideological nature of the term and thus implicitly critique it through their imaginative work. Many also present the concept of failure in similar ways, actively taking up the label and exposing its contradictions, while others merely echo and reinforce dominant interpretations of the terms under capitalism. At the same time, I have selected these texts because they resonate with contemporary issues as they grapple with how to define gender, success and failure. Some have dubbed the present era the “New Gilded Age”³⁵ because of the unprecedented and ever-growing gap between the rich and the poor, so these ideological debates of more than a hundred years ago in the texts of Howells, London, Norris and Cather are very much alive today.

In Chapter One, I begin by considering the conflicted world of 1880s masculinity through the fiction of William Dean Howells. Howells, I argue, was acutely aware of the alternate forms of hegemonic masculinity within American culture and their corresponding conceptions of success. Howells uses *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885) to critique the ethical problems with the notion of the self-made man and

³⁵ See Paul Krugman’s Review of Thomas Piketty’s “Capital in the Twenty-First Century” in the *New York Review of Books* (nybooks.com).

chronicles Lapham's journey to a new manhood that rejects the principles of self-made masculinity and likewise comes to re-assess the popular conception of failure as a result.

In Chapter Two, I turn to the 1890s and consider Spencerian "passionate" manhood's violent reaction to failure through the fiction of Frank Norris. I demonstrate how his fiction contributes to a culture of masculinity that lauded violence as a valid means for men to re-gain pride in the face of perceived inadequacy, primarily as a result of their ability to remain "breadwinners" for their families. I argue that while Norris wanted to legitimize reactive male violence in the face of failure in both novels, to some extent, his thinking about male violence shifted between *McTeague* (1899) and *The Octopus* (1901). I also argue that in *The Octopus*, physical violence is interlaced and amplified by a larger conception of violence embedded in capitalism and that both subsequently reinforce each other.

In Chapter Three, I consider Jack London's ambivalence about passionate manhood's relationship with productivity and success. I argue that London underwent a shift in his thinking about success, from an optimistic celebration of bodily and mental "energies" that often emblemizes inner perseverance in *The Sea Wolf* (1904), to a more cynical evaluation of success and how it merely reflects the will of the upper classes in *Martin Eden* (1909). This latter text exists in extreme tension with his previous works.

In Chapter Four, I analyze the female performance of traditionally male economic roles in the works of Willa Cather. Here, I assert that Cather "queers" success by imaginatively destabilizing the heteronormative and masculinist worldview that

defines the term. Through her characterization of powerful women in novels like *O Pioneers!* (1913) and *The Song of the Lark* (1915), Cather exposes the hypocritical rhetoric surrounding success and its deployment, exposing its reliance on gender norms for its essential meaning.

Finally, in my conclusion, I consider how states of economic failure and success still impact how we view masculinity in the United States today. As mentioned, we are currently seeing a resurgence of Gilded Age inequality in the twenty-first century. As Thomas Piketty argues, “Modern meritocratic society, especially in the United States, is much harder on the losers, because it seeks to justify domination on the grounds of justice, virtue, and merit, to say nothing of the insufficient productivity of those at the bottom” (416). In other words, the social and economic transformations begun in the nineteenth century still have a profound, crucial impact on the construction of failure or success and its complex relationship with masculine identity. Changing the root behaviors associated with hypermasculinity and all the attendant societal problems they inspire--domestic violence, homicide, and gender inequality in the workforce-- starts in many cases with a reconsideration of the economic motivations we uncritically regurgitate.

Chapter One: The Un-Making of the Self-Made Man: *The Rise Silas Lapham's* Revision of Masculinity Through Failure

In the July 1885 issue of *Good Housekeeping*, author Clark W. Bryan offers a biographical narrative about the rise of “America’s Leading Writer of Fiction,” William Dean Howells. Evoking the tropes common in American chronicles of the ambitious

man's rise to fame and fortune from less-than-desirable circumstances, Bryan seems to be speaking of a self-made businessman rather than a novelist. "It is...marvelous," Bryan comments, that Howells's status has "been acquired without outside aids of any kind, without wealth and with but limited opportunities for acquiring an education." Bryan says that Howells's biography bears an inexpressible magic that seems "a fiction having more of the character of a page from the Arabian Nights than like a plain unvarnished tale of American life" (366). "In no other country but that of America," Bryan concludes, "could there have been developed so rapid attainment of literary supremacy" (366).

It is perhaps no surprise that Bryan places a novelist within the ubiquitous celebration of self-made masculinity in late nineteenth-century magazines and journals. Howells was indeed a financial success, especially for a novelist. Howells's net worth "mounted 'from \$60,000 in 1890 to \$68,000 in 1892, \$84,000 in 1894, \$93,000 in 1897'"; in 1991 dollars, "these figures become \$900,000 in 1890, \$1,000,000 in 1892, \$1.3 million in 1894, [and] \$1.5 million in 1897."³⁶ That a writer could make so much on his work alone was largely unprecedented until Howells's time. However, Bryan's image of Howells as a "self-made" author was actually based on an apocryphal interview conducted by Theodore Dreiser, which later turned out to be an assembly of statements cribbed from Howells's memoirs on the subject of success.³⁷ The fictional

³⁶ See Crowley, 33. Crowley cited Edwin H. Cady for the initial figures and used John J. McCusker's tables in "How Much Is That in Real Money? A Historical Price Index for Use as a Deflator of Money Values in the Economy of the United States" for the "reasonably accurate estimation of relative money values" (118). 1991, Crowley notes, is the "the last year for which McCusker gives any data" (118).

³⁷ The article, "How He Climbed Fame's Ladder," was originally published in the 1898 issue of *Success* magazine. For more commentary on the suspect composition, see Don

version Bryan constructs of Howells depicts him as an industrious man who implies that impoverishment and deprivations at a young age serve to foster invaluable qualities for success in later life--rhetoric not unlike his most famous character's own interview at the start of his most famous novel, *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885). In actuality, Howells was far more complex. He was not a mere example of the myth of self-making, but an active critic of its ideological roots. Howells was aware of the wider culture's need to use figures like him as emblems to promote a certain idealized fiction about self-made manhood. Recognizing that insecurity is often the basis for cultural change, Howells instead filled his fiction with portrayals of self-made masculinity defined more by their emotional frailties than their toughness. As William Morgan puts it, "Howells rejects the heroic, unfragmented, and neoromantic fictions of masculinity disseminated throughout the 1880s and 1890s" and participates in a realist discourse that "suggest[s] that manhood is more acutely defined by its internal contradictions, moral conflicts and social failures than as culturally-unifying, nation-building myth" (23).

I make two claims in this chapter. First, in *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, Howells tries to reveal the tensions and contradictions that defined his era's sense of self-made manhood. Second, Howells uses the anxious depiction of self-made manhood depicted in *Lapham* to re-conceptualize failure by presenting the protagonist's financial defeat as a moral victory, since it finally involves a rejection of the acquisitive, hollow values implicit within the self-made, producerist model of manhood.

Cook's notes on the origins of the article in the Norton edition of *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, 371.

As a myth, self-made masculinity was seductive, but Howells believed it was defined more by what it hides rather than what it reveals. In short, self-made masculinity was an assembly of traits defined by a hollow cultural narrative about self-determinacy and individualism that worked to suppress very natural fears and doubts. In *Rise*, Lapham betrays his performance of self-assurance through marked internal anxieties about his relative status to the other portrait of successful manhood in the novel, as embodied by Bromfield Corey. As David Leverenz points out, “anyone preoccupied with manhood, in whatever time or culture, harbors fears of being humiliated, usually by other men” (73). Leverenz also observes that marketplace competition amongst men was meant to validate their own power in front of their male peers and hence assuage these secret fears.³⁸ John E. Hart’s early essay established the symbolism of paint and its link to Lapham’s rise, and I wish to extend this symbolic reading by using paint to characterize the function of Lapham’s self-made masculinity.³⁹ Paint functions metaphorically not just as the literal cause of Lapham’s rise to fortune but as a representation for the persona he dons, the gruff exterior presentation that hides his secret fears about not measuring up to Corey or other men. In other words, Lapham uses the rhetoric and stylings of the self-made myth as “paint” in order to perform

³⁸ More specifically, Leverenz argues that “men defined manhood much more exclusively through their work. Beneath a greater preoccupation with manhood and competition...lies a greater fear of humiliation.” “To adapt a term from John Von Neumann’s game theory,” he further explains, “manhood becomes a way not of dominating, though domination may be a by-product, but of minimizing maximum loss. While the loss may be symbolized as castration, its emotional roots lie in a man’s fear that other men will see him as weak and therefore vulnerable to attack” (72-73).

³⁹ “To Silas,” Hart states, “paint is a matter of commodity...Paint is material, money. It has become his passion, his ‘heart’s blood,’ the driving force behind his way to wealth and power. As symbolic agent, paint is both energy and matter; it can both destroy and create” (441).

secure masculinity so that he can continue to be viewed as a success, and, therefore, as a man. Lapham and the patrician Bromfield Corey embody two very different ways of viewing power and success, and both are insecure in their own ways. Michael Kaufman articulates these differences best when he discusses class-based gender values: “part of the ideal of the working-class manhood among white North American men stresses physical skill and the ability to manipulate one’s environment, while part of the ideal of their upper-middle class counterparts stresses verbal skills and the ability to manipulate one’s environment through economic, social, and political means” (145). Though Lapham is, of course, newly upper-middle class himself, he retains the physical, energy-based emphasis on labor central to his working-class roots. Specifically, mobility and energy function as the most crucial performative elements of his self-made masculinity. This kind of masculinity defines itself through *producerism*, which Michael Kimmel describes as an “ideology that claimed that virtue came from the hard work of those who produce the world’s wealth.”⁴⁰ The patrician Bromfield Corey, in contrast, portrays success through conspicuous leisure, success put in evidence by demonstrating all of the daily chores one does not have to do. Each character’s version of success correlates with their version of manhood, making them eager to validate their own power in front of the other.

Lapham’s “rise” in the text, as many critics have mentioned, refers to his moral rise rather than any financial one.⁴¹ Since masculinity is often viewed synonymously

⁴⁰ See Kimmel 29. Kimmel goes on to say, “Producerism held that there was a deep-rooted conflict in society between the producing and the nonproducing classes and that work was a source of moral instruction, economic success, and political virtue.”

⁴¹ See Cox 119, and Dimock 83-84. Howells intended this meaning of the “rise” even in an early synopsis, when the character was called Silas Needham: “The reader is made to

with success or the image of it, the fact that Lapham's moral rise is caused by his financial failure invites readers to critique the embedded gender assumptions that coalesce with financial acquisitiveness and ruthless corporate competition. Lapham comes to realize that self-made masculinity results from an uncritical absorption of cultural norms about what it means to be an ideal man, and he thus uses the circumstances of failure to confront the insecurities that fueled the need for such an inauthentic portrayal of gender identity.⁴² As Don Cook observes, "Howells frequently depicted popular attitudes ironically in order to reveal their hollowness. In *Rise* for instance, he tests the accepted image of the self-made man and captain of industry against the reality he had observed" (360). The "reality" of self-made manhood is one, Lapham decides, where achievement is defined by climbing over the backs of others in the midst of ruthless economic competition. Thus *Rise* ends by redefining masculinity through failure, taking what would be ignominious circumstances in fiction celebratory of hypermasculine heroes and envisioning failure instead as an ethical (re-) discovery of self rather than a plunge into irrelevance and melancholy.

feel that this adversity, consciously and deliberately chosen, is The Rise of Silas Needham" (328).

⁴² I do not, however, wish to suggest that Howells himself did not deploy a masculine ideal within his texts, fictional or otherwise. Howells and other novelists involved in the promotion of certain aesthetic movements used similar kinds of rhetoric to dismiss the work of their forebears; Howells feminized romanticism by claiming it was solipsistic and promoted a kind of lazy navel-gazing, while his own work in realism was likened to physical labor and masculinized as a result. Ironically enough, his own literary descendants, the naturalists, would levy the same charge against Howells. The gendered rhetoric was thus circular, returning with each new generation who felt they had discovered a form of writing more equipped to define a new form of masculinity for a new age. Like most, Howells conformed in some ways with the spirited discourse on gender in his era and critiqued it, imaginatively or otherwise, at other times. See the entry on Howells in *Men and Masculinities*, p. 411, for a summary of this evocation of differing kinds of masculinity within literary movements.

I will first explore how the novel portrays conflicting models of masculinity and success in fragmented, insecure ways in order to challenge prominent myths about both markers of identity. I will then examine how Lapham, in confronting the destructive moral values inherent to the self-made model, allows financial failure to become a tool for self-reinvention.

Howells's Insecure Self-Made Manhood

Building off of Debora Battaglia's thoughts in the *Rhetoric of Self-Making*, James Catano argues that "the appeal of self-making, and in this case particularly that of verbal self-making, is an appeal based not solely on a positive desire for self-making but on an equally negative need to deny being made" (37). The "inaction, [and] passivity" that characterizes determinism and subject construction, Catano states, "represent[s] feminization within models rooting masculinity in agency, a core aspect of the myth of self-making" (37). The era of self-made manhood and the value associated with active agency coalesced with an economic ideology predicated upon individual physical exertion and dominance. The historian Charles R. Morris argues that the "national predilection for speed, [and] the obsession with 'moving ahead,'" was spearheaded by tycoons we usually associate with self-made manhood in America: Cornelius Vanderbilt, Andrew Carnegie, John D. Rockefeller, and Jay Gould (xii). Similarly, historian Ben Barker-Benfield asserts that nineteenth-century texts like John Todd's *Student Manual* "told young men how to become self-made" by asserting that it was the "product of will and energy" (46). "Energy," Barker-Benfield further observes, "was one of the most frequent and most characteristic terms associated with male

activity and vital forces in this period (along with its synonyms: vigor, vitality and vital forces).”⁴³ Even Howells himself saw something powerfully symbolic in this energetic industrial landscape. Early in his career, for instance, Howells wrote about the 1876 Philadelphia Centennial Exposition’s emblematic Corliss engine, a behemoth forty-five foot tall assembly heralded as a feat of engineering. As he depicts the machine, the anthropomorphisms abound: “[The Corliss engine] rises loftily in the centre of the huge structure, an athlete of steel and iron with not a superfluous ounce of metal on it; the mighty walking beams plunge their pistons downward...the hundred life like details do their office with unerring intelligence.”⁴⁴ Howells compares the machine to an athlete, suggesting that the structure’s productivity is a product of its sturdiness and vice versa. The fact that it doesn’t have a “superfluous ounce of metal” recalls similar statements about the physique of muscular athletes and how they often lack “superfluous” deposits of fat in order to ensure maximum speed and efficiency. Howells thus locates and celebrates in machinery the nation’s sense of male individualism and human identity in an era of increased technological and economic mobility.

By the writing of *Rise* some nine years later, however, Howells changed as a writer and a thinker. The physical ability to manipulate one’s environment, the prevailing rhetorical emphasis on masculine energy, and the material acquisition as parallel demonstrations of economic success, all play a role in accelerating the moral degeneration of Silas Lapham for Howells, not his triumphant rise. Lapham is an anti-

⁴³ Among some of Barker-Benfield’s more important observations about this text is that Todd argued that men need to overcome a natural “indolence” and require “a course of suitable discipline” that would awaken “dormant energies” and allow them to compete against other men in a competitive economic system” (46-47).

⁴⁴ Quoted in Morris, 120. Howells’s article on the Corliss engine was published in the July 1876 edition of *The Atlantic Monthly*.

Corliss engine, an initially energetic machine that eventually runs itself into the scrap pile. When Tom Corey is introduced to the Laphams, Silas is reminded of an aristocratic manhood in Boston that rivals his own energetic manhood. When Silas mentions he would like to “make a man out of” Tom Corey later on in the novel, he is clear that autonomy, self-sufficiency and activity make manhood: “I don’t see how a fellow like that, that’s had every advantage in the world, can hang round home and let his father support him...I should want to strike out and do something for myself...I like to see a man *act* like a man. I don’t like to see him taken care of like a young lady” (51). A real man should instead want to “strike out and do something,” as Lapham puts it, not sit at home on his father’s dime, and so he hypothesizes that he could “make a man out of” Tom if only he could get the young man to work (51).

Bromfield Corey, more than his son, defines this more leisurely form of manhood and success. Born and raised to make a hobby of luxury, he epitomizes Thorstein Veblen’s notion of “conspicuous leisure.” Through this concept, Bromfield embodies a different kind of manhood and, since the two are intertwined, a less energetic conception of success.⁴⁵ Veblen defines conspicuous leisure, as, simply, the “the requirement of abstention from productive work” so as to display “wealth and power” (28-29). Veblen further observes that it is not enough for these classes to merely

⁴⁵ After the publication of *Rise*, interestingly enough, Howells championed Veblen’s *The Theory of the Leisure Class* in a review, calling it a text for the novelist that wished to “seize upon” this portrait of the “whole American story: the relentless will, the tireless force, the vague ideal, the inexorable destiny, the often bewildered acquiescence” of the attainment of capital (361). In the review, Howells also applauds Veblen for recognizing that wealthy Americans abide by aristocratic habits. Howells therefore anticipated Veblen in certain ways; conspicuous consumption and conspicuous leisure appear in imaginative form in most of his novels before *Leisure Class*’s publication in 1899.

have wealth and power. Lapham, for instance, is certainly successful and richer, by far, than the Coreys or their ilk, but he nevertheless feels inferior to the Coreys because of the way they perform their power *through* their leisure, or what Veblen calls “wealth or power...put in evidence” (29). If Silas Lapham, then, infused with a “go-ahead” work ethos, has an energetic mentality in a constant state of (seminal) flow, then Corey is conservator of energy and inherited funds, someone who desires a life of stasis. Bromfield Corey values his ability to articulate ideas, to influence minds, and to communicate power through leisure. Whereas Lapham values self-determination and autonomy, Corey values familial legacy and interdependence through inheritance. There is nothing for Bromfield to change because everything is already perfectly fine; there is nothing for him to act upon that someone else can’t do for him.

Bromfield’s vision of masculine success is articulated most clearly during his conversations with Tom. When Tom announces his intent to enter Lapham’s paint business, Bromfield fears his son will tire himself with social effort: “You must give your energies a rest” (55), he instructs. Bromfield reminds Tom that his son had always “shown a fair degree of moderation” where “abnormal activity,” like getting a job, is concerned (55). Corey’s wife responds to Tom’s ambition by calling him “selfish,” as if he’s refusing to take the family’s status and its reputation into account in his apparent adherence to self-made masculinity (84). The advantage of having ample leisure is having the opportunity to cultivate cultural capital, or what Bromfield later calls qualities “that can be felt, but not defined” (121). As Elsa Nettels puts it, these qualities may include the Coreys’ “conversational ease, refined diction, and irreproachable

grammar” which “represent a barrier [Lapham] can never pass.”⁴⁶ Of course, Lapham’s childhood disadvantages demanded a preoccupation with labor that left little time or opportunity to pursue intellectual cultivation. Bromfield thus may be hinting to his son that, in taking on Lapham’s lifestyle, Tom risks losing the kind of power that this variety of manhood capitalizes upon.

Lapham indeed emphasizes physical vitality during his early attempts to talk about failure before his epiphany later in the novel. His ex-partner, Rogers, is synonymous with failure; he is characterized as a weight or drag on an otherwise speedy, physically industrious person, an assessment that mirrors the larger economy’s own demonization of the lazy, leeching “loser.” Lapham likens Rogers to an inert, heavy mass that slows Lapham down (and, if Lapham is metonymic to self-made manhood, Rogers therefore slows the economy as a whole). Rogers was merely a “drag and a brake on” Lapham “from the word go.” “I was *loaded up* with a partner that didn’t know anything, and *couldn’t do* anything, and I *unloaded*; that’s all” (42, my emphasis). As if strung about the energetic man’s shoulders, hampering his ability to “go,” Rogers is dumped. After Rogers ruins him financially, Lapham declares that Rogers would ruin the most archetypal of the period’s self-made tycoons as if he were a contagion: “He’d run through Vanderbilt, Jay Gould, and Tom Scott rolled into one, in less than six months” (230). Success manuals of the period mirrored Lapham’s

⁴⁶ See Nettels’s *Language, Race, and Social Class in Howells’s America*, 145. For a commentary on gender and language in Howells’s other fiction and how it works within *Lapham*, see her other volume, *Language and Gender in American Fiction: Howells, James, Wharton and Cather*, 39-40. She argues that while female characters never criticize improper male speech, men criticize improper female speech as a means of asserting authority in Howells’s fiction. The male-to-male critiques also have an implicit power relationship; people of Corey’s ilk critique the language of “provincial male characters” presumably for the same kind of illustration of power.

characterization of Rogers. One author even compared the failed man to a “soft, flabby, nerveless mollusk or shellfish in the ocean...as for going anywhere, or being anything in particular, that would be out of the question entirely” (Bates, 196). Going is synonymous with *being* for the self-made man—Lapham likes to think he is defined by a body that works in tandem with the *laissez-faire* ideology’s emphasis on individual speed in a competitive economy.

Throughout *Rise*, we receive the sense that Lapham is dodging a more authentic mode of being and doing through his display of energy and his demonization of people like Rogers. Lapham, however, doesn’t discover this himself until the end of the novel. The interview at the beginning of *Rise* illustrates Lapham’s eagerness to assimilate with the self-made myth and to use its performance as a kind of protective barrier. Bartley Hubbard, the journalist returning from Howells’s *A Modern Instance* (1882), leads Silas Lapham through a series of clichéd questions designed to provoke an already anticipated response. He describes Lapham on his notepad as a kind of human Corliss engine, hinting at the robust willpower within; Lapham is a man of “solid bulk” with a “square, bold chin” (4). In depicting Lapham this way, Hubbard constructs a kind of cookie-cutter figure of both masculinity and ambition, a representative of preconceived physical and mental notions about the ambitious character his audience expects. Hubbard also asks Lapham about “early deprivations of any kind” in his past “that would encourage the reader to go and do likewise?” (4). One scholar suggests that Howells inserted the interview into the novel as a way of satirizing overused biographical conventions, including a clichéd emphasis on early triumph over poverty

and adversity as a child.⁴⁷ Hubbard's view seems akin to Valentin de Bellegarde's shortsighted reading of Christopher Newman in Henry James's *The American*. The French aristocrat observes to Newman, who is depicted as an archetypal self-made man in the novel, that "your poverty [was] your capital. Being an American, it was impossible you should remain what you were born, and being poor—do I understand it?—it was therefore inevitable that you should become rich" (93). The belief that poverty could be a boon to success was indeed held as conventional wisdom during the period, even if the historical data actually suggested, according to one historian that "the drive for self-employment itself constituted a major cause of failure. A determination to commence business, despite inexperience and limited capital resources, rendered countless young proprietors vulnerable to financial reverses" (Ballestein 15). Hubbard's inquiries are thus less motivated by reality than the desire to maintain an entrenched habit of thought about the self-made myth.

Lapham is hesitant to shed the clichéd image Hubbard wants to tease out of him. Nonetheless, the "pride which comes of self-making" cannot be contained (94). Lapham tells Hubbard that the magazine wouldn't want his "life without [his] money" (3), and that Lapham's embodiment of the rags-to-riches myth makes him a valuable resource for its pages. Thus, though there is a little resentment on Lapham's part, the paint czar gives Hubbard what he wants to hear, and dutifully chronicles his youthful deprivations

⁴⁷ See Scott Casper's *Constructing American Lives: Biography and Culture in Nineteenth-Century America*, p. 316-18. Casper argues that it is satirical because Lapham begins with the clichéd image of self-made manhood, but "Howells reversed that familiar narrative...his 'rise is purely moral and never rewarded: deciding to redress a perceived wrong he did to a partner decades earlier, he instigates his own ruin" (316). Casper also suggests that Howells's own experience in writing Abraham Lincoln's biography motivated this subversion.

and frugalities. Lapham indicates that he read the omnipresent *Poor Richard's Almanac*, Benjamin Franklin's collection of maxims and advice from his self-published colonial pamphlet, at the bidding of his equally industrious parents.⁴⁸ Though Hubbard is sure to include numerous compliments in his notes, such as when he mentions that Lapham has a "single-minded application and unwavering perseverance which our young business men would do well to emulate" (19), it seems apparent that the journalist, who can barely stifle his boredom, has written similar cliché-ridden sentences about many other men in these pages before.⁴⁹

Indeed, Hubbard's job, as one critic puts it, is in a sense to "cover up Lapham's crude vernacular just as effectively as Lapham's refined mineral paint covers up natural defects and even nature itself."⁵⁰ Lapham is not ignorant of this need to cover over his

⁴⁸ Some of these maxims were later assembled into Franklin's 1758 text, *The Way to Wealth*, and became a key ideological text for later generations of aspiring self-made men. Some of them became entrenched into American popular culture. Among them: "there are no gains without pains" and "early to bed, early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise" (2). While Patrick K. Dooley argues that such texts make up Silas's sense of moral conduct and inform his ultimate decision to not succumb to Roger's temptation in selling the mills to British interests, I think they may also inform his earlier, more dubious ethical decision to cut Rogers out of his business in the first place. The sense of unyielding productivity the text promotes often induces one to sacrifice "weaker" others in the midst of cutthroat competition in the business world. See Dooley, 380.

⁴⁹ If we turn to *A Modern Instance*, Hubbard arguably even lived the self-made narrative as well, albeit without the emphasis on physical labor. Like Lapham, he begins as a small town nobody and steadily gains more lucrative work until he arrives in Boston, interviewing important figures for *The Events*. His "rise," too, accelerates his moral degradation: he increasingly neglects his wife in favor of work and then cheats on her, resulting in their divorce. That he absorbs the self-made myth is something Howells makes reasonably clear: "He had been not only well housed and fed, and very well dressed, but pitied as an orphan, and petted for his beauty and talent, while he was always taught to think of himself as a poor boy, who was winning his own way through the world" (18).

⁵⁰ See Cox, 115. For a more detailed examination of how paint works symbolically in *Lapham*, see also Todd 19-21.

rougher edges, and his paint business, both the literal business and the symbolism of its product, becomes a way to do just that. Indeed, the “paint mine” is also his “gold mine” for him, the ticket to prosperity (9). Lapham has, as his wife puts it, “paint on the brain” (62), meaning that he is not only concerned with his business, but concerned with covering up rough patches in habit and the blemishes of his background with the symbolic marker of his achievement and the source of his capital. Even Hubbard seems to observe this tendency when he jokingly asks whether Lapham had “ever tried [his paint] on the human consciousness” (11), which foreshadows Lapham’s strategy during his later ethical lapse when he buys and sells stocks on a margin with Rogers, and also when he recalls the time he kicked Rogers out of the business. His incessant working is another form of having paint on the brain, as it clouds the anxieties and self-doubts about these complex ethical questions. He wears self-made manhood as a paint-like armor, a protective carapace of an identity based upon the industrial mantras of work ethic, productivity and rationality.

Lapham’s mission seems to be not only to paint over his deficiencies but to paint over nature itself as part of his belief, as he declares during the Hubbard interview, that “the landscape was made for man, and not man for the landscape” (14). “I never saw anything so very sacred about a big rock, along a river or in a pasture that it wouldn’t do to put mineral paint on it in three colors,” he proclaims (14). Indeed, Don Cook notes that literally painting over “large boulders” or other natural objects for advertising purposes was not an uncommon practice for farmers looking to make a bit of extra

cash.⁵¹ Used in this sense, paint becomes not only a literal covering or a gesture meant to assert man's superiority over nature, but a tool of transformation, rendering an inert object "useful." As if proving his adherence to such an ideology, Lapham shows the journalist an old family photo in which the entire family appears before an "old farm house, whose ugliness had been smartened up with a coat of Lapham's own paint" (8). The painting of the old farmhouse betrays Lapham's eagerness to cover over the blemishes nature delivers to both humanity and the objects they dwell within.

The paint-covering that occurs on the emotional level is just as notable. During a ferry journey home, just after Tom Corey presents himself to the older man for employment consideration, Lapham takes an avuncular role and advises young Corey on the virtues of emotional discretion. Upon considering how he passes the time during these ferry journeys, Lapham tells Tom that he watches the "faces on board" (70). "The astonishing thing to me is not what a face tells, but what it don't tell," he says (70). Considering their own impending business relationship and the principles that should ostensibly guide it, Lapham says to Corey that he thinks revealing too much takes "a man out of his own hands" (70). "As long as he's in his own hands," he states, "there's some hopes of his doing something with himself; but if a fellow has been found out—even if he hasn't been found out to be so very bad—it's pretty much all up with him" (70). This odd lecture not only reveals a lot about the nature of his kind of carefully crafted ethos of self-reliance and emotional stultification, but also about his deepest fear: being "found out" and deemed a fraud, an ostensibly virile figure that is secretly filled with doubts and insecurities about his own status as a success. It also indicates a

⁵¹ See Cook's footnote to the Norton edition of *Rise*, p.14. "Silas is voicing the classic views of the public-be-damned school of nineteenth-century industrialism," Cook notes.

fear of being shaped and controlled by external forces, which results in the self-made man's feminization. As long as he's emotionally in control and able to conquer financial issues with his strong willpower, then he can shape his own destiny and continue to "make" himself. Giving himself over to someone else's control eschews his will, the source of his strength, and also opens a man up to ridicule and humiliation. Thus Lapham succeeds at being inscrutable for the majority of the novel; the narrator reports that his girls could "never tell when he meant a thing" (34), for instance, though Persis remains a frequent exception.

He even gazes at others in secret, so as not to give them a glimpse of what greater meaning they hold for them. For instance, Silas goes inside at one point "so as not appear to have been watching" his daughters and Tom on the shore (81), in order to avoid revealing his hopes for their eventual marriage and his own rise in status. Hiding his emotions through an occasionally inept poker face gives him the illusion of control. When Tom Corey notices Lapham may be ill, he remembers that "in Lapham's circle of acquaintance they complained when they were sick, but they made no womanish inquiries after one another's health" (133). While sickness was acknowledged by those who bore it, the inquiry of others into that sickness is feminized, as if to emphasize the fact that a man, especially a self-made one, is to deem illness just another troublesome challenge that nature has thrown up for him to thwart, rather than as a potential compromise to his personhood.

Along with emotional suppression, a corollary to this sense of manhood, money, is accumulated and "spent" in order to maintain this illusion of potency and self-sufficiency. Lapham's accretion of capital through his "gold mine" of paint validates his

success, and thus it must be made into more capital through investment; he can never have too much money, just like he can never have too much masculinity. While his wife feels like money ought to be used to enjoy life, Silas merely views it as a barometer for manhood, for which any amount is never enough in this state of perpetual insecurity: Persis observes that “the more money he got, the more he wanted to get” (131). The income stream is the seminal stream, as I mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, and this intangible asset is turned material through the buying of goods, rendering the identity itself palpable in some way. Indeed, money is almost synonymous with a paint-like covering for Lapham—money is made possible through his paint’s literal and symbolic success as a commodity, and the two coalesce to provide a protective carapace of success and power.

Lapham’s income thus must further be continually dispensed in an effort to preserve this image of success. While Lapham avoids the leisure associated with the more established classes, he adores spending. When faced with a decision on a purchase, he determines which product is the most expensive of its kind and buys it. The new home in Boston, for instance, is filled with the “costliest and most abundant frescoes” (21) instead of those that illustrate a mood, theme, or some other register of aesthetic sophistication. “We spend more money on our houses nowadays” (48), he informs a quietly judging Tom, inquiring about Lapham’s contribution to the house’s design and subtly noting his unscrupulous manner of decoration. While Lapham pays an architect to make sound decisions regarding the most fashionable furnishings in the East Bay, at several points he rejects the architect’s plans in favor of more ostentatious and

expensive versions.⁵² He thinks that, like nearly everything else, artistic and architectural taste can be bought, but then oddly rejects the decisions of the person he paid to make them. “You can’t have a nice house for nothing,” Lapham explains to Tom, “It’s just like ordering the picture of a painter. You pay him enough, and he can afford to paint you a first-class picture; and if you don’t he can’t...give an architect money enough and he’ll give you a nice house, every time” (48). The house is, in a sense, the repository for his energetic economic conquests, the museum that houses the artifacts of his successful masculinity. Its materiality, like the paint, serves as a solid marker of the identity he wants to project to the world. One receives the impression that if Lapham could turn gold and greenbacks into house paint, displaying his riches on the surface of the walls to all his future guests, he would.

If self-made masculinity is paint, hiding emotional frailty and weakness, what exactly characterizes that vulnerability? Mostly, Lapham has an intense envy of the Coreys and harbors a secret fear of eventual humiliation. Lapham’s attempt to render the Coreys effeminate is motivated by self-defense; the best way to avoid humiliation is to humiliate, Lapham figures, and thus he points out how often either Bromfield or Tom rely on family funds in order to do nothing “but say smart things” (80). Despite these characterizations, however, Lapham also admits “he had long hated [the Corey] name as a symbol of splendor which, unless he should live to see at least three generations of his descendants gilded with mineral paint, he could not hope to realize in his own” (80). There is a kind of brand-name legacy and long-established elegance to the Corey name that enables Bromfield to summon the most esteemed figures in all of Boston—a kind

⁵² For a more detailed examination of Lapham’s deficient architectural tastes, see Bonnell, 97-98.

of power that Lapham does not have, nor can hope to have in his lifetime. In short, the Corey family name suggests the threat of a superior social success and suggests a kind of power that, while not explicitly gendered, is nevertheless threatening to Lapham's masculinity. While Lapham's outward presentation as an energetic self-made man suggests that he doesn't think social esteem is something that dictates manhood, he clearly thinks otherwise internally. Indeed, though he pretends to be disinterested to others about Tom's induction into his paint empire, he calls it "one of the sweetest flavors that he had yet tasted in his success," presumably because it promises to accelerate his ascent to the top (80). This envy asserts itself again when the Laphams are invited to dinner. Silas, rather than taking the route of the self-assured masculine stylings of self-made manhood, becomes consumed with the minutiae of refinement such as whether or not he should wear white gloves or a black cravat to the dinner. Lapham procures a book of manners and combs through it, rehearsing its instructions, but is dismayed to find that gloves aren't addressed in its pages. He briefly contemplates asking Tom whether he should wear the gloves before admitting that he'd "rather die" than ask a question that would tacitly confirm the Coreys' suspicion that he doesn't know how to comport himself in society, thus opening himself up to potential humiliation (160).

Indeed, Lapham gets so worked up about the dinner clothing that "drops of perspiration" gather as he groans and swears in front of his family at one point. In his frustration, he even declares that the Laphams should have refused the invitation altogether in order to save face (162). Acknowledging his anxiety over the upcoming appearance, Penelope makes a feminizing joke at his expense, wondering aloud whether

he should “order one of the imported dresses” for himself to make the whole “trouble” of dressing himself a bit more tolerable (162). Penelope’s humor acknowledges that, for the first time in awhile, Lapham appears out of his depth regarding outward appearance. The tables have turned, and now the aristocrats are dictating the discussion on proper manliness.

At the disastrous dinner party, Lapham is conversationally ill-equipped to deal with the talk of the management of estates, the sophisticated discourse on literature, artists, and the like. All of these witticisms and social maneuverings continue to express a power he cannot possess, embarrassing him into silence. When the subject comes to his experiences during the war, he starts promisingly, but the drink he consumes begins eroding his sense of self-awareness and control—indeed, the drink seems to be stripping off Lapham’s emotional “paint” he so carefully applied, and he ends up succumbing to the thing that “takes a man out of his own hands,” his most dreaded fear. Thus, he becomes alarmingly boastful about his fortune, as if seeking to bolster his pride in the wake of all this conversational failure. He makes his money his symbol of belonging to true manhood and waves it about to the other guests, but it only comes across as desperation, a bald revelation of compensatory pride, born out of the inability to demonstrate those qualities that can be “felt but not defined.” He tells them the story about how he lent money to Rogers, spinning it as a kind of exhibition of his beneficence as well as an example of his ample bank account. Instead of effortless self-confidence, however, it only communicates vulnerability. He even tells Reverend Sewell to come see him if he got in a “tight place” with his work, as “he would let him

have all the money he wanted; he had more money than he knew what to do with” (184).

When Lapham wakes the next morning and realizes he has revealed himself and his anxieties about manhood to the other guests, he becomes an emotional wreck upon meeting Tom, and all of his repressed desires come gushing forth in the sober light of day. Lapham feels he has been taken out of his own hands, been discovered as a fraud, a man who doesn’t deserve the label of “success.” Thus, Lapham’s “strenuous face” bears “shame, fear of the things that must have been thought of him, mixed with a faint hope that he might be mistaken, which died out at the shocked and pitying look in [Tom] Corey’s eyes” (185). “I disgraced you...[and] disgraced my family!” he exclaims to a bewildered Tom who is unnerved by this sudden behavioral turn by a man once emotionally contained. Most tellingly, Lapham feels he “showed that I wasn’t fit to go with you,” or to associate with the Coreys (185). Lapham even feels, oddly but revealingly, that this social failure impacts his economic standing; he offers to leave the business, since he no longer feels fit to rule over a “gentleman” like Tom. Of course, Tom, rigidly denies any such thinking, even though these events cause the young man great internal discomfort and even a bit of shame at one point. In this moment, the virile emblem of self-made manhood crumbles and Lapham admits that the Coreys, kings of the great indoors, are the superior men.

Yet, this is not to say that either Bromfield or Tom feels they can claim superior success or superior manhood, or that Howells feels that they *are* the superior men. This consistent portrait of fragmented, competitive, and envious masculinities is indeed a credit to Howells; the author ultimately dodges the portrayal of one paradigmatic kind

of powerful masculinity in favor of revealing the anxieties of all the represented masculine forms. Bromfield Corey is undoubtedly without the same intense insecurity that plagues Lapham, but recognizes nevertheless that the influence of his kind of American aristocracy is all but extinct: “We represent a faded tradition,” he later tells his wife Anna after her failed attempt to influence Tom, acknowledging that their preferences regarding whom their son marries bears little weight in a land where titles are informal, unlike the British aristocracy (89). He also admits to his son that lineage is no longer the determinant of success: “money buys position at once...there’s no doubt but money is to the fore now. It is the romance, the poetry of our age. It’s the thing that chiefly strikes the imagination” (56). Thus, Bromfield essentially recognizes that many places, if not in his exclusive Bostonian enclave of American aristocracy, increasingly define success by having a hefty bank account rather than an extensive vocabulary and knowledge of the arts.

Though we receive no evidence that Bromfield envies Lapham in quite the same way that Lapham envies him, Bromfield at least recognizes that his own son is a harbinger for a new kind of manhood and financial display of success. Indeed, the younger Corey seems a kind of amalgam of traits at times, an energetic individual who simultaneously feels the ideological tug of his surrounding milieu that asks him to become something by *doing* something, and the comforting lure of his father’s tradition, which asks him to do nothing, and to make a big performance out of that nothing. We see this conflict most vividly after Lapham’s emotional breakdown, during which he momentarily “recognizes his allegiance to the exclusiveness to which he was born and bred, as a man perceives to his country when her rights are invaded” by an “offensive

boor” like Lapham (187). Besides such momentary demonstrations of loyalty, the values of self-made masculinity are more pronounced in Tom; Tom’s turn to the self-made model of masculinity is signaled early on, when he shows up at Lapham’s offices looking like a hardy man fresh from laboring outdoors due to his recent sojourn to the South: “He could not have presented himself in a figure more to the mind of a practical man. His hands and neck still kept the brown of the Texas suns and winds, and he looked as business-like as Lapham himself” (64). A real aristocrat’s son, one would presume, would also care about the financial status of his future father-in-law, but Tom seems genuinely undeterred in his continued affection for Penelope in the wake of her father’s economic collapse, leaving the reader to presume that Tom wishes to provide for the couple’s future through his continued employment. This value is demonstrated when Tom declares that it would be shameful to continue living off his father’s income: “I am ashamed to come back and live upon you, sir” (59). Bromfield jokes that Tom’s attitude, which Bromfield presumably identifies in not just his son but in his son’s generation as a whole, is why America “will never have a real aristocracy” (59). If anything, Tom’s internal conflict illustrates another variety of masculinity in Howells’s time, but Tom’s eventual turn to the self-made variety by the novel’s end suggests it is the style of masculinity that his generation increasingly associates with power.

Tom’s mental shift, however, is not entirely described as a choice, but as somehow *genetic*. Tom’s dedication to financial independence and hard labor reflects the long-lost qualities of Giles Corey, Bromfield’s father and Tom’s grandfather. As he gazes at a portrait of his father, Bromfield acknowledges that *he* is the outlier in the family legacy, not Tom:

The resemblance between his son and the old India merchant...must have been what struck him. Grandfather and grandson had both the Roman nose which appears to have flourished chiefly at the formative period of the republic...Bromfield Corey had not inherited it, and he had made his straight nose his defense when the old merchant accused him of a want of energy. He said, 'What could a man do whose unnatural father had left his own nose away from him?' This amused but did not satisfy the merchant. 'You must do something,' he said; '...No Corey yet ever proposed to do nothing.' 'Ah, then, it's quite time one of us made a beginning,' urged the man who was then young, and who was now old, looking into the somewhat fierce eyes of his father's portrait. He has inherited as little of the fierceness as of the nose, and there was nothing predatory in his son either, though the aquiline beak had come down to him in such force. (61).

Bromfield's analysis of the portrait reveals a telling secret: it was Bromfield who fashioned the Coreys as an American quasi-aristocracy, not his grandfather, as he tacitly wants others to believe. His father, Giles, rather valued productive labor—he commands his son in the memory to “do something”—making the ambitious merchant actually more similar to a man like Lapham. In the memory, Giles shames Bromfield for not feeling the same way, accusing him of corrupting the family tradition. The nose that skipped a generation is the genetic symbol of Tom's ambition, which also presumably skipped a generation, generating Bromfield's “want of energy.” Though a product of the values of Bromfield in his childhood, Tom, “aquiline beak” and all, signals the family's return to grandfather Giles's willpower and energy. The son is thus

becoming the self-made man, leaving his father's definition of masculinity by the wayside. Symbolically, since Tom is the representative of a generation increasingly combining work and masculinity, he helps validate Bromfield's impression that he is clinging to an outmoded tradition. Both Lapham and Bromfield, in other words, fear that it is the other man who epitomizes masculinity for others, fueling their respective insecurities and fears of humiliation. Through these characters, Howells asserts that ideal masculinity is less a stable, fixed condition and more of a fluid defensive mechanism born of a very human fragility, one that can be critiqued and even dispensed with entirely.

Lapham's Revision of Masculinity Through Failure

While Lapham cannot help the decline and fall of prices or the whims of an unpredictable market, he nevertheless admits to Persis that he has participated in stock speculation schemes with his old partner, Rogers. It is a risky procedure, since the prices of securities are unpredictable, and thus he is partially at fault for his own failure. Lapham also admits that speculation is an ethical failing on his part, akin to "gambling," (262). Yet this ethical transgression, as Lapham deems it, was only entertained in the first place because he kicked Rogers out of the business. Lapham ultimately sacrifices much to absolve himself of any semblance of perceived sin, and it is this spectacular compensatory failure that allows him to reinvent the values that define his sense of masculinity.

The ethical remedies that the novel presents for Lapham's situation have been thoroughly explored by other critics. Donald Pizer argues that Sewell's "economy of

pain” maxim in the novel serves as a moral tenet for both the solution of the romantic subplot quandary involving Lapham’s daughters and Tom Corey, as well as Lapham’s own financial situation.⁵³ Due to an unfortunate misreading, the family assumes Irene is the object of Tom’s affection during his numerous visits, but it turns out he’s actually more interested in the more aloof but better read Penelope. Penelope, overwhelmed with guilt, cannot accept Tom’s proposal despite her wish to do so because of its likely affect on Irene. Penelope therefore resolves to stifle her own affections for Tom so that Irene can feel a semblance of happiness. Sewell, however, rejects the girl’s sense of moral duty by asking her parents why they shouldn’t let “one suffer instead of three, if none is to blame?” “That’s sense,” Sewell argues, “that’s justice. It’s the economy of pain which naturally suggests itself, and which would insist upon itself, if we were not to all perverted by traditions which are the figment of the shallowest sentimentality” (212). Sewell offers the Laphams a utilitarian solution for their awkward predicament, a pain restricted to one person (Irene) for the benefit of more people. Pizer further suggests that the same maxim could apply to Lapham’s ultimate decision not to try and recoup his finances by delving into yet more schemes with Rogers and admit that more people would feel less pain if he decides to voluntarily withdraw from his business endeavors.

However, other critics have suggested that Sewell’s distaste for noble self-sacrifice in fiction, indicated during their discussion of sentimental novels at the Corey dinner, would mean that the reverend’s “economy of pain” may not easily map onto

⁵³ See Pizer, 323. Specifically, Pizer examines how the major romantic plot and the failure plot intersect in an ethical sense. “The thematic similarity in the two plots,” he argues, “is that both involve a principle of morality which requires that the individual determine correct action by reference to the common good rather than to an individual need.”

Lapham's sense of ethics. At the dinner, Sewell abhors the seemingly unjustifiable portraits of "psychical suicide" that reign in some contemporary fiction (173).

Lapham's conduct, however, epitomizes the apparently pointless self-annihilation in those novels. Lapham even admits that he had "done wrong about Rogers in the first place" which inevitably, in his mind, necessitated his eventual financial collapse (320).

As Walter Benn Michaels puts it, Lapham's failure is a "just punishment for becoming a capitalist," entailing the acceptance of ethical transgressions and the consequences that may result (39). The most crucial part of Sewell's words, critic John Crowley mentions, is "that one should suffer instead of three if *no one is to blame*...[which] implies that if blame *can* be ascertained, the 'economy of pain' does not apply so easily, because responsibility for evil should justly weigh upon the evildoer" (133 original emphasis). Thus, Crowley concludes, "an individual's capacity for morally meaningful self-sacrifice is directly proportional to his or her strength of character; at the limit of moral perfection, such sacrifice would become sublimely redemptive. Lapham's rise regains sublimity, therefore, from the nearly annihilating degree of his suffering" (133).

The sheer enormity of what Lapham does sacrifice in order to rectify an arguably minimal wrong—his finances, his business and its legacy, and even his dream house—renders Crowley's analysis more credible than Pizer's. Indeed, as I've pointed out, Sewell's vaguely utilitarian ethics sound contrary to the almost deontological sense of ethics apparent in Lapham's sacrifice. It could be argued that the utilitarianism Sewell advocates shares values with capitalism, thus defining the core values of the self-made manhood Lapham ultimately rejects. Raymond Williams, for instance, observes that the "utilitarian system," while originally an ethical method founded on

supporting the happiness and pleasure for the greatest number, eventually became “the working philosophy of a bureaucratic and industrial capitalist society” upon its increased association with “usefulness.”⁵⁴ Max Weber arrives at a similar conclusion when he conflates utilitarian principles with Benjamin Franklin’s ideas about self-made manhood and the Protestant work-ethic: “All Franklin’s moral precepts have a utilitarian slant. Honesty is *useful* because it brings credit. So are punctuality, hard work, moderation, etc., and they are only virtues *for this reason*... According to Franklin, these virtues like all others, are only virtues at all to the extent that they are useful to the individual in concrete situations” (12, original emphasis). Weber’s reading suggests that virtues under utilitarianism are only meaningful in relation to what they produce for the individual’s career or social status. Sewell’s version of utilitarianism indeed puts an emphasis on overall pleasure, but when applied to Lapham’s situation, what determines overall pleasure could be synonymous with whatever actions contribute to the health of the economy overall. Read this way, Sewell’s doctrine could even allow Lapham to continue to do whatever is necessary to preserve his business and save his employers’ jobs, even if it means rampant stock speculation and selling Rogers’s mills to the Englishmen. The actual decision is determined through a belief that virtues like honesty should be followed as ends in themselves rather than as means to self-promotion. Lapham’s willingness to absorb the consequences for his actions disproportionately to the evil he committed generates a form of masculinity possibly resurrected from his humble, rural childhood: “Adversity had so far been his friend that it had taken from him all hope of the social success for which people crawl and truckle,

⁵⁴ See Raymond Williams’s entry on Utilitarianism in *Keywords*, 328.

and restored him, through failure and doubt and heartache, *the manhood* which his prosperity had so nearly stolen from him” (315, my emphasis). Lapham thus now equates manhood with the willingness to *sacrifice* ego and the pursuit of “social success” in favor of a more convincing moral structure.

Thematically, Howells explores the tendency for certain values to become twisted during the pursuit of individual ambitions in his other novels, which is most evident in *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1889). *Hazard* also contrasts numerous types of masculinity that Howells’s characters, mostly tacitly but also sometimes explicitly, define through their endeavors, their notions of success, their values, and their conflicts. This book, however, ends with the more pessimistic conclusion that the ideologies of self-made manhood are as systemic and entrenched as the ideologies of capitalism itself. Basil March, the central character, values literature for its own sake, and this attitude drives him to New York to become the editor for a journal, *Every Other Week*. The magazine is bankrolled by Mr. Dryfoos, a millionaire and staunch capitalist. It becomes apparent that the two men hold conflicting motives regarding the publication; March does not seem too concerned that the magazine isn’t making a lot of money, while Dryfoos does. “There’s something in the glory that pays” (200), March tells a belligerent Dryfoos, who isn’t impressed, having earlier pointed out that he made more than the journal’s expected yearly income in “half a minute in Wall Street, sometimes” (199). Later, March says to his wife that money changes a man like Dryfoos, and that the ethical sacrifices in pursuit of wealth have generated a new ideal character:

“I guess [Dryfoos has] come to despise a great many things that he once respected, and that intellectual ability is among them...He must have undergone

a moral deterioration, an atrophy of the generous instincts, and I don't see why it shouldn't have reached his mental makeup. He has sharpened, but he has narrowed; his sagacity has turned into suspicion, his caution to meanness, his courage to ferocity...and I am not very proud when I realize *that such a man and his experience are the ideal and ambition of most Americans*" (202, my emphasis).

Of course, this monologue characterizes a ruthless corporate titan like Cornelius Vanderbilt rather than a relatively milquetoast middle-class capitalist like Lapham. Dryfoos's ethical lapses are more blatant. Dryfoos's son, Conrad, who holds markedly different political views than his father, is shot during a labor protest. While it is clear that Dryfoos feels somewhat guilty for never accepting the young man's political and religious ideals (Conrad wanted to be a priest, rather than a businessman like his father), and for also recognizing he may have inadvertently wished for his own son's death in declaring the government ought to "call out the militia and just fire into" the strikers (378), Dryfoos never questions his own moral identity or re-evaluates his strident manhood the way Lapham does. Though Dryfoos is arguably the atypical man in a financial sense, his mentality, according to the narrator, reflects an "ideal" masculinity; it is, as he puts it, the "ambition" for "most Americans." By the writing of *Hazard*, it therefore seems that Howells' perception of the ability for the self-made man to recognize moral culpability and change as a result has undergone a shift. Using Dryfoos as an example, Howells suggests that the admirable virtues within the self-made man—

intelligence, sagacity, caution, and courage—inevitably “atrophy” into myopia, paranoia, pettiness and wrath at some point during the pursuit of success.⁵⁵

Rise, then, ends with an optimism that *Hazard* discards. The latter indicates that moral change isn’t possible while the former does, but both novels indicate that the reinvention of self, and, therefore, *masculinity*, can only occur if an individual re-evaluates the self-interested, Franklinesque sense that virtues are only really virtues if they have *use* for an individual under capitalism.⁵⁶ Indeed, if the first part of *Rise* is associated with Lapham’s overt attempt to preserve his “self-made” masculine persona, then the novel’s third act is arguably associated with the virtues of a kind of voluntary “un-making,” a de-raveling of an ultimately destructive and selfish persona. As Walter Benn Michaels puts it, “Lapham goes bankrupt, but his bankruptcy is not a sign of ruin and disgrace; it becomes instead the vehicle of his final redemption and return to the precapitalist (and in most respects the anticapitalist) ideals of his beginnings” (40). If a man can be made, he can be *un-made* in a sublimely self-annihilating way, a way of stripping away the “paint” and inauthenticity of self-made manhood and its adherence to hollow values for the sake of apparent progress. Lapham’s realization that his success

⁵⁵ Regarding *Hazard*, Alan Trachtenberg observes that “Howells’s terror” by this point in his career, “arises from the sudden fear that moral choice, the acts of good people of sound character, might not prevail against the ‘accidents’ of mechanized life” (47). Trachtenberg furthermore notes that the book’s pessimism in this regard reveals “how far toward cultural despair Howells had travelled since his response” to the Corliss engine at the 1876 Centennial Exposition, which seemed optimistic in its “confident vision of cultural progress” (47).

⁵⁶ The similarities between the two novels do not end there; *A Hazard of New Fortunes* also features a contrast of patriarchal, quasi-aristocratic and self-made varieties of successful masculinity. Colonel Woodburn, for instance, represents a Southern aristocrat. Woodburn thinks slavery could still be successfully implemented with a few tweaks, on the one hand, while he reviles the acquisitive, uncultivated values of men like Dryfoos on the other, similarly to the ridicule the Coreys dish out regarding Lapham’s self-conscious materialism.

comes from shoving his partner out of his business essentially deflates the pride in having “made” himself; his willingness to exploit his former partner, he realizes, has as much to do with his success as his own personal drive and willpower. “The whole trouble comes from that,” he says to Sewell, referring to cutting his partner out of the business. “It was just like starting a row of bricks. I tried to catch up, and stop ‘em from going, but they all tumbled, one after another. It wa’n’t in the nature of things that they could be stopped till the last brick went” (320). He also later tells Persis that this image of success was like some kind of trap, and that failure was “a hole [that] opened for me, and I crept out of it” (321). Likening success to an enclosed space or a place that demanded constant energetic charging without moral reflection tells us several things. First, it was a place in which he felt a kind of identity claustrophobia—a place in which he felt compelled to be someone he wasn’t. Second, Lapham realizes that keeping up with the demands of success, here symbolized through the unceasing plastering of bricks, often demands a willingness to compromise personal ethics, such as when he is nearly tempted to let the Englishmen buy the mills that Rogers purchased with his loaned money, which would have potentially saved him from insolvency.

It is indeed interesting that Lapham chooses a building metaphor to refer to his success, as it also suggests the active construction and the frenetic energy that the act of self-making requires. The “self-made” lifestyle simply seems incompatible with a self-*sacrificial* sense of ethics, since it tends to privilege a few agents willing to cut a few moral corners in order to gain (or maintain) personal wealth.⁵⁷ Thus, if Lapham wanted

⁵⁷ For a more detailed examination of the numerous interpretations one can arrive at upon reading Lapham, see Patrick K. Dooley’s “Ethical Exegesis in Howells’s *The Rise of Silas Lapham*.” Dooley argues that “If an ‘economy of pain principle is applied to

to abide by this ethical system all along, it was only natural for him to let the bricks, and the façade, eventually fall. Lapham, while initially devastated, “spoke freely of his failure, and with a confidence that seemed inspired by his former trust in Sewell” (320). Though ashamed initially by his failure, he eventually comes to terms with it, and even recognizes that his failure provided the opportunity for transformation. Accepting this incipient *un*-making allows Lapham to make an arguably even more crucial step away from hegemonic masculinity in his willingness to *submit* to external occurrence and accept the circumstances in which he is placed. He ultimately chooses to be heretical to the action-based creed of self-made manhood, eschewing the willpower that burns so fiercely in those who adhere to it.

As many other critics have pointed out, the accidental burning of his own house is the most obvious symbol of Lapham’s failure and the catalyst for this turn to self-reinvention. The Lapham family’s new home represents the Lapham family’s movement into high society and culture in Boston’s exclusive East End. The house’s burning is initially torment for Lapham—he couldn’t even bear the thought of selling it in order to save himself financially--but by the end of the novel he believes it a necessary sacrifice. The house is a monument to the ego, like most ostentatious houses in fashionable districts are. It is the representation of a selfish quest for a family dynasty built around his paint, filled to the brim with costly, flamboyant materials. The rest of his family does not care enough to live there, partly because of their respective personalities and because Persis, of course, thinks there is “blood on it” because it was

Silas’s refusal to sell, his action appears to be a pseudo-heroic act of self-sacrifice. In other words, perhaps his ‘brother’s keeper’ mentality is foolish and quixotic” (381). See also Mannierre, 361, and Pizer, 123.

built with the funds Lapham had essentially taken from Rogers (42). It is thus appropriate that, when his house burns amid impending financial ruin, he overhears a kind of foreshadowing with respect to the disappearance of his own “paint,” or that actorly surface hiding a truer self when a bystander watching the conflagration jokes that maybe Lapham should use “non-combustible paint” on his next house (276). The quip suggests that Lapham’s inauthentic performance of self-made success fooled no one; it was bound to go up in flames.

Laphams’ return to the family’s ancestral home in the country awakens what he feels is a more genuine, undisguised self. He was “more the Colonel in those hills than he could ever have been on the Back Bay” (319), the narrator states, indicating that the paint has started to chip, revealing what had been buried underneath. His family, too, seem more themselves in their new setting: “Perhaps because the process of his ruin had been so gradual...the actual consummation of his bankruptcy brought a relief, a repose to Lapham and his family, rather than a fresh sensation of calamity. In the shadow of his disaster they returned to something like their old, united life” (308). In other words, the Back Bay house’s conflagration allows the Laphams to start afresh with an ancestral home more reflective of their core personalities and moralities. Lapham’s family, according to the narrator, is also “proud” of this change in his character and finds “a delicate, aesthetic pleasure in the heroism with which Lapham had withstood Rogers and his temptations” allowing him to become “the noblest and grandest of men” in his wife’s eyes (315, 318). Lapham is deemed heroic precisely because of his ability to sacrifice ambition and energetic will for family unity, something a man like Dryfoos would never even entertain.

I do not wish to argue, however, that Lapham's discovery of a more authentic sense of self-sacrificial manhood is easy and entirely without shame; the narrator spends considerable time detailing Lapham's initial discomfort. At an earlier point, just as it is taking shape and the uncertainty as to its outcome is at its height, his impending bankruptcy is likened to "the process of some chronic disorder," that eats at his "constitution"; sometimes it "advances," but then it abates with "apparent amelioration" (269). Its physical effect on Lapham is chronicled in the language of the biological and the mechanical, appropriate for an era which frequently confused and conflated the two: "he was more broken than he knew by his failure; it did not kill, as it so often does, but it weakened the spring once so strong and elastic" (311). Lapham feels bent, a "flaccid" piece of machinery no longer fit to literally stand tall like Howells's depiction of the phallic Corliss engine. Thus, both the metaphors of disease and of malfunction capture the un-making of the self-made man, demonstrating Lapham's sense of a devolving masculinity before his ultimate realization that his manhood can be re-defined by other values. His family, too, responds to the changes in an anxious way, if only for their realization of how it could affect the Coreys. Penelope, for instance, is convinced that she is tainted by her father's failure, rendering her "not fit" for the likes of Tom Corey (314). Tom, however, repeatedly assures her that he is not interested in her father's money, assuring her that he only "think[s] the more of [her] on account of [her] father's loss" (312) and the two end up being married. The family's final pronouncement of contentedness renders all these tensions and anxieties a temporary discomfort in the light of financial and social change rather than a permanent disturbance. If anything, Howells suggests here that shedding decades of gender ideology is difficult, but it is

ultimately very possible. The fact that Lapham eventually learns to discard societal expectations regarding his manhood compounds the already present suffering, rendering his final ability to surmount these ideological pressures and change all the more noble.⁵⁸

Howells ultimately used *The Rise of Silas Lapham* not only to explore the varieties of manhood and success in his period, but also to explore the inherent insecurities and motivations these performances of masculinity hide. Finally, Howells was also aware not only of the malleability and ambiguity of failure and its implications for masculine performance, but also how failure can invite self-redefinition and indeed even a rejection of the dubious ethics and dogma of industrial capitalism. Failure, equal parts pleasure and pain for the individual involved, is not without its sense of shame, but it often invites critical reappraisal of economic as well as personal motivations. In large part, however, Howells also recognizes that failure's ability to challenge a status quo understanding of what it means to be a successful man depends upon how the subject and his immediate family and friends receives or interprets that failure; one wonders, for instance, how Silas might have reacted had Persis and his family received the news with censure and shame instead of eventual acceptance. In the next chapter, I will explore what happens when men interpret failure as the loss of manhood rather than the acquisition of a different kind of manhood.

⁵⁸ As Wai-Chee Dimock puts it, "Between the unrisen Lapham at the beginning of the book and the risen Lapham at the end, some momentous change has taken place...what he possesses at the end is no longer the gross animal vitality he once flaunted, but rather 'a sort of pensive dignity'" (84).

Chapter Two: Shame, Failure and Retributive Violence in the Fiction of Frank Norris

As noted in previous chapters, the dominant version of hegemonic masculinity during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries has been termed “passionate manhood” by Anthony Rotundo (5). Passionate manhood is defined by aggressive interpretations of Darwin and their subsequent applications to human psychology. While critics have exhaustively chronicled the presence of atavistic violence within fiction that appeared during the heyday of passionate manhood, they have generally underrepresented the influence that failure and shame has on this portrait of male violence. In essence, historians have observed that states of failure and the shame that accompanied it often predicted violent retaliatory behavior from men during this period. In particular, I believe that Frank Norris serves as a prominent example of an author who depicted the violence of failure and shame as embedded in the overall portrait of passionate masculinity during his time. In Norris’s novels, violence resulting from states of male failure was imagined as not only a means of structuring relations between genders, but a means of structuring power relations within genders; shame was not only a means of defining power structures between men and women, but between *men*. While shameful insults or deprivations (imaginary or not) could be dealt with through self-control, Norris depicts shame or humiliation as an affront to a man’s personal or

family dignity.⁵⁹ The period's national values, including the extreme individualism and self-reliance, also amplified self-propelled aggressive stances toward an external object of threat by framing violence as a masculine imperative rooted in biology.

Frank Norris's *McTeague* (1899) and *The Octopus* (1901), I argue, provide a lens through which we may analyze this darker side of the American male's imaginative response to shame and economic failure during the turbulent *fin-de-siècle*. There are, however, a few critical differences between the two novels and how they imagine this connection between failure and violence, and both illustrate some telling features of passionate masculinity's response to shame and failure. Norris's earlier novel, *McTeague* accounts for shame-based male violence as a straightforward atavistic regression in the face of growing threats to financial autonomy in modern capitalist economies and McTeague's potential dominance by other powerful rivals, both male and female. Norris furthermore legitimizes this portrait of male rage in *McTeague* to his audience. *The Octopus*, however, adds a layer of complexity to the author's depiction of the failure/violence dynamic when he suggests that corporations themselves can be envisioned as another kind of powerful "rival" threatening male financial independence and personal pride. While the later novel is often read as part of the muckracking genre and the violence in the novel is often described as something legitimized by class struggle, I instead want to suggest that Norris is more interested in explaining the violence in the novel as a response dictated by passionate manhood's conventional method of dealing with failure and shame through violence. Further, I want to reveal the extent to which the novel portrays corporate capitalism as something that exacerbates

⁵⁹ See Rotundo 229-238 and Pettegrew 1-5.

violent responses to male failure by both causing that failure and by legitimizing the post-Darwinian empirical discourse of the period and its portrait of successful economic manhood through its pursuit of profit.

Before examining Norris's account of the relationships between shame, failure and masculine violence, we need to first examine the ways that historians have conceptualized post-Darwinian "passionate" manhood and violence during the turn of the twentieth century. I will then turn to the construction of failure and its role in generating retaliatory violence in *McTeague*, and, finally, complete the chapter with a discussion of *The Octopus*.

The Role of Failure and Shame in Generating Male Violence

Of course, violence, like shame or failure itself, is notoriously difficult but important to define. While I focus on some neatly delineated concepts of violence, I also reveal how Norris complicates two kinds of violence: structural (or latent) and literal (or manifest).⁶⁰ While the author uses both versions of violence in his novels, Norris reveals, especially within *The Octopus*, that simplistic binaries are often inadequate expressions of male violence when shame is introduced.

Many social theorists have tried to reconcile social and individual types of violence, both symbolic and literal, with varying degrees of success. Sociologist Johan Galtung differentiates between six dimensions of violence, all predicated on the preventability or *avoidability* of the outcome. For example, Galtung states that "the case of people dying from earthquakes today would not warrant an analysis in terms of

⁶⁰ The structural form is "latent" because it is hidden, and the literal form is "manifest" because it involves physical action. Henceforth, I will use these terms interchangeably.

violence, but the day earthquakes may become avoidable, such deaths may be seen as the result of violence” (168-69). Thus, if a corporation or governmental body had the ability to avoid mass casualties and did not act, then it would be guilty of any of his six types of violence.

Galtung defines “structural violence,” as an indirect type of violence that is embedded within the daily operations of corporate capitalism (171). Structural violence is informed by the endless accumulation of capital and is generated by unequal power relations. Capitalism, in other words, carries systemic violence in that it creates a hierarchy where pecuniary status determines sociopolitical influence. The most obvious forms of literal violence are the acts we are used to conceiving of as violent, like actual gunshots or stabbings (171). As opposed to the systemic form, for Galtung, these “manifest” acts of violence create a visible disruption of normalcy for victim, agent, and the surrounding society because it involves physical actions and physical wounds (168). In contrast, systemic violence is invisible, or buried in what is deemed *normal*. Galtung thus follows Marx and Engels as these precursors also argued that violence was ideologically endemic to capitalism.⁶¹ While manifest violence has a “clear subject-object relation” and is “visible as action” through stabbings or gunshots, structural violence involves “latent” aggression often linked to the profit motive, involving injustices and exploitation on the part of principle agents in an economic system (171). Thus, for Galtung, it appears as “silent, it does not show—it is essentially static, it is the

⁶¹ See especially chapters 28 and 31 of Marx’s *Capital* and chapters 2 and 4 of Engel’s *Anti-Düring*.

tranquil waters...[and] may be seen as natural as the air around us.”⁶² Norris tends to render the systemic violence in his novels as something immediate and as located in many persons operating on behalf of a corporation, thus confusing the neat binary Galtung lays out by blending forms of structural and manifest violence. In other words, Norris reveals through his male characters how systemic violence often becomes interpreted as manifest, so that policy changes become likened to highway robbery and property sales become understood as a literal invasion of homes. Furthermore, while Norris does infuse a class-based causal explanation into his interpretation of the link between economic failure and masculine shame, *he foregrounds fears of masculine shame as a more important precursor to violence than class status.*

Masculinity scholars have interpreted early twentieth century masculine obsessions with violence and its connection to states of failure and shame in a similar fashion; R.W. Connell believes that shame-induced male violence is the result of, as he puts it, a man’s “constant concern with front and credibility” (116). Violence for Connell, in short, is a man’s way of avoiding the emasculation that comes with wounded pride by passing as a “credible revenge threat.” A man therefore also “ward[s] off injury by being known as someone who injures back.”⁶³ While Connell

⁶² Galtung, 173. Similarly, Slavoj Zizek has a similar term for structural violence, which he calls “systemic violence.” For him, it is also buried in the invisible, generated by the “often catastrophic consequences of the smooth functioning of our economic and political systems” (2). In other words, he says, it is “something like the notorious ‘dark matter’ in physics, the counterpart to an all-too-visible subjective violence” (his word for manifest violence) in that it is “invisible” but “must be taken into account if one is to make sense of what otherwise seem to be ‘irrational’ explosions of subjective violence” (2). Zizek’s sense of subjective violence is also akin to Galtung’s literal violence; I use Galtung’s vocabulary in this chapter for clarity.

⁶³ See Connell 116. Though Connell does not use the word shame in his theorization of male violence, he implicitly does so through his characterization of its motivations. For

primarily considers contemporary hegemonic masculinity in his understanding of shame-based retaliatory male violence, Anothony Rotundo also uses fear of failure and shame to define his passionate manhood. Things like neurasthenia, an absence of aggression and an overabundance of intellectual turmoil, became, Rotundo notes, “a badge of shame...[during the] turn of the century,” while aggression and dominance were seen as a key attributes for self-promotion and advancement (188). The avoidance of potential emotional injury through accusatory aggressive action was in some sense a denial of the *possibility* of that injury, a proclamation that one was impervious to such diminishments of pride. Masculine retaliatory violence, therefore, resulted from fears of possible “powerlessness,” and was part of a man’s “claim to the gendered positions of power” (Connell 111). Male manifest violence is enacted because the shamed individual believes he should have a right to claim the cultural dividends associated with masculinity. In Norris’s fiction, retaliatory violence becomes, then, a tool for the reclamation of success in the face of perceived failure, and even if it is ultimately ineffective, it is still perceived as the only viable means to regain that lost sense of pride.⁶⁴ In *The Octopus*, such a collectivization of shame-induced aggression is

instance, he claims that “Men gain a dividend from patriarchy in terms of honour, prestige and the right to command” and they become violent when they feel the need to “sustain their dominance” (83).

⁶⁴ Similarly, Nancy Chodorow, re-working theories from Melanie Klein and critiquing Freud’s emphasis on instinctual violence, suggests that human aggression is not so much an “innate drive,” but is rather reactive-- an emotion that emerges “from a variety of situated psychodynamics that in the most general sense seem connected to self and other, selfhood and object status” (243). Chodorow reacts to Sigmund Freud’s *Civilization and its Discontents*, which is perhaps the most famous work regarding the suppression of natural aggressive human instincts through a network involving guilt, the superego, and civilization. “Aggression,” Chodorow believes, “may eventually be linked with self-expression” in that “extreme destructiveness becomes an attempt to express an inadequate, defective self-structure when confronted by other human beings

metaphorically depicted through the agrarians' tendency to code their actions and lives as an "epic" struggle against a person-like mighty corporation.

Because popular cultural readings of Darwinian thought informed thinking about masculinity, it also unsurprisingly informed the popular conception of personal success within corporate capitalism generally. Norris, too, used passionate masculinity to highlight the role aggression should play in a man's plan to achieve success in a corporate environment, and this discourse often not only exacerbated the shame-based retaliatory violence limned above, but also served to legitimize corporate capitalism's most egregious crimes. Norris was surrounded by a culture of corporate capitalism that understood structural violence as a product of nature, as inextricable from daily life as the air, and thus bound to characterize the free-market. Both historians and social critics in Norris's milieu have also observed the many connections between Spencerianism, masculine identity, violence and corporate capitalism. Both physical and financial conflict were even thought to be metaphysical, as one 1888 article in *Popular Science Monthly* put it. "Antagonism" it argued, "[is] a necessity of existence, and of the organism of the universe so far as we understand it" (608). Thus, portraits of violence were embedded within capitalistic competition as a means of legitimizing such acts using quasi-scientific narratives about the inevitability of male violence and about the inevitability of violence generally. Anthony Rotundo asserts that passionate masculinity and Social Darwinism not only served to justify "the ill-gotten gains of robber barons," but also changed the popular perception of "civilization" itself and what it was (254).

who are themselves seen as inanimate, nonreflective selves or dangerous objects" (242). Reactive male violence for Chodorow is therefore a "defense against an endangered self," which can include "a fantasized or perceived threat of physical or emotional attack, punitive guilt, shame, and humiliation" (243).

Put simply, Rotundo argues that this new understanding of civilization “could not exist without...male passions” like “combative strength and vigor” (254). As Nancy Makepeace Tanner observes, extensions of Darwinian thought from the nineteenth century to the present have served as “backward projections of features of our own culture,” seeking to “interpret and justify aspects of the Western economic system and some of Western society’s particularly chauvinistic, hierarchical, and warlike characteristics.”⁶⁵ Richard Slotkin has observed similar tendencies in his encyclopedic reading of American expansionism and its impact on class relations. Placing an emphasis on American history as narrative, through which individual “heroes” or dynamic individuals simplify the complicated verities of the past through acts of symbolic violence, Slotkin argues that “the history of savage warfare and westward expansion as a Social Darwinian parable, explains the emergence of a new managerial ruling class and justif[ies] its right to subordinate lesser classes to its purposes” (22). In short, passionate manhood and the Darwinian assumptions about natural male violence both amplified the systemic violence performed by robber barons and business tycoons as well as more manifest forms of physical forms of violence.

Making “Small”: Shame and Domestic Violence in *McTeague*

McTeague, I will argue, naturalizes domestic male aggression and legitimates it as a response to late nineteenth-century perceptions of what failure means for a man in

⁶⁵ *On Becoming Human*, 23. In a similar vein, Walter Benjamin notes in his “Critique of Violence” that the individual’s perceived “*de jure*...right to use at will the violence that is *de facto* at his disposal” may have “been rekindled by Darwin’s biology, which, in a thoroughly dogmatic manner, regards violence as the only original means, besides natural selection, appropriate to all the vital ends of nature” (269).

financial terms.⁶⁶ Thus, the eponymous McTeague feels ashamed when he becomes economically dependent on his wife, Trina, a figure other critics have interpreted as a loose representative of the financially independent, rule-defying “New Woman”—a powerful threat to his autonomy and sense of personal pride.⁶⁷

Though McTeague’s shame is sometimes communicated directly, it is mostly conveyed symbolically through an oft-repeated phrase: “you can’t make small of me.” For McTeague, smallness has a symbolic dimension that he associates with Trina’s both controlling and transgressive behaviors. Smallness also represents, for McTeague, physical, domestic confinement, a restriction of power and, consequently, a loss of virility. In addition, I also argue that the narrator urges readers to sympathize with McTeague during his gradual decline in status, creating a kind of collaboration in their demonization of the hoarding, usurping Trina. While both the novel’s treatment of “smallness” and its relationship to gender and the latter argument about audience sympathy have been offered by other critics before, I extend these arguments by

⁶⁶ As I mention in my introduction, shame is highly variable and always context-dependent (Munt 3). Thus, in this period, shameful characteristics for hypermasculinity are “womanly” characteristics, and shame thus involves emasculation (Connell 116). In other words, shameful states were linked with docility, submissiveness, dependence and domesticity. Since both shame and failure are interlinked, in that shame is often read as the result of failure, or that failure brings about shame, when I talk about one term in the course of this book, I implicitly evoke both terms to some extent.

⁶⁷ James Gilligan expounds at length on contemporary American gender norms and their role in perpetuating violence through shame in a way that could also clarify how Norris depicts masculine violence as a means of exerting domestic control in *McTeague*. The male climate of shame surrounding gender roles “encourages men to treat women as sex objects, and encourages women to conform to that sex role; but it also encourages women (and men) to treat men as violent objects. [Gender roles also compel] a man to become violent if the woman to whom he is related or married ‘dishonors’ him by acting in ways that transgress her prescribed sex role (233).

emphasizing the novel's depiction of male violence as a direct consequence of shame and failure.

McTeague concerns a dentist of the same name, who marries a German-American named Trina Sieppe in San Francisco. Marcus Schouler, Trina's cousin and McTeague's best friend, sees Trina as a love-interest as well, but volunteers to step aside when his friend expresses his own amorous desires. The gender roles in the marriage, however, begin to change when Trina wins the lottery and refuses to spend any of the winnings. Instead, she relies on McTeague's income as a dentist and her own income making Noah's Ark figures. Marcus, however, becomes jealous of their marriage and tells the City of San Francisco that McTeague is practicing dentistry without a license. McTeague is then forced to close up shop and, after failing to find another job, becomes dependent on Trina's finances. However, she still refuses to spend her lottery winnings. After McTeague experiences enough helplessness and shame at his own dependence on her meager income, he begins violently to force her to give up the lottery winnings and then spends the money on needless extravagances. Eventually, McTeague simply steals almost all of her winnings and abandons her. Trina, still convinced that the rest of her lottery winnings need to be conserved, becomes a scrub-woman at a local kindergarten in order to make a living. A pitiful McTeague comes back to her after spending all of her money, begging for a loan. After she refuses, telling him she doesn't have any money to give, McTeague finds out that she has already withdrawn the last of her savings and is hoarding it in her room. He murders her, takes the gold, and sets out for the desert. Marcus, partly wanting the gold but also desiring

revenge for Trina's murder, tracks him down to Death Valley. McTeague kills Marcus, but as the latter man dies, he handcuffs McTeague to himself, sealing their mutual fate.

Most recently, Jennifer Fleissner has persuasively argued that Trina represents a New Woman figure because of her financial wealth and subversive, even explicitly masturbatory, independent sexuality (204). Extending on Fleissner's thinking, I propose that Trina's status as a financially independent, relatively masculinized New Woman helps Norris paint McTeague as a victimized male to Norris's audience.⁶⁸ Indeed, expanding on an argument by both Jennifer Fleissner and June Howard, I believe that we can think of the depiction of McTeague's brutishness as a kind of collaborative commentary between the author and narrator, which capitalizes on the aforementioned male anxieties about female labor in this period. The novel tends to absolve McTeague of his violence in the face of failure by either casting it as instinctual, beyond the mediation of willpower, or as a "natural" male response to the threat of dependence. Though Norris's narrator takes pains to distance himself from McTeague in terms of intellect and background, there are surprising degrees of sympathy in the midst of his narration that help to characterize McTeague as a victim of Trina's revolt against these gender norms. As Howard argues, "the narrator, in naturalist novels and in others, is generally the 'character' who is closest to the reader" and this sophisticated reader/author dynamic, through third-person omniscient commentary, literary references, and cultural allusions "achieves a subtlety of meaning utterly beyond the

⁶⁸ I use "masculinized" here to depict the historical reaction to New Womanhood as a gender transformation or evasion of what they felt was a natural gendered identity rather than an expression of the human desire for autonomy regardless of gender. Examples of this depiction abound. See Emma Goldman's February 1898 address to the Liberal Progressive Society, in which she states that the New Woman is "aping the male, seeking to become masculine"(qtd. In Patterson 63).

reach of the [lower class] characters” they depict, which she calls the device of the “spectator” (105). However, the cultural tourism at work in the reading and creation of the naturalist novel, for Howard, does not entirely render the narrator or audience unsympathetic, nor does it position the audience and narrator in a sphere of distinction that renders them invulnerable: “The privilege of the spectator, constructed by contrast, is necessarily vulnerable; fear and desire--sexual passion and violence, the fatal spell of the commodity, the fascination of the Other—constantly disrupt the design of safety” (x). Indeed, the dangers of a reader’s “proletarianization,” of a slide into the murk and baser instincts of the lower classes and their association with the primal instincts depicted in much of naturalism are a potential hazard of the middle-class reader’s navigation of this fiction. The consequence of imposed threats to male autonomy results in the promotion of the erroneous, destructive narrative about aggressive atavism established to protect the social order, implying that *all* men, even Norris and his genteel readers, could (or should) suffer from such violent urges given the appropriate conditions.

Indeed, Norris was inspired to write *McTeague* when he read an account of a real 1893 murder case in the *San Francisco Examiner* that garnered attention, in part, because it gestures to these pervasive fears about gender role disruption. Patrick Collins brutally murdered his wife, Sarah Collins, after she refused to give her husband her month’s wages. What was especially stunning about the case was the enormity of the violence in the wake of this refusal—something *McTeague* does not actually

approximate, evading its direct depiction.⁶⁹ Sarah Collins had been stabbed all over her body, including the face, about thirty-five times. A bystander pulled the still-protruding knife from Sarah's neck and heard the victim accuse her husband before she died of her wounds. According to the *Examiner*, autopsy physicians concluded "any one of the twenty-nine [wounds] would have caused death," and noted that the walls of the crime scene were "splashed with blood and the floors were covered with it...the red stain extended out into the hall and down the steps to the street" (8). Thus, the journalists spared no detail in their cataloguing of the crime. While the newspaper's descriptions evince a transparent prejudice against Irish-Americans reflective of the period, in that Collins was also depicted as a "brute" and the "savage of civilization," by newspapers ideologically fueled by Nordau and Lombroso's theories of degeneration and genetic criminality, these same newspapers were not entirely unsympathetic to Collins.⁷⁰ For instance, they chose to highlight the natural rage and indignity a man might feel at becoming dependent upon his wife, a tacit assertion of his dependence and her autonomy. As the *Examiner* put it, Collins "had ceased to feel that he was in any degree bound to be the *bread-winner*" (8, my emphasis), that all-important title. The *Examiner*

⁶⁹ Interestingly, studies of his composition of the novel reveal that Norris *had* written a lengthy and brutal section of Trina's murder based upon the *Examiner*'s depiction of the real case, but he ultimately decided to leave it out for unknown reasons. James D. Hart, a graduate instructor at Harvard, noted on an early draft of the murder scene that it was "not a toothsome subject," which could have been enough to motivate Norris to leave it out. See "Composition and Revision: Harvard and San Francisco" in the Norton edition of *McTeague*, 285.

⁷⁰ See *San Francisco Examiner*, October 14, 1893. It further notes other "brutish" features: his nose was "as broad as a negro's" and that his jaw was "heavy and cruel" (8). It concluded that he was "made an animal by nature to start with" (8). These observations directly mirror Lombroso's text in *The Criminal Man*. Lombroso felt the criminal could be identified by the "flattened nose...common to criminals and apes" as well as by a projected jaw "found in negroes and animals" (518).

reporter felt that “no man ought to submit to having his own wife shut the door in his face” (8). Trying to simulate his angry thought process, the *Examiner* gives an impression of what must have gone on in Collins’s mind: “What did the woman mean by treating him as if he was dirt under her feet! By the lord, he’d see whether she’d give him money or not...He would bring her to her senses or know the reason why” (8). Throughout the characterization of Collins’s subjective state, an emphasis on the outrage of a man facing the disruption of traditional gender hierarchy prevails; the author emphasizes that Collins was symbolic “dirt” for his wife and relies upon tropes about female emotionality to promote naturalized gender roles (thus claiming only Collins had that ability to “bring her to her senses” about exclusively male matters of finance).

Norris creates his own half-sympathetic and half-demonizing portrait of McTeague by echoing the language of the *Chronicle*. Half degenerate brute, but also half victim in his embodiment of besieged working-class manhood, McTeague as a fictional version of Collins is still a low-life, but sympathetic enough for a middle or upper-class readership. As explained in my introduction, hegemonic masculinity described men as the family “breadwinner,” and that role was a source of pride and a barometer for success, as it cast a male family member in a protective role.⁷¹ Male violence against women during Norris’s period can partially be explained, then, as an overblown male reaction to this perceived “threat” of autonomous New Womanhood. Indeed, the labor patterns in the era do reflect a small change in domestic labor roles;

⁷¹ As I mentioned in my introduction, the term “breadwinner” can be traced etymologically through the Old English term for “lord.” It thus confers a power status within the family, and clearly demarcates the gender hierarchy within the family (and, if the family is a microcosm, society at large) as well.

historian Bruce Laurie, for instance, notes that the number of “employed women rose by 1.4 million during the 1880s” and expanded to a million more by 1890 (194). As Laurie puts it, the male labor unions perceived women “as keepers of hearth and home” (196). “The more women went to work,” Laurie states, “the more they aroused the anxieties of workmen who considered it their birthright to be the sole support of the household” (196).

As mentioned, McTeague’s repeated phrase, “you can’t make small of me” appears as a marker for McTeague’s financial shame throughout the text. It reveals when he is feeling at his weakest and most vulnerable, as evidenced in the bodily symbolism of the phrase. Trina’s sudden status as breadwinner is the most obvious circumstance that renders him “small,” but his intellectually inferior status further connects him to a notion of smallness, since the ability to make money is often dependent upon intellectual acumen in one’s profession. McTeague’s sense of mental “smallness” is exacerbated when his dentistry business fails because of McTeague’s informal education. This exposure only serves to reinforce the insults he receives from Trina and the narrator regarding his subpar intellect and its implied relationship to financial success. Trina, for instance, seems amazed that McTeague doesn’t realize he needs a degree, and subsequently blames his obtuseness for their failure. “Oh, why didn’t you go to a dental college?” (149), she exclaims, acknowledging it is the cause of their incipient status as “paupers, beggars” (149). Thus, it is no coincidence that McTeague feels small in contexts in which bodily power is not as valued as other forms—brains, witty conversational skills, etiquette, and financial assets, for instance, are all avenues of power associated with the intangible rather than the material.

McTeague reacts to smallness as a space in which his ability to exert his power is limited, resulting in a symbolic claustrophobia. These indoor spaces where he is made “small” through his inability to participate in sagacious conversation is also associated with Trina and the world of threatening, controlling femininity that she represents.

Trina’s diminutive stature is even a symbolic counterpoint to the hulking McTeague. While Trina’s status as McTeague’s “little woman” (85) is initially an appealing part of his attraction to her, she eventually “annoy[s] him because she was so small, so prettily made, so invariably correct and precise” (169). This annoyance occurs after their marriage, when he is forced to become well mannered and cultured. Trina subtly trains McTeague, albeit for a short period, to become a prim and proper middle-class husband: “In her attempts to improve McTeague—to raise him from the stupid animal life to which he had been accustomed in his bachelor days” she begins to domesticate McTeague “with such slowness that the dentist was unconscious of any process of change” (108). Thus, Trina “kept his linen clean and mended,” insisted that “he change his flannels...once a week,” and persuades him to stop “eating with his knife” (109). When company comes, he becomes a gentleman who “take[s] off his hat” and walks with “them to the door” as they leave (109). Once averse to the abstractions of parlor room discussions, he begins to “read the papers” and “observe the broader, larger interests of life...as a member of a class, a profession, or a political party” (109). He is gradually inducted into the world of the domestic, the world of the small that she rules. These actions are, of course, ironic in that while they do not outwardly display that McTeague has finally generated intellectual acumen or learned that it is valuable, but that it actually comes about “unconsciously” as a result of Trina’s training. Thus, it

conveys the opposite impression of a determined will forming what he desires; McTeague instead becomes a docile and even less-intelligent kind of puppy, house-trained by a controlling woman. He is being manipulated by a smarter person, which furthers Norris's sympathetic portrayal of a man subject to forces beyond his control.

McTeague doesn't really seem to realize he is being subtly programmed until he loses his occupation and Trina becomes progressively more miserly. This way of portraying McTeague as objectively stupid, as a slave to drives and instincts, furthermore seems a strategy to absolve him of any blame for following those instincts when they lead to aggression. Indeed, the narrator suggests that his extreme reactions in the face of his failure are quite justified in light of this financial and intellectual impotence--the implied result should any man receive similar treatment. As mentioned, the partial reason for this sympathy is the narrator's characterization of this aggressiveness in genetic terms, rendering McTeague almost blameless for his eventual submission to dormant instincts: "Altogether he suggested the draught horse, immensely strong, stupid, docile, obedient" (6). He was "this poor crude dentist of Polk Street, stupid ignorant, vulgar, with his sham education and plebian tastes," like playing his concertina and drinking his steam beer (20). Later, these character traits become explicitly genetic, linked with the libidinal drives that seemingly force him to kiss the subdued Trina, knocked out on the dental chair: "The vices and sins of his father and his father's father, to the third and fourth and five hundredth generation, tainted him. The evil of an entire race flowed in his veins. Why should it be? He did not desire it. Was he to blame?" (22). Setting up his determinism, Norris unsurprisingly answers his own question, "It had faced him, as sooner or later it faces every child of man... To reason

with it was beyond him” (22). Norris’s narrator effectively makes McTeague’s brutishness so complete that he reacts from external force rather than from interior thought. The “race” the narrator targets here may indeed reference the Scots-Irish ancestry that McTeague ostensibly has, like Patrick Collins, hence linking degeneration and Irishness just as newspapers and many other texts did at this time. Simultaneously, however, one could read this sentence as indicating the broader human “race,” or, as it is written, “every child of man.” William E. Cain makes a similar critical determination about the ambiguity of the word “race” here in his “Presence and Power in *McTeague*”: “Norris asserts that we too [as readers] are members of the afflicted ‘race’” (336). Humans are animals, but McTeague’s stupidity renders him even more connected with these instincts than most men. The narrator thus implies that the intelligent man that falls prey to such instincts in a similar moment would have been less innocent (indeed, a smart McTeague would not have provoked the same amount of audience sympathy); nonetheless, this capacity for brutish behavior is part of *all* men, rendering McTeague’s plight an example of universal male suffering.

The male rivalry between McTeague and Marcus, who both compete for Trina’s affection, is also mentioned as something that threatens to make McTeague small, to embarrass him in front of his potential mate when they begin dating. For instance, during an impromptu shooting match after a picnic, Marcus and McTeague seem to regress into a pair of stags in rut as they strut before the admiring ladies, eventually going shirtless, and working “themselves into a lather of perspiration for the sake of making an impression” on them (129). McTeague seems especially the object of attention for these “little feminine cries of wonder,” as he “strutted back and forth in

front of the women, his chest thrown out, and his great mouth perpetually expanded in a triumphant grin” (129). Of course, this fills Marcus with a jealous rage, and sets the stage for a shame-based retaliatory violence of his own. This is exacerbated when Marcus is embarrassed during a wrestling match before the new object of his affection, Selina, as well as Trina, for whom he still has feelings. Thus, when Marcus feels bound “to defeat at the hands of the dentist and before Selina’s eyes,” Marcus is overcome by an “impotent wrath” and is suddenly compelled to bite “through the lobe of McTeague’s ear” (132). This sudden rage seems ripped out of Darwin, as it illustrates that complex relationship between the potential effeminacy (“impotence”) and redemptive male violence. True to form, the violence does not suddenly make McTeague show vulnerability, or sudden remorse. He responds with murderous rage, seemingly conjured from his primitive ancestors: he becomes a “hurt beast...no longer human” (132). McTeague thus breaks Marcus’s arm and continues to “batter the life out of the man” until two acquaintances stop the fight while McTeague swears to murder Marcus (133).⁷²

⁷² Interestingly enough, such illustrations of male strength or power through wrestling, boxing or some other sporting event was common enough in the period, even if it hardly ever digressed to the bestial aggressiveness depicted in the novel. More often, it was a tool for homosocial bonding. Just two years after the book’s publication, for instance, President Theodore Roosevelt had a habit of inviting male friends to the White House for a little boxing or wrestling. Most noted among these attendees was Gifford Pinchot, chief of the United States Forest Service, who tended to share Roosevelt’s philosophy of the necessity for periodic manly revitalization through toe-to-toe competition (Limerick 295). Though the potentiality for violence does not seem linked with bodily size for either men, Pinchot once gloated that, while the president defeated him at wrestling, he did excel during the boxing match, “during which I had the honor of knocking the President of the United States off his very solid pins.” The recognition that Roosevelt’s figure is usually sturdy and robust seems to make the glory of victory all the more sweet for the forester. While Marcus resorts to cheating in order to gain

As the novel continues, the narrator only further validates McTeague's rage. McTeague's gestures of hope for success upon marriage, his longings for Trina's love in spite of his low conception of self-worth (at least initially), also paint him as a love-struck protagonist for the audience. When the couple begins courting, McTeague's self-confidence lags, which enables Norris's audience to begin rooting for his underdog hero's success. McTeague thinks Trina is "too good for him; too delicate, too refined, too prettily made" for someone so "coarse, so enormous, so stupid" as himself (31). After a picnic with the Sieppes, he is invited to stay over at their house that evening. Trina gives up her room for him, and McTeague feels like an "intruder" in this "lady's bower" that seemed like a "little nest, intimate discreet" (46). He lingers on odors and objects associated with her and pines over her hairbrush, which has a "talismanic scent" that sends an imaginative portrait of Trina through his mind (47). "It was as though Trina were close by, but invisible," he states (47). "McTeague felt all the delight of her presence without the embarrassment that usually accompanied it" (47). Here, he is a shy schoolboy transfixed by the possibility that this stark femininity could one day be his. He is the heroic underdog, fighting against societal labels and his own ever-changing self-doubt to win his lady love.

In contrast, Trina is increasingly demonized as a hoarder who divests her husband of his breadwinning status, subverting the harmony of domestic sex roles. Indeed, her miserliness seems to degrade her moral compass, while McTeague becomes all the more appealing as a mistreated husband. When Trina's own family falls on hard

success over his much larger opponent, it allows him to save face in front of his date and thus avoid total ignominy.

times, for instance, she refuses to lend them any money, even though McTeague generously considers giving them money he really doesn't have. James L. Caron agrees, arguing "Trina perversely denies financial aid to her parents despite her large bank account, and when McTeague is charitable toward the Sieppe family, the context is quite different. McTeague shows flexibility in his response to the needs of others, while Trina rigidly refuses to accommodate others" (366). Trina also begins to show a callous disregard for sentimental objects associated with her marriage, signaling that she cares more about gaining funds for her collection than mending the relations with her increasingly estranged husband. The most telling example is when she tries to auction off the couple's wedding photo, claiming it was an accidental lapse in attention when Old Grannis, the elderly neighbor, spots it (157). Her insults of McTeague's intellect also help paint McTeague as an assailed man on all fronts, simply trying to protect himself against a distant wife who knows her husband's weaknesses and isn't afraid to exploit them for monetary reasons. For instance, she sends him out looking for a job in the rain and refuses to give him spending money. She shames him by appealing to his size, that ever-constant source of pride and joy for McTeague: "A big fellow like you 'fraid of a little walk; and it ain't going to rain" (161). This insult to his pride, of course, does the trick, and he plods along the streets of San Francisco, slowly getting soaked. He curses his luck and mutters to himself until a friend urges him to come out of the cold to a nearby tavern. Further shame arrives when he realizes he needs money to buy beer, and he reminds himself of his wife's stubborn unwillingness to grant him change before he left. Sitting at the bar, dependent on another man's generosity, he thinks it a

“humiliating position for Trina to place him in” (163), foreshadowing the shame-induced violence he later carries out.

The determinism so prevalently attached to McTeague’s motivations is absent in the novel’s treatment of Trina’s hoarding. It suggests that the narrator deems them a product of the character’s will, instead of a byproduct of genetic (or social) forces, like he does with the male character. Even though Trina herself claims her hoarding habits were beyond her control, the narrator indicates otherwise when she lies about her ability to afford a new, more upscale apartment: “Trina could have easily afforded better quarters...but she made McTeague believe that it was impossible” (152). McTeague had already signed the papers for the better place, and her stubbornness reinforces his newfound sense of impotence. Upon her refusal, he asks her, “Are you my boss, I’d like to know?” “Who’s got the *money*, I’d like to know?” she responds (152, original emphasis). Unafraid to assert her ownership of the money, and challenging the masculine presumption of financial ownership and control within the confines of marriage, Trina transparently displays a power dynamic that generates McTeague’s further resentment and his further degeneration. After losing his job, he frequently gets drunk, goes on long walks, or simply sits “watching Trina at her work, feeling a dull glow of shame at the idea that she was supporting him” (168). Thus, when McTeague decides that an abusive response is the alternative path to reasserting the gender hierarchy, he ominously proclaims to her that she “can’t make small of [him] *always*” (165, author’s emphasis). At this moment, we might envision Norris’s readership reacting to the slightly adjusted character’s refrain as a kind of heroic one-liner, serving as a microcosm for all male resentment. Indeed, the phrase becomes a promise of

gender-norm restoration. Before McTeague leaves with her money and goes on a possibly compensatory drunken spending spree about town after getting her money, Trina thinks he is more sexually appealing when he begins to abuse her: “his brutality made Trina all the more affectionate; aroused in her a morbid, unwholesome love of submission, a strange, unnatural pleasure...in surrendering herself to the will of an irresistible, virile power” (171). While it must be acknowledged that Norris’s narrator describes this capitulation as “morbid,” as if hinting that her sexual behavior or even the submission itself is unnatural, the passage also contains an acknowledgement that the change and her capitulation is also inherently natural by deeming virile male roles sexually “irresistible,” implying that proper separate spheres arrangements awaken primal sexual urges in both sexes as a result of their differentiated tasks.

That McTeague wants to reclaim his place of power in the relationship is symbolically revealed in the subsequent violent acts themselves. If slights symbolically diminish him in the eyes of others, then an aggressive vociferation makes him larger, more visible. It reminds him of his bachelor days which he associates with a free manhood and symbolic largeness. His body is indeed described as something, in a literal sense, that one cannot make “small” or confine: “McTeague was a young giant, carrying his huge shock of blond hair six feet three inches from the ground; moving his immense limbs, heavy with ropes of muscle, slowly, ponderously. His hands were enormous, red, and covered with a fell of stiff yellow hair” (6). Thus, as other scholars have mentioned, the outdoors are where we see a thriving McTeague. He can exert his abundance of physical power on his surrounding environs; he can defeat Marcus in

fights, win races, and attract Trina with his virility.⁷³ During an outdoor arm wrestling matches with the other men, for instance, he “began to abuse” his size as he “domineered over the others, gripping suddenly at their arms until they squirmed with pain” (129). The juxtaposition of size adjectives between the genders during this outdoor arm-wrestling match also helps emphasize that this is an area where he feels the most powerful and “large”—the women are “little,” gawking at a man with “great,” “triumphant” attributes (129). Intellect is not one of those sources of pride, but his primitive strength gives him a leg up over other males competing for the same mates, giving him social and physical capital in a myopic culture obsessed with male strength. Thus it makes sense that his symbolic way of regaining power over his circumstances when he eventually murders Trina is to return to the mining camps where he began his career, where the nature there seems to reflect his own gargantuan size.

Famously, Kenneth Burke has proclaimed that language can serve as symbolic action, revealing otherwise unintelligible thoughts and desires (4-8). Others think that violence, like language, can reveal a symbolic action, a revelation of perhaps unconscious desires. William Gilligan puts forth a similar idea, stimulated by Burke, in his contemporary study of violence and its perpetuation through male subjective states like shame and failure. Gilligan constructs a persuasive case for its use in psychiatric practice, but also for interpreting patriarchal culture’s propensity for violence at large (61-3).

⁷³ I am not the first critic to examine the symbolism of size in the novel. For a more detailed examination of size and how aesthetics work in the novel, see Don Graham’s “Art and Humanity in *McTeague*.”

Since McTeague's primary concern is that he is deprived of his breadwinner status, he thus literally declares that he "won't have [Trina] work" anymore (170), ostensibly so he can feel some modicum of influence, even if it is to his own detriment. Beyond these declarations, his violence carries the same symbolic logic. McTeague's odd choice to bite Trina's fingers is a case in point. He bites Trina's fingers so often that she contracts blood poisoning from the paint she uses to create her Noah's ark figures. If we use Burke and Gilligan's interpretation of violence as symbolic action, this act of violence functions as an expression of McTeague's emotional state. Indeed, her fingers are the bodily instruments she uses to provide the financial support McTeague finds so threatening to his masculine pride, so he destroys them; it is thus not coincidental that this leads her to give up the job, just like he wanted.

Her fingers are furthermore what she uses to admire her hoarded gold coins, as if reveling in her status as the family breadwinner: "She loved her money with an intensity that she could hardly express. She would plunge her small fingers into the pile with little murmurs of affection, her long, narrow eyes half closed and shining, her breath coming in long sighs" (170). She also "polished the gold pieces with a mixture of soap and ashes until they shone" (170). Her fixation on the symbol of the gold coin is not only financial, but also transparently erotic, seeming to carry the potential to replace the romantic as well as financial function of the husband, especially when McTeague leaves. In Erich von Stroheim's lengthy film-version of the book, the camera lingers on Trina as she pools the coins on her bed, picking them up one at time, admiring the light they reflect. In the book, after McTeague finally abandons Trina, the gold coins become an even more literal sexual substitution, as she strips off all of her clothes and rolls

around on them. “To Trina,” critic Barbara Hochman argues, “sexuality means inner chaos and dependency on another person, while greed appears to promise control and self-sufficiency” (351). I would counter that, while the physical intimacy with McTeague is undoubtedly defined by a masochism that seems a byproduct of investment in proper heterosexual identity, her treatment of the coins as a sexual object amplifies any promise of “self-sufficiency” they may yield. The coins may instead simply represent her longing for autonomy, as if the gold is a kind of promise of independence from a patriarchal culture that denies it. That her blood poisoning forces Trina to abandon her work probably reveals McTeague’s subconscious intent, since it means the act of violence against her fingers symbolically and literally destroys her connection to the pecuniary (and sexual) power to the independence McTeague doesn’t want her to have. The object of Trina’s devotions, gold, also elicits a foundational value that transcends arguably all other forms of currency—no matter the fluctuation of value with other forms, gold will always retain its attractiveness, and hence its exchangeability, one author argues.⁷⁴ It is a kind of power, invested at once with independent erotic and financial status. Indeed, this pining is explicitly masturbatory in its erotics of marginal utility, suggesting the cultivation of an autonomous sexual selfhood that is finally not involved with a man at all. This masturbatory selfhood would also be doubtlessly read as threatening to Norris’s Victorian audience—Trina is a not only a version of the New Woman, but an overtly sexual one, eschewing the need for male erotic partnership and for dependence on male finances with one subversive action.

⁷⁴ See Walter Benn Michaels, p. 149-151.

“Epic” Failures: Systemic Violence and Agrarian Rebellion in *The Octopus*.

Similar themes preoccupy *The Octopus*, as a collection of humiliated agrarians meet headlong with a railroad corporation threatening to take their land. *The Octopus* also depicts shame-induced male violence, but introduces a broader, systemic violence embedded within capitalism, which both influences and is influenced by the aforementioned atavistic form of physical aggression, confusing the distinction between the manifest and systemic forms. The novel spends the majority of its time considering how success within capitalism is perpetuated *through* the active construction of failure; the railroad’s greed creates an unequal distribution of wealth and power, allowing it to stack the political decks of California politics in its favor against the farmers as part of the more systemic violence embedded in capitalism. The agrarians, too, participate in a kind of systemic violence by bribing politicians, but later turn to the more literal form of violence when they feel they can no longer afford to buy the railroad-owned properties they have developed, a situation that they believe obligates an armed uprising.

The novel thus renders Galtung’s aforementioned neat binaries unstable. This confusion results primarily when Norris conceives of the corporation as a kind of powerful rival with a superior model of economic production, threatening to emasculate the relatively weak agrarians. Appropriately, then, the railroad is anthropomorphized as a rival in competition for resources and mates, rendering systemic violence more manifest. The conflict represented in *The Octopus* thus could be said to mirror the rivalry between Trina or Marcus and McTeague in the earlier novel, but the “rival” embodied in *The Octopus* is a corporation, representing a new economic culture, which

is nevertheless personified in many forms. The novel often codes the competition between the rival corporation and the farmers through its repeated evocation of “epic” heroism on the part of the latter.⁷⁵ Indeed, following other critics, I suggest that the novel goes to great lengths to depict the corporation as a figurative “person,” which is especially apropos for a period that legally defined the corporation *as* a person.⁷⁶ However, I also want to point out that critics have not yet recognized the degree to which the corporate personification in the novel intensifies the agrarians’ sense of personal failure and masculine shame, furthering my own argument that Norris is more interested in a gender-based, rather than class-based, justification for the violence that takes place in the novel.

Norris’s depiction of a group of farmers’ violent imperative to protect their home and hearth, feeling it is their duty as men to protect their livelihoods and to thwart an emasculating railroad, has quite complicated gender politics. The farmers have developed plots of land owned by the railroad company, under the pretense that they would eventually be able to own the land outright and buy it from the company. However, the railroad attempts to sell the land at a higher price to other bidders as well, leading to an armed conflict when a local railroad representative, S. Behrman, and a group of marshals hand out eviction notices. In the midst of all this is Presley, a would-be writer searching for an “epic” tale of struggle in *Los Muertos* and a kind of stand-in for Frank Norris. Presley envisions an allegory for the generally pervasive late nineteenth-century conflict between the populace at large and the political influence of

⁷⁵ As Thomas Piketty notes, whereas “agriculture in the eighteenth century accounted for nearly three-quarters of all economic wealth and employment,” it accounted for less and less as the Western world shifted to industrial economies (119).

⁷⁶ See Mrozowski, 161-62.

corporate trusts. The ensuing gun battle leaves many of the agrarians dead, and their leader, Magnus Derrick, exposed, vilified, and feminized, as Derrick becomes just another corrupt lobbyist like the railroad he condemned. The women and dependents the men were so eager to protect end up starving or becoming prostitutes in San Francisco. Presley, failing to have written a single word of his epic, then ventures off to China as he seeks a natural explanation for the trauma he experienced, leaving the novel—in an odd and sudden reversal of course—to seek cosmic answers for corporate injustice.

The epic version of masculinity the farmers imagine codes their fight against the railroad as a manly duty to protect their land and family and further informs their rush to arms upon learning of the impending eviction notices. This compulsive, repetitive description of the agrarians as protectors of a disappearing way of life may reflect what Jennifer Fleissner has called masculine nostalgia. Nostalgia, for her, can be understood as a kind of male sentimentality, which is a kind of atavism that returns “masculine power and adventure to a vitiated modernity by rediscovering the freedom and struggles associated with a still wide-open, untarnished natural landscape” (7). Though speaking primarily of *McTeague*, Fleissner characterizes the male anxieties about this disappearing mode of life that could easily apply to *The Octopus* as well: “Norris’s novel looks out onto an era in which the old stories—of cozy villages where all are friends, of women who have four children as a matter of course, of men who succeed through bodily strength alone—are breaking down.”⁷⁷

⁷⁷ See Laurie, 13-19 and Fleissner 217. Regarding self-sufficient production, Laurie argues that rural agrarians were used to thinking of the household itself as a kind of factory, in which they could construct or barter for the goods they needed. He calls it,

As has been exhaustively noted by other critics, the plowing performed by the agrarians is described through metaphors of oddly natural, oddly machinelike sexuality, casting the agrarians' work as a kind of male fertilization of the feminine soil.⁷⁸ It is appropriate, then, that when the railroad declares their intent to re-sell that land, stands in for their actual wives, the ranchers react like Darwin's male in *Descent of Man* faced with a rival's competition for their mate: "It was the human animal hounded to its corner, exploited, harried to its last stand...its back to the wall, defending its lair, its mate, and its whelps, ready to bite, to rend to trample, to batter out the life of The Enemy in a primeval, bestial welter of blood and fury" (272-73). Of course, the farmers aren't in literal danger of losing their spouses; so, at least partially, the "mate" evoked here is their land. The "whelps" are not only their literal children, but also the fruit of the earth mother's loins, the wheat, which she generates after insemination from a virile plow, in Norris's language. What they think they're defending, at least symbolically, is the Darwinian imperative to "reproduce" and to stop the rival mate-as-corporation from being able to do something similar to their precious, feminized land. In thinking of the

interestingly, a "household factory," which obviously conflicted with a new economy that called for urban store purchases (16). The jobs in this household factory were doled out according to gender roles: "Men and teenage sons worked the field and forest and carried out routine repairs and maintenance....Women did the cooking and preserving, not just of game but of all manner of fruit and vegetable" (18).

⁷⁸ See Seltzer's famous *Bodies and Machines* for more on this specific connection between "nature" and "machine" in Norris's fiction, which he views as representative of naturalism generally. The sexuality implicit within their labor is perhaps best expressed in this over-used passage: "[plowing] was the long stroking caress, vigorous, male, powerful, for which the Earth seemed panting. The heroic embrace of a multitude of iron hands, gripping deep into the brown, warm flesh of land that quivered responsive and passionate under this rude advance, so robust as to be almost an assault, so violent as to be veritably brutal...the two world-forces, the elemental Male and Female, locked in a colossal embrace, at grapples in the throes of a infinite desire, at once terrible and divine, knowing no law, untamed, savage, natural, sublime (131).

corporation as a rival male of sorts, the agrarian men can indeed help render the abstractions of systemic violence immediate. This act furthermore helps legitimize the actual shootings by the agrarians as an act of defense against a corporation rendered suddenly corporeal through the lawmen that simply act on behalf of the railroad.

Indeed, protecting the maternal symbolism that the land evokes has its literal component in the female characters the agrarians have actual relations with. The best example is Hilma Tree, Annixter's eventual wife, who conjures a very different image than that of Trina McTeague. She is not a defiant New Woman like Trina, but rather almost an archetype for classical motherhood. As such, she becomes representative of conventional womanhood, with clearly defined maternal and domestic labor roles. As Lon West observes, Hilma "is not only a potentially fertile Tree (her last name) but a 'Hill-ma'—a hill of mammaries, a giant breast" (17). Though her pregnancy ends in miscarriage, which would seemingly contradict her association with idealized motherhood, the fact that it occurs after Annixter's death only seems to reaffirm such a role. After all, it suggests that a true mother is dependent upon a strong man for support, that one gender role is not complete without the other, and that, oddly, proper fetal development is dependent upon the stability that two gender roles would provide. Hilma is additionally associated with milk; her voice mingles with the "liquid dashing of the milk" (165), she is frequently "wet with" it or "redolent" of it as a result of her farm chores (166), further constructing her as an ideal procreative female. She views Annixter as her protector, assuming female dependence on male strength for their survival: "To Hilma's notion Annixter's attitude was heroic beyond all expression... single-handed, Annixter fronted the monster. But for him the corporation would gobble

Quien Sabe, as a whale would a minnow. He was a hero who stood between them all and destruction” (327). In her mind, Annixter would be a fitting character for Presley’s epic tale of the west—a virile Beowulf taking on the “monster” of the railroad. She even endorses his use of “guns” to stop the corporation from handing out evictions if it remains the only other option (329-330). Annixter, too, views himself in a heroic light after his marriage: “Where once Annixter had thought only of himself, he now thought only of Hilma...A fight was to be fought, one more, the last, the fiercest, the attack of the enemy who menaced his very home and hearth, was to be resisted” (498). This male obligation to be a breadwinner, the provider and supporter of the family has an aggressive tinge now, and such passages lend further credence to my reading that the novel foregrounds a gender-centric explanation for the violence that results rather than any political or class-based motivations. Thus, when the marshals start to hand out evictions, the gun battle is depicted as the “last trial of strength, the last fight between the Trust and the People, the direct, brutal grapple of armed men” (516). While the appearance of the phrase “the People” might seem evidence for a populist reading, that the agrarians are also stand-ins for the oppressed who have no choice but to violently respond to corporate abuses, the situation is also depicted as a “brutal grapple of armed men,” making the situation, regardless of political motivations, focused on the way that men are duty-bound to perform a certain role in accordance with their gender. While I do not entirely reject the notion that the violence may be politically inspired in part, I think the repeated emphasis on gender causality over political causality in the descriptions of the violence in the novel can only be evidence that the gender-based explanation seems more critical as an explanation for character conduct. As mentioned,

whenever the struggle between the railroad and the farmers is described, the phrases that endorse a separate spheres viewpoint regarding gender roles and that call upon the male, as protector of “home and hearth,” to violently defend his honor are more consistent explanations for the retaliatory violence that occurs within the novel.

However, in reacting to an object of threat that is at once everywhere and nowhere, the agrarians, as another critic has observed, also don’t know *where* to point their guns.⁷⁹ Throughout *The Octopus*, Norris depicts the agrarians’ antagonist as something that embodies the pervasive influence of the corporation, as evident in the connotation of broadness in the notion of an octopus, but it is also something with a strangely immediate, if indirect, presence. Norris thus resorts to a tangle of metaphors to render the force at least somewhat identifiable as an antagonist. This rhetorical confusion is best exemplified when Presley tries to conjure a villain responsible for the sudden death of Vanamee’s sheep on the railroad tracks: “abruptly Presley saw again, in his imagination, the galloping monster, the terror of steel and steam, with its single eye, cyclopean, red, shooting from horizon to horizon; but saw it now as the symbol of a vast power, huge, terrible...leaving blood and destruction in its path; the leviathan, with tentacles of steel clutching into the soil, the soulless Force, the iron-hearted Power, the monster, the Colossus, the Octopus” (51). With a flurry of adjectives, cold metal, classical and biblical allusions alike populating his prose, the narrator tries to describe the relationship between direct, observable violence and the abstract machinations of corporate brass. The description reflects the complexities of an era just beginning to

⁷⁹ See Daniel Mrozowski’s article, which considers the problems of representation and agency within the novel’s depiction of the railroad, it is an “active yet elusive presence” that finally leaves the farmers asking, as he puts it, “Who could we shoot?” (162).

grapple with the notion of corporate personhood, the argument that a corporation should be granted the same legal rights as individuals. *Santa Clara County v. Southern Pacific Railroad* (1886) was the real-life case that granted equal protection under the constitution for corporations, rendering them, under the law, persons with legal rights. The fact that the Southern Pacific is considered a legal person, Norris recognizes, does not change the fact that an engine of bureaucracy cannot finally be rendered neatly corporeal. At the same time, the *Santa Clara* case provided a way to make a human agent working on the corporation's behalf, like S. Behrman, an anthropomorphized synecdoche. Such ambiguous causalities characterize the period's perception of a new, troubling kind of violence embedded within corporatism, one that really has no immediate person to blame.

However, the agrarians do primarily identify a certain person with the railroad, S. Behrman. Behrman is continually depicted as the most prominent individual male invested with the symbolic and literal power of the railroad, and thus he is depicted as the primary male rival of the farmers, who, in turn, uses that power to prop up his own sense of masculine pride as the "Master of the Wheat," as he arrogantly nicknames himself (615). "There was no denying the fact," the narrator states, "that for Osterman, Broderson, Annixter and Derrick, S. Behrman *was the railroad*" (67, my emphasis). Behrman is thus almost made too much of as an actual man in description, as if the narrator attempts to encapsulate a broad power within his person. For instance, a great deal of attention is paid to his obesity and especially his stomach; it is a "protuberant" or "great stomach," at several points in the novel, which, masturbatorily, "he stroked from time to time" (66, 345). Lest the symbolism of the body part be missed, when

Dyke is given the new rates for hops and learns of his financial ruin, Behrman's "great stomach," "protruded far in advance, enormous, aggressive" (345). He is a man of appropriately enormous monetary appetites, nicely connoting corporate avarice in an oddly phallic way, even as his physical body is at the same time more representative of the flabby, over civilized degenerate that Teddy Roosevelt deemed effeminate. The fact that these usually feminized features are so overtly masculinized—an obese stomach becomes a phallus, connotative of strength and violence—seems to gesture toward the difficulty of coming to grips with systemic violence enacted by other rotund office-bound males who are nonetheless able to exert such power from mere documents. While emotionally calm and physically rotund, his corporate affiliation allow his body to reflect a powerful essence: Behrman is "never ruffled, never excited, sure of his power, conscious that back of him was the Machine, the colossal force, the inexhaustible coffers of a mighty organization, vomiting millions to the League's thousands" (346). Thus, he confidently protrudes and patronizingly smiles at the bellowing of an impotent counterforce. Behrman does not, however, ultimately reflect what Max Weber would call the "typical person in authority" in a bureaucracy, who is "subject to an impersonal order" and "acts '*Sine ira et studio*,' without hatred or passion, and hence without affection or enthusiasm" (330,340). While he is not ruffled in the face of bellowing farmers, he seems to embody a passionate masculinity of his own. It is apparent, after all, that he is enthusiastic about his eventual triumph over the agrarians, as indicated when he offers the defeated Magnus Derrick a job with the railroad after the latter man's ignominious fall, as if, "testing the completeness of [Behrman's] victory" over this previously staunch enemy (625). Norris's text thereby

suggests not only that the corporation's presence can be elicited through Behrman, but also that Behrman serves as testimony that males within the corporation are just as interested as the agrarians in establishing a sense of subjective masculine authority and priding themselves as manly agents of conquest.

Considering the way Norris describes Behrman, then, the farmers themselves cannot help but speak as if the corporation is a single, malevolent being. This is especially true when its form of systemic violence has such devastating, often manifest effects. In their habits of speaking, the ranchers tend to compare the corporation to another kind of villainous human entity, like a Wild West outlaw. For instance, when Behrman tells the ranchers that their plows would need to be routed through San Francisco before their eventual delivery at Los Muertos, Harran Derrick compares the action with outright robbery: "My God, why don't you break into our houses at night? Why don't you steal the watch out of my pocket, steal the horses out of the harness, hold us up with a shot-gun; yes, 'stand and deliver, your money or your life?'" (71). Earlier, in explaining a court ruling that determined that grain rates would need to remain the same because the railroad "could not be operated at a legitimate profit" (11), Harran points out to Presley that the costs incurred would only trickle down to the ranchers: "Can we raise wheat at a legitimate profit with a tariff of four dollars a ton for moving it two hundred miles to tide-water, with wheat at eighty-seven cents? Why not hold us up with a gun to our faces, and say, 'hands up,' and be done with it?" (11). Harran Derrick's comments illustrate that the consequences of systemic violence are not all that different from the consequences of manifest violence; the only difference is that the railroad's methods are legal robbery, so they do not have to rely on an actual man

with a gun. Thus, the systemic form of violence inevitably references its manifest form in execution, and arbitrary price hikes become experienced by the farmers as a robbery.

Indeed, Harran's comparison with highway robbery aptly predicts the behavior of the former engineer, Dyke, who resorts to literal train robbery against the railroad after he is fired from the railroad and is later made bankrupt by the corporation's rate hike on hops. Dyke, speaking to Presley after getting fired, speaks about the railroad as if it were a real human friend he stood by when it most needed him: "when the strike came along, I stood by them—stood by the company...and now, when hard times come along...they cut my pay down just as off-hand as they do the pay of any dirty little wiper in the yard" (18). Betrayed by his friend, Dyke begins growing hops, assured by Behrman that the transportation rate would not change, and he bristles with hatred for the railroad as he is forced to borrow money from Behrman's bank to fund the new business. Nevertheless, he is urged onward because he feels on the verge of redeeming himself in the wake of his dismissal through his own drive and ambition: "He was no longer a subordinate, an employee," the narrator says of Dyke, "He was his own man, a proprietor, an owner of land" and this causes him to square "his great shoulders" (344) and walk with manly pride. Annixter thinks that using Behrman's funds will backfire, and it inevitably does just that. The railroad changes the transportation rates for hops on what appears to be a whim, rendering Dyke's business unprofitable and immediately in debt. This changes Dyke's formerly prideful walk: "a certain feeling of shame touched him. Surely his predicament must be apparent to every passer-by. No doubt, every one recognized the unsuccessful man in the very way he slouched along" (352). Significantly, Dyke, like McTeague, feels exposed in front of women; in this case,

“young girls in lawns, muslins, and garden hats,” who Dyke feels must “surely sense in him the type of failure, the bankrupt” (352). He feels his body, symbolically flaccid, indicates his financial status and thus his sexual and material suitability as a mate to the women. Eventually, however, shame turns to anger at the source of his failure: the railroad. He experiences “the rage of helplessness, the fury of impotence,” much like Marcus during the wrestling match in *McTeague* (353). Dyke felt himself “a victim of the insatiate greed of the monster” and fantasizes about choking S. Behrman with his bare hands, “wringing the breath from him, wrenching out the red life of him” (353). Also like *McTeague*, Dyke’s shame manifests as a lack of power, and he feels that retributive violence is the only remedy. Thus, he stops a train that he knows is carrying five thousand dollars worth of railroad funds and helps himself to its coffers.

Dyke is influenced to take such action via a kind of peer pressure that swirls amid the milieu of angry males in Los Meurtos, already boiling with outrage at the railroad’s incursions. Caraher, the radical bar owner is depicted in the novel as politically ambiguous, both a “Red,” ostensibly a socialist, and an “anarchist” (357). Caraher tells Dyke that it is his duty to retaliate: “And now it’s your turn” he instructs Dyke. “It can’t last forever. They’ll wake up the wrong kind of man some morning, the man that’s got guts in him, that will hit back when he’s kicked” (355). Carher promotes two vastly different ideologies, anarchism and socialism, but both are aligned with populism, causing some critics since to read Caraher’s presence as enough evidence to interpret the violence as a class-based, rather than gender-based, response to financial abuse. While I do not necessarily claim this reading is entirely inaccurate at some level, I believe that Dyke’s principle inspiration for violence can be better explained as a

relatively illogical response to gender-based shame given the fact that Dyke felt infuriated and “impotent” and fantasized about doing harm to Behrman before he even went to see Caraher. Caraher thus only seems to urge him along, and his murky political convictions mask the illogical in logical dressing. Indeed, Caraher, despite proclaiming his political motivations, persuades Dyke by highlighting a man’s duty to provide financially for his family, and he also references the shame a man like must feel at no longer being a breadwinner, or being a “black-listed engineer, discharged employee, ruined agriculturalist” (357). “Wait till you’ve see [your family],” Dyke says, “getting thin and white, and till you hear your little girl...[tell you] she wants her dinner and you can’t give it to her.” The end result is that a thoroughly convinced Dyke bases his actions on pride, on the raw emotion of a wounded ego, rather than logic. It isn’t violence motivated out of a need to free the “people,” as Dyke ends up killing an innocent brakeman, a working- class man like himself, in the process. Though the impulse for the theft is guided by *quid pro quo* logic—you kick me and I kick back—there is thus discordance in the respective objects of the kicking. Dyke kills an innocent man only loosely affiliated with the railroad, and absconds with a fraction of what the railroad makes weekly or what he could have made as a hops farmer. Thus, it seems, the act for Dyke is one of desperation conjured out of a need to preserve his honor, making it more of a symbolic action; he shot the man and stole the cash for his own peace of mind, to feel like he did *something* to try and regain that powerful status that he took so much visible pride in, even if he secretly acknowledges it would not change the end result. Annixter sums up the imperative to violence nicely when asked by a reporter friendly to the railroad to deliver his opinion of the Dyke affair. He declares that the

railroad “ruined him...[and] he’s only taken back what [they] plundered him of and now [they’re] going to...bring him to the gallows at San Quentin” (424). In essence, Annixter states that Dyke was only trying to regain his sense of identity by forcefully taking the cash he should have earned but was deprived of by a more powerful “male” force. He thus has every right, according to Annixter, to try to take it back, saving his wounded pride in return.

Through Magnus Derrick’s disintegration after the gunfight, Norris illustrates another consequence of defeat by a more powerful male counterforce like the railroad. Indeed, many of the characters imply that it is better to have died *before* failure than to live and admit that one has succumbed to a more potent force. Presley (says) as much to Cedarquist--“If it had only killed him,” he observes (562)—indicating that Derrick’s present state is so disgraceful, so unnerving a collapse, that it would have been better for Derrick to have died doing something to change his circumstances, even if that something might be just as pointless. His new status is compounded by the fact that he tried the railroad’s methods of financial aggression in bribing the Railroad Commission and even failed in this endeavor. He pays the officials to defend the farmers, and this abandonment of personal conviction allows him to be shamed. Indeed, he becomes that most feared of identities after the gunfight: a woman. After his bribery is exposed before a crowd of former supporters, Magnus retreats to an “actress’s dressing room,” where he gazes at his face in the actress’s mirror, realizing that he has become “an old man, discarded, discredited, abandoned” (560). Indeed, his later emotions reflect the juxtaposition of the elderly and the effeminate as he becomes uncertain, trembling, losing his memory, and afflicted with an “unreasoned terror of the Railroad” (563).

Bodily, his previous “erectness was broken and bent,” the “muscles that had held [his] back rigid, the chin high, had softened in stretched” (622). If the “erect” body is a kind of phallus, as with Behrman, an indication of male capability and strength, Magnus’s body has undergone a castration, much like Dyke’s own “slouching” body in the wake of the engineer’s financial failure. As Presley characterizes it, the railroad had “beggared Magnus and had driven him to a state of semi-insanity after he had wrecked his honour [sic] in the vain attempt to do evil that good might come” (650). In this sense, Presley thinks Magnus’s bribing ineffectually mimics the structural violence of the corporation, and the railroad forced him to compromise his values in the process, leading to a plunge in personal integrity to those who followed him. Magnus’s failure constitutes an ethical compromise, having something to do with backing away from older masculinities where everything was communicated in a straightforward, physical fashion, rather than in the circuitous fashion of the railroad’s underhanded financial schemes. But realistically, Magnus’s only flaw is having made the effort to deal with the railroad on its own terms and then *losing*. One wonders whether the League would have turned their backs so quickly on Magnus had he succeeded in the bribery scheme. Indeed, Magnus ultimately comes to the conclusion that bribing was the only way to “crush his enemy, to defeat the railroad, hold the Corporation in the grip of his fist...[to] regain his self-respect” (184). Though initially torn, Magnus feels like not taking the chance “meant failure; a life begun in promise, and end[ing] in obscurity, perhaps in financial ruin” (184). To go through with the plan, in contrast, means his only chance at “achievement, fame, influence, prestige, possibly great wealth” (185). He did take the chance, and nevertheless failed, and when that failed, he took the more

direct route with guns, and that failed as well. Had he succeeded in either endeavor, one gets the feeling that Presley and the agrarians would laud him as a manly hero. Instead, they pity him as an indecisive, weakened neurasthenic figure—as a woman.

After the ranchers are killed, Presley too has a Dyke-like moment where he thinks retributive violence is the only way to regain his own sense of masculine pride after allying himself emotionally with the ranchers. He imagines, for instance, that the best way to satisfy his own “deep-seated desire for revenge” would be to “sink his fingers into the white, fat throat of [Behrman]” and choke him, a fantasy that recalls Dyke’s own (542-43). Thus, Presley throws a bomb at Behrman’s residence, but, characteristically, it fails to go off. Despite just witnessing the farmers’ ineffectual gunfight, Presley believes the bomb is an effective vehicle for the articulation of his own masculine power. Though, of course, he too is urged to think this way by the militant Caraher. Again, Caraher appears before another character completes a violent act. However, Presley, like Dyke, is already enraged by the time he goes to Caraher; the latter again only legitimizes these emotions that Presley was already experiencing. Presley feels the “desire for revenge” as a result of “the anger of defeat” and this shame and anger ultimately spur the poet’s aggressive action (542). When even the bombing fails, Presley confirms his own ineffectuality: he had become “of all human beings, the most wretched—a failure” (567). Behrman later sums up the nature of systemic violence when he asks Presley what he “would have gained by killing [him],” implying that even if Presley had succeeded in bombing Behrman’s house, he ultimately would have failed anyway, as Behrman is only the most immediate human representative of the railroad and many more would be waiting in the wings upon his death (626). “I

guess there ain't anything can touch me," Behrman subsequently proclaims, obviously reveling in his sense of invulnerable, superior masculinity, protected by the corporation (627).

It is tempting to think that Presley changes his perspective on the validity of retributive masculinity by the end of the novel, but this is not the case. The end changes the novel from an epic narrative of angry men ready to plunge into combat to save their homes into a portrait of sad survivors, mulling over the implications of a more powerful male counterforce embodied in the railroad. Presley becomes the principal focus of this section, as he searches for answers about the slaughter he has witnessed and also confronts his own shame and failure as a man. These emotions seem to be the central motivation for the confused worldview and theodicy he conjures from as the result of an impromptu meeting with the railroad's head, Shelgrim. It is "force" Shelgrim claims, that is responsible for the railroad's presence, not his own governance, and the tycoon oddly compares the human-generated technology of the rail to the nature-generated growth of wheat. In the end, Presley is convinced; he thinks "force" is the only entity governing both economic demand for crops and crop growth itself. He refines this initial epiphany into a theodicy, concluding that while evil is essentially unstoppable, the "force" of nature inevitably destroys evil in favor of good: "Men were naught, death was naught, life was naught; FORCE only existed—FORCE that brought men into the world, FORCE that crowded them out of it to make way for the succeeding generation" (634). In this fashion, then "force" is both the entity responsible for the evil wrought upon his agrarian friends, but he seems comforted by the fact that this "force" will also be responsible for ultimate good, a replacement of deaths and a righting of wrongs.

“Falseness dies,” Norris has Presley conclude, “injustice and oppression in the end of everything fade and vanish away. Greed, cruelty, selfishness, and inhumanity are short-lived; the individual suffers but the race goes on. Annixter dies, but in a far corner of the world a thousand lives are saved” (651-52).

Despite Presley’s depiction of force as something divorced from human direction, he nonetheless had come to the opposite conclusion earlier during a dinner with his rich cousin, Beatrice. There, he does see a connection between insatiable corporate greed and the deaths of the agrarians. Corporate policy and avarice are, after all, very human forces, he seems to conclude; a product of will, not the guidance of some updated notion of Adam Smith’s invisible hand: “the clink of the wineglasses was drowned in the explosion of revolvers. The railroad might indeed be a force only, which no man could control and for which no man was responsible, but his friends had been killed and years of extortion and oppression had wrung money from all the San Joaquin” (608). Presley sees the opulence and thinks, “for this, then, the farmers paid...it was for this that Dyke had been driven to outlawry and a jail. It was for this that Lyman Derrick had been bought, the Governor ruined and broken, Annixter shot down, Hooven killed” (604). He then accuses the rich he dines with of being “fattened on the blood of the people, on the blood of the men who had been killed at the ditch” (608). This scene depicting the indulgence of the rich is tellingly juxtaposed with Minna Hooven’s gradual starvation in the streets, a victim of the wealthy and their quest for greed and surfeit. As depicted here, the railroad is still a villainous human creation, a greedy profit-based construction, not a vessel for cosmic energy.

Given these contradictory, confused statements about what one might call Presley's "philosophy of force," one could conclude that there are no easy answers for what it suggests about the novel's depiction of the masculine duty of retributive violence. Indeed, the philosophy of force seems disingenuous, as if Norris felt compelled to insert a hammy philosophical lesson to assuage his nerve wracked readers, anxious about the unredeemed farmers. Many critics have argued that the depiction of the conflicted musings of a dreamer was simply Norris's attempt at further characterizing Presley, and that it would be a mistake to conflate the views of the author with that of a character Norris intentionally depicts as naïve.⁸⁰ For this reason, which I find persuasive, I too deliberately call it *Presley's* philosophy of force and wish to emphasize that I find it more an illustration of Presley's character than something meant to be attributed to Norris's worldview. Others believe Presley's philosophy of force is confused because it involves a tension between determinism and free will. If Presley believes that divine guidance works through nature and evolution, yet simultaneously sees the clear role of avarice and human will in generating that force, then we might conclude that we have an example of a philosophical problem that has been pondered for centuries rather than a cogent argument.

⁸⁰ See Link 107 and Drabelle 224. The most traditional reading of the force problem is that Norris's exposure to Joseph LeConte, a geology professor at Berkeley who believed that the evil evident in natural processes was all part of an ultimately benevolent divine plan beyond human understanding, inspired the concept (Pizer 535). Eric Carl Link suggests that while LeConte undoubtedly informed Norris's choices, the more important observation is that Norris "creates characters which respond to the problem of evil through a means remarkably similar to the positions taken by many theorists in the late nineteenth century who struggle to fashion a theodicy in the light of evolutionary theory" (107).

I am sympathetic to this argument as well. Again, Presley's theodicy is not very logical, no matter which way you look at it. He simultaneously determines that Shelgrim is not at fault for the outcome at Los Meurtos, believing it the outcome of force, but he also paradoxically believes that Behrman, Shelgrim's employee, is more responsible than Shelgrim for that outcome. Again, free will seems both attributable to some persons and denied to others, leaving it unclear what Presley is actually saying. By arguing that "men were nothings, mere animalculæ" amid force, but also that force was something that made the "falseness" and "injustice and oppression" wrought by men "fade and vanish away," then he, absurdly, states that men are both nothing but enough of a something that nature will eventually have to correct men's actions (651).

However, I believe that if this is *Presley's* philosophy of force rather than the author's, as I am inclined to believe, it is crucial to look at the statement as something born more out of the character's emotion than something illustrative of the author's own logic. Indeed, Presley's mind itself, the very mind that delivers this philosophy, is described as logically incoherent after the death of his friends: he is "nerveless, weak" but "still invaded from time to time with fierce incursions of a spirit of unrest and revolt" creating a "blind, undirected energy" (565). In essence, Presley has a need to convince himself that his philosophy of force is correct, that it is something worth considering because he needs, quite simply, to *be* persuaded that he is still a man and still worthy of respect. His incoherent theodicy might then be read as his need to save face after defeat, something necessary to persuade himself that he is still a worthwhile male worthy of esteem. It is profitable, I propose, to consider how Presley's philosophy of force is the edict of passionate masculinity in another guise; Presley's "force" indeed

seems explicitly *gendered* philosophy of nature, in that he, as the novel's spokesman at this stage, wants to identify the righteous imperative to shame and violence within masculinity as something present within nature itself, as a penultimate version of systemic violence and something that acts to preserve honor for the "good" farmers and makes sure to punish the "bad" Behrman. It is not coincidental that Behrman, the novel's central representative of evil, meets his end by being suffocated by the wheat in a silo, appropriate because wheat is the product of nature's force. Like Dyke, Presley is shamed and knows he must do something to restore his sense of manhood, even if it is unlikely to make much of a difference. Unlike Dyke, however, he is paralyzed by an inability to *act*: "his constitutional irresoluteness obstructed his path continually; brain-sick, weak of will emotional, timid even, he temporized, procrastinated, brooded" (565). Here he is described as a kind of neurasthenic, not brave enough to respond with his own kind of force, with, of course, the notable exception of the bomb he throws at Behrman's house, an action which only leaves him further convinced when the bomb fails to go off that he is indeed a failure. The philosophy of force eliminates the burden for him to act; it is therefore summoned out of a very urgent need for the shamed Presley to save face, to continue to deny the possibility that he might be a neurasthenic and be reassured that even in his failure, nature ultimately will be his redeemer and defender. His philosophy of force eliminates the burden of having to act and still allows him to preserve the illusion that he is enough of a man.

In this sense, Presley's philosophy of force sounds a lot like the aforementioned popular speculations in scientific magazines that argued "antagonism" characterized the fabric of the universe itself. Indeed, this is illustrated after his meeting with Shelgrim

when Presley tries to make sense of his epiphany: “Forces, conditions, laws of supply and demand—were these then the enemies after all? Not enemies; there was no malevolence in nature. Colossal indifference only, a vast trend toward appointed goals” (577). If forces are everywhere in nature, then they are embedded within any economic system as well, and they are not necessarily bad, he decides. They are only another part of nature itself. Given this characterization of Presley as someone convinced by Shelgrim into condoning systemic violence as a feature of the universe, one might think that the word “force” (which Norris places in all capitals, as if granting more aggressiveness to the already intense denotation) is used deliberately to characterize Presley’s theodicy. If this force is benevolent, then a more neutral term, like energy, or even karma, especially given Behrman’s demise at the hands of the wheat for his crimes, might seem to be more suitable. The word again, then, rather serves an emotional function like the philosophy it encapsulates; Presley is gendering this theodicy in adapting Shelgrim’s use of the word “force,” rendering it masculine aggression, utilized to whip the universe into shape.

Chapter Three: Marking the “White Silence:” Jack London’s Ambivalent Attitude Toward Masculinity, Success, and Failure in his Self-Development Fiction

In this chapter I argue that London defines success in his early fiction through the development of an individual ‘economy’ of manhood, understood as a strategic exchange of physical and mental energies for ideal economic productivity, but in his later work he rejects this developmental program by demonstrating how it only leads to a kind of enslavement to normative visions of human achievement. In his early fiction, London believed that the way to thwart failure and ensure success required the persistence of a hard, energetic body that could translate to desirable habits of mind like willpower and discipline. As Jonathan Auerbach explains, London feared failure because it meant “anonymity” and a subsequent “social death,” or a state of irrelevance to other living people (14). Anonymity and failure generally, Auerbach notes, are symbolized in London’s novels through the inactive, unproductive or even frozen (as often occurs in his arctic novels) male body (14). Adding to Auerbach’s conclusions, I suggest that these anxieties are one explanation for why London’s early fiction often depicts protagonists summoning the courage to confront anonymity, resolving to generate personal meaning, which is generally portrayed through idealized self-development and the tireless pursuit of success. In this sense, London’s early fiction often depicts an initially imperfect male protagonist—either with an overdeveloped

mind and underdeveloped body, or simply the latter—who trains himself to apportion the energies of mind and body into a more relational union, a kind of “economy” of self, developed through the direction and guidance of another male character who monitors his progress. I propose that London’s early fiction, then, implicitly necessitates a path of masculine self-making for financial prosperity. London’s early narratives depict failure as obscurity and meaningless decay —making a mark on an otherwise blank world is the only way for a finite, organic being to generate the kind of figurative immortality granted with great success.

While London’s view of failure-as-submission remains relatively stable throughout his career, I also suggest that London’s frequent portrayals of ideal self-development and eventual success grew increasingly complicated. His later works, especially *Martin Eden* (1909), for instance, characterize success as a product of random luck at the hands of an unpredictable market and an unworthy bourgeois audience, leading his eponymous character to conclude that success is formulaic instead of the product of an unique ability developed through an economy of body and mind. For Eden, the despair at learning his success was a product of luck and not pluck necessitates the character’s suicide. While *Martin Eden* seems to retain the trajectory of London’s early protagonists in that Eden initially believes that ultimate financial triumph validates masculinity, its ending reveals London’s growing uncertainty about the value of success and his ambivalence about what success really reflects about masculinity, concluding that success only determines one’s ability to capitulate to feminized bourgeois values.

In his early fiction, London felt that success, or at least a certain kind of it, ultimately validated one's masculinity and, hence, one's superiority over other wills similarly striving in a Darwinian economic sphere. London furthermore made several statements that would suggest that his conception of personal economy could be explicitly linked with his understanding of ideal masculinity. While describing his alcoholism in his autobiographical *John Barleycorn* (1913), for example, London emphatically states that his lifelong alcoholism does not mean he is a "fool" or a "weakling:" "As the world measures such things, I am a success—I dare to say a success more conspicuous than the success of the average successful man, and a success that required a pretty fair amount of brains and will power. My body is a strong body. It has survived where weaklings died like flies." (245). Here, London offers his success in the highly competitive literary marketplace as proof of his superior strength, and willpower relative to other men and denies that his predilection for alcohol diminishes these characteristics.⁸¹ If London had a tendency to equate sufficient manhood with success in a capitalistic marketplace in his early fiction, one might note, then it seemingly conflicts with his noted advocacy of socialism. However, many critics have called London both an individualist and a collectivist, an admirer of Spencer as well as an avowed socialist, an author torn at the seams by his own intellectual impulses in an era where these two political tendencies—individualism and collectivism-- were not

⁸¹ Indeed, he later depicts alcohol as superhuman force that knows just how to exploit primordial human weakness: "My drinking is a thing that has happened...and, as I see it, it but lays the emphasis on the power of John Barleycorn" as a "deadly institution" that has taken "its heavy toll of youth and strength...and of very much of all the best that we breed" (246). In other words, if even a strong will and an example of "the best that we breed" like London could temporarily succumb to its effects, alcohol could easily lay waste to weaker specimens.

necessarily viewed as diametrically opposed as they typically are in the present.⁸² I, too, think these interesting and complex ideological tensions reflect a complex human being who changed his mind often and whose changes are registered in his fiction. Hence, I argue that a developmental thesis that traces his thinking about success is but one other example of such a larger political aporia.

As mentioned, I want to follow Jonathan Auerbach in suggesting that London's early philosophy of failure—the nihilistic apathy that the generation of a perfect economy of self is meant to ward off-- is best expressed through a thematic most often found within London's northern fiction called "The White Silence," after an early short story by the same name (34). The attribute of nature most able to convince man of his "finitude [sic]," the narrator in the story states at one point, is the "snow-laden cold" of the White Silence, a natural enemy of the forward progression of human life, where

⁸² For an autobiographical admission of these tensions, see London's "How I Became a Socialist," in which he concedes that he once was an individualist as a youth, and "could only see [himself] raging through life without end like one of Nietzsche's blond beasts, lustfully roving and conquering by sheer superiority and strength" and then notes his political change. However, Earl Labor observes that London had a "politically idiosyncratic political attitude, a peculiar amalgamation of socialism and individualism" throughout his career (xv). London's fiction can often be categorized thematically according to which of these impulses asserts itself more predominately in a particular work. His socialism was defined by a society of classlessness, a world where interpersonal equality prevails, and thus books like *The People of the Abyss* (1903) evince a genuine compassion for the poor. London's Spencerianism, however, presumes a natural hierarchy within the process of adaptation—a process in which individual failures and successes are both inevitable and part of a fixed natural order. London's novels about individual progress thus tend to foreground the Spencerian side of London's fraught ideology by necessity, as his thematics emphasize a procedure of self-making and biological progress. However, Geoffrey Harpham suggests that London's ideological contradictions were a byproduct of a period that saw its socialism as more of a 'group individualism': "Playing socialism as a strong man's game, London became a primary spokesman for a barbaric American Kiplingism in which the fit survived and the unfit perished, to nobody's regret" (26).

“movement ceases” and the human being becomes a “sole speck of life journeying across the ghostly wastes of a dead world” and “realizes that his is a maggot’s life, nothing more” (London 144). Other critics seeking to define London’s early attitude about the generation of human meaning have adopted the “White Silence” as a phrase that designates this thematic within London’s fiction. “To stop moving or to deviate from the trail is to die,” Auerbach observes, arguing that the protagonists in London’s fiction mirror London’s own anxieties about authorship and his desire to avoid anonymity by achieving literary success (34). “By imagining the scene of writing as a blank waiting to be marked,” Auerbach notes, “London analogizes his own efforts to make a name for himself in print...Just as London’s character’s most fear being wiped off the landscape, obliterated or obscured by blankness...so too does their author most fear obscurity,” Auerbach further notes (56).

Though unmentioned by Auerbach, London’s depiction of the White Silence also appears to represent the indifference of the natural world toward human striving--“a dead world” in which the human being is insignificant, disintegrating matter. In other words, the philosophy encapsulated by the phrase places emphasis not just on London’s fear of death, but what makes that death meaningless: failure, obscurity. In London’s later *John Barleycorn*, a thematic cousin to the White Silence appears called the “White Logic,” which insists that “[l]ife is a perpetual lie-telling process” about life’s inherent worth (10). Here, London thinks the “White Logic” struggles to generate meaning amidst a universe that looks upon it with cold indifference (10). Alcohol addiction (nicknamed “John Barleycorn” in the novel) tries to cover over a sense of “soul-sickness” or “life-sickness,” which reveals that all human striving and “[a]ll these head-

reaches after immortality are but the panics of souls frightened by the fear of death” who “trick themselves into believing they will outwit the game and win to a future, leaving the other animals to the darkness of the grave” (10). While Auerbach’s argument is persuasive, such passages from the later London reveal how the author’s attitudes about success and failure, and thus the White Silence itself, evolved over the course of his career. In *Martin Eden*, London portrays a character much like in the one in *John Barleycorn*—a man who comes to the conclusion that success is deception, a ruse concocted by men convinced they *could* “outwit” death.

Only in London’s early fiction, then, is the way to conquer death, stillness, and the nihilistic weight of the White Silence through the dogged perseverance of body and will, of perpetual motion, deemed a legitimate means of warding off the symbolic death of anonymity that stillness and failure represent. As Mark Seltzer has aptly observed, “the difference between life and death in London is the difference between the body staying in motion and the freezing of bodies and motion” (167), and the freezing of bodies—the idleness or unproductiveness of the body in his early fiction-- means one has succumbed to the vast meaninglessness of the White Silence.⁸³ The early twentieth century, the heyday of London’s writing career, was a period obsessed, as Andrew Lynn Knighton observes, with a “new coroporealization of unproductivity” which revealed “a new focus, away from idleness conceived as a moral boon or danger, and toward unproductivity as a physiological and directly economic malady” (114-15). Such diagnoses, including “the pathologization of neurasthenia and other inhibitors of the

⁸³ Interestingly, Soren Kierkegaard posited that his “levelling,” a kind of proto-nihilism, was “like the stillness of death where one can hear one’s own heartbeat...into which nothing can penetrate, in which everything sinks, powerless” (51).

will” thus made “[the body] the privileged site for articulating visions of what productivity is and what it can be expected to achieve” (125). Neurasthenia’s medicalized name disguised the rather unscientific ways in which it was diagnosed, and legitimated the body-specific shaming discourses that wanted to expurgate those that did not correspond to its strict vision of national selfhood. As Leo Braudy puts it, those who exhorted men to abhor neurasthenia wanted “to purge the national body of those who were perceived as less than men, or... men of the wrong kind; it was strong impulse for men of London’s period, which likened racial, genetic and intellectual deficiency with a disease that needed to be eradicated like any other.”⁸⁴

In London’s early work, then, the dichotomy of somatic stillness and motion usually relates in some fashion to the economy as well. The ability to be productive and endure labor gave meaning; idleness only anticipated a meaningless death. Thus, a strategic “self-making,” as Ben Barker-Benfield puts it, is defined by a “product of will and energy,” an economy of self that harnesses and distributes will (mind) or energy

⁸⁴ See Braudy, 354. With regard to masculinity, the fear was that an entire generation of men was losing their virility as a result of the oversaturation of modern comforts. G. Stanley Hall was perhaps the most prominent psychologist associated with male neurasthenia. He advocated, along with other prominent cultural figures like Theodore Roosevelt, a “west cure”—a return to the uncivilized wilds by moving temporarily to the Western frontier in order to regain an apparently lost willpower and bodily endurance as a result of overcivilization. A working-class model of masculinity promoted by William Jennings Bryan and the so-called “Populist” party, which swelled with sentiments aimed against capitalists and the higher classes while championing the rural yeoman and working-class wage earner, serves as a telling example (Kimmel 74). Historian Michael Kimmel describes one particular 1896 Bryan speech as a celebratory account of the “rural Heroic Artisan” struggling against the rapacity of capitalism as an “autonomous worker and family man, virtuous and virile” (74). The consistent supervision and economic dependence that professionalism demanded led to widespread male pining for the self-generating, family-producing working man of times past, who could, as one “wage-worker” testified before a U.S. Senate panel, feel “like he was somebody” in the face of widespread mechanization (59).

(body) at need (46). London's early career can thus be philosophically associated not only with Spencer, but with earlier authors who responded similarly to the discourses of overcivilization with a remedy for individual improvement like minister John Todd, and psychiatrists Amariah Brigham and Isaac Ray. As Ben-Barker Benfield observes, Todd, Brigham and Ray form part of the ideological backbone for what he calls the "spermatic economy":

The courses of discipline advocated [by these authors] reflect two conventional assumptions about man's being. First was the somatic basis of the mind: the intellect depended on the material body for 'vigor and power.' Properly developed, the mind itself could stimulate the body's resources: 'mental excitement increases the flow of blood to the brain,' the organ that 'manifested' mind. But too much exercise, too large a flow, could 'enfeeble or derange the mind.' The second assumption was that the underlying model for the operation of the whole man, psychological and physiological, was economic. Americans shared this convention with Europeans, some of whom Brigham cited. It was, he said, a 'fundamental law of the distribution of vital powers...that when they are increased in one part, they are diminished in all the rest of the living economy...to increase the powers of one organ it is absolutely necessary that they should be diminished in all the others. This law underlay Todd's and Ray's recommendations for the arousing and channeling of energies from latency and waste into self-education, railroading, business—in short, into the 'majesty and destiny of Manhood (47).

While Barker-Benfield's observations are mostly applicable to an earlier nineteenth-century ideology, there is much within London's works that suggests a kinship.⁸⁵ The texts I've chosen here—*The Sea Wolf* (1904) and *Martin Eden* (1909)—both depict masculine bodies reacting to a discourse of failure and success in a market economy that values productivity, itself a product of a disciplined mind and body working strategically to distribute energies so as not to deplete the resources of either. Of most interest to me here is London's portrayal of the complexities of a subject's received ideas about productive masculine selfhood, its relationship with his successes and failures, and the corresponding bodily registers of such inner turmoil.

Of course, these two texts are also chosen to highlight London's shift in thinking about success over the span of his career. While the *Sea-Wolf* was written in his early career, when London still fervently believed that mind/body harmony could conquer the anonymity present in *failure*, *Martin Eden* was written after he had gained his fame and

⁸⁵ Another example may be derived from London's famous dog protagonist in *The Call of the Wild*, Buck. The dog develops "an internal and an external economy" upon his exposure to life in the wild (38). Described as a hardening of "muscles" as well as a development of keener instincts, a sharper "sight and scent," and a seemingly preternatural ability to "scent the wind and forecast it a night in advance," the description chronicles the 'distribution of vital powers' and the strategic distribution of bodily and mental energies, even if this particular description does not explicitly evoke the seminal, sexual connotations that Todd brought to them (38). London thus evokes the language tropes of pop-Spencerianism when describing Buck's change: the dog's "adaptability" or "capability to adjust himself to changing conditions," determines his biological fitness to thrive in these new, harsh circumstances (37). The adaptation of self to a harsh environment, correcting frailties and developing a more fluid internal economy, is the initial corrective measure that leads to Buck's success in the wild, manifested as a physical superiority to other dogs and wolves. Though Buck is certainly not literally (though perhaps metaphorically, as a reflection of man) placed within a wider economy in this fictional world, London later imputes the very same personal development to protagonists in a literal market economy as they adjust to the demands of different kinds of labor and eventually succeed, becoming alpha males who often even "win" a female mate by the end of the narrative.

coincided with other works, like the aforementioned *John Barleycorn*, which expressed a more pronounced ambivalence toward *success*. I begin, then, with the *Sea-Wolf*, and use it to delineate London's earlier attitudes toward masculine self-making as a means of warding off fears of anonymity and failure. I will then turn to the more ambiguous portrayal of masculine self-making and success in *Martin Eden*. While the former book is a celebration of Franklinesque virtues of self-making and success, *Eden* uses his protagonist's earnest developmental logic to conclude that success itself is an unworthy and even effeminate social fabrication.⁸⁶

Earning "Legs": The Development of the Economy of Self in *The Sea Wolf*

The Sea Wolf follows a seafaring narrative tradition established in London's era by Rudyard Kipling, which details a dandy's journey to manhood through hard physical labor.⁸⁷ Protagonist Humphrey Van Weyden is a land-bound intellectual at the narrative's beginning, and the book ends with his achievement of ideal somatic and intellectual balance. London's work, of course, responded to a variety of discourses about proper self-development beyond the economy of self that Barker-Benfield details, including those of neurasthenia and the generally pervasive fears about overcivilization during his time. As vessels for moral conduct and individual units that inspired a national economics of material mass-production, bodies like Van Weyden's indeed faced greater scrutiny with respect to endurance and physical capability in London's era than in earlier periods.

⁸⁶ In a letter to Mary Austin, for instance, London said he "attacked Nietzsche and his super-man idea" in the *Sea Wolf* and also attacked "the super-man idea" in *Martin Eden*, he asserted, yet this message somehow "failed to get across" to his readers.

⁸⁷ See Bender, 83-85, 89.

Like many authors of his era, London cultivated a sense that the subject could be “read” like a text for deficiencies in mind, like discipline and willpower. In a 1903 essay published in the *San Francisco Examiner*, for example, London gleans a sense of a young criminal’s moral deficiencies through stagnant muscles and oxygen-deprived lungs. After observing a doctor catalogue the various maladies in the boy and prescribe a regimen of strength conditioning as a cure, London concludes that there must be “a direct and intimate relation between the body and brain, between the flesh and spirit” (76). This idea would be revisited in the *Sea-Wolf*; he would detail, among other things, the impact of environment on body and mind, the links between genetic superiority and the ability to surmount challenging obstacles. In this concern, he echoed a nation concerned with bodily and moral degeneracy and its potential rectification upon exposure to environments that would ostensibly propel extensive self-reevaluation.⁸⁸ He included overcivilized characters responding to the possible plunge into neurasthenia in his fiction—something he likely associated with the “stillness” of a lethargic person in danger of being consumed by the White Silence or White Logic—and exposed them to the brutality of nature as an impetus for progressive self-correction.

It is then appropriate that Humphrey Van Weyden is cloistered and bookish at the novel’s beginning; his experiences are limited to the intellectual pursuits common in upper-middle class professionalism reflective of neurasthenia. Van Weyden’s body and

⁸⁸ It is interesting to note that even Theodore Roosevelt considered London a fellow ally in his war against deficient, overcivilized American men—indeed, this has been cited as the principle reason Roosevelt intervened in London’s court-martial during the latter’s time as a war correspondent during the Russo-Japanese War. Roosevelt, Labor asserts, had respect for an author that, like the president himself, contributed “character-building” articles for *Youth’s Companion* magazine, even though the president would later critique London’s depiction of wolves in *The Call of the Wild* on grounds of inaccuracy. See Labor, 198.

his emotions reflect the domestic withdrawal associated with femininity; his disdain for the world of competitive sports or violence left his muscles “small and soft, like a woman’s” (33). This feminine exterior is the result of an equally “soft,” pusillanimous mind: When the ferry carrying him across San Francisco Bay begins to capsize, Van Weyden cannot help but mimic the “hysterical” women aboard the ship and “shriek aloud” when he finds himself alone and faced with the “primordial vastness” of the sea (6-8). Several critics have interpreted this plunge into the waters as a rebirth or “baptism” of sorts, symbolizing his entry into a world of proper masculine conduct.⁸⁹ Others have emphasized descriptive similarities between Van Weyden’s near drowning and other depictions of drowning in London’s earlier work. Jonathan Auerbach argues that Van Weyden’s near “drowning signifies social death” and thus Van Weyden’s rescue by Larsen “represents a reprieve from the abyss of failure” (185). In order to further support this claim, Auerbach points to a similar event in London’s earlier short story, “A Thousand Deaths,” in which a protagonist with an equally privileged background faces possible drowning as well, trying to content “[him]self with the bitter thoughts of a wasted career, now drawing to a close” (186).

I would further suggest that the “primordial vastness” and solitude of the sea mirrors the human relationship to environment that London wanted to evoke with the White Silence. Both descriptions emphasize a vast, indifferent swath of nature that highlights humanity’s “maggot”-like insignificance and furthermore threatens to stop the progress of bodies in motion. The key difference between these two visions of nature is that the figure within the White Silence does not deviate from the metaphorical

⁸⁹ See Miner 107 and Reesman 234.

trail and keeps moving despite these discomfiting realizations, suggesting that the arctic figure depicted in the earlier short story still finds meaning in perseverance. Van Weyden, however, seems incapable of any sort of self-preservation in facing the threat of the primordial sea. Indeed, it is worth emphasizing that in both the depiction of Van Weyden and the unnamed protagonist in “A Thousand Deaths,” emphasis is placed on the fact that both seem resigned: Van Weyden certainly does not want to die, signified by his terrified shriek, yet he repeatedly fails to call out or act to rectify his plight. Van Weyden proceeds to float passively in the water after his plunge into the San Francisco Bay—a stillness that invites outright frozenness and death. He lacks the willpower necessary to fight for his survival or hail the passing *Ghost*. Instead, his eyes meet the preternaturally attentive gaze of Wolf Larsen, and Larsen drags Van Weyden onto the ship. Larsen demands to know “why in hell” Van Weyden didn’t bother to “sing out” for help (9). The question bears a corrective impatience that also characterizes his later lessons, which all attempt to legitimize the struggle for existence as a pinnacle value, an end in itself. If succumbing to the White Silence also represents failure, then Larsen wants to teach Van Weyden that the struggle against possible failure and anonymity is what generates success and prosperity. Larsen thus thinks the task of constructing a newer, improved Van Weyden is as much ideological as it is physical, in that Larsen emphasizes that there is no greater human meaning than the ceaseless fight for self-preservation.

Indeed, the dichotomy of energy and passiveness (in body and attitude) largely defines the distinction in both body and philosophy between Larsen and Van Weyden. Larsen’s philosophy is a jumble of butchered Spencer and Nietzsche. It is characterized

by the belief that the life with the most bodily vigor and energy “wins” in a universe driven by competition—that the alpha male that triumphs over others makes a mark on the White Silence and thus achieves a kind of immortality through his deeds. Life itself is something Larsen calls “a yeast, a ferment” which only bears meaning if it becomes “big” and eats “the little that they may continue to move” (40). A worthy life exhibits both its utility and its value through accumulating fuel for motion and production. Thus, the values of productivity within Larsen’s worldview necessitate a body capable of such constant strife, and this logic becomes Larsen’s primary standby in his attempts to produce a virile Van Weyden. As a way to prod Van Weyden into self-reliance, Larsen accuses him of standing “on dead men’s legs” (20), equating corporeal integrity with the ability to earn a living through labor. Larsen also thinks Van Weyden’s hands have been kept soft by the support of “dead men,” or Van Weyden’s father (21). These assumptions about Van Weyden’s dependence on the labor of other men are gleaned from Van Weyden’s feminine exterior; Mugridge, the Cockney cook, for instance, thinks Van Weyden has “bloomin’ soft skin” that was “more like a lydy’s [sic]”: indicating his skin had not been subjected to the harsh elements of labor or the outdoors (12). Van Weyden thus brings no value to Larsen’s coldly materialistic view of existence: “You have never made anything in your own sweat. You live on an income which your father earned. You are like a frigate bird swooping down upon the boobies and robbing them of the fish they have caught” (41). Van Weyden’s life is parasitic to Larsen—Van Weyden feeds on the labor performed by other life to get his sustenance and continue to move. Lack of productivity for Larsen, echoing Hall and Roosevelt’s similar exhortations to an over-civilized masculine culture, denotes structural

unsoundness, an inability to “stand tall” with pride because his body did not earn its own existence through employment. Thus, Van Weyden earns a new nickname, “Hump,” which suggests an inert, lump of contented flesh with no “legs,” and signals Larsen’s disgust for a man who even in the face of death refuses to exert himself physically for his own preservation while floating at sea, indifferent to the coming of anonymity, the White Silence.

At one point, Larsen comes closest to defining his vision of economic success and, therefore, his vision what a man’s motivation should be in capitalism, by using the rough men on the *Ghost* as examples. The workers, Larsen says to Van Weyden, “dream of making lucky voyages which will bring them more money, of becoming mates of ships, of finding fortunes—in short, of being in a better position for preying on their fellows, of having all night in, good grub, and somebody else to do the dirty work” (40-41). Because of his privilege, Van Weyden lacks the fighting spirit Larsen attributes to his crew, who all derive energy from the dream that they might someday be financially superior to other men and able to “prey” upon them. Accumulating finances is likened to the accumulation of power, as if the economic and numerical is denotative of both the physical and mental strength necessary to survive in the natural world.

It is therefore appropriate that Larsen’s own body seems to harbor boundless energy and strength as an epitome of successful masculinity. As if acknowledging a body in close consort with the demands of life, Van Weyden’s descriptions of Larsen’s figure is worshipful, but oddly contradictory. He closely parallels a sense of Larsen’s masculine beauty, which he affixes with feminine features, and an atavism he uses to express the captain’s violent streak and zeal for all things in motion. At first, for

instance, he describes his physical bulk as one of “massive build” but of the thin kind that “partook more of the enlarged gorilla order,” yet, he quickly adds, does not suggest he is “in the least gorillalike” (14). This odd description—both gorilla, yet still within the evolutionary, developmental end point of the cultivated *homo sapiens*—is mirrored in subsequent descriptions replete with nature metaphors: “[Larsen’s] strength was of a strength we are wont to associate with things primitive, with wild animals and the creatures we imagine to be our tree-dwelling prototypes to have been...the *essence of life that is the potency of motion*” (15, my emphasis); his eyes, though “large and handsome” could “brood with the hopeless somberness of leaden skies, that could snap and crackle points of fire...[and] could grow chill as an arctic landscape” (19); his body is “apparently massive at first sight” but this physique could “vanish” and be replaced by an appreciation for the “excessive mental and spiritual strength that lay behind and beyond and out of sight” (19). His physical qualities, in other words, mimic the earthly plane of Spencerian evolutionary progress—it is a body that reflects the imperative of continual motion, which is both ostensibly logical in argument, since it mimics sound Darwinian conclusions about biology and seems a reflection of objective reality, but is also brutal in execution. In this way, Larsen’s body and mind form an ideal economy of self or distribution of energies, and Van Weyden only fails to comprehend, thus he resorts to jarring contradictions and indecisions in attempting to convey this seemingly paradoxical harmony of atavism and evolution, aggression and refinement. Larsen has ape-like strength but is not in the least ape-like in mental ability, so we can associate him with the “primitive” things and with the emotional complexity necessary to “brood” that is beyond the primitive. This is why Larsen’s apparently “massive” body can

paradoxically “vanish,” as Van Weyden characterizes it, when it is necessary for Larsen to exert a strength of mind instead of strength of body, and then just as swiftly return to his body when violence seems the more efficient means of getting what he desires.

As mentioned, Van Weyden also sees a bit of the feminine in Larsen’s body—a femininity that also suggests white racial purity: While Wolf Larsen “was the man-type, the masculine...almost a god in his perfectness,” he was also blessed with a “body, thanks to his Scandanavian stock, [that] was as fair as the fairest woman’s” (112). This ogling from Van Weyden is much replicated throughout the text, and is most notably applied to the lower class Cockney cook Mugridge and the exotic appeal of the native hunter, “Oofy-Oofy.” Oofy-Oofy, is “a beautiful creature, almost feminine in the pleasing lines of his figure” and has a “softness and dreaminess in his large eyes which seemed to contradict his well-earned reputation for strife and action” (109). Scott Derrick suggests that, whereas the feminine contained in Larsen is antiseptic, white, and, “clean”—to use London’s oft-used adjectives to describe upper-class people and places-- the threat within Mudgride and Oofy-oofy contains a more immediate threat of homosexual digression by linking the nasty, “dirty,” practice of those erotics with the seedy underbelly of society: racial Others (Oofy-oofy) and the poor (Mugridge).⁹⁰ Derrick thus casts Van Weyden’s gaze upon Larsen as a son-to-father idolatry in the mode of the Oedipus myth: “the son’s desire for the father hides behind a façade of mutually maintained competition, hatred and even violence” (126). If we accept Derrick’s argument, the act of feminization the text attaches to Oofy-Oofy and

⁹⁰ Derrick argues, more specifically, that “Hump’s intense fascination with Larsen, despite these suggestive erotic moments, is “‘saved’ from homosexuality” by what he “described as the text’s attempt to differentiate the ‘clean’ and ‘white’ from the ‘filthy’ or anal body and by Larsen’s unrelenting ferocity” (126).

Mugridge is a kind of distancing or segregating gesture that describes the mysterious, contaminating racial and class potential the two carry and links it with the equally fluid, polluting world of the feminine. The feminine attached to Larsen, however, reflects a purity contained within the white male body. We thus can't miss the racial undertones to Van Weyden's upward progression: he aspires to Larsen's god-like Anglo-Saxon manhood.

While Van Weyden's romantic desire for Larsen may be less about his own corporeal sexuality and more about attempting to live up to a perceived ideal fantasy about gender and racial identity, the two--romantic desire and idolatry--seem inevitably fused. An erotic longing combined with aspiration is, after all, nothing new for an author that also depicted Martin Eden's romantic quest in similar terms, which I will turn to in the next section. The difference between Martin Eden and Van Weyden's experiences, however, is that the latter man learns to incorporate idolatry and romantic desire into his torturous "training" at the hands of Larsen. One theorist, for instance, usefully explains how pain in an environment where men are learning to become men can be experienced as sexual pleasure. Expanding upon Foucault's analysis of carcereal institutions, Klaus Theweleit interprets the infliction of physical pain by a panoptic power source during "training" as a response "to [the subject's] longing for pleasure" (309). Furthermore, Theweleit states that violence becomes an acceptable substitution for desired intimacy, since it allows for the subject to demonstrate its loyalty and its ability to suppress "weak" emotions and transfer them into aggressive ones (Theweleit 319). The subject inevitably replaces longing for external, familial or sexual comfort with sexual longing for the power source inflicting the pain, which, in Van Weyden's

case, could be the ever-present, drill-instructor like presence of Larsen, the embodiment of an idealized hegemonic masculinity (309). Thus, Van Weyden's sexual desire for Larsen becomes a kind of desire for the model of balanced masculinity he embodies--at least until the arrival of Maude Brewster, who, as I will later mention, is the text's anxious way of moving Van Weyden away from dangerous homoeroticism and into legitimate heterosexuality once his balanced masculinity is finally achieved, or when he finally earns "legs" on which to stand.

Though Theweleit theorizes soldier training during Nazi Germany, aspects of the theory seem to approximate the logic that Larsen applies during the pseudo-masochistic training of "Hump." As a kind of drill-instructor in this confined space, Larsen's gaze is likened, for instance, to the "cruel hand of a vivisectionist" with which he "grope[s] about" in the crews "mental processes and [examines] their souls as though to see what soul stuff is made" (59). This panoptic sort of gaze seems to guide Larsen's decisions to forcefully correct Van Weyden's missteps. After Larsen grips Van Weyden and the latter collapses in pain, Van Weyden could see in Larsen's eyes "that curiosity I had so often noted, that wonder and perplexity, that questing, that everlasting query of his as to what it was all about" while the latter man "writhed about" in pain on the deck floor (67). As if getting the hint as to the more appropriate response, the very next page depicts a somewhat transformed Van Weyden "becoming animallike" when Mugridge tries to strike him. "My lips lifted and snarling like a dog's," Van Weyden states, "my eyes gleaming with fear and helplessness and the courage that comes of fear and helplessness" (68). Van Weyden thus transfers "weak" emotions into what Larsen might deem life-preserving ones, turning fear that comes with being cornered into

combative, defensive courage. Fittingly, Larsen likens Van Weyden's new cabin boy position to body-shaping training, stating that the occupation is all part of "learning to walk" in the expected fashion, or learning to move as a man of labor in this environment ought to move (31). A knee injury in labor is shrugged off by Larsen as something he would "get used to in time," adding that while "it may cripple" him some, it is a necessary part of his corporeal adjustment to his manner of walking, as if weak bones are being purposefully broken only to be re-calcified in stronger form (31).

Van Weyden thus learns that this "new and elemental environment seemed to call for a savage repression" (32) of all emotions unnecessary to completing the daily labor on the ship. He ascribes this demand for suppression to the "elemental" ship itself, correlating, like he did with Larsen's earthly, cosmic masculinity, the space with a primal undercurrent embedded in the fabric of biological reality. Injury and pain are in close harmony with the captain's vision of labor—indeed, his lauding of a creature that eats the most ferment and continues to move by taking the pain of doled out by an indifferent universe. Larsen's reading of Van Weyden goes beyond pathologization and into punitive correction when he is forced by Larsen to become the crew's new cabin boy and earn a new body through grunt labor. Larsen thus declares that Van Weyden is kept aboard merely because it is a "whim" of his to keep Van Weyden where he may "break [him] or make [him]" in Larsen's quest to re-create the latter man as a bigger piece of ferment (43). Van Weyden admits that his manhood has "been smirched and sullied" (31) via such a regression in status at the hands of Larsen and the stoic crew. In a Foucauldian sense, of course, prescriptive physicality demands corporeal intervention from Larsen to correct errors due to disobedience or lack of knowledge, so when labor

doesn't elicit injury to Van Weyden, Larsen himself does the deed. For instance, ashes accidentally dispensed over the wrong side of the ship warrant a swift kick from Larsen, the pain of which is enough to leave him in a "half-fainting" condition (37); Van Weyden's failure to blindly accept Larsen's pseudo-intellectual ponderings is greeted with a bicep-crushing grip (67), a response repeated later when Larsen chokes Van Weyden to illustrate a point, causing the latter to pass out (86). If an intellectual or physical mistake means ceasing to move in the correct way, of regressing into the lifeless apathy of the "Hump" persona he once was, then the introduction of pain serves as a corrective reminder of the body (and values) Van Weyden should be developing.

Indeed, Van Weyden himself seems to recognize the value of such violent instruction. Though he continues labor without respite, he seems to simply slough off the injuries he received through a learned stoicism: "My knee is much better, though it often aches for long periods, and the stiffness in gradually leaving the arm which Wolf Larsen squeezed," he notes at one point (82). He also observes other changes: his "muscles [were] growing harder and increasing in size;" his previously delicate and soft hands gain a "parboiled appearance, are afflicted with hang nails...[that are] broken and discolored" (82). Van Weyden's hands, the most obvious corporeal evidence for a life of labor, become grotesque in their appearance, but they have nevertheless morphed into a kind of credential for the laborious, energetic manhood he is being asked to adopt. Part of the training emphasizes the economic realities of the seal hunting occupation, and he is asked to become useful by counting "the pelts as they came aboard from the boats" and to "oversee the skinning and afterward the cleansing of the decks" (122). Van Weyden slowly learns how to be a productive member of the

economy, a kind of seal-hunting foreman, which he comes to appreciate: “this handling and directing of many men was good for me. It developed what little executive ability I possessed, and I was aware of a toughening or hardening which I was undergoing and which could not be anything but wholesome for ‘Sissy’ Van Weyden” (122). For all his violence, Van Weyden concludes, Larsen “had opened up for me the world of the real, of which I had known practically nothing and from which I had always shrunk” (122).

While recognizing a growing physical kinship with his workmates, however, Van Weyden notices a few features of the men he labors with that reveal some key differences:

Their masculinity, which in itself is of the brute, has been overdeveloped. The other and spiritual side of their natures has been dwarfed—atrophied, in fact. They are a company of celibates, grinding harshly against one another and growing daily more calloused from the grinding. It seems impossible sometimes that they ever had mothers. It would appear that they are a half-brute, half-human species, a race apart, wherein there is no such thing as sex; that they are hatched out by the sun like turtle eggs...they fester in brutality and viciousness and in the end die as unlovely as they have lived” (101).

The description suggests that the crew members’ overabundance of corporeal energy results in their “atrophied” minds. It seems their lack of exposure to women and mothers reinforces this atavism, and, to recall Theweleit, they even seem to derive all necessary erotic satisfaction from labor and the homoerotic influence of other men. The harsh “grinding” against one another to the point where they become “calloused,” suggests a strange kind of intimacy via labor, where gentle dermal contact is eschewed

in favor of the rough, so that the men here gain a hardened exterior impervious to the pain that the seal-hunting trade doles out. The key difference, of course, between Van Weyden and the “overdeveloped” brutes of the crew is that he learns to not wholly embrace atavism during his development, but merely seems to draw upon the bodily hardness to generate corresponding intellectual “hardness.” For instance, Van Weyden throws “all restraint to the winds” during an argument with Larsen, in which Van Weyden’s “incisive way of speech...cut and slashed” at Larsen with his words, until the “whole man of him was snarling” (67). Van Weyden thus seems closer to creating a more harmonious economy of self that transfers the aggressive energies in his newly crafted body to his intellectual attacks, suggesting the “hard” body leads to a hardened mind, a kind of stoicism. Larsen, indeed, seems intellectually outmatched at this point, and can thus only resort to his physical advantage through violence.

Eventually, Maude Brewster’s arrival intervenes in this world of men, providing a heterosexual companion for Van Weyden just as he flirts dangerously close with homosexual desire.⁹¹ It is no coincidence that she arrives just after Van Weyden has achieved his new sense of balanced manhood –it indeed seems the implied reward for having achieved proper masculinity. Her presence also inspires previously dormant male romantic instincts about protection that he seemed to ignore in his previous, bookish life. He is astonished, after immersion among hardened muscles and emotions, to find her smiling as he guides her to a lower deck, and to observe her “fragile” nature and weak body strength, which causes him to worry as he guides her with his own hand that her arm might “crumple in [his] grasp” (140). They are rescued by the *Ghost*, but

⁹¹ See Auerbach 212-23, Gair 132, Johnston 165, Oliveri 99-105, Mitchell 325-35, and Stasz 121-30.

the crew members, whom, as mentioned, Van Weyden deems “a company of celibates” suddenly don’t know what to make of this alien presence that awakens a long forsaken lust. Sensing predatory sexual stirrings, Van Weyden adopts a protective response. When Larsen mentions Brewster for the first time, Van Weyden observes that a “twinge or pang, like the cut of a knife” occurs in his mind, and he determines that she had become his “responsibility” to protect (142, 148). The descriptions are clichéd in their cataloguing of gender stereotypes. The novel’s logic seems spelled out: Van Weyden’s newly balanced economy of self awakens ostensibly natural, instinctual heterosexual lust that his overcivilized self prior to this adventure would have rejected.

Perhaps sensing the erotic tension between the two, Larsen doesn’t miss the opportunity to shame Van Weyden in front of the new guest—he takes full credit for his role in reconstructing Van Weyden from a “scrawny, pitiful specimen of humanity” when he first comes onto the ship, to a man who has “muscles...[and] legs to stand on” (150-51). As mentioned earlier, the repletion of “legs” functions as a synecdoche for body and spirit, and it links the economy of “go-ahead individualism” to the potency of a physical body. Larsen thus tries to deprive Van Weyden of any credit for constructing his own body, attaching the “work” or substance of the endeavor to his own training efforts, while Van Weyden feels the credit, by circumstance and situation, belongs to himself. The hunters all gain a laugh at his expense; suddenly, Van Weyden felt Larsen “was challenging [his] manhood with his slurs, challenging the very legs he claimed to be instrumental in getting for me” (151).

Indeed, after one of Larsen’s debilitating headache and the pair abscond with a boat and leave the *Ghost*, Van Weyden takes pains to demonstrate to Brewster how his

newfound masculinity is authentic. When they land on a deserted island, Van Weyden becomes a survivalist of sorts as he learns to light fires with sticks and stones, provides seal meat for their meals, and assuages Brewster's fear of a seal herd with stoicism. These skills seem to arrive preternaturally, as the byproduct of having awakened a "forgotten ancestry" as a result of his self-development (228). "The primitive deeps of my nature stirred," he states. "I felt myself masculine, the protector of the weak, the fighting male" (227). Furthermore, he realizes that he had "to thank Wolf Larsen" for delivering him from the "overcivilized man" he once was (228). Van Weyden thus admits that Larsen was a kind of model through which Van Weyden reshaped himself. It also seems implicit that his present circumstances—protecting a woman he now loves by using every intellectual and physical resource at his disposal in the face of possible death—would not have been possible had Larsen not taught Van Weyden about the value of eternal struggle in the face of a hostile universe.

"The God and the Clod": Making and Un-Making the Masculine Economy of Self in

Martin Eden

By the publication of *Martin Eden* in 1909, London's philosophy of self-development underwent a complex shift. While his philosophy follows a similar trajectory as his previous novels of self-development, it ends more ambivalently. Like Larsen, Ruth Morse is an idealized representation and guide for Martin Eden's mental sophistication; also as in his other novels, the implicit ideal self the protagonist develops is defined by an economy of intellectual and physical energies. In contrast to *The Sea Wolf* and London's other development novels, however, Martin Eden's malady is not

neurasthenia; rather he is already a hard-bodied, working-class man, and so his quest is to develop his mind for a writing career. Despite these differences, the thematic focus in *Eden* still centers on ambition and details a self-development trajectory that brings eventual success. Yet, in this novel, the protagonist determines that the success he sought through such self-development is a fabrication, a state defined by effete bourgeois values that effectively undermines the balanced manhood he attains. Tellingly, London's original title for the novel was "Success," implying the author meant to interrogate it (Reesman 176). Many critics have indeed suggested that the novel is a criticism of the pursuit of upward mobility, and, while the novel arguably spends a lot of time seeming to celebrate self-willed masculine ascendancy, it also depicts Eden's immediate deflation of his own achievement upon his realization that his masculinity is invalidated by becoming a literary slave to the expectations of bourgeois culture.

The catalyst for Martin Eden's aforementioned quest for intellectual development is an awkward encounter with the upper-middle class Morse family. Eden's unsophisticated diction and his ignorance of social conventions results in what the narrator depicts as physical incompatibility, an incongruence with Eden's working-class body and the upper-middle class environment of the cloistered indoors: "He was surrounded by the unknown, apprehensive of what might happen, ignorant of what he should do, aware that he walked and bore himself awkwardly" (32). His "muscled" body is additionally subjected to this constrained refinement of space, and, just like Norris's McTeague, Eden's physical presence becomes overemphasized: "The wide rooms seemed too narrow for his rolling gait, and to himself he was in terror lest his

broad shoulders should collide with the doorways or sweep the bric-a-brac from the low mantel” (30). The environment seems too fragile to accommodate such a rough, even animalistic physical presence meant for the spaciousness of the sea or the outdoors generally. It is bodily excess and phallic protrusion, as Brian Pronger observes, that characterizes the male form, in contrast to the feminine form, which at least since the late nineteenth century, is idealized as thin and small (72-73). When Eden is about to knock over some books, for instance, he lurches “away like a frightened horse” (30). At dinner with the Morses, he compares his rough conversational style with “his walk to the table, filled with jerks and halts as he groped in his polyglot vocabulary for words, debating over words he knew were fit but which he feared he could not pronounce, rejecting other words he knew would not be understood or would be raw and harsh” (49). Again, London uses upright motion and an appropriate way of using legs as his metaphor for self-development. If Van Weyden’s quest to gain a pair of “legs” means adjusting to a life of labor instead of leisure, Eden’s own quest for “legs,” it would seem, means refining his clumsy but masculine force into a word-count-obsessed engine of creative productivity.

Thus, Eden comes away from this shameful experience with the Morses determined to improve himself by developing his heretofore neglected mind, a mind that nevertheless seems “responsive” but inarticulate “like a lambent flame” (34). While his principle objective is to “win Ruth” (115) and her love, it becomes increasingly clear that Eden considers Ruth less an actual person at this initial stage of development than a prize to win, reinforcing the idea that Eden views her, at least initially, as more of a template for the kind of mental habits exhibited by the upper classes. In this way, Ruth

becomes Martin's Larsen, subjecting him to mental pain instead of physical pain, as when she corrects his grammatical missteps and logical fallacies during an early attempt to master the basics of philosophy and literature. As a representative of an ideal mind at this early point in the novel, it is perhaps appropriate that Ruth does not appear to have a body at all for Eden, but is rather hyperbolically invested with abstract attributes: Her lips were "not mere human clay" but "pure spirit" (95); Eden thinks "her body" was "an emanation of her spirit, a pure and gracious crystallization of her divine essence." (58). Indeed, these descriptions of Ruth are remarkably akin to Eden's later assessment of the "elusive spirit of poetry" itself as he tries to grasp its abstractions, which "seemed a glow to him, a warm and trailing vapor, ever beyond his reaching" in a "misty wafting of unseen beauty" (132). Both poetry and Ruth-as-emblem thus seem conflated, as if Ruth *was* poetry or a stand in for literature herself, a representative of a vague mental world he wants to absorb but lacks the mental acumen to comprehend. Like Larsen, Ruth, is emblematic of all the qualities he wants to gain, and she is thus what inspires Eden to become a success: "The very thought of her," the narrator states, "purified him and made him better, and made him want to be better" (67).

However lacking in mental ability he may be, Eden's toned body and the energy it exudes is an implied *cause* of his mental vigor and eventual literary success. Eden, in developing an economy of self, begins to redirect some of his overabundant physical energy, flooding his underutilized mind with some of its vigor. As he rides in a trolley car, for instance, he notices a group of "university boys" that likely "went to the same university that [Ruth] did" and "were in her class socially" (60). The evaluation of the boys quickly turns to an evaluation of his qualities compared to those of the students.

While Eden was “confident that he was physically their master,” he is also aware that their “heads were filled with knowledge that enabled them to talk [Ruth’s] talk” without the bumbling inadequacies evident in his own speech (61). He thus resolves to study the books these university boys already have, albeit without the benefit of formal instruction. “What they had done, he could do,” he decides, and hits the books in the library (61). The way Eden later studies the books, however, suggests that he draws upon his ample physical strength in order to energize his feeble brain for a demanding regimen of study that “would have ruined a dozen pairs of ordinary eyes.” As London explains, Eden’s eyes “were strong” because “they were backed by a body superbly strong” (89). Eden uses the bodily instrument most responsible for intellectual development to channel the required energy. Thus, at these initial stages, while “his mind was fallow” it was also “ripe for the sowing,” and his bodily energy, animating his eyes for their ceaseless page scanning, lends an attitude of physical domination to his autodidactic absorption of knowledge.

Perhaps because of the newness of this strategic interchange of energy, his early fiction suffers from “the clumsiness of too great strength—the clumsiness which the tyro betrays when he crushes butterflies with battering rams and hammers out vignettes with a warclub” (283). For Ruth too, Eden’s prose ripples with strength, his words suggestive of the bodily power summoned to construct them. She observes, for instance, when reading one of Eden’s adventure stories, “Martin’s intensity of power...seemed to pour from his body and on and over her. The paradox of it was that it was the story itself that was freighted with his power...through which his strength poured out to her” (170). Even as she senses the beauty and the potential of the piece, she later determines

that a confused motif—perhaps a byproduct of an Eden still too reliant on the energies of brute force -- keeps the work from being truly exceptional, and thus she concludes that Eden probably has little reason to believe in future literary success. In contrast, just as Eden becomes successful and receives an ample income for his labors, his work benefits from an effort to “increase his strength by avoiding excess of strength” (283). What differentiates Eden’s early fiction and his later, more successful fiction, he determines, is his ability to coalesce the physical and mental energies. Decreasing without sacrificing bodily strength leads to a more scrupulous mental performance, an ability to articulate themes and choose fictional details without attempting to overreach. As mentioned, the notion of strategic balance avoids the possibility of imperfection and therefore drives away the possibility of failure for the male subject, who needs a modicum of both rationality and physical strength to prosper in the challenging larger economy. Indeed, his philosophy of successful fiction, though overly simplistic with its binary logic, relies upon a sense of balance between what he views as the two prevailing fictional schools of his moment: “the god and clod schools” (284). While the former “treated man as a god” and evaded “his earthly origin,” the latter “treated man as a clod” and ignored “his heaven-sent dreams and divine possibilities” (283-84). Successful fiction, in this later view, involves a “compromise” between these two schools, much like an author must enact a compromise between his intellectual and physical energies. It should, in other words, deny the utter fragility or incompetence of the human subject while simultaneously acknowledging the possibility that this earth-born, mortal creature could still achieve remarkable things.

Productivity, too, is ever linked to strength of will in Eden's mind. The values of working-class labor are transferred to the act of writing, in that an economy of efficiency, of time management, and constant (often metaphorically and physically violent) struggle against publishing obstacles. When Eden works, his movements are designed to be efficient, to maximize valuable productive time. His assembly-line like cataloguing of the various minutiae related to intellectual output thus resemble his friend Joe's reports at the laundry at which they both work for a time, in that both methods of work are Taylorisms, scientifically managed labor.⁹² In the laundry room, Joe teaches Eden the benefits of eliminating "waste motion," pointing out to Eden "where he did in five motions what could be done in three, or in three motions what could be done in two" (190). Of course, the pair's exhaustive regimen of labor laundry is ironically the inspiration for such timesaving, since, to them, it means the prospect of future leisure time, where each day becomes one of "fighting for moments" (190). In the laundry, then, the method makes them more productive, but the work itself never really ends, making it a more efficient practice for getting work done faster in order to do *more* work rather than none at all. Recognizing the efficiency of the labor method, Eden creates his economy of self by transferring this managerial technique. In a scene detailing Eden's struggles to conquer the minutiae of limited space as he writes, the narrator also catalogues Eden's attempt to fight for more moments in which to squeeze

⁹² Though slightly anachronistic, since Winslow's book was published in 1911, the philosophies presented in both books bear important resemblances. More specifically, Frederick Winslow Taylor introduces his famous "stopwatch" time experiment in *The Principles of Scientific Management*, which resembles Eden and Joe's attempts to "fight for moments" in the laundry. Taylor catalogues the necessary tasks for efficient shoveling while studying workers at the Bethlehem Steel Company, and determines the precise amount of shoveled material per movement that would produce the largest quantity of overall product in the shortest amount of time. See Taylor, 65-70.

as much labor into an entire day: “When the chair was not in use, it reposed on top of the bed, though sometimes he sat on the chair when cooking, reading a book while the water boiled, and even becoming skillful enough to manage a paragraph or two while steak was frying” (243). Additionally, his intake of food relative to his fluctuating income is relentlessly catalogued, and his bedroom becomes a kind of scientific “laboratory” in which he “dissected beauty” and sought “principles” for rich storytelling or descriptive language (245). By this point of the novel, mental labor has lost its ethereal, mystic quality and has instead unified with his sense of physicality and motion, becoming, like “beauty,” a material reality, an object responsive to manipulability and a quality subject to change with proper attentiveness as Eden moves toward a more balanced economy of self.

Like Van Weyden, Eden too has his share of confrontations with the prospect of eventual anonymity and failure as he strives for success. His body, however, only seems to invest itself with more masculinity upon rejection by magazine editors, as if the prospect of failure only makes him more inspired and resolute. Whereas Van Weyden might respond to failure with a lack of movement, Eden initially responds with unqualified aggression: After his typed manuscripts begin to be sent back, for instance, he notes that his “jaw seemed to become squarer, his chin more aggressive” before he sends them off to other journals, exaggerating prototypical masculine features as a way of preparing for the combat of publication (134). Eden’s most telling analogy to his “battle” against the White Silence of meaninglessness is the memory of his repeated fights with a boy named Cheese-Face when he was a child (174). As a way of reassuring himself, Eden becomes convinced that his intellectual “fight” to win fame

abides by the same principles as this street fight from his past: Fame is a fight for recognition that can be conquered by persistence in the face of a superior opponent and by a stubborn inability to accede to defeat, even in the face of seemingly insurmountable obstacles and repeated failures. “You licked Cheese-Face,” he tells himself in the mirror, “and you’ll lick the editors if it takes thrice eleven years to do it in” (183). Indeed, Eden takes the metaphor quite literally when editors begin publishing his manuscripts without sending him the payment he is owed. He eventually confronts one editor, Mr. Ends of the *Transcontinental*, and seems to think it another iteration of his series of fights with Cheese-Face: “Martin sprang for him, clutching him by the throat with one hand” and shook the editor “like an Astrakhan rug” (353). Bolstered after successfully receiving his payment through these violent means, he decides to visit yet another journal that owes him money, but finds it occupied by “strapping young men” that promptly kick him down a flight of stairs (354). The writer thus adopts a philosophy of aggressive motion against the threat of anonymity, a vigorous insistence upon achieving victory over the White Silence.

It is thus appropriate that, beyond general stillness, sleep, is often likened to death in *Eden*, and thus seems the bodily state most symbolic of the stillness of a body entombed by the White Silence. Sleep is a state not only obviously linked with lethargy, but also unconsciousness. Unsurprisingly, then, Eden strictly limits his sleep to four hours, calling it “ceasing to live” (133). The wakeful pursuits of knowledge, are filled with the exhausting outpourings of “life”—depicted here as a manly epic, filled with dangers and the potential to win a lady love. When life becomes tiresome for Eden at the end of the book, however, sleep becomes the precursor for Eden’s literal cessation

of motion after he takes the plunge out of the ship porthole: "Sleep had become to him oblivion, and each day that he awoke, he awoke with regret...time was a vexation" (468). Whereas the frenetic machine-like existence of both the laundry and his writing career "fought for moments" before they could slip away, Eden, having already achieved his success but unable to find an alternate form of motivation, sees all "moments" as bothersome.

Even though the novel seems celebratory of the masculine logic of literary success, the novel indeed has a strange ending, rife with odd reversals, which seem to indict the productive values that Eden had heretofore observed as a source of his unhappiness.⁹³ Eden identifies the principle source of his dissatisfaction: the seeming randomness of the success he has been granted, the sense that a certain version of success could be achieved through persistent, rote convention. The hackwork Eden eventually sells is merely the byproduct of what Eden calls a "perfect formula" for literary publication, which, he deems, "should never end unhappily, and should never contain beauty of language, subtlety of thought, nor real delicacy of sentiment" (283). By implication, he devalues his achievements because a formula is something anyone could follow; it is a task eventually perfected by simply following instructions. He therefore concludes his success "was all a matter of chance," which leads Eden to question "the validity of his popularity" (441-42). Journals and critics largely accept works that are profitable, but they are conventional page-turners that say little of significance. Brissenden, who encourages Eden to create work for his own spiritual and

⁹³ Others have also felt the ending is odd. Some critics, as Charles Watson has suggested, felt the ending was illogical and inconsistent, and have thus determined that London chose suicide for Eden merely because he wanted to come to a swift ending (397).

emotional fulfillment and to ignore the critics (“Love beauty for its own sake,” he advises), doesn’t offer much hope: this alternate path, though optimistically and courageously advocating artistic exploration at all costs, ends in Brissenden’s own suicide (344).

At the end of *Martin Eden*, the protagonist concludes that with the achievement of what society sees as success and progress lies disillusionment and an inauthentic masculine identity. Eden finds a home now neither amongst the dull working-class or the insipid, conformist minds that he has discovered inhabit the upper-middle class. In his letters, London says he wanted readers to realize that Eden’s cherished Spencerian individualism, this evolutionary reading of economic and societal progress through individual triumph, does not satisfy, as Charles Wild Walcutt observes in his classic text, “man’s doubts or answer his emotional needs” (10).⁹⁴ Though London clearly understood that his success was a validation that he was indeed the “fittest” in literary society, it still brought some degree of emotional dissatisfaction: “The things I had fought for and burned the midnight oil for, had failed me. Success—I despised it. Recognition—it was dead ashes. Society—men and women above the ruck and the muck of the water-front and the fore-castle—I was appalled by their unlovely mental mediocrity.”⁹⁵ London and Eden share their assessment of the upper echelon’s “mental mediocrity,” but what saved London from ultimate despair was his apparent love for “the PEOPLE” which, he proclaims, were still something “to fight for” (255). In short,

⁹⁴ See *Letters of Jack London*, 1514, and Whipple, 97. London writes to Mary Austin that *Martin Eden* “was an attack on the super-man idea” along with his previous novel, the *Sea-Wolf*, and thus an attempt at morally legitimizing collectivism. London also says of Eden, “I am Martin Eden. Martin Eden died because he was an individualist, I live because I am a socialist and have social consciousness.”

⁹⁵ See London’s autobiographical work, *John Barleycorn*, 254.

London implies that Eden, whom he purposefully depicts as a staunch individualist, has no recourse but to commit suicide because he fails to generate an alternate source of pinnacle meaning that could presumably be found in fighting for the “people.”

Brissenden even explicitly encourages Eden to embrace socialism, convinced it will alleviate the despair that he anticipates will come to Eden upon his success:

“[Socialism] will give you a sanction for your existence. It is the one thing that will save you in the time of disappointment that is coming to you” (389)—ironic, considering that Brissenden implicitly did not consider socialism enough of a sanction for his own existence during his suicide. However, perhaps London’s conviction that socialism is the cure for what ails Eden is presented with more ambivalence in this book than in his later letters. Indeed, in the novel itself, there seems little reason to conclude that finding *any* sort of alternate “sanction” for Eden’s existence would save him from suicide.⁹⁶

It is thus worth considering why this state of success brings the kind of suicidal despair that it does. While I believe that Earl Labor is essentially correct when he observes that “Martin is destroyed ultimately like Gatsby by the delusion that an ideal goal may be attained through material means and that success is synonymous with happiness” (Labor, 122), I also believe that Eden’s loss of a gendered identity, his sense that success is emasculating instead of empowering, is also an important element to

⁹⁶ Renny Christopher offers yet another plausible explanation for Eden’s dissatisfaction with his success, and it is rooted in class values: “to be truly middle class is to value the retention of the status quo, that is, to value a system which allows one to keep that middle-class status” and, consequently, to turn on the working-class culture (84). The way Renny explains it, Eden seems trapped in this kind of purgatory of success, leaving very little possibility for an escape other than death.

consider. Eden strived to attain success, but finds that success is a “fad of the hour,” a byproduct of bourgeois orchestration, rather than the just reward for an artist’s daring literary uniqueness (442). “That recognition is not I,” he states. “It resides in the minds of others” (460). The success Eden is granted thus does not bear the promise of an unqualified legitimization of one’s superiority or one’s masculine strength. He has instead become a trophy for the bourgeois to present at parties, and a tool for their self-promotion—an author for them to quote at dinner to demonstrate their literary acumen. This state of affairs, perhaps, makes Eden feel no longer like a strong, autonomous will, but rather a garland for the middle and upper classes.

Furthermore, the members of the middle and upper classes that suddenly gravitate towards Eden with praise and overtures of friendship are deemed hollow, inauthentic, and unreal. Martin Eden writes in a naturalist or realist mode—his stated mission was an “impassioned realism...[representing] life as it was” (283), and it seems reasonable to presume that his choice of literary movement further masculinizes his prose by investing it with the weighty implications of raw, material life, which places it in stark contrast with the unreality of the bourgeois. “Realism is imperative to my nature, and the bourgeois spirit hates realism,” he tells Ruth; “The bourgeoisie is cowardly. It is afraid of life,” he additionally notes (462). Eden even begins to sound like Thorstein Veblen when, at one point, he declares that these “the wealthy idlers...do not know, as a rule, the things known by the persons who are doing something in the world,” and instead talk of trivial things, like “the latest operas, latest novels, cards...tuna-fishing, big-game shooting, yacht sailing, and so forth” (289). Indeed, both Brissenden and Eden adhere to the aesthetically rough, masculinized ethos of naturalism

and realism, and use it to target the bourgeoisie's artistic shortsightedness. When the two meet, Brissenden proclaims that he "respect[s] and admire[s]" Eden's "failure" to get recognized by publishers initially because it takes "guts" to offend the tastes of those critics who run the magazines (339). Upon learning that Eden aspires to win Morse's heart, Brissenden calls her a "daughter of the bourgeoisie," who, according to Brissenden, is a part of a "pusillanimous" group "prattling out little moralities that have been prattled into them, and afraid to live life" (346-7). Indeed, Brissenden mimics Eden's words exactly, gravitating toward what he and Eden deem a more authentic, "real" version of artistic worth. Ruth here seems the voice of the largely voiceless critics that reject Eden's more worthy work; they reject it because, as Eden himself assures Ruth at one point, "it is life...it is real. It is true" and people in her class, who had "been born and sheltered to such innocence" couldn't summon the strength to confront it (357, 168). Eden's feminization of the upper and middle classes is nothing new in London's fiction; the previously ignorant Van Weyden thanks Larsen for exposing him to the harsh brutality of life on board the *Ghost*, implicitly recognizing that this was a crucial step in his construction of proper masculinity (122).

It is thus perhaps appropriate that even Eden's suicide bears the stamp of rebel masculinity, in that he characterizes the act as a pugnacious final defiance. He rejects the "will to live" with his own manly willpower in a world where other people are the arbiters of worthiness: "Well, he had a will—ay, will strong enough that with one last exertion it could destroy itself and cease to be" (481). Eden refuses to live in a world in which male-validation through success is privileged, and so he dies as if to make that very point. However, his suicide is also, of course, laced with despair: his struggle did

not achieve the immortality he sought, nor did it assuage his fear of death. Just as London admits in *John Barleycorn*, Eden realizes that having success only leaves a person who believed it represented the pinnacle of human achievement essentially unhappy. Thus, he also envisions death as the sleep he was never able to give himself in life: “When life became an aching weariness, death was ready to soothe away to everlasting sleep” (480). Here, he views death as a release from the now fruitless effort of self-development for the sake of others, and this resignation is coupled with the fatalistic notion that a finite mortal might as well learn to embrace his end. In other words, Eden recognizes that the White Silence eventually comes to everyone. Through his suicide, Eden is simultaneously protesting the arbitrary human construction of ultimate meaning, regretting his newfound identity, implicitly critiquing the notion that living with false fame is better than dying with anonymity, and acknowledging that the human fight for fame is an illusory form of comfort for those who wish to avoid contemplating their own mortality and their own perpetual unhappiness. The suicide is thus part juvenile protest against a society that wronged him, but also part genuine existential despair—an Eden succumbing to the ocean like Van Weyden almost does at the beginning of the *Sea-Wolf*, deciding that the cessation of motion is actually welcome relief.

It seems that Eden, then, is a reflection of Jack London’s own pronounced dissatisfaction with his life after success at the later stage of his career. London, too, may have felt just as ambivalent as his character about the necessity of economic success for masculine validation, feeling resentful toward capitalism’s exhortation for young men to pursue a narrow, highly idealized version of gender. Indeed, the author’s

own death, as described by others, also seems to come as a welcome relief, perhaps because of his unhappiness with “formulaic” achievement. Just before his own death at the youthful age of forty from uraemia, as Earl Labor recounts, London smiled at his wife, Charmain. Charmain was then prompted, according to Labor, to remember what London had said to her about death before: “Death is sweet. Death is rest. Think of it!—to rest forever! I promise you that whensoever and wheresoever Death comes to meet me, I shall greet Death with a smile” (qtd. In Labor 381). Like Eden, this is a man no longer interested in fighting for more moments of productivity, in being the frail human figure bravely enduring the harsh, cold expanse of the White Silence. Instead, London at death welcomes stillness, for stillness seems to him an escape from a myopic world with narrow standards of success and gender.

The “Queering” of Success and Failure: Willa Cather’s Depiction of Gender Fluidity in
Song of the Lark and *O Pioneers!*

In November 1894, a British satirical magazine called *Punch* decided to poke fun at the era’s perception of New Womanhood by publishing a parody of Walt Whitman’s “Pioneers, O Pioneers!” It read, in part:

We primeval fetters loosing,

We our husbands taming, vexing we and worrying Mrs. Grundy

We our own lives freely living, we as bachelor-girls residing,

Pioneers! O pioneers! (qtd. in Gilbert and Gubar 49)

Whitman’s version of actual Western “pioneering” envisions bold men facing the dangers of the wild frontier. Though his “Song of Myself” emphasizes liberatory sexuality, the poem also lauds masculine settlers of the West as engines for empire. *Punch*’s satirical response to Whitman uses New Womanhood to envision different ways the word “pioneer” might be deployed. Anticipating Willa Cather’s appropriation of Whitman’s title for her most famous novel, the poem takes the pioneer label and reminds us of how preconceptions about gender often shape how we receive the word itself. Thus, it chooses to define the New Woman as a *cultural* pioneer—albeit satirically and ambivalently-- as a feminine subject casting off the restraints of tradition and “freely living” as a sexually autonomous woman.

Likewise, when Willa Cather evokes Whitman's title in her most famous novel, *O Pioneers!* (1913), she uses it as a descriptor for both the pioneer in its most common sense, denoting the literal figure seeking new land and opportunity in the fertile West, but also as a reminder that gendered paradigms inform our historical portrait of frontierism.⁹⁷ Like the poem, Cather evokes the "pioneer" term to destabilize the gendered way in which society defines productivity and even success. As Cather states in one essay, the frontier was "subdued" by "a group of rugged figures," which included both "old men and *women*" (337-338, my emphasis). She finally states that both genders were equally invested in "the attainment of material prosperity," which was a "moral victory, because it was wrung from hard conditions, was the result of a struggle that tested character" (338). Though Cather was influenced by the rhetoric of her period, which saw the frontier as a wild *tabula rasa* for Euro-Americans to tame or "subdue" for their own material ambitions, she here qualifies the common historical narrative by placing the woman pioneer on *equal* terms with the male. The female pioneer, in multiple senses, was not necessarily always in the background, but in the ambitious foreground, seeking agricultural and financial prosperity. Cather constructed herself as a pioneer in her authorial self-portraits, but this self-portrait also embodied a kind of gender pioneerism, exploration of gender fluidity and the unabashed

⁹⁷ Sharon O' Brien more specifically addresses these concerns, arguing that Cather's "novel radically revises the vision of pioneering and settlement that Whitman advances" by turning her predecessor's celebration of the "masculine urge to subdue and to violate." (392). My own argument is more mixed—while Cather's novel undoubtedly invites feminine subjects into the popular notion of frontierism, she does not necessarily reject or accept the aforementioned "masculine" urge to subdue the landscape.

circumvention of what many have called the “Cult of True Womanhood.”⁹⁸ As a girl, for instance, Cather wore long pants, cut her hair short and insisted on being called “William” or “Billy.” As a younger author, she made controversial statements that often verged into an outright condemnation of female writers. For instance, Cather famously declared she would be more inclined to take fiction by female authors seriously if they would cease being “so horribly subjective” and start writing “manly battle-yarn[s].”⁹⁹ However, she acknowledges that she eventually found a literary foremother in Sarah Orne Jewett.¹⁰⁰ Jewett, critics observe, inspired Cather to question the binary logic informing her criticism of “women’s” psychology and writing. Furthermore, the older author’s tendency to use female protagonists in rustic settings inspired Cather to depart from the Jamesian undertones of her first novel, *Alexander’s Bridge* (1912), and explore her childhood roots in rural Nebraska using characters that expressed her own rebellious

⁹⁸ This phrase is from Barbara Welter’s oft-cited article of the same title, p. 151-52. In conceptualizing the period’s ideal womanhood, Welter points to religiosity, submission in the face of male orders, purity (or virginity until marriage), and tending to the domestic sphere for her husband and children. By the dictates of the time, a woman who eschewed these tenets was deemed a failure as a woman.

⁹⁹ See *The Kingdom of Art: Willa Cather’s First Principles and Critical Statements, 1893-96*, 409. The full passage reads: “Women are so horribly subjective and they have such a scorn for the healthy commonplace. When a woman writes a story of adventure, a stout sea tale, a manly battle yarn, anything without wine, women, and love, then I will begin to hope for something great from them, but not before.”

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, 447-49. Cather states she initially found it “hard to write about the things that are near to your heart, from a kind of instinct of self-protection you distort them and disguise them” and she “decided that [she] wouldn’t write any more about the country and people for which [she] had such personal feeling” until she “had the good fortune to meet Sarah Orne Jewett” (449). Jewett, Cather says, had read her “early stories and had very clear and definite opinions about them and about where my work fell short. She said, “Write it as it is, don’t try to make it like this or that. You can’t do it in anybody else’s way - you will have to make a way of your own. If the way happens to be new, don’t let that frighten you. Don’t try to write the kind of short story that this or that magazine wants - write the truth, and let them take it or leave it” (449).

attitudes toward gender circumscription.¹⁰¹ By the time she writes *O Pioneers!*, which is dedicated to Jewett, Cather had found a stronger authorial voice, inspired by writing about the western setting of her childhood.

The prairie of Cather's fiction, while still filled with white settlers and absent of minorities, is nevertheless depicted as a space where gender boundaries blurred. As William Handley puts it, "Cather's West is distinguished" from earlier, male authors like "Turner, Wister, and Grey" because "she refuses to synthesize the oppositions—man/wilderness, East/West, men/women—that structure various forms of western nationalism...[allowing] such terms [to] take on new meaning" (125). While I only reservedly agree with Handley's reading, as I believe it is important to not gloss over the evidence that Cather shared some of the nationalist assumptions of her time right along *with* her male peers, I agree that her fiction challenges some examples of binary thinking. Specifically, her fiction critically negotiates key concepts like success and failure--concepts crucially bound up with the labor of pioneers, farmers, and businesspeople just like they would for the Eastern entrepreneur. For Cather, women on the frontier were more than mere helpmates for men in the quest to install a replica of Eastern towns and industries in the West. Rather, they were an inextricable part of homesteading, agricultural pursuits, and industrial endeavors that were deemed avenues for accruing capital. While western women were often isolated from the cultural debates about New Womanhood raging in the east, they were also often constituted, out of sheer

¹⁰¹ See Elanor M. Smith's "The Literary Relationship of Sarah Orne Jewett and Willa Seibert Cather," p. 473-74 and Marilee Lindemann's *Willa Cather: Queering America*, 94.

necessity, as New Woman figures themselves as they claimed monetary independence in the complicated economic struggles of the West.

In her fiction, Cather recognized the way in which gender performance could lead to the disruption of the popular image of success and its seemingly inexorable link to masculinity, thereby “queering” popular depictions of success and failure. Following Marilee Lindemann in her influential *Willa Cather: Queering America*, I argue that two Cather novels, *O Pioneers!* and *Song of the Lark* (1915), trouble gendered notions of success and failure, rendering the binary unstable. More specifically, I want to highlight how Alexandra Bergson from *O Pioneers!* and Thea Kronborg from *Song of the Lark* undermine sex-dependent meanings of success or failure through their complicated performances of gender, which expose the degree to which such concepts depend upon heteronormative ideological tenets. That is, like their author, Cather’s protagonists “queer” success through ambiguous gender performances enacted as respective challenges to male-dominated occupational spaces. The characters thus exhibit a commitment to widening their culture’s expectations about what kind of person, regardless of their gender identification, can and should be successful through their irreducible, boundary-violating values.¹⁰² If concepts like success contribute to what Judith Butler calls the illusion of the “‘unity’ of gender” or the “regulation of attributes along culturally established lines of coherence,” then Cather’s fiction intervenes by

¹⁰² I am indebted to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s famous thesis in the *Epistemology of the Closet*, in which she asserts that most concepts in Western culture are tainted by reductive thinking about gender and sexuality: “‘Virtually any aspect of modern Western culture, must be, not merely incomplete, but damaged in its central substance to the degree that it does not incorporate a critical analysis of modern homo/heterosexual definition’ (1). This incompleteness naturally, I argue, extends to conceptions of success and failure.

divorcing such regulatory practices from a particular gender construction, thereby revealing the disunity and cultural contingency of the term (43,33). I rely on Lindemann's analysis of "queer" voices in Cather's letters and texts, which she thinks evokes an ideology of resistance to sexual and political reductiveness.¹⁰³ In a letter to Louise Pound, for instance, Cather registers her feelings of love and admiration for Pound, then a student at the University of Nebraska, and the letter highlights Cather's shame about these feelings when she orders Louise to keep the communication private.¹⁰⁴ Further, she signs the letter as "William," the name she used when she

¹⁰³ Many critical studies of Cather's fiction have wanted to foreground her lesbianism before attempting to unpack the gender performance of her characters, as if presuming that the "butch" identity of her characters can be causally attributed to such an identity. However, there is still debate as to whether Cather participated in lesbian relations or not. Janet Sharistanian, for instance, argues that "Cather did not label herself a lesbian nor would she wish us to do so, and we do not know whether her relationships with women were sexual" (xiii). However, in my argument, like in Lindemann's, I don't necessarily deny Cather's lesbianism, but I also don't believe it is necessary to prove its existence in order to read *queerness* within her texts either. Cather's literal sexual activity is beyond the point—delineating any essential historical criteria for determining homosexuality in her period or in any other seems both impractical and presumptive. Instead, "queer" is an ideology of resistance that Cather participate in through her numerous correspondence with other women, which suggest a deliberate adoption of gender fluidity. In a recently published volume of her letters—delayed because Cather wished them to remain unpublished upon her death, which in itself implies she wished to "restrict the readership of them"—the editors note that it is curious that Edith Lewis and Isabelle McClung, her purported lovers, are mostly absent in her voluminous correspondence, implying she may have had a lot of them destroyed (Jewell and Stout, xiii). Still, the letters that do exist attest to her literal and metaphorical adoption of the "queer" mentality.

¹⁰⁴ See Cather's letter dated June 15, 1892 in *Selected Letters of Willa Cather*, 16-17. The postscript is probably the most notable evidence of her desire for secrecy: "I suppose you will get this in bed, for goodness sake dont [sic] let Tude [Olivia Pound] look over you shoulder" (17). She also points out how they "will laugh at [their friendship] someday as other women do," as if dismissing the infatuation as juvenile, even while lamenting that "it is manifestly unfair that 'feminine friendships' should be unnatural" (17). Such instances suggest her sense of conflict—testimony to a person torn between social norms and desire.

wished to perform masculinity.¹⁰⁵ Cather's identity in the letter, Lindemann argues, "underscores the theatrical nature of queer desires and the shame that often accompanies their articulation."¹⁰⁶

Cather's gender fluid exploration of success and failure reveals that the categories of success and failure are part of a corporate capitalist (and, thus, patriarchal) investment in keeping sex roles distinct and in keeping the binary that privileges male masculinity intact.¹⁰⁷ Thus, Cather's protagonists--women that take on supposedly "male" roles by creating careers instead of babies, making claims for suffrage, or choosing to remain single and eschewing the entire convention of marriage--expose a contradictory logic: paradigms of success or failure for each gender were nothing more than hollow constructs, dependent upon patriarchal norms for their essential meaning. The gender-dependent construction of the terms was most clearly demonstrated

¹⁰⁵ See *Selected Letters of Willa Cather*, 17. It's also worth mentioning that she uses the word "queer" three times in the letter, suggesting it was a word she felt most characterized her affection for Pound. Specifically, she describes wanting to say goodbye to Pound before leaving school for the summer. "If I had known how queer it would make me feel I would not have gone up to your house," she states. "I wanted very much to ask you to go through the customary goodbye formality, but I thought it might disgust you a little so I did'nt. It was so queer that I should want to, when three years ago I had never seen you" (17). Thus, her use of the word is most apparent when she tries to describe the nature of her attachment to Pound, as something strange, forbidden, shame-inducing, but real.

¹⁰⁶ See *Queering America*, p. 23. Lindemann goes on to state that, according to Eve Sedgwick, shame and its creative manifestations are a marker of "queer identity" and an inextricable component of queer performance. Quoting Sedgwick, she argues that "William"/Cather the registers of shame are not "distinct, 'toxic' parts of a group or individual identity that can be excised; they are instead integral to and residual in the processes by which identity itself is formed. They are available for the work of metamorphosis, reframing, refiguration, *transfiguration*, affective and symbolic loading and deformation; but unavailable for effecting to work of purgation and deontological closure" (qtd. In Lindemann 23).

¹⁰⁷ Like Judith Halberstam in *Female Masculinities*, I use "male masculinity" to denote hegemonic masculinity rather than female masculinity.

throughout history when women began to obtain traditional markers of male success. The rhetoric of failure dictated that women in states of financial dependence (provided she had a husband) were winners, but women in states of financial independence were failures, even though the opposite was true for men. Thus, women like Alexandra and Thea were subjected to arguments that declared they were encroaching on masculine territory. For *Ladies Home Journal* editor Edward Bok, the term “New” Woman was something of a misnomer, since, he felt, it was entirely natural to proclaim that a woman was always a complex human being who had certain ambitions, who “felt like she must *do* something, and do it in a public way so that people will know about it” (130). However, Bok goes on to state that a woman’s only true ambition in this sense should be limited to giving at least “one true man to the world” through background support and nurturance (130). “If from the moment of the beginning of that life until its final development into manhood she influences [mankind’s] destiny for good,” Bok states, “she has attained the highest success possible” (130). In other words, a woman’s success for Bok should be measured by what kind of man she stands behind and nurtures, and he deemed this pursuit the only respectable way for women to satisfy personal ambitions. Thus, while seemingly cognizant of a woman’s need to feel ambitious, Bok still follows a standard argumentative template that denies woman’s need for autonomy and pursuit of greater subjective meaning, while also prescribing marriage as the solution for feminine discontent.

Indeed, depicting ideal womanhood as a role of both “reproduction and consumption” within the “separate ‘sphere’” of the household served an important ideological role, as J.K. Gibson-Graham has put it (64). “Domestic labor,” Gibson-

Graham elaborates, “organizes the consumption of the commodities produced in a capitalist labor process. Women’s work in service to capitalism is performed under the governance of patriarchy, a system of rules and practices of gender domination” (64). According to this analysis, then, men had a vested economic interest in using the rhetoric of failure against women when they threatened to change the marketplace that structured male privilege. As a result, many women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century resorted to performing masculinity in the course of upward mobility in order to gain validation for their labor. Some women even literally opted to *become* men in order to avoid pay and sex discrimination in certain occupations. As one woman in the 1860s put it, a “woman’s wages” didn’t pay enough for her to live on her own, so she simply “decided to become a man” (Matthaei 192). “It was simple,” she states. “I just put on men’s clothing and applied for a man’s job. I got good money for those times, so I stuck to it” (Matthaei 192). This woman’s literal drag performance exemplifies the gender-dependent restrictions under which late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century women lived and worked. The only choice for many women who felt compelled to challenge themselves beyond the domestic sphere was to habitually perform a certain degree of maleness on the path to financial success. However, as Cather realized, this performance could potentially be disruptive to gender norms: by behaving in a “male” way at work while still remaining untethered to maleness in life, such women revealed the constructedness of such rigid associations between performative characteristics, biology, and economics.

However, I also do not wish to overstate the transgressive nature of Cather’s fiction in relation to traditional paradigms of success and failure, or to obfuscate her

views toward expansionism, most notable in her tendency to render a contemporary Native American presence all but invisible in her texts.¹⁰⁸ It is therefore merely realistic to acknowledge that Cather's characters subvert the predominant discourse of success as monetary gain in some ways but, as should be apparent, rigidly conform to it in others. For instance, though Alexandra Bergson may discard traditional models of female success as she embodies monetary and personal success, these ambitions are also primarily motivated by the period's reductive investment in acquisitiveness, materialism and hard-nosed willpower, despite her occasional tendency to subordinate these characteristics to other values like personal autonomy. To some degree, I observe how Cather's queering of success and failure also occasionally turns into another kind of conformity. Alexandra in *Pioneers*, after all, defines career success in narrow and ideologically complicit terms, largely denying alternate ways of defining them, even as she recognizes the double standard to which she is held because of her sex.

The Song of the Lark is likewise celebratory of ambiguous gender identities, exhibiting Cather's creative range on the subject of queer subjectivities in her prairie novels. However, *Lark* questions the assumptions behind the logic of success and failure more thoroughly than *Pioneers*, allowing the definitions *themselves* to be scrutinized while revealing their dependency on gender norms. Although Thea Kronborg initially lapses into the same clichéd association of success with monetary acquisition, she ultimately ends up viewing success as something that occurs because of an investment in self-acceptance and self-exploration rather than through an obligation to societal norms. In doing so, Thea queers the concept of success by linking laborious

¹⁰⁸ See Melissa Ryan, pp.419- 421, for more specific critical commentary on the Cather's inability to acknowledge Native American presence in *O Pioneers!*

ambition to periods of contemplative leisure, self-exploration, and non-productivity--as well as through the tropes of willpower and doggedness-- in a way that Alexandra doesn't.

While my primary focus will be on Cather's two protagonists in each novel, I also analyze other characters that either seem to "queer" success or failure by defying gender norms in their own ways, which, I believe, highlights the protagonists' own unconventionality. I will focus, first, on Alexandra's complex, more entrepreneurial portrayal of the female pioneer and then Thea Kronborg's rebellious self-explorations through the pursuit of a musical career.

"We Will Go on Living As We Think Best": Alexandra Bergon's Complication of Gender and Success in *O Pioneers!*

Alexandra's first appearance gives us an idea of her attitude toward general ambition. Described as a "tall, strong girl" who "walked rapidly and resolutely as if she knew exactly where she was going and what she was going to do next," Alexandra determinedly comes to her whimpering little brother's aid as he waits for someone to rescue his cat from a tree (10). She furthermore "wore a man's long ulster (not as if it were an affliction, but as if it were very comfortable and belonged to her; carried it like a young soldier), and a round plush cap, tied down with a thick veil" (10). The contrast between the ulster coat, her soldierly bearing, and the veil chronicle her gender-fluid self-definition; the coat and mannerisms underline stereotypical masculine attitudinal traits, but the veil--that clichéd feminine garment, suggestive of social withdrawal and

modesty-- offsets any suggestion that gender identity is unambiguous. Importantly, the veil's association with feminine modesty and emotional self-effacement is also undercut by the way it highlights the features of Alexandra's "serious, thoughtful face" with "clear, deep blue eyes" that were, importantly, "fixed intently on the distance, without seeming to see anything" (10).

Alexandra's queer exterior is thus associated with a complex, determined interior, confident in her trailblazing methods. Determination and willpower were presumptively male prerogatives in most success manuals in the nineteenth century, which, of course, informed most of the period's popular conceptions of what traits it took to be successful in a hostile marketplace. For instance, one author argued that "willpower symbolized a man's ability to contain and direct an *inner masculine force* in productive ways; it represented the *proper combination of potency and self-control*" (Hilkey 149, my emphasis). Thus, when authors listed the most essential ("proper") traits for a man who wished to be successful, they inevitably included willpower at or near the top of their lists. One such author of a popular success manual, William Owen, even argued that men who wished to be successful had to be "soldier like, and rest on their arms ready to spring up and fire on the instant," a description that is very similar to how Alexandra is depicted by Cather.¹⁰⁹ In the aforementioned scene, Alexandra exudes the willpower and soldier-like discipline conjured out of these manuals but performs these characteristics in a way that is not reducible to either gender—her hard eyes gazing determinedly at the landscape she wants to use to build her success, all while wearing a veil and simultaneously conjuring the image of Owen's soldier-like bearing

¹⁰⁹ Quoted in Hilkey, 147.

with her ulster—disrupting most audience expectations. Most importantly, her appearance renders these paradigmatic characteristics suddenly queer and gender fluid, attachable to *any* human being of either sex.¹¹⁰

Alexandra's determined gaze also allows her to convey power and confidence in situations that would normally allow men to objectify her. This dominant occupation of space therefore allows her to perform a unique subject position in relation to power, which, in itself, is another predominant aspect of the performance of ambition. For example, a "shabby little travelling man," proclaims, "[m]y God, girl, what a head of hair!" to her (11). Alexandra counters the infantilizing "girl" appellation and the objectifying statement with an angry glance that communicates a different kind of subjectivity than the one she is assumed to possess: "She stabbed him with a glance of Amazonian fierceness and drew in her lower lip—most unnecessary severity" (11). This fierce counter-gaze disrupts Laura Mulvey's objectifying male gaze and leaves the travelling man the more effeminate of the two in this situation: "His feeble flirtatious instincts had been crushed before, but never so mercilessly. He felt cheap and ill-used, as if some one had taken advantage of him" (11). He further wonders to himself if he is "to be blamed if...he suddenly wished himself more of a man?" (11) Alexandra here claims a superior fierceness, which is coupled with a kind of pride in her sexual purity; the fact that her dominance is linked with such an ambiguously gendered exterior dislocates an association between the trait and male masculinity. This scene anticipates

¹¹⁰ I will occasionally use "gender fluid" as a descriptor for Alexandra and Thea in order to vary my vocabulary. Even if the term is a relatively recent one, it is recognized term within queer theory for those who wish to remain uncommitted and flexible regarding their gender identification. For more about the description of both "gender fluid" and another term, "genderqueer," see Brit Mandelo's introduction to *Beyond Binary: Genderqueer and Sexually Fluid Speculative Fiction*, p. 1-3.

later interactions between Alexandra and other male characters throughout the novel. Her brothers, Carl Linstrum, and Emil all feel threatened by Alexandra's superior financial wisdom, willpower, and confidence. The subversiveness of these characteristics can be registered in the general confusion these male characters exhibit regarding how to confront such a complex "Amazonian" identity; it is so disruptive to conventional identity performance that it borders, for them, on the incomprehensible.

However, some of Cather's characters in *Pioneers* welcome such a strong woman and acknowledge her unique individual talents, even if they bear a tinge of resentment for her willingness to usurp gender norms in the process. Indeed, John Bergson all but encourages Alexandra's defiance when he realizes that her agrarian acumen eclipses that of his three sons. While his sons "were willing enough to work" (17) in the physical sense, John thinks, the larger, intellectual details involved in running a thriving farm eludes them. John therefore concludes that he could "never teach his sons to use their heads" like he could with Alexandra and that the farm should go to her if it should ever see prosperity, as "it was Alexandra who read the papers and followed the markets" (17). Though John admits that placing Alexandra at the head of the farm upon his death would be breaking with tradition and that he "would much rather" had observed this penchant for leadership and sound business judgment "in one of his sons," he concludes that it ultimately "was not a question of choice," but rather of reality and circumstance (17). Alexandra's "resourcefulness and good judgment" made her a better person to carry out his will, and this persuades him to eschew the tradition of male primogeniture precisely because, to him, Alexandra more directly embodies the traits of John's own father: "In his daughter, John Bergson recognized the strength of

will, and the simple direct way of thinking things out, that had characterized his father in his better days” (17). Bestowing the fate of the heretofore-unsuccessful farm on her shoulders, then, John simultaneously subverts and follows male standards of inheritance, in that Alexandra seems the most logical successor, a kind of maternal patriarch.

Indeed, Alexandra’s abilities also eclipse other patriarchs in the community, including Carl Linstrum’s father, who apparently is just as ineffectual at physical labor as his son. Indeed, her disposition—a cool confidence or “serious ease” (28)—makes this queer, gender fluid figure the unlikely rock for so many people in an otherwise fragile, despairing community desperate for economic turnaround. Years after John Bergson’s death, the family and the surrounding community experience widespread “drouth [sic] and failure” and “the whole country was discouraged” and “farmers who were already in debt had to give up their land” (27). This event presages a widespread exodus of many of the men in the community; the Linstrum family moves to St. Louis, and the Bergson boys head off to find industrial labor in Chicago when they become convinced of the farm’s eventual failure. Alexandra, however, is determined to make something out of what others feel they cannot. At one point, Carl Linstrum admits to Alexandra that his family never had a penchant for farm labor. Indeed, many in his family and the surrounding community “all depended so on [Alexandra]...even [Carl’s] father” (29). Carl reminisces about a time when Alexandra “showed father how to let the wind out of the horse.” “You were only a little girl then,” Carl explains to her, “but you knew ever so much more about farm work than poor father” (29). Carl justifies his leaving for St. Louis by acknowledging that he and his family feel like they would be a

burden to her as she chases her ambitions—“only one more drag, one more thing you look out for and feel responsible for” (28). Alexandra, even at this young age, is a woman who fathers *and* mothers other fathers, but also fathers and mothers her own brothers, especially when she educates Emil. She is person who can claim a pragmatic agrarian expertise that eclipses men much older than herself, but she can still take on a role of sympathy and care for them and for those under her own roof. She thus transcends the notion that one has to stick to a predetermined outline of labor activities based on gender.

When the novel leaps forward in time, Alexandra’s success only continues to outpace all of her male fellow farmers, who seem convinced of their own inevitable failure. Even her brothers had initially urged her to consider the endeavor to create a farm out of the barren soil a lost cause (31). Alexandra, however, cultivates a unique disposition toward the scoured, unfertile landscape—a sophisticated way of growing success out of soil: “For the first time, perhaps, since that land emerged from the waters of geologic ages, a human face was set toward it with love and yearning. It seemed beautiful to her, rich and strong and glorious” (34). Here, at this early stage, her farm’s soil is an emblem for hope, in which no clear literal or metaphorical boundaries are discernable. It gestures back toward the confidence her own father expressed in her talents for farm labor, but also implies a different perspective toward it, associating the cultivation of crops with a stereotypically feminine nurturance.

It is interesting to note, however, that, when the novel leaps forward in time and finds a successful Alexandra gazing upon that land, her previous nurturing perspective changes. Indeed, Alexandra’s characterization of the landscape at this point somewhat

echoes the sexual symbolism reminiscent of what we saw in Frank Norris: “There are few scenes more gratifying than a spring plowing...the brown earth, with such a strong, clean smell, and such a power of growth and fertility in it, yields itself eagerly to the plow; rolls away from the shear, not even dimming the brightness of the metal, with a soft, deep sigh of happiness” (37). To contrast this perspective with her previous one, before her success, the plow was actually deemed “insignificant, like the feeble scratches on stone left by prehistoric races, so indeterminate that they may, after all, be only the markings of glaciers, and not a record of human strivings” (16). This is a curious mixture of perspective—the former connoting nurturing motherliness and the latter a paternal, phallic and clearly sexual rapaciousness that seems to negate Cather’s earlier pessimism about the futility of human creation. I would argue that this seemingly contradictory perspective is merely evidence of Alexandra’s complexity and instead suggests a gender fluid character wrestling with clichéd gender perspectives about the landscape to the point that no single perspective dominates.¹¹¹ I think the complex attitudinal shifts are rather a symptom of the character’s overall disposition: Alexandra will not or cannot fit into binaries, and her seemingly rapacious turn merely illustrates her adaptation to paradigmatic capitalistic notions of success. It is no coincidence, after all, that this perspective arrives years later, well after Alexandra has already assumed the reins of the family farm and subsequently depended upon herself to ensure its future profitability. It is possible then that Alexandra has, at this moment, let assumptions about the male-dominated role of a “pioneer” or farmer socialize her personality to

¹¹¹ See Annette Kolodny’s *Lay of the Land*, pp. 4-9. Kolody establishes that male American authors represent the land as a strange amalgam of mother and virgin; a thing that provides them life and sustenance but also an object to symbolically rape and control with agricultural pursuits and territorial mapping.

some extent, even as the tendency to sexualize the land as a virgin female is still tempered by that former nurturing attitude. Toward the end of the novel, for instance, she and Carl stand overlooking the Bergson pasture during a stunning sunset. Remarking on it, Alexandra observes, “We come and go, but the land is always here. And the people who love it and understand it are the people who own it—for a little while.” (125) Here, she places emphasis on the ephemeral love and labor of man on the land rather than the implied ownership exhibited earlier, a perspective she instead ascribes to “Lou and Oscar” who “can’t see” the same things she does in the land (125). Such inconsistencies indicate that her perspectives about how to work the land simply cannot be contained within limited, gendered prescriptions about personality.

At this point in the novel Alexandra is undoubtedly a financial success, but it is exactly that status that prompts her family and the wider community to undermine Alexandra’s accomplishments by labeling her a gender failure, an unwomanly woman. She is an “odd” woman and yet also a kind of patriarchal and motherly figure blessed with a wonderful agricultural mind, so many in the community are perplexed about how they should *perceive* her labor in light of domestic and agricultural gender conventions. Cather’s narrator supplies hints throughout the narrative regarding Alexandra’s disinclination for traditional female labor, such as her inattention to the aesthetics of her home: “If you go up the hill and enter Alexandra’s big house, you will find that it is curiously unfinished and uneven in comfort. One room is papered, carpeted, overfurnished; the next is almost bare” (40). The concentration of furniture in one room suggests that she views domestic space as a pragmatic abode for her rest after labor rather than a domestic space intended to please a future spouse or child. Instead, as the

narrator states, “Alexandra’s house is the big out-of-doors, and...it is in the soil that she expresses herself best” (41). Indeed, Lou and Oscar think of Alexandra as “too independent” (54) in her attendance to these agricultural matters, implying she should try to find a deserving husband.

But Lou and Oscar’s concern about her independence also suggests they are worried about her seeming ambivalence toward marriage itself. In remaining single Alexandra risks becoming the object of scrutiny for a wider culture anxious about the rise in rates of unmarried, independent women and their potential for sexual and economic disruption. Elaine Showalter observes, for instance, that still-unmarried older women like Alexandra were not only threats to men because of their presumed lesbianism, but they also presented new arguments for female suffrage, since “adult single women...needed to vote because they were legally unrepresented,” (21). Thus, unmarried women were threatening, Showalter argues, because they were “a constituency” that could claim “potential opportunities, powers, and rights” in the future (21). One of the powers and rights that such women locate on a more forgiving future horizon is sexual liberation: a defiance of heteronormativity, and also free fraternization with men without necessarily intending to marry them (21). Thus, part of the rhetoric of gender failure associated with unmarried women was conjured out of a wider patriarchal fear of female power and sexual liberty that Lou and Oscar echo in *Pioneers*. Hence, the brothers try to persuade Alexandra that her farm success won’t matter to the rest of society without a husband to take the credit. Their inability to clearly locate Alexandra’s erotic cathexis in another person, a clearly discernable object of her lust, also generates discomfort. Their later effort to acquire the Bergson land therefore

becomes an effort to impose a straight male normalcy on the otherwise strange relationship between ownership, legal rights, and ambiguous sexuality that Alexandra's singlehood highlights.

Indeed, Alexandra's resistant attitude toward marriage may be inspired by her *own* recognition of what a traditional man would force her to become. It could be said that she looks upon traditional marriage as a process through which a bride gives up her own "identity" in order to promote the "masculine identity" of her husband" (Butler 52). If she's chained to the house in a conventional marriage to a strictly heteronormative relationship, in other words, she'll be finally forced to limit her horizons to more invisible domestic labor, like making a home comfortable for a husband coming in from the space she wants to own: her "big out-of-doors." Marriage would undercut her defiance of gender normative labor.

She does eventually marry Carl Linstrum, but we are given little indication by novel's end that the relationship between them is actually *romantic*. Indeed, Cather's narrator gives sparse attention to Alexandra's thoughts on sexuality and her ultimate desire for Carl as a male object of desire. Most of the opinions about Carl come from Alexandra's brothers, who deem Carl a loser as a man, a "tramp," who is "after [Alexandra's] money" and looking to "be taken care of" when he later aspires to marry her (72). Additionally, his Eastern physicality is depicted as degenerate; he has "high, sharp shoulders" for instance, which "looked like the back of an overworked German professor off on his holiday" (53). By implying Carl is "queer" himself, Lou and Oscar seem worried that two unconventional, atypically gendered figures could be guiding their family's legacy. Ironically, the brothers' concern about Carl's lack of financial

independence is the very thing that keeps the pair from eloping when she was younger and presumably more eligible; Carl recognizes how he is perceived by the other men in the community and feels that he must go to Alaska to find his riches and his manliness first: “Measured by your standards here,” he tells Alexandra, “I’m a failure. I couldn’t buy even one of your cornfields. I’ve enjoyed a great many things, but I’ve got nothing to show for it all” (56). Carl claims that he tried to dupe Alexandra regarding his success upon his return to the town, but he immediately realizes it was no use, since, as he puts it, “there are too many of my kind; people know us on sight” (55). So he goes to Alaska, searching for a masculine identity and the financial success that has thus far eluded him. When he comes back to Nebraska, however, he has “changed very little” and only looks like “a tired scholar” that “no one would have taken...for a man of business” (122).

Many critics have rightly pointed out that the ambiguity regarding Carl and Alexandra’s lack of passionate romance leaves Alexandra’s choice to marry the equally unconventional Carl open to numerous interpretations.¹¹² I agree, and even suggest that it is not improbable to conclude their marriage is one of convenience, as it would allow Alexandra to maintain her freedom. Indeed, Alexandra partially suggests as much when she discusses their marriage for the first time, asking Carl if he “feel[s] at peace with the world” at her homestead. “I think we shall be very happy,” she continues. “I haven’t

¹¹² Just one example can be found in Wiesenthal, 410. Wiesenthal argues that Alexandra’s friendship with Marie may reflect Cather’s own “unusual” female friendships and that she is the more authentic object of the character’s desire: “While Alexandra’s relationship with Carl remains a fairly dispassionate affair throughout—arrested, in fact, at the stage of hand-holding until a light kiss at the very end of the novel is offered as a prelude to marriage of ‘friends’—her relationship with Marie allows for a great measure of uninhibited physical contact.”

any fears. I think when friends marry, they are safe” (125). Alexandra’s characterization of their marriage as one between “friends” doesn’t exactly suggest romantic passion; her overt, repeated concern with safety rather suggests the marriage will be a kind of refuge because of the heteronormative “cover” it provides. It therefore seems implicit that Carl will let Alexandra continue to do the farm work during their marriage, and it does not seem improbable that Alexandra and Carl’s domestic space in marriage would be gender atypical, a space where the separate-spheres ideology would not impose gender normative labor roles upon them. As Michael Moon puts it, heteronormative discourse imagines domestic space as a symbolic approximation of white, straight marriage, but queer marriages destabilizes such spaces: “Queer lives and impulses do not occupy a separate social or physical space from straight ones; instead, they are relational and conditional, moving across and transforming the conventional spaces that were designed to offer endless narcissistic self-confirmation to the unstable normative systems of sex, gender and family” (30). Given their already complicated relations to normative sexuality, it is not a reach to suggest that Carl and Alexandra, tired of the gender conventions that dictate their labor and their life ambitions, want to reinvent a domestic space in light of their unique preferences, where Carl is free to indulge his more subdued passions and thumb through books indoors as Alexandra continues to plow the fields outside. Of course, if their partnership is one of strategic convenience rather than amorous intent, it is also not implausible to conclude that it serves to hide some of Alexandra’s more covert erotic attachments. One critic even suggests that Alexandra’s friendship with Marie signals an undercurrent of sexual desire that her

relationship with Carl lacks, arguing that the character suffers unfulfilled homoerotic desires that are left unfulfilled upon Marie's murder.¹¹³

While eschewing the conventions of marriage, it is also evident that Alexandra defends the unsettling and boundary-defying tendencies within humanity more generally, as exhibited by her guardianship of "Crazy" Ivar. Her friendship with Ivar also becomes part of the narrative her family and the surrounding community generate about her. Ivar is described as a "queerly shaped old man" with equally queer ideas; a quirky loner and an atypical representation of manhood who invented his own religion out of disagreement with most Christian denominations (22). While her brothers and the wider community see Ivar as a potential violent and even lascivious threat, Alexandra sees herself in his position: a person whose actions betray a keen insight into the punitive, containing habits of thought dominating American culture. For instance, he states that, "the way here [in America] is for all to do alike. I am despised because I do not wear shoes, because I do not cut my hair, and because I have visions. At home, in the old country, there were many like me...[and] we thought nothing of it, and let them alone" (44). Ivar's long hair, poverty, and his atypical spiritualism set him apart from traditional rural lifestyles, religiosities, and masculinities in their small town. Thus, when he declares that townspeople are threatening to take him "to the asylum," Alexandra instructs him to abide by a principle she no doubt abides by herself: "Let people go on talking as they like, and we will go on living as we think best" (43-44).

¹¹³ See Wiesenthal again, p. 413. Such speculations, critics suppose, could be naturally inspired by Cather's own notorious secrecy about her own possible lesbianism; the unclear sexual preferences of the character may thus mirror Cather's own inattention to the subject in her numerous letters.

Their bond is thus defined by their mutual irreverence toward the dominant expectations of what they should become.

Alexandra's relations with Ivar are also problematic for her brothers, who arrive at the Bergson ranch in one scene convinced that Ivar should be locked up. More covertly, however, they also want to reignite their masculine privilege, which Alexandra is undermining through her occupation. As a result, they demand that Alexandra relinquish her property rights to the farm because of the surrounding community's reading of her relations with Carl Linstrum: they see their friendship as a perpetual courtship without the possibility of marriage. Thus, they proclaim their right to the land under what critic Daniel Worden deems "the cover of public sentiment" (93)—the right of the Bergson men to protect the family's reputation in light of Alexandra's sexual indeterminacy. However, Lou and Oscar ultimately seem less interested in this accumulating gossip than with the opportunity the gossip presents: taking ownership of the now successful family land, which, they claim, "really belongs to the men of the family" anyway (73). To legitimize their argument, they circle back to protecting family reputation: "if anything goes wrong, it's the men that are held responsible," they claim (73). Alexandra is now a danger to her own family according to this rhetoric: she is just as unstable and queer in habit as old Ivar, and thus the brothers cannot help but presume that something will, eventually, go "wrong" despite Alexandra's unprecedented success.

Alexandra's logic is better: she owns the titles and deeds, she reminds them, and she stayed at the farm while the men wandered off to other prospects in order to evade the stigma of what they felt would be eventual failure. She's the self-made woman who eclipses her brothers in success; she "built it up" herself, she reminds them, and her

land's success therefore has "nothing to do" with her flighty, uncommitted brothers (73). The brothers had no reason to suspect the farm's failure before Linstrum's arrival or before her tacit commitment to the single lifestyle, she implies, so they are framing their convictions on arbitrary social conventions, not legitimate predictions. Lou and Oscar, however, deem her arguments nonsense, simply because they *can* deem it nonsense: "This is what comes of letting a woman meddle in business," they decide (73). Indeed, Lou and Oscar's reversion to arguments reliant on male power is something Alexandra suggests is their only logical recourse: "the authority you can exert by law is the only influence you will ever have over me again" (74). The brothers try to tell Alexandra that her present power is rather a result of their own tolerance of her leadership rather than any inherent superiority, stating that they always "humored her," implying that they only let her take the reins in the same way a father would let a precocious and ambitious child perform an adult task (72). The men also try to take credit by implying they did all the work behind the scenes and that Alexandra somehow got lucky in her success despite her gender. Their own physical labor, they say, made the difference in the farm's eventual outcome; her own planning and strategizing wasn't the "real work," which always "fell on" them (73). Of course, there is an obvious privileging of material over immaterial labor here—which is without logical merit; the family patriarch, John Bergson, explicitly deemed intellectual, immaterial labor the most important. Lou and Oscar's attempt at usurpation highlights their own failure in other endeavors and their shame at her success in an occupation they thought they were destined to hold.¹¹⁴ The brothers' desperate, fumbling search for a logical

¹¹⁴ Such rhetorics of farm labor, and certain kinds of material labor generally, are not

counterargument to Alexandra's assertions betrays their discomfort about the fact that a woman in the family became the most financially prosperous.

Though Alexandra is representative of a gender fluid character that doggedly pursues success in unlikely spaces, using an awareness of the gender-bias behind the construction of meaning to interrogate those who would thwart such unconventionalities, she ultimately also embraces the Progressive Era, capitalist-centered values inherent within the notion of success itself. Marilee Lindemann similarly concludes that "the narrator cannot escape the logic of the systems of representation (semiotic and political)" s/he only occasionally questions by ending with a classically entrepreneurial Alexandra who represents the "values of systematization and efficiency in matters of business and discipline," allowing her to be aligned with stereotypical definitions of success (44). Lindemann makes it clear, however, that Cather's sense of queerness evolves along with her fiction.¹¹⁵ It is with this point in mind that I transition to *Song of the Lark*, not with the illusion that it does not occasionally celebrate the same kinds of values about success and failure that *Pioneers* does, but nonetheless with an appreciation for how this more psychologically

only still viewed in gendered terms in the United States today, but internationally as well. As Judith Halberstam relates, "eastern Europe, the Middle East, and India and China allow for female children to be raised as boys where a family farm requires male rather than female labor" (75). Many different cultures deemed it necessary to re-allocate gender identities first in order for a certain kind of labor to be performed, revealing that nothing is "natural" about gendered labor.

¹¹⁵ Specifically, Lindemann writes, "Cather's steady movement away from realist technologies of representation—e.g., detached and impersonal narration, the striving for verisimilitude and the illusion of unmediated transcriptions of a world, plots driven by conflicts and the rhythms of heterosexual desire—is a movement toward the generic instability and the profound subversiveness of her ambitious narrative experiments of the 1920s, *The Professor's House* (1925) and *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927)" (49).

ambitious novel reflects an author's attempt to engage more critically with the definitions of success and failure.

“They Might Trample Her to Death, But They Should Never Have It:” Thea Kronborg’s Revision of Success Through Self-Discovery in *Song of the Lark*

Cather’s *Song of the Lark* is the second novel in her *Great Plains Trilogy*. This novel also chronicles the ascendancy of a rural, Western woman. However, Thea Kronborg, a small-town girl from Colorado, ultimately defines success through artistic self-exploration and through a determination to elude gender boundaries. In the process, she blurs strict gender value categories in relation to labor, like creativity, leisure and a drive for financial accumulation. While she initially appropriates prototypical masculine qualities and some consequently myopic ideas about success, she also eventually critiques the usefulness of such values and their necessity for a life of fulfillment. Other scholars have recognized that Thea’s eventual acceptance of her own gender fluidity corresponds with her growing talent for music. Elizabeth Wood, for instance, thinks Thea eventually embodies the “Sapphonic” voice, which is characterized by its “powerful and problematic, defiant and destructive” sound. Such singing embodies a “flexible negotiation and integration of an exceptional range of registers” and “crosses boundaries among different voice types...to challenge polarities of both gender and sexuality” (28). Wood further believes that Cather modeled Thea’s particular talents on the “deep-throated, velvet” contralto Olive Thremstad. Upon hearing Thremstad, the experience would have evoked a Sapphonic effect for a “lesbian” listener like Cather, Wood states (33). Cather, Wood claims, would likely have found the “powerful range

and mysterious breaking quality magnetic and thrilling” (33). Though Wood certainly wants to highlight lesbianism in her depiction of the Sapphonic voice, I also think the identity she describes—someone who defiantly crosses barriers that emphasizes sexual and ideological irreducibility-- can be used to describe queerness more generally.¹¹⁶ Along similar lines, I want to argue that Thea’s queer subjectivity challenges and disrupts the conventions informing the definition of the successful individual.

Like Alexandra (and Cather herself), the young Thea identifies with typically male characteristics as a girl. She has an intimidating tenacity according to other men and women, is generally independent (her mother takes her “more seriously” than Thea’s siblings, for instance, because she “had her own routine” and “kept out of everyone’s way”), and seems uninterested in marriage (48). She is also driven to acquire wealth—she feels, at this early stage, that being “awfully rich” is “the only thing that counts” (167). Thea’s childhood instructor, Wunsch, uses a flower metaphor to contrast her with other girls and that sums up a complex personality: “she was like a flower full of sun, but not the soft German flowers of his childhood...she was like the yellow prickly pear blossoms that open there in the desert, thornier and sturdier than the maiden flowers he remembered; not so sweet, but wonderful” (70). The symbol acknowledges that Thea is a blooming talent composed of sturdier stuff than those delicate flowers reminiscent of “maidenly” softness, signifying the character’s strength

¹¹⁶ Refer to the introduction’s section about Cather and how she comes to embody queerness through her letters. My favorite definition of “queer,” perhaps because it is so easily understood, comes from José Esteban Muñoz, who states, “One possible working definition of queer that we might consider is this: queers are people who have failed to turn around to the ‘Hey, you there!’ interpellating call of heteronormativity” (33). The confident rebellion embodied in Wood’s depiction of the Sapphonic voice certainly seems similar to this definition as well as Cather’s own evocation of the term.

of will. She is also a plant that grows in the aridness of the desert, implying she requires less nurturance to grow strong. Wunsch's description mirrors Alexandra's appearance at the beginning of Cather's former novel: Thea is beautiful, but "sturdy" and "thorny," capable of great beauty but without the feminine fragility usually associated with it. This hardy pulchritude, however, also highlights Thea's difference from other women for some in her family and community. These people witness a diminishment of aesthetically pleasing feminine features when such ambition reveals itself; her mother, for instance, thinks that Thea "would make a very handsome woman...if she would only get rid of that fierce look she had sometimes" (155). Thea, however, refuses to acknowledge that feminine "sweetness" and aesthetics have to be separated from supposedly masculine willpower. As she does so, she reveals the narrow range in which successful subjectivities have been enclosed by gender normative rhetoric and suggests new possibilities.

Thea's youthful views on success, however, are indeed rigid and do seem to embrace the period's clichéd metaphors about Darwinian combativeness when it comes to financial acquisition.¹¹⁷ Yet, her views on success also harbor a hint of sophistication about the gender norms that inform them. "Everybody's up against it for himself," she says at one point, "succeeds or fails—*himself*" (88, my emphasis). It is not insignificant

¹¹⁷ In an essay, Amy Ahearn suggests that Cather's journalistic affiliations with naturalism might have informed her depiction of success in the novel. Ahearn highlights how success seems to become a "natural law" and determinism in the text, reiterated not only by Thea, but by Ray Kennedy and Dr. Archie, allowing Cather to depict what Ahearn calls the progression of the "Natural Female Artist" in Thea (151). Ahearn aptly highlights my own reservations with Cather's depiction of success as something innate and related to genetics and willpower, as mentioned in my introduction, but I also think Ahearn (perhaps by necessity) ignores how *The Song of the Lark* also quite vividly opens spaces for dialogue about how much a successful person depends upon leisure and honest self-reflection as well.

that Thea ascribes the male pronoun to all social actors or ambitious persons here, including herself. The youthful Thea depicted here may think she has to become masculine in order to succeed, much like the numerous women before her who had to dress like men and perform manhood in order to fool their bosses into paying them more money. Indeed, the narrator makes it more than evident that Thea's qualities are enough to already make her less feminine to her family and friends. Even as she embraces an identity that undercuts traditional notions of female beauty in the context of ambition, she demands to be taken seriously as a flower with thorns—pretty, but potentially prickly, capable of self-defense, and able to survive in a harsh climate—despite recognizing that her surrounding culture may not be ready to accept such a disruptive force. Indeed, at one point she even seems to associate outright failure with unambiguous, docile womanhood: “It’s easy to fail,” she says at one point to Dr. Archie, “and if I fail, you’d better forget about me, for I’ll be one of the worst women that ever lived. I’ll be an awful woman” (169). Though we could interpret this statement as a simple acknowledgement that she would be an awful person generally upon her failure to meet her goals, the fact that she reverses nouns to describe failure when she had previously described success as implicitly male allows us to extract a double meaning: she would be a horrible because circumscribed *person*, because she would *make* an “awful” woman, since a “good” woman is someone who accepts the cloistered home with quiet acceptance. To become a failure, for Thea as well as for Alexandra, is to become a traditional woman---or, at least, the kind of woman in the way most of society would expect: docile, silent, and unambitious, but, in heteronormative male eyes, *successful* as a woman.

As Thea grows older, hits puberty, and continues her singing endeavors, she senses a general cultural aura of disapproval. This is perhaps most readily detected in a prolonged passage in which she detects a threatening undertone to the forced stares she meets from strangers in Chicago, where she later goes for singing lessons. Just after Thea feels like her creative ambition has been rewarded through praise for the first time, she receives a sense that her newfound abilities carry the potential for tacit threat from those around her. Thea exits a concert hall to find a threat contained within the bustling energy of the city of Chicago, “brutality and power...that flowed in the streets, threatening to drive one under” (139). A young man, perhaps thinking her a prostitute, asks her if she’s “looking for a friend tonight ” (140). She turns away, disgusted, and encounters another older man, who keeps “thrusting his face up near hers” (140). A gust of wind blows her cape up, and the older man holds it down for her while looking “at her intently,” as if to suggest her budding sexual attributes are now flying out into open space like the object itself, disturbing but enticing the people around her (140). Though she had encountered objectification before, there is a more overt threat contained within these gestures—primarily male gazes tacitly communicating her intrusion upon the hustle and bustle of the street. “Why did these men torment her?” she asks herself (140). The scene here is a bit similar to the one Alexandra faced at the beginning of *Pioneers*, although Thea’s confrontation with sexually threatening men is certainly more disturbing and strangely omnipresent to Thea. She concludes that there was something within her, a dangerous and strange medium of self-expression, projecting out into a suddenly threatening world:

There was some power abroad in the world bent on taking away from her that feeling with which she had come out of the concert hall. Everything seems to sweep down on her to tear it out from under her cape. If one had that, the world became one's enemy; people, buildings, wagons, cars, rushed at once to crush it under, to make one let go of it... All these things and people were no longer remote and negligible; they had to be met, they were lined up against her, they were there to take something from her. Very well; they should never have it. They might trample her to death, but they should never have it. (140)

The phantom-like, anonymous figures in this passage, sexualizing her and policing her, stand in for a wider social order that sees her rising talents and autonomy as subversive. Of course, these figures in the street are literally male, but it is worth pointing out that previous policing gestures came from women as well, even from Thea's own mother. The cape symbolizes a shield that both disguises (and tantalizes others to want to discover) her literal sexual body but also serves as a figurative cloak for her secret ambitions—she “drew up the collar of her cape” after her encounter with the man who hoped she was a prostitute, for instance, and speaks of the world swooping down to take her autonomy “out from under” it. As she walks away, she presses her hands to her “old cape,” feeling a “heaving bosom” that was “a little girl's no longer” (140), thus allowing her to realize that her bodily transition, presumably visible even from beneath the cape, is part of the reason for the appellations on the street. Thea's sense of being scrutinized and tacitly controlled because of her ambition is not unlike what Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar observed when they chronicled the male response to female artistic endeavors. The female artist, Gilbert and Gubar state, is often

portrayed as angelic when she ascribes to feminine conventions and monstrous, aggressive, or lascivious when she does not.¹¹⁸ Thea was not meek about her ambitions or her unconventional sense of womanhood before, but here she acknowledges the hidden meaning in the male stares and dares her oppressors to take “it”— an aggressive stance which she later reveals to mean “her ecstasy” in music and in art generally. Yet it is also apparent in the passage that this “ecstasy” is linked to her unique sense of gender fluidity, antithetical to societal customs.

However, she also has support for her ambitions—indeed, the novel is filled with figures that do embrace her complex identity. These people are, increasingly, figures outside her family. Her family, as mentioned, abides by conservative, religious principles and occasionally encourages her to become more womanly, which ultimately factors into her decision to leave them and Moonstone “for good” when she returns to her singing lessons in Chicago (170). While some critics have mentioned that Cather’s over-emphasis on authoritative male presence to define her artistic progress is problematic,¹¹⁹ I think it is also important to recognize that at least some of these male

¹¹⁸ See Gilbert and Gubar’s *The Madwoman in the Attic*, pp. 24-28. While domestic women were “slim, pale, passive beings whose ‘charms’ eerily recalled the snowy, porcelain immobility of the dead,” thus embodying a “surrender of her self—of her personal comfort, her personal desires or both,” the monstrous women were those that exhibited “assertiveness, aggressiveness” and likened to sirens and “accidents of nature” (25, 28-29).

¹¹⁹ Mary Titus perhaps summarizes these concerns most adamantly; her analysis foregrounds the ways in which the masculine gaze works to authorize Thea’s talent: “Although the novel traces the achievement of a woman artist, it does so from a masculine point of view, moving from male spectator to male spectator, exploring as much the critical acumen and communal relations of these men as it does the heroine’s ascent” (28). In concluding, however, she wonders aloud whether Cather’s consistent turn to masculine authority reflects either her “desire to be one of the boys” or “both the complexity of Willa Cather’s own sexuality...and the cultural models she encountered throughout her life” (36). Though presuming that inconclusive sexuality is the

figures embrace Thea's queer, complex identity. Their intellectually inclined, free-thinking style that does not necessarily embrace the judgmental filter of hegemonic masculinity. There are, of course, a few occasional exceptions to this argument—Dr. Archie, for instance, assumes a kind of paternal role that disapproves and judges Thea when his previously adoring female subject isn't so dutiful later in the novel. But some men, because "queer" in a certain way themselves, believe that Thea should ignore gender-related circumscriptions and realize her ambitions. Some of these men, especially artists like Spanish Johnny and Andro Harsanyi, are labeled in the narrative as bohemian, freethinking artists embracing a world of difference who in many ways transcend the boundaries of normative masculinity. To the white-dominated Moonstone community, for instance, Spanish Johnny's outsider status is most obviously attributable to a racial demonization prompted by a desire to erect boundaries between the white majority of Moonstone and the small Hispanic minority. Yet, it is important to note that Spanish Johnny is considered strange even by the dictates of his *own* community. He is an itinerant musician, playing in bars all over the Southwest, motivated by what appears to be the sheer love of the art form and a desire to bring joy to backwoods communities that are normally never privy to such entertainment. Harsanyi is a more urbane version of Spanish Johnny, a tutor and devoted composer bearing a Hungarian name who appears to guide students because of his genuine love for music. In her use of these

automatic gateway through which we can ponder gender ambivalence, she does raise a few important questions: to what extent is Cather's fiction a reflection of her own Gilbert and Gubarian anxiety of influence, and thereby her ambivalent conclusions about gender and authority? And is it possible to read her male characters as a *part* of her female characters' self-interrogations, a part of their method of coming to an ambivalent conclusion about the degree to which they represent hegemonic masculinity?

characters, Cather indeed seems more willing to use ethnically ambiguous, artistic men as a part of her fictional interrogation of success than she was in *Pioneers*.

Even Ray Kennedy, Thea's first suitor, is a refined campfire intellectual and a hardened railroad man at once, telling stories that bear the stamp of an untutored, eclectic but nonetheless enthusiastic creative mind. Indeed, Kennedy becomes the target of jokes by other men for his unfailing support for Thea's musical endeavors, and for his willingness to shift gender roles in the household in order to demonstrate his appreciation of Thea's unique personality, much like Carl in *Pioneers*. For example, Kennedy's braking partner for the railroad, Joe Giddy, nicknames Ray "the bride" because of his unusual cleanliness relative to Thea (79). Joe insinuates that it is a good thing "some men like to mess about the kitchen" like Ray, since he thinks "the man that gets [Thea] will have to wear an apron and bake the pancakes" (80). Joe's logic here echoes the reductive, gender-dependent view of success and its implications for domestic labor: it is presumed that, if one person were to take the ambitious role of breadwinner that the other married partner, regardless of sex, must take the subordinated role of "woman" in order to practically apportion workloads, regardless of individual preference. Ray, however, doesn't perceive himself as less masculine when faced with Joe's ribbings, and instead indicates that he is a rather progressive-thinking straight male secure in his sexuality and bold enough to defy social norms. He even seems to enjoy performing such household duties in the mist of his hypermasculine workplace. He scrubs "the floor and the seats" of the railcar and put "clean sheets on the bunks," and is "as fussy about his car as an old maid about her bird-cage" (79). Ray even seems outraged by Joe's posters of scantily-clad women during one of these

cleaning endeavors and takes them all down before Thea's visit, signaling his sensitivity about matters of gender portrayal and the power signals implicit within objectification, which is especially sophisticated for a man of his era and environment. Just before Ray dies in a railroad accident, he even admits to himself that he didn't have much of a chance at being Thea's suitor because of her reluctance to marry. Out of all the things he dreamed about—getting an education, becoming rich as a result of finding a successful “gold mine” or “copper well”—“Thea,” he thinks, “was farther out of his reach than all the rest put together” (105). Knowing this, his last wish is to leave his investment funds to pay for Thea's escape from the confines of Moonstone and to further her musical education in Chicago.

Like Kennedy, most similar male figures conclude that Thea can and should be as independent as possible, which means she should strive to eschew traditional marriage if she chooses to marry at all. When Thea does eventually become interested in marriage, it is not understood by either partner as an institution that dictates gender roles; Fred Ottenburg, her future husband, realizes that she is not a “nest-building bird,” and proclaims to her that he will not “try to carry [her] off as [he] might another woman.” (213, 222). Fred states that in their marriage, Thea's own interests will not be subsumed in favor of his own: “You have your own future in the back of your mind all the time...and I have it in mine” (222). He also claims to want to marry because he “want[s] to be with [her]” and not because he has any sort of “plan” for their future existence (222). Thea's and Fred Ottenburg's relationship is based on mutual acceptance and is therefore similar in manner to Cather's depiction of Carl and Alexandra in her previous work. It therefore seems apt to conclude that this marriage,

like the marriage depicted in her previous fiction, is a convenient arrangement Thea can use to thwart the rhetoric of cultural expectation while she continues with her career. Indeed, Fred seems explicitly critical of the patriarchal construction of marriage after he proposes, arguing “most fellows wouldn’t” like her sense of ambition and direction, which he humorously analogizes to the “drift of a rifle ball” when she humbly tries to claim she has aimlessly drifted through life (212). When Thea mentions that other men have liked her, Fred counters that they all were “serious” or “old, or solemn,” indicating their uncommon ability to decide for themselves what they want in a woman. Most men, however, are “jolly fellows” who “have no imagination” and “want a girl to be extinct” when they aren’t around (212). In other words, he thinks that most traditional men want women to cease to exist when their men aren’t at home. This description again recalls the arguments of Gilbert and Gubar, especially when the authors recount texts that describe the idealized domestic woman as sick or even corpse-like in the absence of their men (55).

It is therefore perhaps not coincidental that she finds the aforementioned “Sapphonic” voice that later catapults her toward success and self-acceptance amidst a reprieve from the hard work in Chicago, the city of hostile stares, at Fred Ottenburg’s ranch. Though the narrative is ambiguous about what exactly occurs during her retreat to the Northern Arizona ranch, Thea finds a newfound confidence in her sense of self and in the transformative purpose of her artistic endeavor. Her thoughts on failure and success undergo a bit of re-evaluation too; she deems herself a “failure” according to her own assessment of how she has progressed in her singing career, but this does not mean she has become a traditional woman she initially feared she would have to

become upon accepting failure. Instead, the sense of failure described here seems less an objective reality than a subjective sense of her impatience at the speed of her progress. More telling, she describes feeling like a failure a welcome result after prolonged labor: “failure was not so tragic as she would have supposed; she was tired enough not to care” (200). In other words, she signals a need to rest more than anything and does not care if this fact is traditionally associated with failure. She simply deems it necessary to take a long repose for her own health. Later on, she feels “completely released from the enslaving desire to get on in the world” and inhabits a mental state away from “the stream of meaningless activity and undirected effort” in the city (200). Sounding like Thoreau, she critiques the ideologies of her youth, devaluing the traditional definition of success as something that imprisons the soul. Indeed, her frequent relaxation begins to give her a feeling of unexpected personal progress, or like she was “waiting for something to catch up with her” (200). Something does eventually catch up with her: instead of losing all ambition, the opposite eventually occurs: she feels inexplicably “united and strong” after using the natural environment around her as a tool for self-discovery (206).

Thea’s acknowledgement of the virtues of rest and self-reflection also allows her to even re-define the thing she is trying to achieve—art through a singing career—in a more gender fluid sense. In one scene, a stream in the midst of Indian ruins inspired by the real-life ruins of the Anasazi takes her on an imaginative journey, imagining Native women from long ago carrying water from the stream. She eventually discovers that art was “an effort to make a sheath, a mould in which to imprison for a moment the shining, elusive element which is life itself” like the pottery that the ancient women

created to carry the water (205). Others have observed that her metaphor for life and its container is an unmistakable attempt to liken art to the vagina and thus to womankind itself, allowing her to finally discard the cliché of the ambitious woman as failure by discovering that women were never entirely docile and obedient in all cultures or times, which, in turn, allows her to eschew what she initially felt was unquestionable.¹²⁰ In my view, however, Thea's epiphany does not mean simply mean that she is now uniformly female in self-presentation because she is able to find an example of a quintessential artistic and ambitious womanhood, but that the epiphany serves as yet another reason for Thea to discard the gender-based definitions of success and failure on the grounds that they are historically inaccurate constructions.

Thea's realization that success is arbitrarily defined through imposed gender norms allows her to transcend her initial confusions about what it means to be a successful woman. Her epiphany also allows her to embrace her ambiguous identity and to use her newfound joy in self-expression during her singing career. After her vacation at Ottenburg's ranch, Thea returns to the stage and feels "a vitality; a lightness in the body and a driving power in the blood" compelling her to achieve something because it is an extension of herself, not for material prosperity or status (206). In other words, the fact that her motivation to become successful is tied metaphorically to her own sense of self and her body indicates how her artistic path becomes part of her journey to self-acceptance. When she returns to the stage, for instance, she is "conscious that every movement was the right movement, that her body was absolutely the instrument of her idea... all that deep-rooted vitality" she kept inside "flowered in her voice," and it "was

¹²⁰ Sharon O'Brien, for instance, argues that Thea's experience is "profoundly female, integrating procreative and creative powers" (416).

as flexible as her body, equal to any demand, capable of every nuance” (318). The themes of flexibility, and adaptation—inextricable from her gender fluidity—are integrated with her on-stage presence, indicating that she feels her own vibrant identity is integral to her artistic expression as well as to the amount of raw, uncommon talent in that expression. Her stage presence even causes Fred to pronounce a causality: “you’re as much at home on the stage as you were down in Panther Canyon—as if you’d just been let out of a cage” (308). If a cage is imprisonment, then the crucial self-understanding that Thea unleashed at Panther Canyon established her freedom from both the strictures of normative expectations about success and gender. Thus, her sense of freedom on the stage is described in terms of bodily expansion, consciously reversing the stereotypical descriptions of the ever-shrinking woman: “far from shrinking, she expanded...she existed in more space than she occupied by measurement” (248).

Through Thea, it would seem that we are presented with an authorial evolution on Cather’s part, in that the novel more vividly presents the reader with a critique of masculinized representations of labor and success. Not only does Cather’s fiction continue to grapple with the endless turmoil surrounding gender norms, but it allows the shifting conversation about gender norms to enter her era’s conversation about the nature of human ambition and whether it is ultimately possible to restrict certain personal goals to specific human beings. While both novels allow us to see the flaws in the logic behind simplistic binaries like success and failure and are able to demonstrate how these arbitrary meanings serve to entrench the power of patriarchy, her earlier character seems more resigned in the face of such a discovery. Her later character,

however, boldly challenges the way success is presented and allows new values not associated with constant productivity and excessive willpower to broaden its meaning.

Masculinity, Failure, and Success in the “New Gilded Age”: A Conclusion

As I’ve argued throughout this work, failure and shame always imply the potential for alternate kinds of successes, and failure can often reveal the path to personal self-fulfillment born of a conscious rejection of prescriptive standards about both gender and achievement. Far from a stigma that connotes deficiency, failure perhaps can be viewed as an arbitrary designation that modern normative gendered

discourses bestow on a subject may not wish to adapt to an economic model of gender-based shaming. Furthermore, I have illustrated that certain conceptions of gender can be occasionally transgressive vehicles for social critique, revealing through their performance a society reliant on needless accumulation, vapid materialism, and stressful overwork. I have not pretended, however, that failure is *always* entirely a mode of rebellion against the status quo, or that normative models of success and failure and their tight grip on gender norms have been eradicated—far from it.

The economic climate today is quite similar to that of the Gilded Age with high rates of economic inequality, which some economists and journalists have noted parallel those during the late nineteenth century. Indeed, Paul Krugman has called our contemporary period “the new Gilded Age,” a troublesome reflection of both the past and the present.¹²¹ According to economists like Thomas Piketty, income inequality is only going to rise in the industrialized world without some kind of major government intervention through progressive taxation and labor class wage increases (571-575). Piketty argues that “the risk of a drift toward oligarchy is real and gives little reason for optimism about where the United States is headed...the egalitarian pioneer ideal has faded into oblivion, and the New World may be on the verge of becoming the Old Europe of the twenty-first century’s globalized economy” (514). The income inequality problem is compounded by the fact that the majority of Americans, according to polls, believe that becoming wealthy and successful is still possible if they cultivate the necessary personal attributes of willpower or perseverance. Such beliefs play their own

¹²¹ See Paul Krugman’s Review of Thomas Piketty’s “Capital in the Twenty-First Century” in the *New York Review of Books* (nybooks.com).

part in preventing necessary economic reforms.¹²² Indeed, Scott Sandage has observed that despite certain changes in vocabulary, popular culture today still largely attributes success and failure to inner characteristics, or “the perennial doctrine of ‘a reason, *in the man*’ [that] continues to inspire both calls for accountability *and* claims of immutability.”¹²³ Summarizing a 1997 article by Fran Lebowitz that observes the same tenets, Sandage observes that these are “nineteenth-century myths, not something new” (274).

Perhaps because of the complexity of our present economic circumstances amid the increased proliferation of critiques of normative gender roles, contemporary fiction’s response to ideas of success and failure and its ties to masculine identity has been inconsistent. Many contemporary narratives invite us to celebrate non-conformist men that embrace the failure label as transgressive. However, as in the “first” Gilded Age, there are still a plethora of narratives that depict hegemonic masculinities reacting to failure in myopic and or gender normative ways. Echoing Howells and Cather, some contemporary narratives force a moral confrontation with the values that drive success, and thereby ask a tacit question of the audience about how society should define the

¹²² See Robert Reich, 4-8. While summarizing the ever-increasing American workload, Reich notes surveys that indicate college students are “far more focused on financial success than ever before (6).” He further argues that “disparities in earnings are growing steadily larger” as a result of rapidly changing labor demands despite technological change (7).

¹²³ See Sandage, 274 (original emphasis). The referenced vocabulary shift was most notable when the “American Dream” phrase was coined, which became synonymous with success in the 1930s and was interpreted in various ways. James Truslow Adams coined the term in his book, *The Epic of America* (1931), and he continued to refine it in subsequent *New York Times* articles. Adams, however, was vague when describing the term, allowing others to create their own image of what personal success in America means.¹²³

term and its opposite. Others, more in league with Norris or London, merely illustrate that deviation from the Franklinian edicts of success results in male despair or acts of compensatory violence.

One popular example of a contemporary fictional representation of masculinity's relationship to financial success is the critically acclaimed AMC series *Breaking Bad* (2008). The television show depicts the rise and fall of unlikely drug kingpin Walter White, an overqualified high school chemistry teacher living in Albuquerque. The show's intense, deliberate focus on White's humiliation and unfulfilled desires for recognition foreground his rise to self-made manhood, and this emphasis on White's shame is what makes the series particularly interesting as a depiction of the relationship between success, failure, and masculinity. As other critics have noted, White appears an atypical representation of hegemonic masculinity when the series begins; he is unable to embody "physical force and control" through his "sterile, white, somewhat elderly body" (Annus americanaejournal.hu); he is humiliated when one of his students finds out about his second job at a car wash; his wife and son adore him in a kind of condescending way, as if he is incapable of exerting any meaningful influence over family decisions as a more assertive father would. When White is diagnosed with a particularly severe form of lung cancer, he coerces a former student to begin making methamphetamine with him, initially intending only to procure enough funds to provide for his family after his inevitable death. As the series progresses, however, White becomes considerably more menacing and money-hungry, suggesting that he wants to compensate for his previous humiliation: he nicknames himself "Heisenberg," as if signaling this profound personal change, and performs a

masculinity that grows more vicious as his unparalleled fame in the national (and eventually international) underworld grows. White's desire to earn just enough money to ensure his family's survival after his death turns into a metaphoric quest to regain all the sense of power he felt he had lost during his impoverished years by accumulating vast amounts of money. Indeed, he later admits to his wife that he didn't begin selling meth for his family, but for himself, to fulfill his own desire to feel like a powerful and influential man. While he eventually finds a way to threaten some wealthy former friends into "donating" his drug money to White's son upon his death, as if attempting to right his wrongs, his family becomes distraught and ashamed when they discover his crimes. White ultimately dies alone of a gunshot wound as police surround him; his destructive pursuit of money in order to assuage his masculine insecurities cost him the family and friends he initially sought to protect.

Other contemporary narratives deal a bit more explicitly with the consequences that gender expectations surrounding success and failure can have for men and their search for personal meaning. For instance, in *Infinite Jest* (1996), a novel David Foster Wallace himself called a "fairly male book," he explores mostly male characters in the throes of addiction, depression, or existential angst in O.N.A.N (the Organization of North American Nations), a country generated from the unification of the United States, Canada, and Mexico.¹²⁴ The privileged, and by most measures, quite successful Incandenza brothers serve as consistent focal points in the thousand page novel. Their

¹²⁴ See David Lipsky's *Although Of Course You Always End Up Becoming Yourself: A Road Trip with David Wallace*, p. 273 for the exact commentary on the book's link to masculinity. More elaborately, Lipsky quotes Wallace noting how he'd "noticed at readings...that the people who seem most enthusiastic and most moved by it are young men."

famous filmmaker father, James O. Incandenza, eclipses all the very talented but troubled brothers in their individual pursuits. James is referred to as “Himself” throughout the novel, obviously referencing the colloquial phrase “the man himself” to highlight his significance for his sons and the artistic culture that celebrates his infamous films. However, despite his success, James Incandenza suffers from alcoholism and eventually commits suicide, setting a disturbing precedent for his equally ambitious sons. A Quebecois prorector named Thierry Poutrincourt, leader of a private school that the boys attend called the Enfield Tennis Academy, summarizes the existential quandary many of the men face after realizing their own goals: “you attain the goal and realize...that attaining the goal does not complete or redeem you, does not make everything for your life ‘OK’ as you are, in the culture, educated to assume it will do this, the goal. And then you face this fact that what you had thought would have the meaning does not have the meaning when you get it, and you are impaled by shock. We see suicides in history by people at these pinnacles” (680-81). Poutrincourt’s statement more explicitly articulates the novel’s own observations about the Incandenza family’s despair after having achieved financial success and social recognition, as they each respectively spiral into self-destruction despite their own achievements.

Though the Incandenza brothers are taught by “the culture” of O.N.A.N that there is no greater happiness than a worthy goal that results in fame or financial rewards for men, their own dissatisfaction with achieving success illustrates the problematic tension between personal desire and societal expectations about identity. Orin Incandenza, for instance, becomes an extremely wealthy punter for the Arizona Cardinals, and is blessed with a masculine frame to go along with his gender-validating

career in professional football. Nevertheless, Orin continues to resort to womanizing, implicitly a kind of sex addiction, withdraws from his family, and occasionally spirals into despair when recalling a past *ménage-a-trois* involving his father and his previous girlfriend, who later became the principle subject of most of his father's films.

Likewise, Orin's younger brother, Hal Incandenza, a brilliant intellectual with an eidetic memory and equally considerably athletic talents, suffers from social anxiety or selective mutism after withdrawing from his daily marijuana habit. In one embarrassing moment, for instance, he inexplicably becomes silent while being interviewed by associates of the University of Arizona about an athletic scholarship. Beyond the Incandenzas, the novel also chronicles the life of a physically dominant, hulk of a man named Don Gately, a former criminal and opiate addict who triumphs over personal despair and addiction and gains stable employment in the residential treatment facility that once housed him. Gately adamantly refuses to take opiates at a hospital after sustaining a gunshot wound in a successful attempt to fend off three violent attackers during a night shift at the recovery house, but the narrative implies it is possible that the physicians ignored his request and injected him with the drugs anyway.¹²⁵ Regardless, during his hospital stay, Gately is relentlessly plagued by visions of his previous drug-use, his incessant thoughts about how the drug would alleviate his present pain, and by an ultimate despair about the discouraging state of his life. Throughout the novel, then,

¹²⁵ In one particular passage just before recalling a particularly vivid experience with his former junky friends, Gately perhaps unsuccessfully tries to tell a doctor he is an addict but is apparently ignored. Shortly afterward, a "brisk clink of I.V. bottles" and a "slosh of bags" is overheard above him, and he even admits to himself that "part of him hoped they were putting Demerol in his I.V. without him knowing" (973). Shortly afterward, he "felt an upward movement deep inside that was so personal and horrible," and the narrative abruptly shifts into the aforementioned dream (974).

these men achingly abide by societal standards of masculine success, balancing intellectual strength with physical prowess much like Jack London's Martin Eden. Yet all the characters eventually realize that fulfilling the culture's expectation of male success does not ultimately leave them satisfied—that abiding by the cultural lie about achieving prescribed gender norms has not left them any less anxious, suicidal, or depressed. Thus, even though *Infinite Jest* is a humorous book filled with hilarious commentaries on human folly, it also reveals the tragic reality that gender ideologies often generate personal dissatisfaction during the quest for personal meaning. David Foster Wallace's own suicide after achieving his literary fame and its similarities with the situations of his characters has not gone unnoticed by critics.¹²⁶ Wallace's trouble sustaining his academic motivation because of nervous breakdowns, depression, and addiction to alcohol and marijuana—he withdrew numerous times from both Amherst and Arizona, and again at Harvard's graduate philosophy program—inspired Wallace to write fellow novelist Jonathan Franzen: “Right now, I am a pathetic and very confused young man, a failed writer at 28” (qtd. in Thomas 283). Wallace certainly did not end up a literary failure by any measurable standard, but it is noteworthy and tragically ironic that the writer found, much like his own characters (and also like Jack London), that his eventual success did not end his quest for happiness and indeed might have instigated his tragic end. It is as if Wallace, too, were “impaled by [the] shock” that

¹²⁶ Eric Thomas, for instance, argues that while all the characters approximate Wallace's own personal struggles with addiction and depression, one minor character, Kate Gompert, most closely mirrors Wallace's struggle with psychotic depression. While Gompert is “a micro-presence” relative to the more major events, Thomas asserts, she “allows us entry into macro-themes of addiction and depression that govern the larger movement of the novel,” especially those concerning the Incandenza brothers and Don Gately (271).

success did not grant the “meaning” he thought it would have; he perhaps was himself a victim of a myopic script about gender that told him how to achieve personal happiness.

Other recent narratives more explicitly celebrate failure as liberation from the constraints of gender norms and are more optimistically understood as the beginning of a quest to find new avenues of personal fulfillment. Perhaps the best example of such a narrative is the film *Little Miss Sunshine* (2006). Judith Halberstam has usefully celebrated this film that uses gendered failure as a way to redefine social norms. The film satirizes a fairly strange manifestation of the American obsession with female beauty: the junior beauty pageant. It follows Olive, a determined and spunky girl who discovers she has qualified for such a beauty pageant in California. Olive’s parents, despite their relative poverty, decide to take the family on a road trip in a dilapidated Volkswagen in order to support her. The family is a collection of misfits—Olive’s gay, suicidal Proust scholar uncle, Frank, her Nietzsche-obsessed brother, Dwayne, who takes a vow of silence to achieve his dream to become a test pilot, and her hard-partying grandfather, who eventually dies of a heroin overdose en route to the pageant—that mirror Olive in their own eccentric embodiments of personal and gender identity. When the family arrives in California, they realize the enormity of the competition: dressed like miniature supermodels, Olive’s fellow contestants are eerily pretty relative to the plain, somewhat overweight Olive. While the family initially encourages her to drop out because they fear she will be humiliated, her mother encourages the rest of the family to let Olive’s personality shine in the spotlight. Her performance, a parodic dance set to James Brown’s “Super Freak,” horrifies the audiences and the judges alike through her exaggerated hypersexualized gestures, intended to dish out a hyperbolic version of a

typical pageant dance. In turn, it displays a biting critique of an industry that encourages young girls to fit a myopic standard of beauty and character at an impressionable age. Pleased with Olive's performance and the message it sent, the family returns home, each member feeling satisfied in their own way. Though Olive's performance satirizes the pageant's bizarre fetishization of young femininity, the men in the narrative also come to realize the significance of Olive's performance and use its message to revitalize their own self images as failed, neglected men. Frank and Dwayne especially seem to connect; scrawny, poor, intellectual, and, in one case, homosexual, the two men are inspired by Olive's flagrant exhibition of self-acceptance and learn to accept their own identities as wonderful failures, as unapologetic, unique nonconformists. Dwayne, wishing he could sleep through high school and wake up when he is eighteen, receives a half-hearted lecture filled with black humor about Proust from Frank: "[He was a] total loser. Never had a real job. Unrequited love affairs. Gay. Spent 20 years writing a book almost no one reads. But he's also probably the greatest writer since Shakespeare. Anyway...he gets down to the end of his life, and he looks back and decides that all those years he suffered, those were the best years of his life, 'cause they made him who he was. All those years he was happy? You know, total waste. Didn't learn a thing. So, if you sleep until you're 18... Ah, think of the suffering you're gonna miss." The lesson, while deeply humorous and delivered with an almost complete lack of conviction on the part of the already-despondent Frank, has a kind of resonance for Dwayne, who learned during the trip to the pageant that he was colorblind, and would thus not be able to pursue his dream of becoming a fighter pilot. While Dwayne initially has a mental breakdown upon learning of his colorblindness and calls his parents and sister "losers,"

invoking all of their respective shortcomings, he changes his tune after Olive's performance. Talking with Frank on a pier, Dwayne seems to recall Frank's lesson about the virtue of facing such false scrutiny and declares, "You know what? Fuck beauty contests. Life is one fucking beauty contest after another. School, then college, then work...you do what you love, and fuck the rest." Thus, Olive's beauty pageant excess becomes a kind of metaphor for the life of the misfit which is also ultimately exemplified in Frank and Dwayne: people who pursue their dreams by turning gender policing into mere background noise amid authentic self-expression.

However, *Little Miss Sunshine*'s message should not be read as a typical depiction of masculinity and failure in the present era, but an atypically optimistic one. Like the characters in the fiction of Frank Norris, the failure label still carries a more destructive message for some men determined to abide by prescribed gender norms. Indeed, my chapter on the works of Frank Norris was inspired by my interest, in large part, with the recent escalation in mass shootings, in acts of terrorism, and other acts of violence generally perpetrated by those who deem themselves failures—fired men, rejected men, imprisoned men, embittered and isolated men-- who felt ashamed and humiliated and come to accuse the world at large for such feelings. Many acts of violence today are still perpetrated by embittered men who feel they have become voiceless, like Timothy McVeigh. While McVeigh's terrorism is often read, not incorrectly but perhaps a bit myopically, as entirely politically motivated, others have read his bombing of Oklahoma City as symptomatic of a toxic masculinity.¹²⁷ We also

¹²⁷ John Pettegrew, for instance, suggests that McVeigh's diary entries two months before the bombing, in which the terrorist asserts that his mind has "shifted from the intellectual to the animal" are reflective of a "pathology that bifurcates thinking into

see premeditated acts of violence by failed men against either strangers (especially homosexuals), domestic partners, or peers who have come to stand in for the society that the men feel has insulted them. Some male-perpetrated acts of violence are spurred by an often-vague sense of rejection by women, by fellow students or employees, or by teachers or bosses. Even if the actual violent acts themselves don't appear to be personal, the victims often stand in for an abstract sense of society "out there" that has humiliated them and made them feel less powerful.

For psychiatrist James Knoll, the popularity of the *Kill Bill* (2003-04) and *Death Wish* series (1974-94), and other revenge fantasy films evoke Greek myths and the narratives of Shakespeare and "speak to the public's fascination with, and indeed their delight in, 'the sweet taste of payback'" in the face of humiliation or a threat to the ego (89). He asserts that these narratives mirror the real-life male figure of retribution that he deems the "Pseudocommando," or a man "driven by feelings of strong personal anger and resentment" toward society, citing the Virginia Tech shooter, and Charles Whitman as quintessential examples (87). The pseudocommando's reactions to feelings of "intolerable powerlessness and humiliation" from an "Other" (a governmental body, a familial relation, a bully), Knoll continues, result from his feeling of having been denied his right to personal honor (89). As I have discussed in my chapter on Norris, violent men that experience shame and humiliation often feel like failures, in that they often think they have been rejected or socially isolated. Some thus turn to violence in

realms of reason and instinct and, in turn, leads to a regressive sequence from conscious control to animalistic aggressiveness" (1). This pathology is something I addressed at length in my chapter on Norris, and Pettegrew's commentary on McVeigh is thus a quite disturbing indication that some form of post-Darwinian atavism continues as a validation or explanation for male violence today.

order to reclaim their stolen dignity. The pseudocommando, dressed in high-tech body armor, combat helmets, and legally purchased semi-automatic weapons, might be deemed our modern iteration of passionate manhood, which is bolstered by a culture that turns its mass-shooters into inadvertent celebrities by probing into their every motivation and in turn inspiring more “copycat” events by men with similar revenge fantasies.¹²⁸

David Graeber has a particularly interesting economic reading of financial failure that could lend even more insight into the pseudocommando phenomenon. Graeber feels honor is tied to a sense of both figurative and literal debt within capitalism, rendering any financially driven sense of male violence suddenly more personal due to the male obligation to provide for one’s family (175). Considering the relation money has to power, the ability to exercise it, and the ability to claim it throughout history, Graeber wonders if the fact that an indebted man is sacrificing a bit of himself and his power to take out a loan has any implications for a contemporary period that is defined by large quantities of debt: “Some of the most genuinely archaic forms of money we know about appear to have been use precisely as measures of honor and degradation: that is, the value of money was, ultimately, the value of the power to turn others into money” (171). Sandage seems to support Graeber’s thesis when he analyzes the economic language of debt which men still unconsciously adopt when confronting success and failure: “we ‘take stock’ of how we ‘spend’ our lives, take

¹²⁸ See Loren Coleman’s *The Copycat Effect: How the Media and Popular Culture Trigger the Mayhem in Tomorrow’s Headlines*, pp. 1-5. Specifically, he redefines a sociologist David P. Phillip’s conception of the “*Werther effect*,” and calls it the “copycat effect” in order to reveal “the power of the mass [media] and culture to create an epidemic of similar behaviors,” like workplace violence, suicides, and, most specifically, mass shootings (1-2).

‘credit’ for our gains, or try not to end up ‘third rate’ or ‘good for nothing’ ...Someday, we hope, ‘the bottom line’ will show that we ‘amount to something.’ By this kind of talk, we ‘balance’ our whole lives, not just our accounts” (265). Graeber further observes that even today “our political and legal ideas really are founded on the logic of slavery,” in that most humans still have to spend every waking moment gaining a semblance of honor (money) through daily work to pay off creditors (210-11). Political theorist Maurizio Lazzarato makes a similar claim when he asserts that debt “is the archetype of social relations” in the twenty-first century and “introduces power differentials between social groups and redefines money, since debt is immediately present as a command, as the power of destruction/creation over the economy and society” (33). While neither Graeber nor Lazzarato specifically make a connection between debt and contemporary, financially- motivated male retaliation, the former author observes that men have been socially constructed to defend honor through violence throughout history (166). It is not a stretch to conclude that a society that believes debt is tied directly to power and a sense of self-worth can only exacerbate an already-systemic problem with the construction of male gender norms as it pertains to honor and violence.

However, there are also reasons to be cautiously optimistic that resistant masculinities, unafraid to question the failure label, will continue to proliferate. The so-called “slacker” Millennials, as right-wing pundits like to call them, for instance, were the agents behind the recent Occupy Wall Street movement and other similar contemporary protest movements. While some critics have observed that movement participants reproduced elements of domestic and economic gender power relations,

others have argued that the movement held men and women within their ranks who actively negotiated gender normative actions while seeking to challenge the subordination of democratic interests in favor of industrial agendas.¹²⁹ This nonviolent movement has served to usher in an important cultural dialogue about the ethics of economic inequality and about the values embedded within corporate capitalism that actively construct gender norms. Some men motivated by similar political values argue that if masculine failure means that one should want to clock out of the workplace at shift's end instead of working overtime, or if it means shunning those weekend commitments in order to grow a personally enriching connection as a father to one's children, then one should embrace a re-definition of failure. Such critics argue that a re-conceptualization of normative labels like failure and success may lead to a healthy and fulfilling life for contemporary men, especially for those overly concerned about conforming to an expected gender role within corporate capitalism.¹³⁰ More crucially, I

¹²⁹ Wanda Vradi has argued that the Occupy movement, while not “openly feminist,” “nevertheless borrowed many of the lessons feminists have developed since the 1970s,” like egalitarianism, decentered power within decision-making, and placing value on social bonds (262). Likewise, while also pointing out the Occupy movement also harbored an “ethos of masculinized resistance,” Molly Talcott and Dana Collins observe that instances of “feminist and decolonial resistance” were common (485). They interestingly note that while many Occupy encampments “were experienced as masculine spaces” due to the “patterned dominance of white male voices at the general assemblies,” which undoubtedly replicates conversational male dominance in most public discourse, they also observed that some of the signs and markers of resistance included “masculinist caricatures of both corporate culture and the police against which a sometimes equally masculinist protest would direct its angst” (493). Though they mean to reveal these protests as another instance of masculine dominance over female and colonial voices, I think it can be more optimistically viewed as manifestations of internal struggle, of progressive men conditioned to be aggressive and angry confronting an equally aggressive, angry representation of hegemonic masculinity that lauds very different socioeconomic values.

¹³⁰ Ralph LaRossa importantly observes that men during the twentieth century began to re-evaluate fatherhood as something central to the lives of some men, even if it meant

would argue that some men are eschewing the gendered values embedded in present day economic discourse by recognizing that re-inventing forms of personal or political fulfillment often prevents literal and systemic violence.¹³¹ Thus, while gender and economic norms still overwhelmingly inform present ideologies about success and failure, there is reason to be hopeful that the aforementioned value shifts will one day change the gender-imposed expectations that often circumscribe a subject's quest for personal meaning. However, I am not naïve, and I realize that the desire to circumvent capitalist values is certainly not a new battle. Herbert Marcuse, a member of the Frankfurt School, re-quoted poet and philosopher Friedrich Schiller to make a similar point about the current state of mankind under capitalism. It is a poignant lament from 1794, and its striking agelessness is something Marcuse himself perhaps recognized when he re-used it in 1955. It is with this same recognition that I repeat it here, as a fitting end to this dissertation:

Enjoyment is separated from labor, the means from the end, exertion from recompense. Everlastingly chained to a single little fragment of the Whole, man himself develops into nothing but a fragment; everlastingly in his ear the monotonous sound of the wheel that he turns, he never develops the harmony of

sacrificing labor hours, though he rightly admits that the breadwinner vision of masculinity is still very much normative (32-40). Concentrating on the late twentieth century and expanding in some form on LaRossa's ideas, Helena Wahlstrom observes how contemporary fiction has intervened into the overall discussion about "new fatherhood" and the surrounding economic implications (21-33).

¹³¹ Bob Connell agrees, stating that reshaping dominant masculinities and reducing "masculine violence" requires intervention on numerous personal but also economic fronts (6). "Neo-liberalism speaks a gender-neutral language of 'markets, 'individuals,' and 'choice,' but has an implicit view of masculinity," Connell states (4). "The 'individual' of neoliberal theory," he elaborates, "has the attributes and interests of a male entrepreneur" who represents the "basis" of a hegemonic masculinity centered on literal and metaphoric violence through "competition" (4).

his being, and instead of putting the stamp of humanity upon his own nature, he becomes nothing more than the imprint of his occupation, of his specialized knowledge.¹³²

¹³² Quoted in Muller, 334. The original passage appears in Schiller's *On the Aesthetic Education of Mankind in a Series of Letters*, and is re-quoted by Marcuse in his *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud*.

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