2013

Gothic Slumming: Realist Writers and Gothic Texts in Progressive Era America

Gillian Nelson Bauer
Loyola University Chicago

Recommended Citation
http://ecommons.luc.edu/luc_diss/500

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses and Dissertations at Loyola eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Loyola eCommons. For more information, please contact ecommons@luc.edu.

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 License.
Copyright © 2013 Gillian Nelson Bauer
LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

GOTHIC SLUMMING:
REALIST WRITERS AND GOTHIC TEXTS IN
PROGRESSIVE ERA AMERICA

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

PROGRAM IN ENGLISH

BY
GILLIAN NELSON BAUER
CHICAGO, ILLINOIS
MAY 2013
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This project would not have been possible without the assistance and inspiration of the English Department faculty at Loyola University Chicago. Dr. Pamela Caughie provided me with the vocabulary I needed to discuss class in America, and challenged me to allow my dissertation to be as difficult as the subject matter warranted. Dr. Jeff Glover asked the hard questions and inspired me to think of the future implications of my project. Most importantly, I’d like to thank my director, Dr. Jack Kerkering, who has supported this dissertation since its inception in an ambitious, somewhat reckless independent study. Besides displaying unflagging faith in this project, Dr. Kerkering has helped me articulate my thoughts, brought complex issues into focus, and patiently encouraged me to find my voice.

Loyola University Chicago has funded my graduate studies generously. The five years of funding I received through a Dean’s Fellowship allowed me the time and resources I needed to develop this project from a few disconnected observations made through several courses into a complex argument. The Arthur J. Schmitt Foundation graciously provided me with a Dissertation Completion Fellowship for 2012-2013, which allowed me to focus exclusively on completing this dissertation. My research was enriched by three colleagues who shared their unpublished manuscripts with me; thank you to Dr. Rebecca Peters-Golden, Dr. Ann Mattis, and Dr. Julia Daniel for permission to cite your work here. I would also like to thank the research librarians and staff of the
Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley, for granting me access to the
Frank Norris Collection of Papers and Related Materials as I conducted research for
Chapter Three.

Finally, I’d like to thank the friends and family who helped me from the
beginning to the end of this process. To Liz Hanson and Julia Bninski: a scholar couldn’t
ask for a more supportive writing group. Your thoughtful commentary and substantive
suggestions guided me through the past two years. To the members of Glottal Attack:
thank you for making wonderful music with me, and for granting me an hour or so every
week to unwind. My brother Sean, sister Jana, and parents John and Penny never
wavered in their belief that I would succeed, and their enthusiasm convinced me, as well.
Finally, I’d like to thank my husband and best friend Jerry. My love, my cheering section,
and my advocate, thank you for helping me laugh through it all.
For Jerry
Fiction is the truth inside the lie. — Stephen King, *It*
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION: CLASSING THE GOTHIC/GOTHICIZING CLASS</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER ONE: EXPRESSING THE GOTHIC: PROGRESSIVE ERA CLASS ANXIETIES AND THE DYNAMICS OF GOTHIC REALISM</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER TWO: THE “INCORRUPTIBLE COSTODIANS” OF THE PAST: CLASS AND THE HAUNTED HOUSE IN EDITH WHARTON’S FICTION</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER THREE: “MANY OTHER KINDS OF MAN”: DOUBLES AND CROSS-CLASS EXPERIMENTATION IN FRANK NORRIS’S FICTION</td>
<td>189</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER FOUR: MODAL SEGREGATION AND THE CANONICAL FATE OF GOTHIC REALISM</td>
<td>255</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>322</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VITA</td>
<td>337</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

CLASSING THE GOTHIC/GOTHICIZING CLASS

Americans have a long history of avoiding the topic of social class. Our inability to articulate clearly what we mean by “class” in a democratic republic, or the extent to which it determines or defines the American experience, is a source of confusion, even terror, that finds its way into our cultural productions. In this Introduction, I contend that the gothic mode was employed in response to a proliferation of social concerns that surfaced during the Progressive Era, the moment at which “class” became simultaneously legible and markedly confused in America. Using media coverage of two historical “events” — the alleged birth of a Devil Baby at Chicago’s Hull House in 1913, and the capture of America’s first serial killer H. H. Holmes in 1895 — as case studies, I suggest that gothic language was deployed during this period to both express and control class tensions and anxieties. I then begin to account for the uncanny absence of critical discussion surrounding the close relationship between class and the gothic.¹ I outline various ways in which my project is problematized by definitional instability and by the

¹ In his 1919 essay “The Uncanny,” Freud defines the unheimlich, or uncanny, as encompassing opposites: “on the one hand, it means that which is familiar and congenial, and on the other, that which is concealed and kept out of sight” (375). By tracing definitive gradations of heimlich and unheimlich, Freud demonstrates that at their extremes, the two words merge into one another; that which is familiar becomes unfamiliar, and vice versa (377). The term unheimlich embodies contradiction, and as such is a useful term for describing both gothic phenomena and the contradictions of class in America.
invisibility of class to the middle class, which has generated a critical lacuna where discussions of this relationship should be. Finally, I detail why the gothic is that mode best suited to voice class anxieties in American fiction, arguing that its employment is one method by which writers could both efface class and make the reality of class in America visible.

Gothicizing Class: The Hull House Devil Baby and the Crimes of H. H. Holmes

Case Study 1

In the fall of 1913, a gothic drama unfolded on the steps of Hull House, a Settlement House designed to serve Chicago’s immigrant poor. A rumor began circulating that the house had taken in a “devil baby” abandoned by its immigrant parents. An onslaught of inquiries plagued Hull House, with visitor after visitor of all classes demanding to see the demon baby, rumored to be red skinned, with horns, tail, cloven feet, and a foul mouth.2 “For six weeks,” Jane Addams would later write, “the streams of visitors from every part of the city and suburbs to this mythical baby poured in

2 Although the most well known of the imps, the Hull House devil baby was certainly not the first (or last) such child allegedly to have been born to poor or immigrant parents in America. As early as May 1888 a similar rumor swept Cleveland, Ohio, where the evil child was supposedly born in Newburg, a Polish suburb. According to a report that made its way to the London, Middlesex Courier, police were called in to prevent residents from “lynching” the “family suspected of harboring the devil baby” (“A ‘Devil-Baby’” 18). According to Adam Selzer, the Cleveland Plain Dealer fabricated the story for its April Fool’s Edition in 1888 before it was picked up and reprinted as “true” in various other outlets (Chicago Unbelievable).

The story found its way to many cities, including Atlanta (where a tongue-in-cheek February, 1906 item from the Constitution located the baby in “downtown”), New York, and Washington DC, before arriving on the steps of Hull House in 1913. The Hull House story bears a strong resemblance to these earlier iterations of the same myth. While the details have changed, permutations of the devil baby myth persist into the present, most obviously in the novel and film Rosemary’s Baby and, more recently, in the Spanish horror film REC (2007) (along with its American re-make Quarantine [2008]).
all day long, and so far into the night that the regular activities of the settlement were almost swamped” (“Devil-Baby”). The popular press eventually took notice of the story, predominately in small town Midwestern newspapers with rural or working-class readerships, like the Emporia Daily Gazette and the Burlington Hawkeye, the latter of which provides a fairly detailed early version of the story in an article titled “Chicago Said to Have Devil Child”:

[T]he prospective mother said she would rather have a devil than a baby, her offspring already being seven…. The midwife showed the mother the baby. It had horns and a tail and it could talk. When the baby saw its mother it shook its finger at her and said: “You wanted a devil and you have got one. If you kill me six others will appear.” (1)

While stopping short of claiming the story is true, the article does note that, “the report is credited by thousands,” and doesn’t exactly deny the child’s existence with subtitles like “City Astounded by Report that Baby is Born with Horns and Tail,” and “THE WEST SIDE IS SEARCHED,” implying an organized official search for the devil baby. Even Addams believed there might be some truth to the story; she eventually hired detectives to trace its source and to look for a real deformed child born somewhere in the vicinity of Hull House, but to no avail (Addams, “Devil-Baby”).

Despite vague, sensational intimations of veracity, most early press coverage uses the devil-baby rumor as a means to maintain class distinctions by subtly assigning the monstrous story to the simpleminded urban poor or foreign. The Emporia Daily Gazette, for example, declares the tale a “medieval episode” circulating among “the ignorant people of Chicago” (“Medieval” 2). The story is an urban curiosity; it locates problems of
immigration, poverty, and ignorance elsewhere, far away from the quiet streets (and rational citizenry) of Emporia, Kansas.

As the *Hawkeye* reported it, the devil-baby was punishment for a mother who had too many children; the subtext of this earlier version of the tale might be urban overpopulation, poverty, hunger, or the latent threat of class conflict. After all, as Amy Lang has argued in *The Syntax of Class* (2006), in the late-nineteenth-century imagination, “the offspring of the newly named ‘tenement classes,’ long the objects of charitable attention, had already been recast in the imagination of the middle class as evidence of a growing and uncontrollable underclass” (Lang 14).³ Nineteenth-century discourse is marked by an intense anxiety, crystallized in the person of the tenement child, of class antagonism. The Devil Baby might be read as a metaphor for the malevolent force lying dormant in the “dangerous classes” of cities, giving new meaning to its cry that “[i]f you kill me six others will appear.” A tenement hydra, the devil baby encapsulates the growing threat an unstoppable, monstrous underclass posed to the middle class. Implicit in the anxieties over the growing numbers of urban poor is the potential for class uprising, a full-scale rebellion in which the middle class is outnumbered and overthrown by a violent and clamoring underclass. The tenement child, figured as a threat to order, safety, stability, and civility, is, in the end, symbolically indistinguishable from the devil baby at Hull House.

---

³ Lang notes that street children, and particular boys, were perceived as a latent threat to social order: “the danger of the street urchin — overwhelmingly a male figure despite the ungendered term — lay in his propensity to violence…. [B]oys of the street were imagined to be active agents of social disruption and potential agents of class warfare” (22).
Like any good folk tale, the details of the devil baby story evolved as the tale made its way into wider circulation. By 1914 more prestigious venues like *The Washington Post* picked up the story. In these more reputable papers, the veracity of the tale was no longer in question, nor was the story used openly to denigrate the urban poor or foreign. Instead, the *Post* reported on the purpose of the story rather than the possibility of its truth. In a widely circulated item, reprinted in the *Post* and recounting Addams’s addressing of the tale to the General Federation of Women’s Clubs, the Hull House devil baby achieves a different kind of symbolic resonance: “The story was told in connection with a plea that club women extend the hand of fellowship to immigrant women, especially the older women. Miss Addams said that the origin of fairy stories seems to have been with primitive women, who invented them to influence to gentler ways their brutal lords and masters” (“Devil Baby a Myth” 4).

It is difficult to see, given the details of the *Hawkeye’s* account, how the tale could be construed as containing a subtext of domestic violence. In its earlier form, the mother, not the father, is culpable for bringing the devil into the world (the *Hawkeye* even casts the father as a hero who defeats evil by killing the demon spawn). By 1914, however, the story in its widely circulated form blamed the father for the arrival of the devil baby rather than the mother, and in so doing shifted the focus of the story from class to gender. According to Addams’s own account of the incident, there were two versions of the story: in one, the child was born to a “pious Italian girl” and her atheist husband after he “tore a holy picture from the bedroom wall, saying that he would quite as soon have a devil in his house as that”; in the other, “the father of six daughters had said before
the birth of a seventh child that he would rather have a devil in the house than another
girl’’ (“Devil-Baby”). In these re-tellings, the class into which the child was born is less
important than its erring parent’s (i.e. the father’s) gender, a shift that is emphasized by
Addams’s report on the story in 1914. By the time Addams told the story to the
Federation of Woman’s Clubs, and later in a thoughtful article for *The Atlantic* in 1916,
the devil baby story had become a vehicle for expressing the travails of the wronged and
helpless immigrant woman.4

The symbolic thrust of the tale could only be achieved by changing the gender of
the erring parent; if the devil baby myth exposes the ills inflicted on women by their
brutish husbands, it must be the father, not the mother, who invites the devil into her
womb.5 Addams skillfully retells the story in a manner most beneficial to her cause and
with utmost sensitivity to her audience; a poor woman who doesn’t want/cannot afford
any more children would have fed into class stereotypes and anxieties that might have
alienated her largely female audience. Thus, while Addams recognizes that the story is
one of oppression, in order to appeal to her audience of middle-class women for
sympathy (and funding) she emphasizes that it is a tale invented by and for women. She
assigns a particular meaning to the tale as part of a woman’s tradition of protective and
didactic storytelling:

---

4 Addams also makes extensive use of the “devil baby” story in *The Long Road of
Women’s Memory* (1917) and *The Second Twenty Years at Hull House* (1930).

5 The gender subtext of the story was also emphasized when the devil-child was assigned
a gender. In the 1913–14 accounts the child is un-gendered, referred to as an “it.” In the
1916 *Atlantic* article, however, Addams refers to the child throughout as a “he.”
The story of the Devil Baby, evolved to-day as it might have been centuries before in response to the imperative needs of anxious wives and mothers, recalled the theory that woman first fashioned the fairy-story, that combination of wisdom and romance, in an effort to tame her mate and to make him a better father to her children, until such stories finally became a rude creed for domestic conduct, softening the treatment that men accorded to women. (“Devil-Baby”)

I do not accuse Addams of any intentional sleight-of-hand in the tale’s revision; after all, she was aware of her middle-class female audience whose sympathy her continued operation of Hull House required. Moreover, it would be impossible to tell exactly when the shift in culpability from mother to father took place in re-tellings of the story. Rather, I trace in the evolution of the tale from a smaller, more rural readership to a larger, more affluent readership not only a shift in responsibility for the devil child, but an evacuation of the tale’s class subtext. What is at stake in this shift is a thematic transformation; a tale of class oppression is re-written as a parable of gender oppression to render it more palatable, and less threatening, for middle-class audiences alarmed by the urban underclass.

Unsurprisingly, the later version of the devil-baby myth proved to be the most enduring, in part because print media cemented Addams’s interpretation as definitive, and also because it was printed in more reputable periodicals. Once Addams had told her version of the tale it seemingly foreclosed further alterations. (Indeed, when I took a “Haunted Chicago” ghost tour in 2010 I heard Addams’s version of the tale, with emphasis on the erring father and wronged mother — and of course on the devil child, who is said to haunt the attic of Hull House to this day.) The more enduring version of the story, which drew attention away from class oppression and toward gender
oppression, also served a particular function for its audience. That function was partially to appeal to female readers and philanthropists on grounds of gender solidarity, but it also served to remove the story’s latent threat of class antagonism. Class anxieties drive this revision (and its general acceptance as the definitive version of the story), shifting the focus away from class and toward gender, thereby foreclosing the tale’s implicit threat of class consciousness for middle-class readers, not only the consciousness of oppression that might result in an underclass uprising, but the consciousness of middle-class readers of their own class position, as well.

I consider the evolution of the Hull House devil baby story a hermeneutic parable, exemplary of a consistent move away from class in the stories America tells itself about our culture. The reasons for this shift emanate from Progressive Era concerns over a vertiginous and shifting social landscape. The effects these anxieties had on both the kind of literature produced during the Progressive Era, and the way in which critics today interpret that literature, form the critical basis of this dissertation. In the next chapter I track how class anxieties inhere in late-nineteenth-century American fiction, in particular through the interaction of the gothic and realist modes and through the conscious use of the gothic by realist writers. Here, however, I’d like to suggest that the evolution of the details of the Hull House devil baby story illustrates an American tradition of eliding class in favor of other interpretive models like race and gender. While initially the tale utilized the gothic to render the poor monstrous, thereby distancing them from the middle-class reader, the removal of the class content from the tale and the subsequent focus on gender over class disarticulated the tale’s gothic content from its potential to
express terrifyingly real economic conditions. Because the gothic tale of the devil baby was attributed to the “medieval” minds of the poor, the story’s evolution also exposes a modal hierarchy that relegates the gothic and sensational to the undervalued realm of popular fiction. Both phenomena will be explored in this dissertation, often in tandem, as I explore how the consistent move away from both class and the gothic in critical interpretations of Progressive Era fiction is a function of middle class *habitus* and anxieties.⁶

**Case Study 2**

The Devil Baby story, a gothic tale of excess and deprivation, was divested of its class content in middle-class periodicals to mitigate its subtextual threats of class antagonism, violent uprising, and an encroaching underclass. As another Progressive Era media event demonstrates, the gothic could also be called upon to describe true events, particularly when those events threatened to result in middle-class class consciousness. In the case of America’s first serial killer H. H. Holmes, the media gothicized a real tale of terror.

H. H. Holmes succeeded in committing between 20 and 200 murders between 1888 and 1894 (the exact number is unknown, although Holmes admitted to 27). Born Herman Mudgett to a middle-class family in New Hampshire, Holmes graduated from medical school before determining that insurance fraud was a more lucrative path to success. Holmes committed many of his crimes in what was later dubbed by the media as

---

⁶ *Habitus* is the term coined by sociologist Pierre Bourdieau to describe “necessity internalized and converted into a disposition that generates meaningful practices and meaning-giving perceptions” (*Distinction* 170); he suggests that class practices and behaviors, including taste and desire, become internalized necessities.
his “Murder Castle,” a hotel of horrors he built on Chicago’s south side just before the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition. He succeeded in securing funds to build the hotel (through a variety of fraudulent schemes and cons), covering up his crimes, and luring in his (mostly female) victims largely because he “conjur[ed] an impression of wealth and achievement” (Larson 35). Truly a devil in disguise, Holmes cashed in on his middle-class privilege; “from the way he dressed and the money he gave … he certainly seemed like a man on the rise” (Larson 63). His middle-class appearance allowed him to commit minor cons (tapping into the city natural gas main and then concocting a scheme to sell the stolen gas back to the city, and selling fraudulent patent medicines, for example), bigamy (he was married to at least four different women under different aliases, and attracted one wife by claiming to be the nephew of a wealthy businessman, [Lindberg 71]), and, of course, an unknown number of murders, while relying upon his considerable charm to escape detection, and upon the decency and propriety of those who suspected him of wrongdoing (none of whom knew the extent of his crimes) to remain silent. While crimes of such magnitude would undoubtedly have evoked a media sensation regardless of the criminal’s class, beneath the exhaustive and lurid coverage runs a strain of disbelief that he could operate so long without being apprehended, that no one recognized the monster lurking inside this “model of virtuous manhood” (Lindberg 67). Holmes was a new kind of criminal, what today we would call a psychopath; he appeared, to most, to be an absolutely normal, ambitious, upwardly mobile businessman.
In a case of life imitating art, after Holmes was finally arrested in 1895 even the most upstanding newspapers employed gothic language to describe his crimes.\footnote{Despite its lurid appeal, the story of Holmes’s crimes is not well known. Beside David Framke’s rather ghoulish Hearst-backed history \textit{The Torture Doctor} (1975), Holmes was largely absent from public consciousness until the publication of Eric Larson’s \textit{The Devil in the White City} (2003), a popular history of Holmes’s crimes that casts the murderer as a real-life gothic counterpart to the rational “White City” of the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago. Even in a twenty-first century work of literary non-fiction, Holmes is depicted as a gothic villain. Larson’s work hopefully will spurn more rigorous scholarly interest in Holmes’s crimes.} It was not difficult, since Holmes’s activities do sound a bit like a stock gothic plot. As the scope of his crimes became more apparent, for example, the \textit{Chicago Daily Tribune} ran a piece called “No Jekyll, All Hyde” that summarized the charges against him. On August 18th, 1895, the \textit{Tribune} called Holmes a “Modern Bluebeard” whose “true character” was finally revealed with the discovery of the bizarre layout of the “Murder Castle.” The lurid piece, reprinted from the \textit{New York World}, includes a media-created blueprint of Holmes’s “Chamber of Horrors,” complete with features labeled “Mysterious Closed Room,” “The Death Shaft,” and “Room of the Three Corpses,” among other morbid descriptions.\footnote{The hotel, which was being remodeled as a museum of Holmes’s crimes, was severely damaged in a fire the next day, on August 19th, 1895. Despite widespread reports that the building burned to the ground, much of it actually survived the fire and was used until the 1930’s, when it finally was demolished and replaced with a Post Office. The common misconception that the hotel dramatically and mysteriously burned down just after Holmes’s capture, repeated even by Larson (366), does make for the better and more gothic story, so it is unsurprising that the less factual account endures.} A tale of excesses, dark secrets, distressed damsels, labyrinthine “castles” with hidden chambers, secret identities, and bizarre plot twists, the monstrous career of H. H. Holmes is difficult to describe without resorting to gothic language. Holmes even thought of himself as a Jekyll/Hyde figure, writing in his confession that “I am convinced
that since my imprisonment I have changed woefully and gruesomely from what I was formerly in feature and figure … I believe fully that I am growing to resemble the devil” (qtd. in Larson 385).

Behind these gothic accounts, and perhaps as masked by them, runs a Progressive Era anxiety over the disarticulation of appearance from identity, a connection very much imbricated with concerns over destabilizing social boundaries. While not exactly class passing (he was, after all, by education and birth a member of the middle class, even if he was masquerading as a respectable businessman), Holmes exploited the faith of those around him in a stable relationship between a classed appearance and a moral identity. The frenzied media attention to the case attests to its power to tap into contemporary anxieties that that relationship was beginning to decay. Moreover, the existence of a middle-class criminal at all was somewhat of a novelty in the late nineteenth century, particularly to a middle-class readership accustomed to reading of crimes committed only by the very rich or the very poor, and who, subscribing to the pseudo-science of phrenology and nascent criminal profiling, were predisposed to correlate criminality with poverty.9

The Holmes case exposed not only the middle class’s reliance on appearance to establish class status, but also its investment in the ideology of upward mobility. His is an exceedingly American horror story. Holmes committed many of his crimes for financial gain. As one of his wives later put it, “Ambition has been the curse of my husband’s

9 The unusual spectacle of the middle-class criminal, and the middle-class observer’s uncanny relationship to him, is also the subject of Frank Norris’s short story “Little Dramas of the Curbstone,” which I discuss in greater detail in Chapter Three below.
life…. He wanted to attain a position where he would be honored and respected. He wanted wealth” (qtd. in Larson 64). His crimes and distorted ambition mask a twisted narrative of upward mobility. No matter how gothic his “Murder Castle” was rendered, nor how villainous Holmes was depicted in sensational media coverage, he was nevertheless a decidedly middle-class monster.

Holmes’s story feeds into a disturbing narrative of the American Dream, one that, as Gwendolyn Foster has recognized, encourages acquisitiveness accompanied by ruthlessness and violence as a means of securing upward mobility (60). H. H. Holmes’s financial success and his maniacal means of securing it are both offensive and strangely irresistible; his cunning and ingenuity are troublingly admirable. An attenuated strain of acclaim runs through the Chicago Tribune contention that, “Endowed with brilliant business talents Holmes’ mind was so warped that he chose dishonest methods for the acquirement of fortune, when honesty would have been more successful” (“No Jekyll” 3). Holmes’s story offers a dark counterpart to the middle-class narrative of upward mobility, exposing the true and often bloody human cost of acquiring money, power, and position.

By casting Holmes as a gothic villain; that is, by describing Holmes and his crimes in lurid, sensational, and grotesque terms, media accounts rendered him foreign, monstrous, and Other, thus distancing Holmes from the middle-class readers he so uncomfortably resembled. The gothic has long been understood in terms of its ability to distance readers from real horrors. Jerrold Hogle writes that “the Gothic has come … to deal, as one of its principle subjects, with how the middle class dissociates from itself,
and then fears, the extremes of what surrounds it: the very high or the decadently aristocratic and the very low or the animalistic, working-class, underfinanced, sexually deviant, childish, or carnivalesque …” (“Gothic” 9). Hogle’s contention, based on Julia Kristeva’s work, that the Gothic is fundamentally concerned with the abject, that is, with rendering unfamiliar “whatever threatens us with anything like this betwixt-and-between” (“Gothic” 7), nevertheless fails to recognize that the middle class is the the betwixt-and-between. In other words, he fails to recognize that the middle class might render itself monstrous and Other, as well.

Hogle invokes middle-class anxieties as important to the gothic but denies the existence of middle-class monsters like Holmes. As the gothicization of his crimes suggests, the gothic is not only concerned with extremes of rich and poor, high and low, but with the undefined area in-between. It is from within this gray area that a modern day middle-class villain like H. H. Holmes finds cultural traction. Holmes blindsided the middle class by presenting it, for the first time, with a monster of its own creation, one that could not satisfactorily be expelled to the freaks of the upper or lower classes and that could only be expressed through the gothic.

The gothic treatment was both a predictable response to Holmes’s crimes, and a means for expressing some of the unspeakable truths about class in America that those crimes evoked. Both his story and the evolving media coverage of the Hull House Devil Baby exemplify how the gothic has been used to control, veil, and yet nevertheless express American middle-class anxieties. The devil baby tale cloaked the threat of class antagonism and the reality of urban privation in gothic terms, and was doubly distanced
from its class content when the subtext of the tale was revised to reflect gender rather than class conflict. Holmes’s crimes threatened to make the middle class visible and class conscious; the recasting of Holmes as a monstrous villain signifies both an attempt to render his middle-class behaviors invisible through gothic language, and a deficient vocabulary for describing and understanding class.

**Classifying the Gothic: Defining the Indefinable**

Like the historical media accounts outlined above, the Progressive Era fictional works under discussion in this dissertation all make use of the gothic to both obscure and express class anxieties. These works were produced by highly regarded realist writers during a period when the critical esteem of gothic fiction was on the decline in America, suggesting that the gothic served a heretofore critically unexplored purpose for these authors. Critical discussions of these works rarely take on both their class content and their gothic form. This combination of qualities — the addressing of a somewhat taboo subject (class) through a critically devalued mode (the gothic) — consistently has resulted in the neglect or misinterpretation of these works.

While the dynamic outlined above somewhat accounts for the critical neglect of works that utilize the gothic to explore issues of social class, I believe that the very instability of both terms also accounts for this critical lacuna. Since “class” is such a

---

10 There are many factors in the general decline in popularity of supernatural and gothic literature around the turn of the century, foremost among them is what Jeffrey Weinstock refers to as “a decline in the respectability of the supernatural tale — to which one must also add the changing configuration of the literary marketplace” (194). Weinstock refers to the “dichotomization of literature during this period into ‘serious’ and ‘popular’ and the disparagement of particular genres as lowbrow” as one factor in the decline of female-penned ghosts stories (196), but I believe his contention applies to the fate of gothic fiction in general. I take up this topic in greater detail in Chapter Four.
contested term in American history it would be untenable for me to assert that each
author or work in this study approaches class from the same political viewpoint or
addresses class anxieties utilizing the same gothic tropes and conventions. Instead, I hope
to demonstrate that the very instability of class discourse in America lends itself to the
gothic mode, since the gothic, in definition and application, is itself unstable and
contested.

What is terrifying or horrifying is culturally and historically contingent, and
critical attempts that understand the gothic as a fixed set of identifiable stock criteria are
reductive and exclusionary. The gothic, to paraphrase Anne-Claire La Reste, destabilizes
the boundaries of other modes like realism and naturalism by interrogating their claims to
realistic presentation (41). That instability might inhere in any number of stock or non-
stock gothic features through which real class concerns might be gauged.

Moreover, I do not recognize these authors as speaking for a particular group or
class. Since class is a nebulous and poorly defined term, I resist assigning any author the
power to speak coherently for his or her class. As Pierre Bourdieu observed, “strategies
and trajectories of writers tend to be highly individual … and highly differentiated, even
among agents of a similar social background” (Field 12). Rather than suggest that each
author in this study has the power to speak for a class or shares the same anxieties over
social change, I apply to each author and work a unique approach to both the gothic and
class. At particular fictional (and sometimes non-fictional) moments, each author under
discussion deploys the gothic to express class anxieties, but the extent to which they
share the same anxieties as others in their class or culture is a sociological rather than a
literary concern and therefore somewhat outside the scope of this project. While I am interested in the sociological milieu that produced this literature, my readings remain grounded in literature; the questions I ask are literary rather than sociological or historical, although I draw from both fields in my analyses.

**Critical Complications I: Defining the (American) Gothic**

While in the next chapter I define both the historical milieu and characteristics of the type of literature I have termed *gothic realism* (hereafter not italicized), in this Introduction I recognize the need to acknowledge the conceptual difficulties of this project. Foremost is the inherent instability of its theoretic underpinnings. “Class,” and “gothic” are both highly contested terms, particularly in relation to American culture and letters. While it is beyond the scope of this project to provide a full-scale overview of the historical contests over the meaning behind these terms, I believe it important to note that both are joined by their theoretic and definitional ambiguity, and that their inherent instability as critical frameworks suggests a heretofore unexplored consonance.

In most contemporary works on the gothic, it has become *de rigueur* to acknowledge a definitional conundrum, and in some cases to incorporate the connotative confusion as itself a defining gothic characteristic. Reacting to early critical definitions

---

11 The “literary” is no less contested, as groundbreaking work during the 1980’s attests. As such, I am indebted to David Reynolds’s *Beneath the American Renaissance* (1988) and Jane Tompkins’s *Sensational Designs* (1986). Although serving different ends, both studies revalue nineteenth-century literature by returning works to what Reynolds calls their “socioliterary contexts” and thereby deconstructing our contemporary notions of literariness (7).
that reduced the genre to a set of stock features, i.e. the “laundry-list” approach to defining the gothic, some of these more current theories border on an all-inclusiveness that threatens to render the moniker ‘Gothic’ almost meaningless. More nuanced approaches, those most useful for my approach, consider the gothic as a culturally contingent and evolving mode that addresses the fears and anxieties of a particular time and place. In *Gothic* (1996), for example, Fred Botting takes a chronological approach, tracing gothic fiction from its inception and as it has evolved over time. He thereby forecloses the need for a stable definition of the term. Without laying out strict boundaries, Botting usefully defines gothic fiction as that through which “certain stock features provide the principal embodiments and evocations of cultural anxieties” that by

---

12 For a recent overview of the critical contest over the boundaries of the gothic, see Jarlath Killeen’s introduction in *Gothic Literature 1825–1914* (2009). Killeen adopts a “flexible and inclusive understanding of the Gothic,” arguing that:

‘purifying’ the genre [as some critics have attempted] by ring-fencing it through a very strict definition and then evicting texts which fail to fit this definition, does not take full cognisance of the sheer generic openness of the Gothic and its ability to migrate and adapt to formal circumstances far removed from its ‘original’ manifestations in the late eighteenth century. (3)

13 The latter offenders, as Killeen notes, emerge from the post-structuralist moment of the 1970’s and 1980’s. During this period, the gothic came to be associated with all forms of rebellion and transgression, a viewpoint predicated on the manufacture of a bourgeois, conservative subject (the Victorian), and his conservative literature (realism) against which the gothic author rebelled. The problem with this argument is that it necessitated the fallacious invention of a stock Victorian subject. Just as the Victorians were not as repressed (sexually or otherwise) as such critical interpretations require, their fiction, realism, was not always conservative. Thus, “Although the realist novel does tend to promote middle-class power, this was often a middle class intent on *undermining* the status quo rather than endorsing it, a middle class trying to understand change, not prevent change from taking place” (Killeen 9). I will discuss some of these post-structuralist works in my discussion of modal interaction in Chapter One below.
necessity change depending on cultural or temporal needs (2). Thus what might be recognized as gothic in one time and place does not necessarily signify as (or will fail to produce the effects of) the gothic in another.

In *Gothic America* (1997), Teresa Goddu takes a similar approach. Goddu counters critical assessments that “classify it as an escapist form,” arguing that “[i]nstead of fleeing reality, the gothic registers its culture’s contradictions, presenting a distorted, not a disengaged, version of reality” (3). The gothic, she continues, “is extremely mutable. Cobbled together of many different forms and obsessed with transgressing boundaries, it represents itself not as stable but as generically impure” (5). Gothic characteristics and effects might, indeed *must* therefore inhere in works that are not otherwise considered gothic. While *Gothic America* is more concerned with gendered and especially raced readings of American gothic fiction, rather than in the “cultural contradictions” of class in America with which I am concerned, I agree with Goddu’s thesis that the American gothic (as opposed to the British gothic to which it is generally compared) is profoundly rooted in material and social reality. Even under the guise of stereotypical gothic trappings (haunted houses, ghosts, family secrets, etc.), the gothic expresses real anxieties specific to a particular place and time. Taking these more contingent approaches into account, throughout this project I employ a broad definition

---

14 Goddu theorizes that the American gothic articulates the dark side of American history, predominately its history of slavery and racial oppression. She assesses American gothic works as providing a voice for marginalized groups, namely women, African Americans, and southerners. That her groundbreaking work does not consider the American gothic as addressing class issues (nor does she mention class in America as a factor at all) speaks to the general neglect of class in gothic criticism, and to the general elision of class in favor of race and gender in American literary criticism.
of the gothic as a multivalent mode that, existing alongside of and often within other modes, expresses very real social and economic fears.

The gothic is difficult to define, but the American gothic has proven nearly impossible to delineate, in part because it is so often considered merely an offshoot or adaptation of a British model which itself is contested. The American gothic has been marginalized in several ways: as an inferior copy of the British gothic, as a mode primarily invested in psychological (rather than social) phenomena, or at its most extreme, as non-existent.

Historically, the American gothic has been segregated from its allegedly superior British (and sometimes German) forebears. Despite his recognition of the mode’s inherent multivalence, for example, in Gothic Literature 1825-1914 (2009) Jarlath Killeen applies the descriptor “gothic” only to British works. David Punter and Glynnis Byron, while acknowledging American authors as part of the gothic tradition in their expansive introductory volume The Gothic (2004), invoke the term “American gothic” infrequently and with no attempt at definition beyond noting that it might be considered “postcolonial gothic” in its reaction to the “European-ness” of the British model (54). Their historical overview of the gothic mode comes from an entirely British perspective. Howard Kerr, John Crowley, and Charles Crow shy away from the term almost entirely.

15 Given my recent experience at the Tenth Biennial Conference of the International Gothic Association in 2011, I feel I must qualify this statement a bit. The conference, held in Heidelberg, Germany, featured a broad range of scholarship on both British and American gothic, as well as scholarship on gothic works from many other countries including Japan and Germany. Nevertheless, British gothic (and British scholars of the gothic) dominated the conference. More tellingly, The International Gothic Association has never hosted a meeting in the United States.
in *The Haunted Dusk* (1983), an early assessment of American gothic, identifying an American tradition of “supernatural” rather than gothic fiction, or more specifically, arguing that American supernatural fiction is distinct both from the British gothic that preceded it and the psychological fiction that would absorb it in the early twentieth century.¹⁶

When it has been recognized as its own genre or mode, the American gothic frequently has been defined in its relation to or reflection of the late-nineteenth-century rise of psychoanalysis, and thereby void of historical or social ramifications. This reading was first suggested by Leslie Fiedler in *Love and Death in the American Novel* (1960), where he contends that American gothic fiction, from Charles Brockden Brown’s *Wieland* (1798) onward, is marked by anxiety and guilt over racial oppression and slavery. Fiedler’s definition has proven so enduring that it continues to influence assessments of the American gothic several decades later, most obviously in Goddu’s work and in Martin and Savoy’s *American Gothic: New Interventions in a National Narrative* (1988). In part, as Goddu explains, the critical tendency to associate American gothic with the purely psychoanalytic arises from the “national and critical myths that America and its literature have no history.” As a result, “If the British gothic is read in

---
¹⁶Kerr, Crowley and Crow’s argument is indebted to the work of Todorov, who in *The Fantastic* (1975) distinguishes between the uncanny (where apparently supernatural events are revealed to have natural explanations), marvelous (where the laws of reality are suspended), and fantastic (where the tension between supernatural and natural explanations cannot be resolved). They argue that American supernatural fiction belongs to the realm of the fantastic, as authors attempted to navigate contemporary “great debates between faith and doubt, religion and science, transcendentalism and positivism” (3).
social terms, the American gothic is viewed within psychological and theological rubrics” (9). While the American gothic is often psychological (as Henry James’s exploration of the alter ego in “The Jolly Corner” [1908] or Gilman’s exploration of female depression in The Yellow Wall-paper [1892] attest), the social implications of gothic literature written by Americans are often overlooked in favor of psychoanalytic treatments that focus on race or gender instead of class analysis.17

Perhaps such readings stem from the happy coincidence of the rise of psychoanalysis and post Civil War nationalism that attempted to identify what was unique about American literature. However, the inward-turning movement of critical theory on the American gothic also evidences a reticence to talk about class issues in America; the American gothic is generally assessed as reflecting internal trauma and repression rather than external material conditions. Class, which might allow for more fully articulated (and less doggedly psychoanalytic) considerations of the American

17 This tendency is especially apparent in the enduring critical interest in “Southern Gothic” fiction. Indeed, Southern Gothic has become almost metonymic for American gothic in contemporary criticism. Rebecca Peters-Golden claims that critical work on the gothic in the early twentieth century focused almost exclusively on Southern Gothic, and considers it proof of the “persistence of British gothic traditions even once the genre has moved to America…. In particular, the southern gothic evidences a similar past-orientation; where British gothics are often set in an emptied-out past, however, southern gothics are loaded by the weight of their regional and national histories” (8). Southern gothic is haunted by the history of slavery, racism, and war, a violent and repressed past that continues to irrupt in the present.

Southern Gothic, which encompasses everything from Poe’s short stories to Cormac McCarthy’s The Road (2006) and Robert Kirkman’s The Walking Dead (2003), is less a mode or subgenre than a method of reading the gothic as fundamentally concerned with repression. It is no surprise that the South has come to represent all that is repressed, backward, and atavistic in American culture and has thereby become a stand-in of sorts for the American gothic. The othering of the South, like the Othering of H. H. Holmes, is a strategy of the middle class to render its less-savory aspects strange and foreign.
gothic, and might provide the American gothic with its own set of unique social anxieties, is seemingly nowhere to be found. America is seemingly both history-less and class-less, psychoanalytic readings of American gothic suggest; its horrors can thereby only be psychological in nature. The relentlessly psychoanalytic approach to American gothic is therefore a form of critical masking that deflects attention from the full scope of cultural contradictions expressed by the American gothic.

Finally, as in The Haunted Dusk, a few critics have dealt with the difficulty of defining the American gothic by theorizing it away altogether. Since America does not have the haunted past of Europe and is void of ruined castles, this line of thinking suggests, then the gothic simply doesn’t exist here at all. Behind this type of reading lurks America’s literary inferiority complex, a sense that to be taken seriously, American literature must distance itself from all associations with the base or popular. These readings attempt to clarify and stabilize the gothic and the literary, usually by policing a strict boundary between them. The larger damage done by these readings is that of amputating gothic works from the bodies of work of canonized American writers, or of eliding the gothic in such works, thus foreclosing one avenue for understanding how these works engage the social issues and anxieties of their time. The gothic, “[a]ssociated with the hackneyed, the feminine, and the popular,” as Goddu writes, “lacks in respectability and hence [has been] quarantined from other literary forms” (5).

Critics have, on occasion, gone to untenable lengths to remove the stain of the gothic from American literature. For example, in “Charles Brockden Brown and the Use of Gothicism: A Reassessment,” Robert Hume attempts to prove that Charles Brockden
Brown was *not* a gothic writer as he is generally classified. Instead, Hume argues that Brown is a realist who occasionally employs gothic devices, but for whom “[e]ven in *Wieland*, the most ostentatiously Gothic of Brown’s novels, the trappings of terror and horror are employed not to work upon the reader but to produce reactions in the characters” (10). Hume’s unstated end is proving that Brown had a loftier purpose in his affective employment of gothic tropes. He argues that it is impossible to characterize Brown as a gothicist, in part because the term gothic is “exceedingly ill-defined” (10), but he nevertheless assumes that compared to other gothic writers of his time, Brown’s gothic displays a “radical dissimilarity” (11), and therefore cannot rightfully be grouped with the gothic of his peers. This contradiction aside, Hume’s argument offers evidence for the stigma of gothicism in American literature; he describes the gothic as “hoary” and its use in novels as “Gothic flummery” (13). His argument regarding *Wieland* actually supports my own contention that Brown is a gothic realist forbear. Neither “gothic” nor “realist” alone can encapsulate the profoundly strange nature of *Wieland*. Hume is not interested

---

18 *Wieland* details a strange and unnerving tale of madness. Haunted by disembodied voices, Theodore Wieland follows their command and murders his wife and children. His sister, Clara, who also has heard mysterious voices, is convinced that the enigmatic Carwin, a wanderer who recently appeared on the family’s land, is responsible for her brother’s madness. Carwin admits to being a biloquist, but insists that he did not instruct Theodore to kill his family, and that he appeared in Theodore’s house after the murders only to rescue Clara from her brother. The novel contains odd plot devices (biloquism and spontaneous combustion), meandering dead-end sub-plots, and conflicting points-of-view, making it nearly impossible to determine the cause of Theodore’s madness or whether Carwin is a hero or villain.

19 Jane Tompkins’s reading of *Wieland* also supports this theory. Tompkins asks us to reconsider *Wieland’s* seeming incoherence in order to understand the work as political commentary on a very real fear that the new Republic would not be able to survive in a “vacuum of authority” (54). Botting, too, reads the novel as gothic, adding that the
in understanding Brown’s gothic as part of an American tradition, however, but instead compares Brown’s work to that of his British contemporaries. He does not recognize an American gothic tradition at all.20

**Critical Complications II: Defining Class in America**

Like the gothic, the concept of “class” has long been contested, and especially so as it applies to American society. Both terms are unstable, but the stakes in the contest over “class” are much higher than those of a critical definition of the gothic, because “class” is fundamentally antithetical to American ideologies of equality and upward mobility. Stuart Blumin notes that contestations over the meaning and existence of class, and particularly the middle class, can be traced to the late eighteenth century.21 Strict or fully coherent definitions continue to elude us. In his study of the shifting meaning of “class” in American public discourse, Martin Burke argues that this “conundrum of ambivalence present in Wieland “reflects an anxiety about the constitution of American society itself” (117). An extension of these readings, according to my own understanding of gothic realism, would place Wieland as part of that group of texts in which gothic elements suggest an American ambivalence toward class relations. In its concern with the viability of the then-new republic, Wieland expresses the terrible dangers that might result from a “classless” society.

20 In “Parody and Dark Projections: Medieval Romance and the Gothic in McTeague” (1991), Susan Prothro McFatter makes a similar contention regarding Frank Norris’s naturalist novel. McFatter argues that Norris used the gothic mode ironically and parodically, demonstrating a self-conscious and “skillful interweaving of genres” (119). As in Hume’s argument vis-à-vis Brown, an author’s use of the gothic is theorized as proof of his/her transcendence of the mode’s conventions. The author proves himself superior to the lowbrow conventions he employs.

21 In The Emergence of the Middle Class (1989), Blumin notes that “class” has had various meanings in America. It was not until the mid-nineteenth century that the term “became the primary but not exclusive term for describing the most fundamental hierarchical divisions in American society” (244). For more on the process by which “class” dominated other terms such as “rank” and “orders of men,” albeit imperfectly and ambiguously, see Blumin, Chapter Seven.
class” can be found in various forums from the eighteenth through the twentieth centuries: “The discovery — or rediscovery — and the denial of class distinctions and class conflict have been recurring features in the speeches of politicians, writings of social commentators, rhetoric of radicals and reformers, and scholarship in the social sciences and humanities” (xi).

Despite our alleged classlessness, the language of class permeated American culture throughout the nineteenth century. Nineteenth-century thinkers frequently spoke of “haves and have-nots,” and writers of distinctions between “‘millions’ and ‘mills,’ and ‘fashion’ and ‘famine’” (Lang 3). While socioeconomic divisions between Americans were undeniable, there was little consensus as to the nature of those divisions — whether, for example, they were natural or determinative. Moreover, the idea that classes might exist in America at all was fundamentally at odds with the spirit of democracy. As Martin Burke notes, late-nineteenth-century America faced a fundamental contradiction, “that there were classes and that there were not classes. It was a contradiction that heretofore had produced ‘confusion’ and ‘absurdity,’ and no doubt would do so again” (ix).

In part, the difficulty of defining class in America emerges from a larger disagreement over the meaning of “class,” which, like the gothic, is a “mobile and unstable category” (Burke xii). As Raymond Williams recognizes, “class” describes either a “relative social position” or an economic relationship; the inexactness of definitional parameters and of the connotations of the term has resulted in conflicting and confused class distinctions (65). Class in America is a highly mutable and indistinct socioeconomic phenomena based upon a combination of factors such as income,
occupation, consumption, residence, education, and taste. My project understands class
as not just a happenstance of income bracket, but, using Bourdieu’s model, a collection of
dispositions, a habitus, often but not always correlating with income, that manifests in
attitudes toward education, consumption, culture, and aesthetic taste. Class is a political,
economic, and social category, a highly flexible term that has been variously deployed
over the past 150 years to control and explain difference, but that nevertheless continues
to elude attempts to define and control its meanings.

For this reason, determining whether or not America is a classed society, and if
so, according to what definition of class and to what extent, is a difficult, if not
impossible challenge, but one that nevertheless haunts and intrigues the American public.
A 2005 New York Times special section on class in America reveals our continuing
struggle to stabilize conflicting definitions of class. In an interactive graphic that allows
readers to determine their class according to four commonly used criteria — occupation,
education, income, and wealth — a graduate student like myself falls into at least three of
the five different “classes” designated in the study (upper, upper middle, middle, lower
middle, lower).

While the authors acknowledge that class is “a powerful force in American life,”
the article strangely contends that class marker destabilization is a contemporary
problem:

Today, the country has gone a long way toward an appearance of
classlessness. Americans of all sorts are awash in luxuries that would have
dazzled their grandparents. Social diversity has erased many of the old
markers. It has become harder to read people's status in the clothes they
wear, the cars they drive, the votes they cast, the god they worship, the
color of their skin. The contours of class have blurred; some say they have disappeared. (Scott and Leonhardt)

The blurring of class distinctions noted in 2005 America is certainly nothing novel, however, for better or for worse. In fact, the quote above could, with minor editing, easily describe concerns over class distinctions in America anytime during the last one hundred and fifty years.

The post-bellum period led to both more opportunities for social distinction and greater anxiety over class distinction than ever before. Increased urbanization, the proliferation of public spaces, and the prevalence of and easy access to mass-produced goods made it easier than ever before to demonstrate class distinction through particular forms of public consumption. However, the ease with which class could be effected through consumption also made it more necessary than ever to police social boundaries carefully.22 As Julia Daniel writes:

"The difficulty of determining one’s class in these new public places reinforced, rather than eliminated, the impulse for such distinctions while also making those distinctions increasingly difficult to decipher. While these new social zones were theoretically open to all, minute boundaries generated by classed habits of behavior and dress were constantly erected, tested, and often violated." (1)

---

22 In “An American Tragedy, or the Promise of American Life” (1991), Walter Benn Michaels argues that the difficulty of defining the middle class and of identifying the self as a member of the middle class marks the Progressive Era, a result of increasing mechanization that rendered individuals interchangeable and standardization of, for example, clothing sizes, that allowed the individual to identify him/herself along a continuum, while allowing observers to determine something about the individual from exterior representations. It became increasingly difficult during this period to identify class based on clothing. Michaels contends that the Progressive Era is marked by concerns over the disappearance of the individual and the rise of standardization and mechanization.
Daniel contends that increasing cross-class contact in turn-of-the-century cities ironically created “heightened class tension” within increasingly “democratized social spaces” (1, 2). The more democratic the space (such as parks, museums, shopping centers, and public transportation), the more class distinctions could be determined only through minute observation of differences in dress or manner. Such was the reality in both Europe and America at the turn of the century. By bringing classes in closer contact with one another than ever before, Progressive Era social and political reform resulted in a heightened awareness of class distinction and a corresponding awareness of the potential for civil unrest. While the *New York Times* feature fantasizes a past in which Americans could easily distinguish “status” at a glance, the truth is that there has perhaps never been a time when this was definitively true, and certainly not since the mid-nineteenth century.

As Blumin, Burke, and Lang have argued, it was during the same mid-century period that Americans first began to recognize (and sometimes vociferously deny) the reality of our socioeconomic hierarchies. Americans grappled with how to account for or alleviate increasingly obvious social and economic disparity, on the one had, while mitigating the threat of full-blown class antagonism, on the other. The language of class was potentially explosive; the act of identifying classes at all potentially engendered class consciousness and with it the threat of class warfare.  

It is of note that the prospect of “class warfare” has often served as a political talking point, particularly during difficult economic times. The term was used frequently during the 2012 Presidential campaign. For example, Republican candidate Rick Santorum charged President Barack Obama with waging class warfare, arguing that the suggestion that classes exist in America is nonsense: “You’ll never hear the word ‘class’ come out of
my mouth,” he said. “Classes? We specifically rejected that. Look in the Constitution. No titles of nobility” (Campbell). From a conservative viewpoint, the naming of classes at all (as when a politician purports to be looking out for the “working class,” or “middle class”) actually creates those classes and fosters social unrest.

Santorum’s rhetoric is nothing new. Republicans have longed viewed classed discourse in America as fundamentally un-American. During the Progressive Era, for example, President Theodore Roosevelt was charged by conservatives with inciting class warfare, particularly following his 1910 “New Nationalism” speech, in which the left-leaning Republican took a decidedly radical turn:

The absence of effective State, and, especially, national, restraint upon unfair money-getting has tended to create a small class of enormous wealth and economically powerful men, whose chief object is to hold and increase their power. The prime need is to change the conditions which enable these men to accumulate power which is not for the general welfare that they should hold or exercise. We grudge no man a fortune which represents his own power and sagacity, when exercised with entire regard to the welfare of his fellows … We grudge no man a fortune in civil life if it is honorably obtained and well used. It is not even enough that it should have been gained without doing damage to the community. We should permit it to be gained only so long as the gaining represents benefit to the community. This, I know, implies a policy of a far more active governmental interference with social and economic conditions in this country than we have yet had, but I think we have got to face the fact that such an increase in governmental control is now necessary. (T. Roosevelt, “New”)

The New Nationalism speech caused an uproar, ultimately deepening the rift in the Republican party that led to Roosevelt’s formation of the Progressive (Bull-Moose) Party in 1912.

During the Great Depression, Democratic President Franklin Roosevelt was likewise charged with inciting class warfare. In a 1936 speech at Madison Square Garden, FDR suggested that his administration had been fighting, rather than inciting, class warfare:

Here is an amazing paradox! The very employers and politicians and publishers who talk most loudly of class antagonism and the destruction of the American system now undermine that system by this attempt to coerce the votes of the wage earners of this country. It is the 1936 version of the old threat to close down the factory or the office if a particular candidate does not win. It is an old strategy of tyrants to delude their victims into fighting their battles for them. (F. Roosevelt, “Speech”)

The pattern is clear here: “class warfare” is a term that, as wielded by conservative pundits and politicians, historically has connoted the threat of classlessness, i.e. a
Historically, the tension between class ideology and reality in America has been mitigated through the language of mobility. Lang identifies the semantics of mobility by which the “conundrum of class” in America has been palliated:

In the absence of social distinctions sanctified by law or custom … the language of class was merely descriptive, identifying the broad social groupings natural to ‘civilized’ communities. These groupings might be hierarchical in their arrangement, but in the American context they were entirely fluid in their composition. (1)

In other words, we may have classes in the United States, but agents are free to move freely between them. The ideology of upward mobility renders class distinctions a mere formality. “[C]lass,” Lang continues, “provided neutral terms of official social description: it mapped the way stations along the route from pauperism to wealth open to each white, male American…. The mobility of individual men would … render the United States immune to the class warfare that wracked mid-century Europe” (1–2).

The language of mobility made it possible to acknowledge class in America while denying its power as a restricting or determinative force.

nightmare of redistributed wealth attained only by the bloody defeat of capitalism. The term is invoked in an effort to maintain a class system in the United States by discouraging our recognition of class as a determinative force.

24 The New York Times series cites mobility as

the promise that lies at the heart of the American dream. It is supposed to take the sting out of the widening gulf between the have-mores and the have-nots. There are poor and rich in the United States, of course, the argument goes; but as long as one can become the other, as long as there is something close to equality of opportunity, the differences between them do not add up to class barriers. (Scott and Leonhardt)

The study found, however, that income mobility is far less common than Americans commonly believe and that it is in fact more rare in the United States than in many European countries. Mobility, it would seem, is more an ideological palliative than a democratic reality.
Mobility, however, is just another way of glossing over class antagonism; by insisting that all Americans have the potential (and perhaps the right) to be middle class, the discourse of mobility displaces conversations about the reality of class in America. Thus despite our faith in mobility, civil unrest threatened The United States throughout the mid-century and into the early years of the twentieth. The threats of class antagonism that simmered below the peaceful surface of American democracy flared up in bloody eruption throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century, from Astor Place in New York City to Haymarket Square in Chicago. If the Astor Place riot in 1849 exposed a definitive class disparity in America, that schism was far from mended by 1886, when a peaceful labor rally in Chicago’s Haymarket Square was punctuated by a bombing and riot that left at least 11 dead and resulted in the unjust indictment of eight working-class men for anarchy.25 Clearly, class-inflected social unrest was not a phenomenon exclusive to the mid-century. Despite overwhelming critical attention to the mid-century as the moment of a class crisis in America, I propose that by the late nineteenth century,

25 In *Highbrow/Lowbrow* (1988) Lawrence Levine identifies the Astor Place riot, instigated by a feud between two actors performing the role of Macbeth in competing productions, as a seminal event in the development and recognition of a cultural hierarchy in America. Backers of the American performer, Edwin Forrest, were largely working class, while his British competition, William Macready, was the darling of the New York elite. The two “had become symbols of antithetical values” (Levine 63) that culminated in a bloody riot of ten thousand outside the Astor Place Opera House on May 10th, 1849. The riot left at least 22 dead and scores wounded after militia opened fire on the working-class crowd, and resulted in the arrests of 86 more working-class men (Levine 63–65). In the aftermath of the riot, the *Philadelphia Public Ledger* reported that:

> It leaves behind a feeling to which this community has hitherto been a stranger — an opposition of classes — the rich and poor … a feeling that there is now in our country, in New York City, what every good patriot hitherto has considered it his duty to deny — *a high and a low class*. (qtd. in Levine 66; emphasis in orig.)
America was more aware than ever of social and economic distinctions and had by no means suddenly come to agreement on how to describe them either in the public forum or through our cultural productions.

**The Gothic and Middle-Class (In)Visibility**

My contention that class was still an invisible and unarticulated force during the Progressive Era may appear inaccurate, considering the vast discourse over class issues in the media at the time and the slew of progressive reforms intended to curtail political corruption and increase the quality of life and health of the working class, thereby allowing our democracy to work more efficiently for all. To ascertain more fully the nature of class tension during the Progressive Era, however, it must be remembered that the political and social initiatives of progressive thinkers and movements were supportive of middle-class ideologies, morals, and culture. The fiction that depicted the “haves and have nots” during the late nineteenth century must therefore be considered in light of the function it performed for the “have enoughs” who consumed (and generally also produced) that fiction. In this section, I provide a lens through which we may assess the intersection of class and the gothic: middle-class invisibility, and the invisibility of class to the middle class.

As Scott Herring writes, “Progressivism emerged as a middle-class response to the perceived mysteries and miseries of the metropolis — immigrant migrations from locales other than Northern Europe; rampant industrialization; and the development of cosmopolitan neighborhoods removed from the watchful eye of developing suburbs” (26). The “slums” of cities
were notorious and notoriously visited for vice, shorthand for activities that did not promote [middle-class] standards of propriety, industry, sobriety, and sexual restraint. For much of the white middle classes then, the denizens of such quarters, precincts, and districts constituted an underclass that terrified and titillated. (26)

While one purpose of Progressivism was “to clean up, control, and categorize these spaces” (Herring 26), another unspoken end of Progressive Era political and social reforms was an unquestioned, hegemonic middle-classedness, a resolution of the problem of the “haves and have nots” by their adoption of the values of the “have enoughs.” It was therefore a period of greater class awareness, but not necessarily of greater class consciousness, since the class responsible for the majority of cultural dissemination, the middle class, could hardly be considered an organized or self-conscious entity. Indeed, much late-century literature depicts an America consisting of only two classes: the

26 My argument here is inspired in part by Lang’s exploration of the invisible middle-class forces guiding mid-century domestic fiction. Lang brilliantly argues that in this fiction, the middle class is conceived as an unspoken shared ground upon which to resolve class tensions: “The gulf between labor and capital can be bridged after all, it seems, by universalizing middle-classness …” (93). Examples of Lang’s thesis abound far beyond the mid-century scope of her project. A typical example can be found in the 1872 E.P. Roe religious-didactic novel *Barriers Burned Away*, in which the class barriers between a wealthy atheist socialite and her father’s poor Evangelical employee are literally burned away in the Great Chicago Fire. Their class distinctions destroyed by the flames, Dennis and Christine discover a literal middle (class) ground upon which to act out a domestic fantasy of marriage, modesty, temperance, and Christian family values. A contemporary example might be made of the sitcom *2 Broke Girls* (2011), in which roommates from opposite ends of the economic spectrum work together to save enough money to attain their middle-class goal of opening a cupcake bakery.
wealthy and the impoverished. The Progressive Era middle class was aware of class, but not conscious of its own classed dispositions and tendencies.

The distinction between these terms, *class awareness* and *class consciousness*, as articulated by sociologist Anthony Giddens, is of central importance to my understanding of how class is both present and continuously effaced in American society and by extension, within particular cultural productions of the late nineteenth century. In *The Class Structure of the Advanced Societies* (1975), Giddens distinguishes the terms as such:

> We may say that, in so far as class is a structured phenomenon, there will tend to exist a common awareness and acceptance of similar attitudes and beliefs, linked to a common style of life, among the members of the class. “Class awareness” … does not involve a recognition that these attitudes and beliefs signify a particular class affiliation, or the recognition that there exist other classes, characterized by different attitudes, beliefs, and styles of life; “class consciousness,” by contrast, … does employ both of these. The difference between class awareness and class consciousness is a fundamental one, because class awareness may take the form of a denial of the existence or reality of classes. Thus the class awareness of the middle class, in so far as it involves beliefs which place a premium upon individual responsibility and achievement, is of this order. (111; emphasis in orig.)

When I argue, as do Blumin and Lang (both of whom cite Giddens), that the middle class was aware but not conscious of class, I do so to emphasize that the Progressive Era middle class attempted to resolve class disparity into an invisible, or “elusive” (to use Blumin’s term) middle class invested in erasing the existence of the idea of class in

---

27 Blumin attributes the invisible middle class in this fiction as driven in part by the market and not by the lack of a middle class in reality. The middle class was simply not appropriate fodder for the popular genre of urban sensationalism, which was driven by the extremes of wealth and poverty in the city. The writers’ “dismissal of middling folk should itself be dismissed as little more than adherence to the themes and styles of urban sensationalism” that traded in extremes (16).
America altogether. “The central paradox” of the middle class is that, as Blumin argues, it “binds itself together as a social group in part through the common embrace of an ideology of social atomism” (9–10) and yet nevertheless openly denies the existence of class. “[C]ertain kinds of consciousness or awareness may be expected from certain classes, the middle class in particular being the one most likely to express awareness of its common attitudes and beliefs as a denial of the significance of class” (Blumin 10). Much of the progress that marked the Progressive Era emanated from a middle class that was ironically that group most likely to deny the existence of classes and to embrace instead a meritocratic language of opportunity and self-efficacy.

Like most of the terms I engage in this study (the gothic, American gothic, and class), the “middle class” is unstable and contested. Wedged uneasily between the more clearly defined ends of the social spectrum, the American middle class is ill-defined and transitory. Nevertheless, America might be defined as a middle-class culture. It is our very inability to clarify the boundaries of the middle class that suggests its all-encompassing power. The middle class is the default, the non-class, in America. Its hegemony generally unquestioned, it is that class from which we extrapolate the wealthy and the poor, the powerful elite and the disaffected underclass. In a literary context, it is from the ubiquitously middle-class vantage point of most academics (and indeed the institution of higher education) that distinctions between the literary and the popular, the realist and the gothic, and the legitimate and vulgar are clarified and policed.

From this hegemonic and yet elusive middle class comes the literature with which my project is concerned. While not always written by members of the same social class,
the works under discussion have all been subjected to the invidious middle-class activity of cultural prestige and literary consecration. Furthermore, all of these writers, if not the works under discussion, were widely read and at least moderately successful; that is, they enjoyed both popular and literary success with middle-class audiences, academic and otherwise. As I proceed, however, I must reiterate that this class (and its fiction) is neither subversive nor staunchly conventional, for that would imply the class had a clear understanding of what must be either subverted or upheld. Rather, I contend that the American middle class during the Progressive Era was deeply ambiguous about the changing social landscape, and struggled to give voice to class insecurities, in part because class itself was (and still is) ill-defined in and threatening to American culture, but also because middle-class America is that group most likely to deny the determinative power of class, adopting instead the language of opportunity, self-reliance, and upward mobility.

**Making Class Visible: Returning the Gothic to American Realism**

The middle class’s reticence (or inability) to recognize class has a profound effect on which fictional works we study and more importantly, *how* we study them. One effect of the invisibility of class to the middle class can be recognized in our difficulty articulating, let alone comprehending, class anxieties, a difficulty that has manifested in literary criticism that fails to articulate how class anxieties have been expressed in American fiction. Amy Lang suggests that:

Lacking a vocabulary, as it were, in which to express the experience of class — its complacencies as well as its injuries and its struggles — and deeply committed, moreover, to liberal individualism and the promise of open mobility, Americans displace the reality of class into discourses of
race, gender, ethnicity, and other similarly ‘locked in’ categories of individual identity. This displacement, in turn, distorts sexual and racial relationships by redistributing conflicts of class across these other domains. (6)²⁸

In fiction from this period, she contends, social signifiers like race and gender often function as stand-ins for class difference. Lang uncovers these displacements of class within the discourses of race or gender in mid-century literature. I take her work as a starting point, but I extend and expand this class-masking tendency to the late nineteenth century. During this period, class conflict was re-distributed not just as racial and gender discourse, but also in thematic and modal dispositions that coded realism as middle-class fiction and the gothic as lower-class fiction. Moreover, however, I consider the gothic mode as both contributing to middle-class class blindness and as providing evidence of that blindness. The gothic is a tool with which we can excavate and examine Progressive Era class anxieties today. To return to my first case study, the Hull House Devil Baby myth was widely disseminated, over time becoming less about the threat of class antagonism, or the reality of urban poverty, than about the treatment of immigrant women by their brutish husbands. A gothic tale was revised to make class invisible. However, by studying the evolution of that tale, critics today can use the effacement of

²⁸ In Cruising Modernism (2003), Michael Trask performs a similar work with modernist fiction. Arguing, like Lang, that class is something of an empty signifier in American literature, Trask contends that modernist works often “treated sexual irregularity [and] class antagonism … as different facets of the same plot” (9). In texts that depict peripatetic sexual desire, Trask locates a veiled discourse of class anxiety in which cross-class contact is treated as illicit desire. In one sense, my project, which explores how the masking of class expresses itself in late nineteenth-century fiction, fills a chronological gap between Lang’s and Trask’s work.
class from the story as evidence of its significance. Studying the gothic in this case renders class, and the mechanisms by which it has been mediated, visible.

The gothic helps articulate the ambivalences and anxieties that attended social change during the Progressive Era. As such, the realist literature that dominates the period cannot and should not be considered a pure mode. Latter-day attempts to purify realism by segregating it from other modes like the gothic render a disservice to our understanding of Progressive Era fiction, in which a complicated mixture of modes, including gothic and realism, were utilized to grapple with the changing economic and social landscape. Indeed, as Punter and Byron note, the gothic was a major tool utilized by realist writers “who began to appropriate Gothic elements in the service of the realist agenda” in the mid-nineteenth century (28). Realism has always had a use for the gothic, but what has not yet been clarified is exactly what work the gothic does in its service, what middle-class anxieties are expressed when the gothic irrupts in realism (or more specifically, when realism interacts with the gothic), and why critics have failed fully to articulate this relationship. If we take as a given that the realist agenda during the Progressive Era is an unspoken middle-class hegemony, as Lang suggests, then the work the gothic does for it would be to express the equally unspoken fears of and threats to that class. It is my purpose in this dissertation more closely to examine how those threats find expression in Progressive Era gothic realist fiction.

As this Introduction has made clear, the conundrum of class is evident in America’s cultural productions. Indeed, it is the very inexactness of class discourse that I believe dovetails, not coincidentally, with the equally imprecise nature of the gothic.
Anxieties arising from investigations of class in America lend themselves to gothic treatment because class is the ultimate taboo subject in America. If the gothic registers its culture’s contradictions, as Goddu contends, then one of its subjects must be the nature and existence of class disparity in America. That this connection has not yet been critically interrogated is evidence not only of the gothic’s meager cultural capital, but also of a pervasive middle-class disposition that both maintains modal boundaries and routinely overlooks the importance of class to interpretations of Progressive Era fiction, a disposition that, as Walter Benn Michaels has observed, “focus[es] on issues that render economic inequality either irrelevant or invisible or both” (“Plots” 298).

In the following chapters I explore all of these phenomena, often in tandem. In Chapter One, I clarify the various types of class anxieties that permeated Progressive Era America. The definitive existence of classes in America is foremost amongst these anxieties, and two related anxieties follow from it: that class mobility isn’t possible and that class mobility is possible within this class system. With the former I associate the practice of slumming, with the latter class passing; both acts were simultaneously practiced in Progressive Era America. I also define a third concern over the disappearance of class boundaries in America. This anxiety emerges from a presumption that once-stable boundaries have collapsed, leading to a proliferation of confusing subclasses. To this anxiety we can attribute the ambivalent sense of nostalgia that permeated Progressive Era fiction. Nostalgia in general, and more specifically for a more stable social order, is also a hallmark of gothic fiction, thereby making the gothic mode a logical means of expressing nostalgia for a stable social hierarchy. I detail my
understanding of gothic realism as a modal composite, and offer readings of several
representative gothic realist Progressive Era works, beginning with a longer reading of
Mark Twain’s *No 44: The Mysterious Stranger* as in many ways an exemplary gothic
realist text.

In Chapters Two and Three, I take a closer look at two gothic realist authors,
Edith Wharton and Frank Norris, respectively, to suggest the variety of avenues writers
could take as they explored social instability via the gothic. In Chapter Two I argue that
the haunted houses in Wharton’s ghost stories “Afterward” and “The Lady’s Maid’s
Bell” can be directly compared to the tasteful home as she describes it in *The Decoration
of Houses*, her 1898 manual on interior decoration. Her manual betrays a distinct unease
regarding social liminality and an attendant desire to maintain an increasingly untenable
and unstable hereditary class system. These themes inhere in the gothic spaces and
haunted locales that serve as the settings for her ghost stories. Reading Wharton’s ghost
stories in light of *Decoration* gives us a new way to conceive of those gothic works as
implicitly critiquing vulgarity and as utilizing agents of a conservative past, in the form
of ghosts, to punish that vulgarity. While critics have predominately considered
Wharton’s ghost stories as belonging to the Female Gothic, a genre that critiques
patriarchal oppression, I argue that the conservative social politics of these ghost stories
have yet to be fully explicated by current scholarship.

Chapter Three examines the doubled literary legacy of Frank Norris as both a
privileged dilettante and a self-styled spokesperson for the masses and popular literature.
Unlike Wharton, Norris rarely overtly utilized the gothic mode. What marks much of
Norris’s fiction as gothic realist is its engagement with unstable boundaries, both modal boundaries that have prevented him from fitting neatly into literary categories and the social boundaries he violates in his fiction by inserting doubles of himself into the lower-class fictional spaces he creates. Norris’s doubles sometimes class pass and sometimes slum; often they experience anxiety as they expose the fine line between these class acts. I focus predominately on two short stories, “Little Dramas of the Curbstone” (1897) and “A Memorandum of Sudden Death” (1902), and three novels, *The Octopus* (1901), *The Pit* (1903) and *Vandover and the Brute* (1914) to demonstrate the anxiety experienced by Norris’s fictional doubles as they interact with the lower classes.

In my final chapter, I interrogate the efficacy of popular critical accounts of Progressive Era culture and the organization of the modern English department to explain the low cultural prestige of the gothic and the high critical esteem of realism. Focusing on Lawrence Levine’s *Highbrow/Lowbrow* (1988) and Gerald Graff’s *Professing Literature* (1987), I suggest that these exemplary historical accounts both provide explanations for the critical dearth of gothic realist scholarship while, by neglecting to make certain crucial observations about middle-class habitus, participate in the same middle-class blindness that continues to render gothic realist fiction invisible. While the first chapter explores class as a factor in the production of gothic realism, this final chapter understands class as it affects literary esteem in the present.
CHAPTER ONE

EXPRESSING THE GOTHIC: PROGRESSIVE ERA CLASS ANXieties
AND THE DYNAMICS OF GOTHIC REALISM

Progressive Era Americans struggled both taxonomically and linguistically to describe social and economic difference. Class was still poorly understood, let alone clearly articulated, during the Progressive Era; indeed, the term “class” had only recently become the “primary but not exclusive term for describing the most fundamental hierarchical divisions in American society” (Blumin 244). Even after its general adoption, “class” failed to describe adequately the broad spectrum of social and economic categories, activities, and phenomena the term had been employed to stabilize. This very lack of clear articulation or assessment allowed a nexus of fears and anxieties concerning class to operate simultaneously in Progressive Era cultural productions. In this chapter, I explore these fears and demonstrate how they found expression through the interaction of the gothic and realist modes.

In Progressive Era fiction, the gothic mode performs a social work that realism can not adequately perform alone. As Fred Botting observes, the gothic

exceeds genre and categories, restricted neither to a literary school nor to a historical period. The diffusion of Gothic features across texts and historical periods distinguishes the Gothic as a hybrid form, incorporating and transforming other literary forms as well as developing and changing its own conventions in relation to newer modes of writing. (14)
Indeed, the gothic’s modal hybridity might itself be considered conventional. As I will demonstrate in this chapter, the gothic realist work might be better understood as what Andrew Hebard, in *The Poetics of Sovereignty in American Literature, 1885–1910*, (1913) calls a “modal composite” (12), a work containing elements of various modes, each with their own set of conventions. As a dynamic mode interacting with realism, naturalism, and regionalism, the gothic expresses a broad range of class anxieties that haunted American culture as the U.S. entered the modern era.

In this chapter, I clarify my use of the term gothic realism, focusing in particular on how the gothic, as an inherently dynamic mode, interacts with realism to express specific, and at times contradictory, Progressive Era social concerns: the possibility of (or limitations to) class mobility, the existence of classes in America, and the decay of a once-stable class hierarchy.

I begin by articulating how the gothic, considered as a mode rather than a genre, is particularly fitted to express class anxieties in Progressive Era fiction. Instead of asking what either the gothic or gothic realism is, as many scholars who have used these terms before me have done, I focus instead on what the gothic mode does in realist texts. In so doing, I bypass the restrictive question of generic identification in favor of a nuanced, dynamic approach to the gothic episodes that mark many Progressive Era texts. The fictional works discussed in this chapter, each of which exemplifies one or more of the

---

1 Jarlath Killeen also considers the gothic as a mode defined by its interaction with other modes and genres. In *Gothic Literature 1825–1914*, Killeen argues that critical attempts to define the gothic as either inherently subversive or conservative fail to appreciate the mode’s flexibility and adaptability. Instead, Killeen understands the gothic’s wide dissemination and incursion into other genres (including realism) during the Victorian era as a result of the mode’s inherent instability (10).
concerns of gothic realism, sometimes adopt recognizable gothic conventions, but just as often they expand our understanding of gothic conventions by employing symbols, motifs, and themes outside of the conventional gothic catalogue. In gothic realist works, the gothic expresses real conditions and anxieties difficult to articulate in American culture or with stock gothic conventions.

Mark Twain’s novel *No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger* is a particularly revelatory gothic realist text in which both gothic conventions and expressions illustrate Progressive Era social concerns. I close the first half of this chapter with a reading of *No. 44* as an exemplary gothic realist text that illustrates Progressive Era ambivalence toward the past in the form of medieval class hierarchies, expresses fears related to class passing and slumming, and demonstrates contemporary concerns over automatism and circumscribed agency, both of which suggest reduced control over class positions and the ability to change them. Because No. 44’s true identity is never revealed (he remains a “mysterious stranger” to the end), I am less interested in determining his identity than in detailing his disruption of both social hierarchies and a coherent plot. In my reading, No. 44 exemplifies America’s inability to articulate the complexities and realities of social class. Twain employs both gothic conventions and expressions that help to articulate many of the Progressive Era’s class anxieties, making the novel a paradigmatic example of the gothic mode’s utility in Progressive Era fiction.

In the second half of this chapter I break down the broad concerns expressed in *No. 44*, focusing more intensively on specific Progressive Era class anxieties and their manifestation in gothic realist fiction. I focus first on the complex class acts of passing
and slumming, arguing that they express different understandings of how class operates in America, and by extension also express different anxieties related to social class. While the acts of passing and slumming depend on a belief that America is a classed society, I also acknowledge that a different set of fears attends considerations of America as a classless society. In particular, I argue that gothic realist works that evoke a diffuse sense of the “past” as a more socially stable time express disaffection with and ambivalence toward an egalitarian, i.e. classless, present. The ambivalent nostalgia for a more transparent and stable social order that marks many Progressive Era texts is contiguous with the troubled relationship with the past that is also endemic to gothic fiction.

Throughout the second half of this chapter I provide several short readings of Progressive Era fiction, drawing from works by Rebecca Harding Davis, Mary Wilkins Freeman, Jack London, and Frank Norris, among others. Each of my literary examples was selected because it contains a particularly revelatory gothic subtext through which we can gauge the timbre of Progressive Era class anxieties. I suggest that London’s story “South of the Slot” illustrates the dangers and terrors of class passing; Freeman’s stories “The Vacant Lot” and “The Southwest Chamber” utilize the gothic to correct errant class behavior, thereby fantasizing a world in which passing is either impossible or self-correcting; and Norris’s novel McTeague illustrates how the language of determinism

---

2 I borrow the term “Class Acts” from Pamela Caughie, whose forthcoming sequel to Passing and Pedagogy (1999) bears that title. Caughie has also instructed a graduate seminar at Loyola University Chicago titled “Class Acts,” a course in which I participated in 2007 and that in many ways inspired this project. My thanks go out to her for permission to use this term in my own research.
could be used to suggest insurmountable social and evolutionary factors preventing upward mobility. My readings throughout this offer a social figuration of Progressive Era anxieties as they inhere in various gothic-marked texts.

**Gothic Realism: Mode, Genre, and Conventional Contradictions in Progressive Era Fiction**

Critics before me have attempted to delineate the relationship of the gothic with realism, often depicting that relationship as one of evolution, tension or, subversion rather than of potential synthesis. In “Polidori’s *The Vampyre*: Combining the Gothic with Realism” (1988), for example, Carol Senf discusses Polidori’s combination of realism and the gothic, concluding that *The Vampyre* is one work through which we can trace the evolution of the novel from romance to realism. Correlating female-dominated rural New England and the “no man’s land” of the untested western frontier, Joanne Karpinski argues in *Frontier Gothic* (1993) that female-authored nineteenth-century New England regionalist writing employs tropes of both realism and the gothic. In Karpinski’s account, the gothic “consistently invades” the space of realism whenever female “autonomy is threatened” (154). In “Charles Brockden Brown and the Use of Gothicism: A Reassessment,” which I discussed in my Introduction, Robert Hume argues that although Brown employs gothic tropes, he is more closely aligned with the tradition of realism than the gothic. More recently, Heidi Strengell argues in “The Ghost: the Gothic Melodrama of Stephen King’s Fiction” (2005) that King expands the gothic by creating hybrid genres, that is, by combining the gothic with other genres like realism, naturalism, and fairy tales. Her argument is based on a somewhat limiting, “laundry-list” definition
of the gothic as meeting certain conventional criteria. These critics offer interesting interpretations of specific authors’ use of the gothic mode, but each is more interested in clarifying distinctions between realism and the gothic than in understanding how the two modes might work together.

A much smaller group of scholars has actually adopted the term “gothic realism” to describe the work of a period or specific author. In her dissertation on the works of New Orleans regionalist writer Grace King, Ellen Falvey uses the term freely, yet she is not particularly interested in defining it. Instead, she argues that King is a realist writer whose “themes and meanings are Gothic in scope and intensity” (vii), and who uses stock gothic conventions to comment upon race, gender, and morality in the Reconstruction Era South. Anne-Claire La Reste explores the intersection of these modes in “The Princess Casamassima: Jamesian (Urban) Gothic and Realism” (2007), concluding that James tries out and discards the gothic in the novel, but in so doing he exposes realism’s inability to express reality and “challenges one of the dominant literary discourses claiming a privileged link with reality” (47). La Reste’s conclusion is provocative and somewhat consistent with my own understanding of the gothic’s potential to express reality, but she nevertheless recognizes the modes of realism and the gothic as opposed, rather than intertwined, within the same works. Rebecca Peters-Golden’s sense of the term is much closer to my own. In her dissertation, Modern Gothic Realism (2011), Peters-Golden acknowledges that although “the sensationalism of the gothic and the everydayness of realism seem oppositional,” there exists a strain of early twentieth-century works in which they work together to address “the combination of banality and
horror that modernity produces.” Peters-Golden defines gothic realism as “a genre of 20th century American literature that merges the traditions of the gothic and realism, producing texts that imbue everyday banality with a gothic sensibility” (3). While like myself, Peters-Golden is interested in filling a critical-historical gap in scholarship on the gothic by demonstrating its imbrication with realism, shifting and nebulous definitions of class are neither the focus of her study nor are they the source of the anxiety she recognizes in these works.³

As this summary of criticism suggests, at this time we have isolated rather than full-scale articulations of gothic realism as a distinct genre, subgenre, or mode, and certainly no consensus as to what constitutes “gothic realism.” Existing readings that employ the term focus on particular moments in which realist writers employ the gothic. In contrast, I trace a larger and more consistent relationship between realism and the gothic, one that has been rendered invisible or undertheorized in critical assessments of realist texts due to a larger critical aversion to discussions of class. I discuss these larger stakes in Chapter Four, but for now I recognize that what most of these assessments have in common with my own approach is an agreement that the gothic performs a function in otherwise realist works. My own understanding of the term is that the gothic expresses social realities that are otherwise taboo, difficult to articulate, or hard to describe, and that therefore defy and exceed realistic description.

I understand gothic realist works as those that employ the gothic mode to express contemporary anxieties in diverse and dynamic ways. Gothic realism is defined not by a

³ My thanks go out to Dr. Peters-Golden for sharing her dissertation manuscript with me.
list of conventional characteristics, but by the dynamic ways in which it helps express contemporary social and cultural concerns. During the Progressive Era, gothic realist works expressed concerns over the nature and determinative power of class in America. In other words, the term gothic realism, as I will use it throughout this project, describes a modally composite group of texts, written during the end of the nineteenth and early years of the twentieth centuries, in which the particular anxieties related to the vast social upheaval and class boundary instability that characterize the Progressive Era are figured through the interaction of the gothic and realist modes.

A strictly genre-oriented approach to the gothic would require me to define clearly a list of conventions and formal qualities that, taken together, would identify a particular work as belonging to the gothic genre. Since I understand the gothic as a hybrid form, however, such a definition is limiting and counter-productive. The gothic, as I have noted above, is a mode that might manifest in various genres, often alongside of or fully imbricated with other modes. My understanding of the gothic as a mode is indebted to structuralist approaches to genre, in particular the works of Tzvetan Todorov and Rosemary Jackson; however, my modal approach to gothic realism is much more dynamic and fluid than what would be allowed by their genre-oriented understanding of the gothic. Moreover, in contrast to both, I consider modal relationships neither violent nor temporary, but rather as mutually conducive to expressing historical contradictions or cultural prohibitions.

In The Fantastic (1973), Tzvetan Todorov describes the gothic as part of the genre he calls the fantastic. For Todorov, the fantastic is defined by hesitation and
ambivalence, as the reader (and not necessarily the character) questions whether or not the events described are supernatural or natural phenomena. Works that resolve this hesitation with supernatural explanations Todorov defines as marvelous; works that resolve it as natural or rational he terms uncanny. Fantastic fiction, he argues, exists between these two genres and is defined by hesitation and irresolution. Gothic fiction might resolve toward either the marvelous or the uncanny, and rarely remains entrenched in the fantastic.⁴ The gothic is therefore defined by its tendency toward resolution, but more importantly for my purposes, by its simultaneous presentation of fantasy and reality and its engagement with the ambivalence and indecision of the fantastic.

Todorov is not interested in questions of class, but his understanding of the fantastic as a genre of ambivalence and ambiguity provides a vocabulary for critics interested in historicizing and contextualizing hesitation and irresolution as symptomatic of particular cultural anxieties. It is Todorov’s investment in hesitation as a generic identifier that Rosemary Jackson, in Fantasy (1981), uses to re-cast the fantastic (and the gothic as a kind of fantastic fiction) as a mode rather than a genre. Because the fantastic is defined by its instability, Jackson reasons, it cannot truly be defined as a distinct form, or genre, at all. Jackson reasons that “[i]t is perhaps more helpful to define the fantastic as a literary mode rather than a genre, and to place it between the opposite modes of the marvelous and the mimetic [the term Jackson prefers to Todorov’s uncanny]. The ways in

⁴ Nevertheless, Todorov identifies Henry James’s novella The Turn of the Screw as a “remarkable example” of fantastic fiction, because “it does not permit us to determine finally whether a ghost haunts the old estate, or whether we are confronted by the hallucinations of a hysterical governess victimized by the disturbing atmosphere that surrounds her” (43).
which it operates can then be understood by its combination of elements of these two different modes” (32). In her revision, the fantastic, mimetic, and marvelous are modes that can be combined to varying degrees within genres.

While Jackson defines the fantastic as a mode, she opposes it to realism rather than suggesting that the two might fruitfully (and non-violently) interact. She argues that the fantastic originates in the real world and then moves toward the realm of the marvelous. It is “suspended between being and nothingness. It takes the real and breaks it” (20). Jackson defines fantasy as an underside of realism, as always subversive, as “an opposite version of realistic narrative” (25), an approach that I find rather limiting and somewhat contradictory to her purpose of understanding “the social and political implications of literary forms” (6). The gothic may be employed to register cultural contradictions and to speak the unspeakable, but it does not follow that everything left unsaid is necessarily oppressed or disempowered. The unspeakable in gothic realism registers cultural contradictions of class; it sometimes expresses fears of oppression, of course, but just as often expresses the anxieties of the oppressors. Not all that is silent is oppressed in gothic realist fiction.

Jackson assigns the gothic a subversive character, maintaining that it “was both created by the dominant classical order and constituted a hidden pressure against it” (96; 5).

5 Jackson acknowledges her indebtedness to Todorov, but criticizes his work’s insularity:

5 Its attention is confined to the effects of the text and the means of its operation. It does not move outwards again to relate the forms of literary texts to their cultural formation. It is in an attempt to suggest ways of remedying this that my study tries to extend Todorov’s investigation from being one limited to the poetics of the fantastic into one aware of the politics of its forms. (6; emphasis in orig.)
Throughout, Jackson foregrounds the violence of this relationship between realism and the fantastic: “A dialogue between fantastic and realistic narrative modes often operates within individual texts, as the second attempts to repress and defuse the subversive thrust of the first” (124). For Jackson, fantasy “disrupts,” “fractures,” even “breaks” realism, all violent words that serve her agenda of detailing the subversive potential of the fantastic mode. However, just as there is no need to assume that silence presupposes oppression in gothic realist fiction, there is also no need to figure the relationship between the gothic and realist modes as one of violence. The contradiction of class in America is hardly subversive; as my Introduction explains, this contradiction is very much on the surface of American culture. When figured in Progressive Era fiction, to be fair, however, Jackson does acknowledge that not all gothic fiction is subversive. Summarizing David Punter’s work on the gothic in The Literature of Terror, she notes that “[i]t is a complex form situated on the edges of bourgeois culture, functioning in a dialogical relation to that culture. But it also conducts a dialogue within itself; as it acts out and defeats subversive desires. Hence the difficulty of reading Gothic as politically subversive” (97; emphasis in orig.). This concession to the potentially conservative force of the gothic aside (a concession repeated later when she writes that “a Gothic tradition is increasingly employed to serve and not to subvert a dominant ideology” [124]), Jackson’s work is overwhelmingly supportive of the subversive model of gothic fiction.

Jackson does consider how the fantastic might be employed to depict class tensions, but her assessment takes into account only fictional correlations of the poor with the monstrous:

Depiction of social and sexual ‘otherness’ as demonic, as devilish and evil, increased during the years which followed the outbreaks of European revolution in 1848…. A fantastic mode has always permitted society to write out its greatest fears as ‘demonic,’ or ‘devilish’: for the Victorian middle class, these were the threats of transformation of social and sexual mores. A ‘devil’ was no longer even equivocally super-human: it was a working-class revolutionary, a desiring female, a social outsider or ‘madman’. (132)

Such an assessment accounts for only a fraction of the work that the gothic mode performs within and alongside realism regarding class.
this contradiction is expressed through the gothic, but this eruption is not necessarily violent. Instead, we might think of the gothic as assisting realism at points when realism fails to express certain truths, and consider the relationship as collaborative rather than combative.

As a mode, rather than a genre, the gothic possesses representational and conventional freedoms. A mode might have conventions that establish its presence within genres, but because of its interaction with other modes, those conventions might be expanded, revised, or adapted, sometimes to the point of unrecognizability. The gothic mode, and how its themes and conventions might be expressed figuratively, literally, or structurally, forms the subject of Sedgwick’s *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions* (1980). More so than either Jackson or Todorov, Sedgwick is concerned with the critical difficulties of defining the gothic. While still a structuralist approach, Sedgwick’s understanding of the gothic allows for a much more flexible understanding of how it functions, or, rather, what the gothic does, in non-gothic fiction.

Sedgwick opens her book with the usual acknowledgment of the difficulty of defining “gothic,” admitting that it “has not been the most supple or useful of critical adjectives” (3). She immediately distinguishes, however, between what the gothic is (as a genre) and what the gothic does (as a mode), a distinction that I find most useful. “To give the description ‘Gothic’ [the full credit which it is due],” she writes, “it is seemingly necessary to acknowledge a discontinuity between it and the Gothic novel proper” (3). While not using the term “mode” explicitly, she distinguishes implicitly between the
gothic as historical genre, and the gothic as a mode that might operate in works across various genres.

Sedgwick’s stated objective is “to make it easier for the reader of ‘respectable’ nineteenth-century novels to write ‘Gothic’ in the margin next to certain especially interesting passages, and to make that notation with a sense of linking specific elements in the passage with specific elements in the constellation of Gothic conventions” (4). She demonstrates the “elasticity of these gothic conventions” as they inhere in ‘respectable’ nineteenth-century works (6), and thereby suggests, like myself, that the gothic operates within different genres. Nevertheless, Sedgwick’s understanding of the gothic, although untethered from the historical genre that shares its name, is still defined by adherence to particular identifiable conventions, whereas my own approach to the mode, as I will explain below, allows for flexibility in what constitutes a gothic convention.

To some extent Sedgwick’s book is apologetic, taking it as a given that the gothic is a somewhat disreputable mode in need of defense. She seeks to recover the esteem of the gothic by complicating our understanding of how stock gothic conventions operate across and within texts. While Coherence is a brilliant assessment of the function and utility of the gothic, it does not question or expand our understanding of what is conventional. Taking accepted conventions as a starting point, Sedgwick identifies them on thematic, stylistic, and structural levels.

Nevertheless, Sedgwick’s discussion of the “unspeakable” as a gothic convention resonates strongly with the work that the gothic performs in Progressive Era fiction. Sedgwick notes that the “unspeakable” is a gothic convention that is often present at an
iterative level (that is, the words ‘unspeakable’ or ‘silent’ occur in the text), or through the narrative layers of gothic tales (frame tales, unreliable narrators, manuscript fragments) that prevent the clear progress of the narrative (13–14). “At a broader level,” she continues, “the novels deal with things that are naturalistically difficult to talk about, like guilt; but they describe the difficulty, not in terms of resistances that may or not be overcome, but in terms of an absolute, often institutional prohibition or imperative” (14). Class is a difficult topic in the US, and indeed might be described as institutionally (and ideologically) prohibited. The silences and ambiguities surrounding class are expressed through gothic phenomenon in gothic realist fiction. The gothic mode allows for expression of the unspeakable; as I argue in my Introduction, the gothic renders class tangible and present.

Like Jackson, Sedgwick considers the gothic’s interaction with realism as potentially violent. This modal relationship is not always so fraught, however, as the work of Andrew Hebard attests. In *The Poetics of Sovereignty in American Literature* (2013), Hebard contests the conventional wisdom that the romantic and realist modes are antithetical to one another. Speaking of the fiction of the Progressive Era, he notes that:

The common sense of the period was that romance and realism were opposed and even incommensurate sets of literary conventions. And yet, romance and realism persistently appear together as an opposition in the novels of this period. They constituted an unresolved contradiction, an ambivalence — but an ambivalence that was quite conventional because of the ways it circulated throughout the fiction of the period. (10; emphasis in orig.)

For Hebard, the irresolution of romance and realism is actually a convention of Progressive Era fiction. Neither mode is subverting or violently attempting to displace the
other; rather, the tension between them occurs with such regularity as to render that relationship a standard characteristic, a convention, of fiction from this period. “The novels of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were modal composites,” Hebard argues, “and the various genres of the period deployed romantic and realist modes according to different conventions” (12).

In identifying indeterminacy as a defining feature of the interaction of particular literary modes, Hebard evokes Jackson’s and Todorov’s definitions of the fantastic. Hebard is not interested in defining genre or mode, however, but in tracing a correlation between public policy on race and immigration during this period and the ambivalent (yet conventional) tension between modes in this period’s fiction. Like Hebard, I place an American practice relevant to this period against the period’s fiction to suggest a correlation between a particular historical anxiety and its literary iterations. Hebard argues that the unresolved tension between realism and romance extant in Progressive Era realist fiction (he considers realism a genre as well as a mode) is actually rather conventional. In my project, I identify a different incongruity during the same period —

---

8 Hebard does distinguish between genre and mode as follows, however:

Literary genre asks the question of literary ‘kind.’ It is, in the words of Austin Warren and Rene Wellek, a ‘principle of order: it classifies literature.’ In contrast to such classificatory criteria, mode raises phenomenological questions about expectations and intelligibility. Mode is that which designates a ‘world’ or representational milieu of intelligibility. In a novel, it consists of the conventions of plot, character, setting and world-view that make the events of the novel intelligible. (12)

9 Distinguishing realism as that mode that deals with the ordinary, and romance as that mode that deals in the extraordinary (a distinction also made by Frank Norris, whose work Hebard treats in a later chapter), Hebard contends that legislation enacted because of seemingly exceptional situations regarding different races and immigrant populations
the apparent modal incompatability of realism and the gothic. Where Hebard applies this conventional contradiction to racial regulations, I suggest that the “conventional contradiction” of gothic and realism expresses larger ambivalences toward and contradictions of class in America.

The violence that marks structuralists readings of modal interaction exists more in these critics’ forced sundering and segregation of modes than in any inherent conflict in the often-fruitful modal interaction present in Progressive Era fiction. While the interaction of modes that Hebard observes also contains tension, “What is salient … is that romantic and realist modes produced contradictions and indeterminacies in the relation between the ordinary and the extraordinary that were, in fact, quite conventional because of the way that they repeated across multiple works” (20). Recognizing the conventional contradiction of realism and the gothic allows us to reconsider the social work performed by Progressive Era fiction.

Above, I suggested that the interaction of the gothic and realist modes, bound together in an effort to express class anxieties, might result in the expansion of gothic convention to such an extent as to render it unrecognizable as convention. The gothic realist work is not always immediately recognizable as gothic; we must expand our

is in fact a convention of US sovereignty. In other words, Hebard proposes that exceptions to and suspensions of rule of law are all part of the conventional work of US sovereignty. Sovereignty has historically been an excuse for taking extraordinary and often violent measures away from the legal norm, Hebard contends. His book compellingly illustrates that the composite modality of Progressive Era fiction offers many potential critical avenues of inquiry.
understanding of gothic convention to include alternative expressions of the gothic, or gothic expressions, in order to recognize how the gothic concerns register in this fiction.

I’ve adopted the term \textit{gothic expression} (hereafter not italicized) to describe the unique ways in which some of these works express cultural anxieties through the modal interaction of realism and the gothic. Gothic expressions are objects or themes that express culturally or historically significant anxieties that may not be recognized as falling within the realm of commonly recognized gothic motifs. While not conventionally gothic, these objects and forces express the concerns conventionally associated with the gothic. A gothic expression is flexible and adapts to the changing concerns of its context. For example, while a giant gilded tooth would never be considered a stock gothic symbol, within the context of Norris’s \textit{McTeague} it expresses the monstrous racial inheritance that prevents the benighted dentist from achieving upward mobility.

Gothic expressions need not be confined to the gothic fiction of the Progressive Era exclusively, nor need they specifically express only class anxieties. As applied to the fiction under discussion in my project, however, unconventional gothic phenomena and class anxieties often go hand-in-hand; the ambiguity over the meanings and manifestations of class in America often manifests in equally ambiguous and veiled gothic phenomena in Progressive Era fiction. Uncovering the gothic in these works often means uncovering class anxieties, as well. Insofar as my project is invested in reading even conventional gothic phenomena as expressive of class anxieties, I suggest that gothic conventions in these works are also gothic expressions. In works like Twain’s \textit{No.}
44, *The Mysterious Stranger*, class anxieties find expression through both conventional and unconventional gothic phenomena.

**No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger: Gothic Realist Twain**

Mark Twain’s final novel, *No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger* has a complicated publication history. Written intermittently between 1890 and 1908, its composition roughly and conveniently spans the temporal scope of this project. Twain’s novel also is a particularly rewarding gothic realist text. *No. 44* illustrates Progressive Era nostalgia

---

10 John Tuckey details the work’s unusual publication history in the 1982, MLA-approved Mark Twain Library edition of the novel, which was left unpublished at Twain’s death in 1908. According to Tuckey, two works exist with the title *The Mysterious Stranger*, but the 1916 work that bears the title was edited and revised heavily by Twain’s literary executor and an editor at Harper Brothers, and ultimately bears little resemblance to the work that Twain himself titled *The Mysterious Stranger* (197–98). Contributing to the textual confusion, themes, characters, and situations from this novel also appear in two other unpublished Twain manuscripts written during the same period, “The Chronicle of Young Satan” and “Schoolhouse Hill” (197). The version used in my reading is the approved Mark Twain Library edition originally published in 1969 and reprinted in 1982. Although Twain did not live to see the novel published (nor is there any indication he intended its publication), this edition consists of the longest and most complete version of the manuscript Twain titled *No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger, Being an Ancient Tale Found in a Jug, and Freely Translated from the Jug*. For the sake of brevity, and to distinguish this work within the constellation of other works critically referred to as the Mysterious Stranger Manuscripts, I refer to the text hereafter as *No. 44*.

For more information on the various manuscripts and fragments that make up the Mysterious Stranger Manuscripts, see Sholom J. Kahn, *Mark Twain’s The Mysterious Stranger: A Study of the Manuscript Texts* (1978), and Alan Gribben, “Mark Twain’s Postmodern Tale Found in a Jug,” in *Centenary Reflections on Mark Twain’s No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger* (2009).

11 The novel has been tagged with many modal and generic identifiers over the years. Alan Gribben writes that it “defies exact categorization,” because it “displays recognizable elements of autobiography, realism, naturalism, determinism, revolt against the village, romantic love and courtship, biblical parable, fable, science fiction, magic show, history lesson, philosophical treatise, theological musing, and dream therapy” (241).
for and ambivalence towards a lost, socially stable past; it evokes fears related to class passing and slumming, acts I will discuss in greater detail in the second half of this chapter and in Chapter Three but both of which No. 44 performs; and it expresses contemporary concerns of automatism and circumscribed agency, both of which suggest limitations on class mobility. Moreover, the figure of No. 44, whom other characters attempt but fail to describe, embodies America’s difficulty articulating class difference or class disparity.

_No. 44_ has only recently received much scholarly attention, no doubt because, as Alan Gribben has noted, the complex textual history of the novel, coupled with a pervasive opinion that Twain’s later works were “incoherent fragments of a despairing and deteriorating mind” (238), prevented much inquiry on the novel for several decades. In his insightful 2008 summary of critical attention to the work, Gribben writes that “literary criticism of this late work … might be said to be still in its adolescence, perhaps as a result of the fact that its textual scholarship suffered such a major case of arrested development” (241).

_in The Duplicating Imagination_ (1990), Maria Marotti describes No. 44 as “romance … interspersed with fantastic, satirical, and burlesque motifs,” although her purpose is not to define the work’s genre so much as to explore how it “expands beyond the limits of a given canon to encompass modes and discourses that are traditionally viewed as opposed to each other” (100). Acknowledging the play of various modes in the work, Marotti nevertheless resorts to Jackson’s contentions that a) the fantastic is inherently subversive, and b) it is violently opposed to realism, both viewpoints I do not share. While not invoking the term, both Gribben’s and Marotti’s descriptions of the modal irregularities and contradictions of _No. 44_ align it with the gothic tradition.
Gribben’s essay, which provides a representative bibliography of scholarship on the novel and associated manuscripts, also usefully summarizes the evolution of criticism on these works as follows:

[C]ritical reception concerning *The Mysterious Stranger* has unfolded in seven stages: commentary on the corrupt 1916 edition; recovery and verification of the actual manuscripts and their order of composition; establishment and publication of accurate texts of all the manuscripts; sorting out of the versions and weighing their merits; defense of the caliber of Twain’s late writings as a whole; focus on *No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger* as the critically preferred manuscript; and increasingly specialized studies of *No. 44* that incorporate it into the patterns of Twain’s other works. (248–49)

My own interest in this novel falls into the last category, although I am less interested here in comparing Twain’s enigmatic novel to his other late writings than I am in establishing the continuity of this work with other fiction that employs the gothic mode to address class anxieties during the Progressive Era. While a few critics have addressed the imbrication of race and class in the minstrel episodes of *No. 44,* my reading is apparently the first to address the significance of class hierarchies and social stability in the novel as a whole.

As in *A Connecticut Yankee at King Arthur’s Court* (1889), in *No. 44* Twain adopts an overtly gothic medieval setting. August, the teenaged printer’s apprentice who narrates the tale, lives in a castle, “prodigious, vine-clad, stately and beautiful, but mouldering to ruin” in fifteenth-century Vienna:

> It was a stanch old pile, and the greater part of it was still habitable. Inside, the ravages of time and neglect were less evident than they were outside.

---

12 For example, in “‘I ain’ no dread being’: The Minstrel Mask as Alter Ego,” Sharon McCoy explores the racialization of social class in nineteenth-century America through a detailed discussion of the cakewalk and blackface minstrelsy as presented in *No. 44.*
As a rule the spacious chambers and the vast corridors, ballrooms, banqueting halls and rooms of state were bare and melancholy and cobwebbed…. In some of the rooms the decayed and ancient furniture still remained, but if the empty ones were pathetic to the view, these were sadder still. (11)

The castle, complete with secret passages, hidden treasure, scurrying rats, ghosts, and potentially distressed damsels, forms a conventional gothic setting. The first half of the novel reads almost like comic gothic, aware of and pushing stock gothic conventions to parodic extremes for comedic effect. However, Twain’s adherence to gothic convention begins and ends with these flimsy gothic window dressings. *No. 44* is a gothic novel, but not in the most obvious sense suggested by its haphazard employment of gothic clichés. As the plot progresses into a series of dead ends, restarts, and anachronistic episodes, it becomes clear that the work’s gothic thrust comes not from generic gothic contrivance but from Twain’s attempt to use or adapt those stock gothic features to articulate the terrors wrought by a changing social landscape. While it would be difficult to classify the work as either strictly realist or gothic, it might certainly be understood as a gothic realist text, utilizing and expanding conceptions of the gothic to voice contemporary social concerns.

The medieval setting of *No. 44* acts as a stand-in for “the past,” and August’s nostalgia for his boyhood home in the castle mirrors Twain’s own well-documented ambivalent nostalgia for his boyhood in Hannibal, Missouri. Citing the “many parallels between August’s experiences throughout the novel and Mark Twain’s own life,” Joseph Csicsila and Chad Rohman even suggest that *No. 44* “might be his most overt and
sustained autobiographical work of fiction” (3). The fictional village of Eseldorf, which Tuckey helpfully translates as “Assville” (x), forms the gothic-nostalgic setting for the novel.

In Eseldorf, priests, represented in the novel by the hypocritical Father Adolf, work in the service of the Catholic Church to preserve a rigid social hierarchy, enforced by denying the villagers literacy. As August explains: “The priests said that knowledge was not good for the common people, and could make them discontented with the lot which God had appointed for them, and God would not endure discontentment with His plans” (4). Early in the novel August relates an incident in which a widow is chastised for reading the printed sermons of a traveling Hussite preacher who encourages literacy. Father Adolf confronts her, telling her she must “‘[b]urn them, burn them, you fool! Don’t you know it’s a sin to read them? Do you want to damn your soul?’” (5). The widow is manipulated by Father Adolf into believing her reading angers God; she gives it up and dutifully returns to the Catholic Church.

Ironically, August works as a printer’s apprentice, learning a trade that would ultimately enable widespread literacy and put printed matter into the hands of the middle and then the lower classes. August admits that “we had to conduct our business with a certain degree of privacy” because “The Church was opposed to the cheapening of books and the indiscriminate dissemination of knowledge”; however, Eseldorfians are blissfully

---

13 Amongst other parallels, Csicsila and Rohman recognize that Twain and August come from “river towns characterized by the scarcity of books and the prevalence of religious conformity; both became printer’s apprentices … and both abandoned conventional religion” (3). Marotti considers the work in part “a recollection of lost childhood” (111).
uninterested in literacy (12). “Our villagers did not trouble themselves about our work” and “we published nothing there” anyway, printing instead only works on “abstruse sciences” or in “the dead languages” (12) that were then shipped elsewhere. Literacy is a nascent yet still dormant threat to the social order of Eseldorf.

Eseldorf is a strictly hierarchical village. Besides living under the rule of the Catholic Church, Eseldorfians are also subjects of the perpetually-absent Prince Rosenfeld. Rosenfeld rarely visits, yet his castle is kept “always in perfect condition for occupancy” by an army of servants. When the Rosenfeld family deigns to visit, “it was as if the lord of the world had arrived, and had brought all the glories of its kingdoms along” (4). In the interim, the monarchy is as perfectly respected and maintained as the Rosenfeld’s empty castle. Eseldorfians are content to be illiterate and slavishly loyal. They are certainly aware of class, but in a state of pre-class-consciousness in which they do not question their place within this oppressive class system.

Strict adherence to hierarchy is reproduced within the print shop, situated in the mouldering ruin of an abandoned castle (also owned by the Prince).¹⁴ August, his master, the master’s family, as well as the print workers and various servants who occupy the castle reproduce within its walls their own hierarchy based upon the ranks afforded to craftsmen. August introduces each member of the household, arranged according to rank, from the top down, in a catalogue fashion: the Master printer Heinrich Stein and his

---

¹⁴ The irony that the “abandoned” and decrepit castle is occupied, while the current castle sits immaculate and empty is clearly lost on August, sequestered as he is in his pre-class-conscious state. August, his master, and the other print shop workers instead feel honored and lucky that they are allowed, “by Grace of the Prince over the river, who owned it,” to occupy the decayed ruins (11).
unpleasant wife; Balthasar Hoffman, a magician, boaster, and spinner of intricate lies; the master’s step-daughter, sister, niece and servants (a cook/housekeeper with several servants under her, also introduced in hierarchical order); then the print shop workers: a proof-reader, three printers, a “general-utility” boy, and two apprentices. August places himself at the bottom of this hierarchy, where he is content. Eseldorf (and the castle in which most of the novel’s action occurs) is a tightly class-structured society, and Twain’s introduction of his characters in catalogue fashion reinforces his depiction of a culture invested in stability, order, and respect for rank.

Despite the oppressive class structure under which they live, the villagers of Eseldorf and the occupants of the old castle are satisfied with their lot. Amidst episodes of acerbic critique (of Catholicism, in particular), August even expresses nostalgia for his boyhood home, a simpler time when everyone knew their proper social place:¹⁵

Eseldorf was a paradise for us boys. We were not overmuch pestered with schooling. Mainly we were trained to be good Catholics; to revere the Virgin, the Church and the Saints above everything; to hold the Monarch in awful reverence, speak of him with bated breath, uncover before his picture, regard him as the gracious provider of our daily bread and of all our earthly blessings, and ourselves as being sent into the world with the one only mission, to labor for him, bleed for him, die for him, when necessary. Beyond these matters we were not required to know much; and in fact, not allowed to. (4)

¹⁵ August narrates the novel in the past tense, but from the perspective of someone chronologically far removed from the events depicted. In the first sentence of the novel August relates both the specific year in which the action takes place, 1490, but also an awareness that that time was “still the Middle Ages in Austria,” a perspective that could hardly be possible for someone literally living through that time (3). Indeed, we might think of the work as being narrated by August’s ghost, looking back onto his boyhood from a far-distant future.
Twain’s speaker looks back on his childhood as a time of ignorance and bliss, a time in which a boy like August could live and die untroubled by concerns over his place in society, since that had been made clear and simple by his printer’s apprenticeship. The entire village lies “far from the world, and asleep” in a valley, so secluded and remote that “news from the world hardly ever came to disturb its dreams” (3).

One particularly poignant (yet still acerbic) passage, in which August is brought to tears by the mysterious No. 44’s anachronistic description of the antebellum South, further illustrates the parallel between Twain’s nostalgia for his Missouri boyhood and August’s nostalgia for his medieval Austrian boyhood. No. 44, who can travel through space and time at will, performs a minstrel show, in full black face, for August. He sings, verse after verse, sketching his humble lost home, and the joys of his childhood, and the black faces that had been dear to him — and there he sat lost in it, with his face lifted up that way, and there was never anything so beautiful, never anything so heart-breaking…. I closed my eyes, to try to picture to myself that lost home; and when the last notes were dying away, and apparently receding into the distance, I opened them again: the singer was gone, my room was gone, but afar off the home was there, a cabin of logs nestling under spreading trees, a soft vision steeped in a mellow summer twilight — and steeped in that music, too, which was dying, dying, fading, fading; and with it faded the vision, like a dream, and passed away…. (138)

In this scene, Twain evokes not just a longing for a particular time and place, but a more general sense of loss and despair that permeates the novel, increasingly so as the work draws to a dissatisfying close. Nostalgia, both August’s for medieval Austria, and No. 44’s for the antebellum South, is a fundamental gothic quality that expresses both a fear of and a longing for a more stable past, even if that past was tyrannical, violent, or
oppressive.\textsuperscript{16} With all of its shortcomings, that past rendered both as gothic castle and modest Southern home, signifies a time of greater social order.

Upon his arrival at the castle door, No. 44, in the guise of a homeless beggar, disrupts Twain’s idyllically rendered past, and the stable class hierarchies within it. No. 44 embodies the various new forces that disrupted stable social hierarchies during the Progressive Era (I stop short of suggesting that he is chaos or class consciousness embodied, although he is, among other things, both of these phenomena. I am more interested in how he affects his surroundings than in what No. 44 is). He appears like an “apparition” during “the tribe’s” (the term August uses to refer to his ersatz family) lunch one day, “a most forlorn looking youth … timid and humble…. His clothes were coarse and old, ragged … and for shoes he had nothing but some old serge remnants wrapped

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{16} A Connecticut Yankee also contains this mix of fear and nostalgia for an antebellum past disguised as a medieval one. Compared to No. 44, however, A Connecticut Yankee is less invested in creating or utilizing gothic effects than in critiquing the Southern adoption of the chivalric codes of Arthurian Romance (particularly as popularized in the works of Sir Walter Scott) that Twain though partially responsible for the Civil War. As he wrote in Life on the Mississippi (1883), in the South:

the genuine and wholesome civilization of the nineteenth century is curiously confused and commingled with the Walter Scott Middle Age sham civilization and so you have practical, common-sense, progressive ideas, and progressive works, mixed up with the duel, the inflated speech, and the jejune romanticism of an absurd past that is dead, and out of charity ought to be buried…. Sir Walter had so large a hand in making Southern character, as it existed before the war, that he is in great measure responsible for the war. (266)

Although A Connecticut Yankee is a satire on the South’s obsession with chivalric codes of honor, it should be noted that gothic fiction has its roots in the medieval romance, rendering the romance and the gothic closely related modes. In this sense, A Connecticut Yankee is a gothic novel, but perhaps more gothic romantic than gothic realist.}
about his feet and ankles [sic] and tied with strings” (17). He sets the household in an uproar as factions divide over what sympathy or aid they should render the boy. When the cook Katrina invites him inside, the master’s wife screams at her to “keep to your own place” (17), angered that the cook has undermined her authority.

Several members of the household assume, extrapolating from his impoverished appearance, that No. 44 must possess an evil character. Frau Stein declares that “he had the look of a liar … the look of a murderer and a thief” (18), but her husband, the Master insists that “[t]he boy is not necessarily bad because he is unfortunate” (18; emphasis in orig.), and invites him to stay. Here Twain invokes the Progressive Era concern over appearance and identity, with the Master voicing the enlightened opinion that appearance need not denote either character or identity. Nevertheless, the rest of the household engages in a vendetta against the boy, both as punishment for his disruption of their stable household and to goad him into behaving in accordance with his appearance. During his early days at the castle No. 44 repeatedly is called an “animal” and a “jail-bird”; attempts are made to impel the boy to behave in the low manner dictated by his appearance, but he takes no notice of the tribe’s efforts to shame him or provoke a physical response to their insults and assaults. His refusal to conform to class expectations is a source of anger and consternation amongst the tribe, but certainly not a source of enlightenment. When No. 44 begins performing fantastic feats like taming the

---

17 Serge is a rugged and stiff fabric commonly used for mass-produced uniforms and upholstery. Its use here suggests that No. 44 is dressed more as a nineteenth-century than a fifteenth-century beggar. Both his dress and his name align with him with mid-century American industrialization, which solidified class disparity while simultaneously offering opportunities to assume another class identity through procurement of class-appropriate mass-produced garments.
vicious castle hound, and later, duplicating the print shop workers to increase their productivity, the tribe attributes them to the magician Balthasar Hoffman instead.

Balthasar never proves himself capable of proving any real magic, and is content (to a point, until No. 44’s feats border on the sacrilegious) to accept the accolades that should be bestowed on No. 44. Effectively, Balthasar is merely passing as a magician by taking on the appearance of one, just as No. 44 passes as a human. No. 44 actually engages in both passing and slumming in the novel; passing, since he adopts a number of guises throughout the novel, and slumming, since it becomes increasingly obvious that he is not human at all, but rather a deity or imaginative force visiting medieval Austria as part of an existential slum vacation to conduct a “small study” of the human race (101). As he explains, “the difference between a human being and me is the difference between a drop of water and the sea, a rushlight and the sun, the difference between the infinitely trivial and the infinitely sublime” (101). No. 44 reveals himself as a sublime being, something unfathomable and terrifying to August, the only human to whom he chooses to reveal part of his true nature.

Humans are infinitely below No. 44, but he takes pleasure in consuming their food and stories, and in creating great stirs amongst them.¹⁸ His slumming betrays the

¹⁸ In his love of great “effects,” No. 44 resembles Connecticut Yankee’s Hank Morgan, as well as Twain’s famous prankster Tom Sawyer. Morgan is what some critics have referred to as a “Mysterious Stranger” figure in Twain’s fiction. Alan Gribben suggests that Twain’s interest in such figures, who appear throughout his oeuvre, is autobiographical. “[I]t seems plausible to deduce that Mark Twain got the inspiration for some of his mysterious stranger figures — those superior beings in Twain’s fictions who invade the Middle Ages and other periods in various guises and with various names — from the impressively traveled visitors who stepped ashore in Hannibal from passing steamboats. Clothed in knowledge derived from experience in a far larger world … they
huge gap between himself and humanity as well as his inability to understand human emotions or motives. We might think of him as a middle-class slummer, entering lower-class space for fun or philanthropy (since he occasionally condescends to reveal some of his true nature to August, who cannot comprehend No. 44’s greatness and receives no benefit from it), but succeeding in little more than laying bare the huge gulf between the far ends of the economic and social spectrum, who in this case are cast as different beings altogether.

While as a supernatural being No. 44 slums among the human race, as a boy he engages in passing, arriving dressed as a beggar and then passing upward through the class ranks within the castle by appropriating the clothing and sometimes the visage of others. Throughout the novel, No. 44’s upward mobility is cause for concern, engendering anger and fear among the tribe. Initially, No. 44 is ridiculed for improvements in his appearance. While he arrived in rags, after the Master promotes him to servant Katrina sews No. 44 a “coarse and cheap, but neat and serviceable” suit of clothes to reflect his improved status as a serving boy in the household (26). As the novel progresses, No. 44 adopts increasingly effete clothing, for which he initially is ridiculed. After the Master promotes No. 44 to printer’s apprentice, however, the hierarchy-

---

19 He passes as many things during the course of the novel, including a boy, Balthasar Hoffman, a black minstrel, and an old male peasant.
destabilizing potential of No. 44 becomes apparent; once his appearance matches his station, the tribe reacts with fury rather than derision. The Master’s promotion of No. 44 from servant to printer’s apprentice has an immediate and violent effect: “Every man jumped to his feet excited and affronted, to protest again this outrage, this admission of a pauper and tramp without name or family to the gate leading to the proud privileges and distinctions and immunities of their great order” (34). No. 44 has been admitted to a trade without the social bona fides required to enter an apprenticeship. In other words, he has succeeded, through industrious hard work (and perhaps a bit of magic), in breaking through the class barriers preventing his mobility into the middle class.

The print workers predictably reject No. 44’s admission to their class; No. 44’s upward mobility is an affront to the stable social hierarchy within the castle and in Eseldorf, in general. As August relates, “I knew the master had made a mistake…. He had struck at their order, the apple of their eye, their pride, their darling of their hearts, their dearest possession, their nobility — as they ranked it and regarded it — and had degraded it” (35). By enabling No. 44’s upward mobility, the Master has ruptured the class stability in the castle. Passing, as I will further explain below, suggests that class boundaries are unstable and mobility possible. In No. 44, passing serves this function by introducing the concept of meritocratic mobility into a strictly hierarchical, non-mobile environment. It is at this point in the novel that the gothic realist concern with class boundary destabilization, the terrors of upward mobility, and anxieties of circumscribed agency coalesce, suggesting No. 44 is fundamentally concerned with the disorienting effects of social mobility.
No. 44’s disruption of a stable social order, brought about by his passing, leads to utter disintegration and chaos. Even the narrative itself begins to break down under the weight of his intrusion, disintegrating into an uneven series of idiosyncratic vignettes, both comic and tragic, and psychological and metaphysical conversations between August and No. 44. Twain abandons any semblance of a plot as No. 44 totters unevenly toward a cynical and disturbing conclusion. Plot points and characters introduced at the beginning of the novel are discarded, such as Frau Stein’s hatred of her husband’s sister, or her daughter Maria’s love for the printer Gustav Fischer. Maria and her mother disappear entirely from the plot, and Twain introduces a number of new characters, including the amusingly named journeyman Doangivadam, and a lady’s maid, whom No. 44 transforms into a cat.

Perhaps the most obvious sign of both narrative and social disruption in the novel, however, comes in the form of the Duplicates, identical doubles of every print shop worker, created by No. 44 to continue the work of the shop after the workers strike to protest his promotion. Earlier in the novel, when the workers had refused to finish a large job in protest (thereby almost ensuring the Master’s disgrace and financial ruin), No. 44 used his powers to automate the printing press. As August relates, “When we

---

20 Doubles like the Duplicates permeate the novel, although not always in such an obvious way. Besides the doubled castles, Twain sets up multiple doubled characters before the introduction of the Duplicates. August and No. 44 are doubles, and there are doubled dueling families within the castle, both with the Master as their head. Frau and Maria Vogel are acquisitive and haughty doubles of the Master’s sister and her daughter Marget. Father Adolf is doubled in the ostracized Father Peter. The Duplicates and doubles perhaps emphasize man’s sense of alienation in the modern world. August’s Double doesn’t even share his name, suggesting August’s self-estrangement but also the ease with which he could be replaced by another, similar laborer.
arrived we saw a sight to turn a person to stone: there before our eyes the press was whirling out printing sheets faster than a person could count them — just snowing them onto the pile, as you may say — yet there wasn’t a human creature in sight anywhere!” (63; emphasis in orig.). Later, the automatic print work is taken up by the Duplicates, who work without pay, food, or rest, thereby rendering their “Originals” obsolete.

Duplication acts as a controlling metaphor throughout No. 44. Although the printing press is not a gothic convention, in No. 44 it acts as a gothic expression, suggesting both the automation of manual labor and the workers’ loss of control over that labor. The automatic printing press (itself an instrument of duplication) and the proliferation of Duplicates and doubles in the castle create an atmosphere of chaos and confusion that reflects Progressive Era concerns over mechanization and circumscribed agency. The anxieties that the Duplicates and the printing press express are fundamentally gothic, but are also insistently attuned to Progressive Era concerns. These anxieties are revealed and magnified by No. 44’s intrusion into a hierarchized space; his passing engenders anxiety, depression, and madness. After the arrival of the Duplicates, all sense of social stability is lost, rendering the castle “no better than a lunatic asylum” (99).

The Duplicates evoke Progressive Era fears that modernization has led to the mechanization of workers, rendering them ersatz automatons. They have no physical needs of their own, and they “did not need to eat or drink or sleep, so long as the Originals did those things” (89). Moreover, they perform the labor of printing far more efficiently than their Originals. “A dandy lot is that handful of Duplicates,” No. 44 tells
August, “and the easy match of a thousand real printers” (98). No. 44’s actions raise the spectre of modularity, of fear that mechanized labor has made workers eminently replaceable, and irrevocably has tethered their value to the labor they perform.\(^2\) When August objects to No. 44’s suggestion that a dilemma might easily be resolved by killing two of the involved parties, No. 44 opines that human life is of little value: “We don’t need those people, you know. No one needs them, so far as I can see. There’s plenty of them around, you can get as many as you want…. There’s dozens and dozens of those people. I can turn out and in a couple of hours I can fetch a whole swarm …” (139), and perhaps the most alarming, “Human beings aren’t of any particular consequence; there’s plenty more, plenty” (140).

Alienated from their labor and denied that through which they derive their identities, the printers fall into a deep depression.\(^2\) Deprived of his labor, August “had

\(^2\) As his unusual name implies, No. 44 both embodies and engenders fears of the alienating effects of mechanized labor. His full name, as he tells the Master, is “No. 44, New Series 864, 962” (20). His numerical-industrial name, obviously evoking a machine’s serial number, is one reason why The Tribe take him for an escaped prisoner, assuming that his name is an inmate number. Moreover, No. 44’s upward mobility is facilitated by his mechanistic behavior. Like a robot, he performs readily with no need for rest or food, and is capable of greater feats of strength and endurance than his small frame would suggest.

Critics have yet to explore the mechanical/industrial connotations of No. 44’s name. In his Explanatory Notes for the text, Tuckey outlines the reigning critical interpretations, from the psychological significance of the number 4 as suggesting “psychic wholeness,” to 44 as signifying “Twain [two] twice doubled” (No. 44 191). More recently, Diana Curtis (2006) has linked the name to the Colt .44, implying that like the firearm, No. 44 could be construed as either a force of good or evil. No. 44, both the figure and his name, remains a critical enigma.

\(^2\) Underscoring August’s complete alienation from his work, his Duplicate has a separate identity and name, Emil Schwarz. “There was no heartiness; we began as mere acquaintances, and so remained … spiritually we were a couple of distinctly independent
nothing to do but wander aimlessly about and be unhappy” (117). The Originals are denied any control over their Duplicates. When an Original drinks, his Duplicate gets half the benefit of the alcohol, thereby making even drunkenness impossible; when an Original sleeps, his Duplicate is refreshed. Yet the Originals have no choice but to support “these intruding scabs” the Duplicates, even at their own financial and psychic expense (89). Twain creates a nightmare of industrialization in which manual labor can be performed without an individual’s permission, a scenario in which humans have no choice but to labor and likewise have little choice in or control over the type of labor they perform.

The crisis of automation explored in the novel is gothic in that it expresses a larger anxiety of circumscribed agency. The human mind, argues No. 44, is fully automatic:

His [man’s] mind is merely a machine, that is all — an automatic one, and he has no control over it; it cannot conceive of a new thing, an original thing, it can only gather material from the outside and combine it into new forms and patterns…. Your automatic mind has performed its function — its sole function — and without help from you. (115; emphasis in orig.)

and unrelated individuals, with equal rights to a common fleshly property, and we cared no more for each other than we cared for any other stranger” (125). The depressing (and distressing) effects of mechanized labor are further highlighted when Emil reveals himself to be absolutely miserable, likening himself to a slave and begging August to free him (151).

23 Here, No. 44, who might also be considered an author-figure, also opines what might be thought of as an aesthetic theory regarding the artist’s capacity to create something truly original. Twain’s contemporary Frank Norris, who considered literature’s highest purpose its conveyance of Truth, advances a similar (if less fatalistic) opinion in his essay “Fiction is Selection” (1897), writing that “[t]here is no such thing as imagination. What we elect to call the imagination is mere combination of things not heretofore combined”
That automatic, robotic mind works without any need for conscious permission. No. 44 functions as both a voice and symbol of Progressive Era agential anxieties. He expresses man’s lack of control over his behavior, thus voicing concerns over inherited personality traits rendering some unfit for upward mobility or marking others for degeneration or downward mobility. He represents the circumscription of agency in his ability to manipulate those around him, even limiting August’s ability to speak his thoughts, for “he barred from utterance any thought of mine it happened to suit him to bar” (83). In particular, August and others are barred from discussing what, exactly, No. 44 is. Emil (August’s Duplicate, whom No. 44 calls his Dream Self), for example, knows the nature of No. 44, but cannot tell August the truth:

“We dream-sprites [mistaking No. 44 for the magician Hoffman] took him for an ordinary necromancer for a while; but when he burnt 44 we were all there and close by, and he let it out then, and in an instant we knew what he was! We knew he was a … we knew he was a … a … a … how curious! — my tongue won’t say it!”

Yes, you see, 44 wouldn’t let him say it — and I so near getting that secret at last! It was a sorrowful disappointment. (162; emphasis and ellipses in orig.)

In an abstract sense, No. 44 might be thought of as embodying our cultural contradiction of class; he is that which remains ever present yet unarticulable in America, and that

(Norris 1117). Norris, however, still grants the artist enough agency to decide how to combine the bits of observed Truth into a piece of art.

While it is tempting to read the novel as an exploration of the artist’s creative capacity (since, after all, No. 44 ultimately reveals to August that he is an author, telling him in the closing paragraphs that “these things are all impossible, except in a dream … they are a dream, and you the maker of it” [187]), in my reading I am more interested in Twain’s use of class signifiers as a stand-in for social disruption and disintegration. No. 44 might be an extended musing on authorial creation, but in its exploration of the terrors and possibilities of the imagination, it employs both class signifiers and gothic expressions.
which within the novel is literally unfathomable. He limits the agency of the characters around him to control their own labor, bodies, or voices, thus subjecting them to class-dictating forces outside of their control. And yet, a class passer himself, No. 44 disrupts class boundaries by his experience of upward mobility.

Ultimately, No. 44 destabilizes stable class hierarchies as well as any attempt at a coherent plot. His ability to disrupt boundaries of class, space, time (not just his ability to travel through it, but in one disturbing episode literally making time run backwards), and between life and death (in, for example, a terrifying parade of the dead he organizes late in the novel) leads to ultimate destruction and despair. By disrupting the stable social hierarchy of Eseldorf, No. 44 — an agent of disorder, liminality, and (ironically, perhaps) of circumscribed agency — both makes class visible and simultaneously renders it incoherent; the destruction of the plot mirrors the existential despair and crisis suggested by the breakdown of social categories and social stability during the Progressive Era.

**Fears of a Classed America: Slumming, Passing, and the American Dream**

While *No. 44* is an excellent vehicle for exploring a broad range of social concerns related to class, it is but one of a constellation of works to explore these issues through the gothic mode during the Progressive Era. In the following sections I take a closer look at how different and often conflicting understandings of class in the Progressive Era manifest in and through gothic-marked texts. I begin with an examination of two behaviors popularized during this period: class passing and slumming. As we have seen above, both acts expose an anxious concern over social boundaries governing cross-class interaction during the late nineteenth century. Both acts
pressupose that America is a classed society; however, they attest to markedly different understandings of the American class structure, and thereby to different anxieties regarding class in America.

Both passing and slumming are evidence of the cultural contradiction of class in America; in order to pass or slum, boundaries between classes must first be assumed before they can be transgressed. To engage in either act is either consciously or unconsciously to acknowledge that America has either social or economic classes with fairly clear boundaries. Slumming assumes that boundaries between classes are stable; they might be temporarily traversed but are not thereby threatened or breached. Passing, however, is ultimately a much more disruptive act that destabilizes our reliance on a clear relationship between appearance and class status and ultimately troubles distinctions between classes.

**Slumming**

Slumming, the middle-class practice of vacationing in or touring impoverished areas, was a popular activity in late-nineteenth-century America. The *OED* lists “slumming” in the sense of “to visit slums for charitable or philanthropic purposes, or out of curiosity, esp. as a fashionable pursuit” as originating in 1884 (“slum, v.” def. 4a).

Definitions of the verb “slum” in the early nineteenth century had much more negative connotations, including “passing bad money,” doing careless work, or visiting poor areas with an “immoral” or unethical intent (“slumming,” def. 1; “slum, v.,” def. 2a, 3a).

During the late nineteenth century the term could therefore be used interchangeably to connote either moral or immoral purposes. At one end of the moral spectrum, we might
place philanthropic pursuits like Jane Addams’s Hull House in Chicago\(^2\); at the other end the sort of debauchery in which Vandover of Frank Norris’s \textit{Vandover and the Brute} (1914) partakes when he leaves his upper-middle-class home to drink and carouse with prostitutes at a disreputable bar near San Francisco’s Chinatown. Both acts might be understood as slumming.

Slumming is an intrusion by the middle and upper classes into lower-class space, either literally (when a middle-class visitor or philanthropist “crosses the tracks,” so to speak, and enters a lower-class neighborhood), or figuratively (when a realist writer engages a popular mode like the gothic, or when a classical musician writes a pop album), without any intention to adopt permanently the practices and dispositions of that class. The slumming artist or philanthropist is fully self-aware; he or she has no pretensions of blending into that lower-class space. The slummer presumably can leave that space at will, suffering no ill effects from his or her time in the slums. The ability of the slummer to enter and exit lower-class space so easily suggests a strong sense of class boundaries and faith in their stability. As I will detail in particular in Chapter Three, however, the slummer does face challenges and threats to his or her classed sense of self. All too often, slumming crosses a fine line into passing, with terrifying results.

\(^2\) As I noted in my Introduction, Progressive Era reform carried with it its own unspoken (and often invisible) agenda that encouraged middle-class assimilation. Scott Herring notes that Addams’s “philanthropic slumming” has been critiqued by various critics since the 1950s, noting that: “the social activities undertaken in these settlement houses advanced, unconsciously or not, assimilation and internal U.S. Imperialism” (27). Herring’s purpose is not to add to this body of criticism, but instead to recognize Addams as a woman who, through philanthropic slumming, managed to “short-circuit sexual surveillance in U.S. literary public spheres to found … an alternative terra incognita” (28).
Slumming also describes the literary practices of some nineteenth-century writers and readers. Regionalist writing, for example, is a type of literary slumming. As Richard Brodhead has argued, regionalist writing, popular during the late nineteenth century, emerged at a time that travel and the appropriation of culture were quickly becoming a means of class distinction. Its height of popularity also coincides, uncoincidentally, with the rise of slum-tourism. Regionalist writing allowed readers to “appropriate experience vicariously” by giving middle- and upper-class readers the opportunity to slum rural and, often, impoverished subsets of American culture (Brodhead 163).

The speaker of Sarah Orne Jewett’s *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (1896), for example, returns to Dunnet Landing after having first seen it “in the course of a yachting cruise” a few years before (1), thus demonstrating her membership in the upper middle class and marking her arrival at Dunnet Landing as a slum vacation. Attracted to “the unchanged shores of the pointed firs” and “the same quaintness of the village with its elaborate conventionalities,” the speaker returns to Dunnet Landing to learn about its history and its residents, but also because of her own nostalgia for a simpler past with which she associates the dying Maine fishing village. She interacts with the townspeople for the summer before slipping away again by boat, watching the town recede into the distance until “the islands and the headland had run together and Dunnet Landing and all its coasts were lost to sight” (131). The speaker remains unidentified, a proxy for armchair tourists interested in vicariously experiencing life in the tiny villages of rural Maine. Moreover, Dunnet Landing’s remoteness marks it as a distinctly different culture.
than that from which the speaker has come. The speaker’s experience in Dunnet Landing can be characterized as slumming because it presumes a clear distinction and obvious distance (rendered by the remoteness of its locale) between the speaker’s culture and that of coastal Maine.

Fiction potentially enables a slumming experience for readers, allowing them to appropriate the experience of another culture vicariously without physically entering that culture’s space themselves. While not using the term “slumming,” Brodhead suggests that regionalist writing reinforces social and regional boundaries through the experience of vicarious tourism. Regionalist fiction “did not simply record contemporary reality,” he writes, “but helped compose a certain version of modern history” by depicting rural American subcultures as “belonging to the past rather than an interactive force still adapting to the present,” a depiction that Brodhead considers “palpably a fiction” (156). Regionalist writing presumes a stable boundary between a homogenized sense of mass American culture and those subcultures it depicts as rural, backward, archaic, and quickly becoming extinct. The divisions regionalist fiction creates and maintains are temporal, spatial, and economic as well, given the austere poverty often displayed in this fiction.

Regionalist fiction creates cultural, and often classed, distinctions and then attempts to maintain them through detailed descriptions and careful attention to the idiosyncrasies of those that inhabit this delineated space. Furthermore, as Brodhead notes, regionalism both creates a fiction of a racially and culturally homogenized nation and simultaneously attests to hierarchies within that nation: “Nineteenth-century regional writing produced a real-sounding yet deeply fictitious America that was not homogenous
yet not radically heterogenous either and whose diversities were ranged under one group’s [the white middle-class’s] normative sway” (Brodhead 167). Regionalist works paradoxically assert that American culture has overcome its classed and regional divisions even while they call attention to and romanticize those divisions. The far-flung cultures depicted in regionalist fiction are both part of the larger fabric of the American present and are vestiges of a divided and often violent American past. Contained within regionalist fiction, then, is an iteration of the paradox and contradiction of class in America: social and cultural divisions and hierarchies are assumed as part of the fecundity of the American experience, yet denied as meaningful in the present. As part of the unifying work of a newly reformed Republic, regionalist fiction relegates social and economic divisions to a less-enlightened past, even while waxing nostalgic for what has been lost in the name of unification. \(^{25}\)

I call attention to regionalism as a type of literary slumming in order to forge a parallel between that more critically esteemed mode and the gothic realist works with which my project is engaged. \(^{26}\) Brodhead’s work on regionalism demonstrates how

\(^{25}\) The reading public’s hunger for regionalist fiction often outweighed its demand for authenticity, a desire we can perhaps attribute to the work regionalism performed in defining the shape of the new, homogenized Republic. In some cases, the other of regionalist fiction was largely manufactured and didn’t represent the true experiences of the subculture it claimed to represent. Mary Murfree, for example, never lived in, and rarely visited, the East Tennessee mountains that form the backdrop for her regionalist fiction (a fact supported by her tin ear for dialect). Her stories manufacture a cultural and class other against which the emerging consolidated Republic could identify itself as unified and whole.

\(^{26}\) Regionalism’s critical revival largely can be attributed to increased attention to female-authored nineteenth-century fiction. Both Freeman, whom I discuss in greater detail below, and Jewett benefited from the cultural turn in the 1980s and 1990s. I find it
certain modes mimic the physical act of slumming through fictional or vicarious means. Employment of the gothic — a mode with little cultural capital and one that has long been associated with the affective and popular — by Progressive Era realist writers is an intrusion of the middle or upper class into the space of the lower; the act constitutes a type of modal slumming, or gothic slumming, not unlike that practiced by regionalist writers touring (or imagining) the backwoods of America.

Beyond its physical manifestation, slumming therefore might also connote a modal practice: realist author’s appropriation of the motifs of popular fiction like the gothic, either through deployment of the gothic mode in otherwise realist works or through their production of wholly gothic fiction. These authors slum the gothic. Gothic slumming entails the employment, sometimes self-consciously, and sometimes as the effect of attempting to express unarticulable social truths, of the gothic mode within realist, regionalist, or naturalist works. Gothic slumming is experimental, a dabbling in the lower-class space of popular fiction. All of the authors included in my study engage in gothic slumming, even if their gothic-marked works don’t actually contain any physical slumming as part of their plots.

Like physical slumming and the type of fictional slumming I associate with regionalism, gothic slumming has highly classed implications. Just as physical slumming insists both that class boundaries are stable and that they might be traversed without telling, however, that most critical attention to these works focuses on their feminist subtexts. While regionalist writing is esteemed today, overtly gothic regionalist writing is still somewhat under-recognized. The regionalist works of Mary Murfree, for instance, espouse a gender conservatism that likely rendered them unfit for “recovery.” Doubly disadvantaged by their gothic content and lack of subversive gender content, Murfree’s once widely read tales have been largely forgotten.
destabilizing those boundaries, gothic slumming assumes a fairly clear boundary between the literary and the popular, or more specifically, between the realist and the gothic, the fantastic and the factual. Slumming the gothic requires that those social and generic boundaries remain stable. Nevertheless, as my discussion of passing below and in Chapter Three will demonstrate, slumming might, and often does, erode into passing; it is a fundamentally unstable act that calls attention to the fragility and constructedness of class and modal boundaries.27

**Passing**

The slummer assumes relative safety in the act of slumming; having descended into lower-class space, the slummer has the option to return to his/her middle- or upper-class life at any time without repercussion. Unlike the slummer, the class passer is continuously threatened by absorption into his or her acquired class. While slumming assumes that class barriers are stable and incursions can be made into lower-class space without negative consequences, class passing suggests that a new class status might easily be assumed and permanently maintained. Passing thereby unmoors stable correlations between an individual’s character and those characteristics conventionally attributed to distinct classes.

Class passing, or the act of taking on a different class status by acquiring a set of markers associated with a specific class, assumes that class boundaries exist, but that they

---

27 In Chapter Four I argue that modally impure Progressive Era works have been forgotten or misinterpreted because of a middle-class academic preference for modal purity that originated in the Progressive Era. Gothic slumming destabilizes modal hierarchies, exposing modal boundaries as fragile and constructed, as well, while making visible the close relationship between cultural and class hierarchies in America.
are unstable, and movement between them fluid. “Successful class-passing,” as Gwendolyn Foster observes in Class-Passing (2005), “proves that class is a fabrication” (38; emphasis in orig.). Nevertheless, the very act of passing implies that class boundaries have at some point been drawn. Class passing, i.e. violating social or economic boundaries, is an act predicated upon a general agreement that there are boundaries to violate in the first place. Class passing therefore fundamentally destabilizes class barriers at the same time it recognizes their existence. That those barriers can be breached at all attests to the fundamental instability of class as a stable or determinative category.

While it poses a fundamental threat to ideologies of American egalitarianism and democracy, class passing is nevertheless a fairly acceptable practice in American society, “normed so intrinsically,” argues Foster, “that it no longer stands out” as unusual or notable behavior (3). Associated with the concept of upward mobility, class passing denotes the act of assuming a class status other than one’s own. Americans participate in class passing with great avidity through conspicuous consumption (public display of wealth or leisure as evidenced by waste and consumption) and pecuniary emulation (mimicking the consumptive patterns of those in a higher class), both terms coined by sociologist Thorstein Veblen at the turn of the twentieth century in The Theory of the Leisure Class (1899). Veblen writes:

In modern civilized communities the lines of demarcation between social classes have grown vague and transient, and wherever this happens the norm of reputability imposed by the upper class extends its coercive influence with but slight hindrance down through the social structure to the lowest strata. The result is that the members of each stratum accept as their ideal of decency the scheme of life in vogue in the next higher stratum, and bend their energies to live up to that ideal. In pain of
forfeiting their good name and their self-respect in case of failure, they must conform to the accepted code, at least in appearance. (84)

Veblen recognizes a consistent drive upward in American society, facilitated by our recursive adoption of the physical attributes and behavior of those with whom we would like to class ourselves, i.e. those in a slightly higher class than our own. Class passing is almost a national pastime, a tool that facilitates upward mobility. Accordingly, passing (and the passing narrative) attests to the inherent instability of class, both its definition and its boundaries, in America.28

Passing narratives abound in American fiction and non-fiction, gothic and otherwise, from Charles Brockden Brown’s Carwin (a man of mysterious origins whose talent for biloquism (assuming other voices) is a symptom of his ability, “when he

28 At their most conservative and (I would argue) insidious, class passing narratives like Adam Shepard’s Scratch Beginnings (2008) assert that the American Dream of upward mobility is still attainable through hard work and fiscal responsibility, downplaying the reality of familial responsibility, psychological trauma, lack of education, access to services, or a safety net that make upward mobility impossible for most. Shepard left his parents’ middle-class home with $25 to “test the vivacity of the American Dream” (Smith, “Homeless”). Unsurprisingly, Shepard “succeeded” by landing a steady job, purchasing a car, saving $5000, and renting his own apartment by the end of a ten-month experiment in which he passed as a homeless youth who had fled an abusive family situation. Ironically, Shepard quit his experiment after learning that a family member was ill, an option that would be unavailable to anyone for whom poverty is a fact rather than an act. Nevertheless, Shepard asserts that the American Dream of upward class mobility is attainable with the right attitude (an attitude undoubtedly facilitated by the “credit card [he] kept in his back pocket in case of an emergency”) (Smith, “Homeless”). At their most liberal, passing narratives like Barbara Ehrenreich’s Nickel and Dimed (2001) suggest that the working poor face biases and challenges that make rising out of their conditions unlikely, if not impossible. Unlike Shepard, Ehrenreich at least acknowledges that “In poverty … starting conditions are everything” (27). Ehrenreich suggests the American Dream is impossible to attain for most, but in so doing she nevertheless risks victimizing and stereotyping the poor as a homogenous mass of suffering and despair, at the same time sometimes revealing an unintentional ignorance of the true living conditions of the working poor she champions.
chose,” to “assume that character” of whomever he chooses [Brown 77]), to Fitzgerald’s Jay Gatsby. The phenomenon operates in both directions on the social scale; passers might, for different reasons, pass as members of a higher or lower class. While passing upward might be consistent with upward mobility, passing downward might be done for any number of reasons, including sociological or anthropological research, or more problematically, to escape the confines of upper or middle-class responsibility by fleeing to the alleged moral freedom of the lower classes.

In some literary examples of passing downward we can detect anxiety about the threat passing poses to an individual’s classed sense of self. In Jack London’s “South of the Slot” (1909), sociology professor Freddie Drummond adopts a working-class persona,

---

29 Unsurprisingly, racial passing is a common trope in African American literature, as well, but at the risk of over-simplification, it should be noted that in many works that include racial passing in their plots, the act of passing is nearly inseparable from upward mobility. When James Weldon Johnson’s Ex-Colored Man decides to pass as white, for example, he does so in part to attain a middle-class lifestyle that has been racialized as white. To become middle class is to become white, and vice versa. Conversely, America has a long history of conflating blackness with the lower class, a phenomena brilliantly explored by Eric Lott in Love and Theft (1993), in which he traces the relationship between blackface minstrelsy and the formation of a white working-class identity during the nineteenth century.

30 Passing downward is a practice adopted by ethnographers and anthropologists acting as participant observers, but it is important to note that this type of passing also is problematically linked, as Marianna Torgovnick argues in Gone Primitive (1990), to commonly held associations of poverty with primitivism. Noting that the primitive acts as a stand-in for various forms of Otherness, Torgovnick recognizes that “[f]requently, the working class or other subordinated segments of a population become associated or identified with primitives…. These Others are processed, like primitives through a variety of tropes which see them as a threatening horde, a faceless mass, promiscuous, breeding, inferior — at the farthest edge, exterminable” (18). Such primitivist discourse, as you may recall from my Introduction, subtended media accounts of the Hull House Devil Baby, as well.
Big Bill Totts, in order to understand working-class life. Even after returning to his middle-class life, however, “Freddie Drummond could not quite shake off the call of the underworld” (644). Big Bill slowly overtakes Freddie’s identity, initiating a battle between his middle- and working-class selves. At the story’s climax, as Freddie and his fiancée Catherine Van Vorst approach a labor riot, Freddie and Bill struggle for control:

Freddie Drummond sat in the auto, quite composed, alongside Catherine Van Vorst; but looking out of Freddie Drummond's eyes was Bill Totts, and somewhere behind those eyes, battling for the control of their mutual body, were Freddie Drummond, the sane and conservative sociologist, and Bill Totts, the class-conscious and bellicose union workingman. (647)

Following a brief internal struggle, Big Bill emerges victorious, a working-class hero and labor organizer; Freddie Drummond is never heard from again.

Freddie’s fiancée, Catherine Van Vorst, is an upper-middle-class woman involved with the settlement house movement;\(^{31}\) the two are on their way to visit a settlement Boys Club with which Catherine is involved when they encounter the strike. She is involved in philanthropic slumming while her fiancé experiments with class passing. Freddie’s engagement to Catherine follows his realization that Bill is attracted to a working-class woman, and his conclusion that “in order to sheet-anchor himself as Freddie Drummond, closer ties and relations in his own social nook were necessary. It was time that he was married, anyway, and he was fully aware that of Freddie Drummond didn’t get married,

\(^{31}\) “Van Vorst” is likely an allusion to Bessie and Marie Van Vorst, who in 1903 published *The Woman Who Toils*, recounting their experiences working undercover as factory girls. According to Donna M. Campbell, London uses this name to suggest the failure of Van Vorst-style social reform (“Undercover”). London’s “radical solution,” as demonstrated by Big Bill, is to force change rather than simply inquire about possible solutions to social problems (“Undercover”).
Bill Totts assuredly would, and the complications were too awful to contemplate” (644). Freddie’s engagement to Catherine signals his final attempt to un-do the damage of passing and retreat to the socially stable space of slumming.

“South of the Slot” is clearly a product of the Progressive Era, combining evolutionary and deterministic language against a backdrop of labor reform on the tumultuous streets of turn-of-the-century San Francisco. The story is also somewhat unsettling. Despite Big Bill’s rugged likeability, Freddie has little choice but to submit to the will of his alter ego. Indeed, it is but a small modal leap from the struggle over mankind’s dual nature in London’s naturalist short story to its overtly gothic counterpart in Stevenson’s *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886), where the middle-class Dr. Jekyll takes a potion that transforms him into the lower-class (and violently murderous) Mr. Hyde.32

32 Stevenson’s *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886) generally is not read as an allegory for class antagonism, even though it evokes class stereotypes to differentiate Jekyll and his atavistic self. Critics have noted the novella’s interest in depictions of Victorian middle-class masculinity, however. In “Hyding the Subject?: The Antinomies of Masculinity in *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*” (2004), for example, Ed Cohen argues that “Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde emplots the antinomies of the male subject in a narrative that continues to offer one of the most popular ways for making sense of the discord that lies at the heart of the organism that is ‘man’” (196–97). Cohen contends that in works by late nineteenth-century middle-class men, and particularly those concerned with dual identities, we can trace an attempt by men to re-define and stabilize middle-class masculinity in the face of a swiftly-changing racialized and gendered social landscape.

Implicit, yet still in need of clarification in Cohen’s argument are the somatic criteria through which the classed body is articulated in Stevenson’s novella. The scant physical description of Hyde depicts him as “pale and dwarfish,” giving “an impression of deformity without any nameable malformation,” but who nevertheless fills those who encounter him with “unknown disgust, loathing and fear” (41), thus evoking contemporary attempts at criminal profiling popularized by Lombroso in the latter half of the nineteenth century that coded the lower-class (and often foreign) male as degenerate.
Like Freddie, Jekyll discovers that he is unable to resist the appeal of Hyde’s moral license:

There was something strange in my sensations [as Hyde], something indescribably new and, from its very novelty, incredibly sweet. I felt younger, lighter, happier in body; within I was conscious of a heady recklessness … a solution of the bonds of obligation, an unknown but not an innocent freedom of the soul. I knew myself, at the first breath of this new life, to be more wicked…. (Stevenson 78)

Jekyll’s split personality, like Freddie Drummond’s, breaches presumably stable boundaries between the cultured and atavistic self, but also between the classes upon which those behaviors have been symbolically mapped.

“South of the Slot” differs from Stevenson’s gothic passing narrative primarily in its ambivalence toward the classed other. Whereas Mr. Hyde is definitively representative of mankind’s dark impulses, the same cannot be said for Big Bill Totts, who in comparison with Freddie Drummond is vital and vigorous, the very face and physique of labor reform, but despite his fighting and carousing not an evil man. Stevenson associates immorality with the lower class by locating Mr. Hyde’s residence in the slums of Soho; London, too, assigns class signifiers to different facets of human behavior, but is much more reticent to correlate the lower class with licentiousness or immorality. Indeed,

While he is allegedly the embodiment of distilled evil siphoned from Dr. Jekyll, Mr. Hyde is therefore also a portrait of class otherness. The nefarious Mr. Hyde takes an apartment in the slums, in “the dismal quarter of Soho” that appears to Utterson “like a district of some city in a nightmare” (48). A man of Hyde’s vile nature seemingly belongs in the slums. Hyde’s low-class qualities exemplify what Jerrold Hogle, in his introduction to the Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction, describes as a middle-class tendency to “dissociate from itself,” rendering that which frightens it as monstrous or other (9). In the same way, both Jack the Ripper (thought to be a gentleman) and H. H. Holmes, whom I discussed in my Introduction, were compared to Stevenson’s fictional Hyde in media accounts of their crimes.
within the context of Progressive Era concerns that modern life was inherently alienating (a concern I address below), Freddie’s transformation into Big Bill perhaps signals his return to his primal and authentic self, even if that self is still troublingly tethered to repetitive manual labor. Freddie Drummond’s transformation, tinged as it is with a problematic assumption of freedom and authenticity in the lower classes, comes off as preferable to his continuing as the dry and patronizing Freddie Drummond.

Nevertheless, Freddie’s lack of agency in deciding whether or not to become Bill Totts expresses an anxiety over the effects of cross-class experimentation during the Progressive Era. Whereas Freddie initially passed in the working-class neighborhood “south of the slot,” a successful participant observer, he ultimately is unable to resist the relative freedom of the working-class lifestyle, where he can carouse, flirt, drink, fight, and smoke without reproach. The passer might, like Freddie, lose his or her sense of classed self and instead adopt a new identity in a new class. Passing suggests that class boundaries can be breached permanently via intimate cross-class contact, and that passers might absorb the values and characteristics of their new class, for better or for worse. Moreover, passing illustrates a lack of agency in relation to class status. Freddie’s experience betrays a middle-class concern that close contact with the lower class might result in a sort of irresistible downward impulse. Freddie’s transformation is disconcerting because he has so little choice in it, thus suggesting that one threat of passing is its potential to alter class status and ultimately to undermine agency.
Class Revenge Fantasies and the Contradictions of Passing

The class boundary instability initiated and exposed by passing lends itself to the gothic mode because the gothic, as I explained in my Introduction, expresses the mutable and uncertain. While in some Progressive Era gothic realist works that instability is expressed through incidents of passing or slumming, in other gothic realist texts class passers are punished in an attempt to stabilize that disorder. In class revenge fantasies, passers are exposed as frauds and returned to their class or origin.  

Ghosts, as representatives of a socially legible past, often act as agents of this revenge; as figures of stability and continuity, ghosts in gothic realist fiction gesture towards a stable past (one that perhaps never existed), while nevertheless expressing, by their appearance, a fundamental disorder in the present. Mary Wilkins Freeman’s ghost stories are particularly good examples of this phenomenon.  

All Freeman stories under discussion can be found in the collection *The Wind in the Rose-Bush and Other Stories of the Supernatural* (1903).
In Freeman’s “The Vacant Lot” (1902), an “ambitious” middle-class family moves to a “genteel, almost fashionable” Boston neighborhood after receiving a large inheritance (86). Though suspicious of the “absurdly low price” of the home, the Townsends allow their “New England thrift” and the prospect of upward mobility to overcome their misgivings (86). Their investment in the ideology of upward mobility turns sour when the home is discovered to be haunted. Significantly, however, the haunting in this story is rife with class connotations. Shortly after they move in, the Townsends discover that the vacant lot next door, which they have been using to hang their laundry, is haunted by the shadows of ghostly laundry hung on invisible lines by spectral hands. The laundry is at once a reminder of the family’s lack of refinement (after all, they fail to recognize the vulgarity of hanging their own laundry in a vacant lot in an upscale neighborhood) and a metaphor for their “dirty laundry,” the murder of the vacant lot’s previous owner at a saloon formerly owned by the Townsend family.

The bizarre haunting escalates to a permeating scent of lower-class food — cabbage, potatoes, and codfish — wafting into the Townsends’ home from the vacant lot. Agreeing that “it was exceedingly foolish to be disturbed by a mysterious odor of cabbage” (92), however, the Townsends continue to ignore a string of unusual occurrences until finally a ghostly structure, marked only by glowing windows, appears in the vacant lot, into which pours a stream of spectral figures (92). The Townsends still stubbornly refuse to leave their new home until the spirits invade it from next door, marching through their dining room and disappearing into the old family saloon signboard Mr. Townsend has displayed on the dining room mantel shelf. Finally convinced,
the family abandons their Boston home, and their class aspirations, to return to their place in the country.

“*The Vacant Lot*” is a fairly tongue-in-cheek iteration of the social revenge fantasy, but its message vis-à-vis class passing is clear. The Townsends are saloon owners and shopkeepers, not socialites. They no more belong in polite Boston society than do Howells’s Laphams in *The Rise of Silas Lapham*. Their appearance in a fashionable Boston neighborhood constitutes a rift in the social order and a corresponding rift in the boundaries between the rational and the supernatural that must be repaired; the success of the spirits in driving out the Townsends represents the successful return of social order.

Freeman gives the class revenge fantasy a more serious treatment in “*The Southwest Chamber*” (1903), in which two poor sisters are haunted out of a mansion they inherited from a wealthy aunt. The deceased aunt, angry that the daughters of her disinherited sister have turned the family home into a lower-middle-class boarding house, ultimately succeeds in expelling the sisters from the home forever, the moral of the story perhaps being that the two sisters were unfit to inhabit the family estate, after all.

Like “*The Vacant Lot,*” “*The Southwest Chamber*” relies on haunted/ing objects, this time as reminders of the class to which the sisters (and their tenants) have been denied access. Classy ghostly gowns (“strange-patterned silk things and satins” [70]), jewelry and luxurious scents, even upholstery and wallpaper, once belonging to the deceased aunt, assault the array of lower-middle-class tenants who stay in her former
bedroom. In one bizarre episode, a ghostly nightcap attempts to strangle a penurious widow as she sleeps. “The Southwest Chamber” ultimately is a more socially ambiguous class revenge fantasy than “The Vacant Lot.” While the Gill sisters fail to keep their ancestral home, their rejection of their inheritance is also a rejection of “the evil strength of [their] ancestors” and might therefore be construed as a moral, if not an economic, victory over their cruel and prideful Aunt Harriett (82). Either way, “The Southwest Chamber” conservatively discourages upward mobility by associating it with cruelty, pride, and acquisitiveness.

The corrective hauntings in Freeman’s stories suggest that successful class passing might not be possible, after all, and class mobility is therefore a fantasy or even a curse. Class revenge fantasies ultimately reject the possibility of class mobility; in other words, they promote the same understanding of class boundaries that facilitates slumming. In these tales, the class passer is betrayed by his or her lower-class habitus, and is punished for attempting to pass upward, thus proving that class boundaries are

35 A similar iteration of the class revenge fantasy occurs in Henry James’s early short story “The Romance of Certain Old Clothes” (1868), in which a social climber, after marrying her sister’s widower, is attacked and killed by her deceased sister’s expensive and luxurious dresses.

36 Clearly, there is some definitional grey area between the acts of passing and slumming. I do not intend in my discussion to have the final word in how these terms are defined. By exposing some of these grey areas between these acts, I suggest a number of unexplored avenues for discussing how they reflect and complicate our understanding of Progressive Era class dynamics. Thus, while here I have uncovered one fictional area, the class revenge fantasy, in which passing shades off into slumming, in other gothic realist fiction, we can observe the practice of slumming as it decays into passing, for example when a slummer begins to identify with, then as a member of the class within which he has slummed. This phenomenon, which I recognize as a prevailing gothic feature of Frank Norris’s fiction, will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Three below.
inviolable, after all. While for those already in positions of class power the passer’s failure might be a relief (since it maintains the integrity of their own privileged class position), for those who have subscribed to the ideology of upward mobility (in other words, the middle class) and are attempting to pass their way into a higher class, the specter of failure is a nightmare.

Freeman’s ghost stories suggest that there is an invisible barrier between classes that is maintained by (literally) invisible forces. Inarticulate, indiscernible class distinctions also factor into non-gothic fiction from this period, as well. Such is Mary Marchand’s observation in her reading of Howells’s *The Rise of Silas Lapham*. Marchand contends that “there is something inimitable about upper-bourgeois culture — something that defies the aspirants’ attempts to acquire or fake upper-class behaviors” so that “many of the essential features of class are so subtle as to be almost beyond the reach of consciousness and explicit statement” (284). The same might be said of the social world constructed in Freeman’s gothic stories, although her ghosts are more than simply metaphors for invisible class distinctions. We do not need the ghosts that haunt the vacant lot to expose the Townsends’ vulgarity, after all; by their actions (employing only one servant, taking advantage of the empty lot to hang their laundry, moving to the city to improve their plain daughter’s marital prospects) they betray themselves as passers. The

---

Marchand suggests that what truly separates the Laphams from the Coreys in Howells’s novel is an air of ease that the Laphams lack: “nothing distinguishes the insider from the aspirant more rigorously than their respective ease and unease” (300). Ease, or more specifically the cultural ease that comes with born class privilege, is something that cannot be faked, but it is the very thing that the Laphams continuously strive to fake throughout the novel. As such, Marchand argues that the novel is patterned by the Laphams’s attempts (and failures) to “fake” ease.
haunting of the vacant lot doesn’t just prevent the Townsends’ social ascent, it also reflects and magnifies their failure to pass.

The popularity of the acts of passing and slumming, along with their literary iterations, suggest that class as a category of self-identification or characterization had become wholly unreliable by the turn of the century. As Christopher Lukasik’s work in *Discerning Characters* (2011) attests, the tension between America’s ideology of upward mobility and the potential threat of social disarray in the absence of a clear class hierarchy has marked cultural discourse and American fiction writing since the country’s inception.  

Correlating appearance with social status historically has been an important tool by which Americans maintain social order in a democracy. By the late century, however, increased cross-class contact in urban areas, mechanized and modular labor, and the wide availability of mass-produced goods that enabled passing experiments posed a formidable threat to preconceived correlations between appearance and class status. Passing and slumming narratives register both the anxiety engendered by this disarticulation and ambivalence regarding whether or not social mobility is or should be possible in America. Neither act could have captured the popular imagination in a period less concerned with understanding and describing class difference.

---

38 Lukasik suggests that part of the social work of the American novel during the early- and mid-nineteenth century was the establishment of a stable relationship between corporeal appearance and class position, one facilitated and enabled by the nineteenth-century interest in phrenology and physiognomy. While early American narratives focused on the performative nature of class, Lukasik observes, by mid-century science sought to contain the perceived dangers of “social fluidity”: “the logic, if not practice, of physiognomic distinction offered a means to establish moral character, embody social origin, and restrain the mobility enabled by the cultural capital of civility alone” (12).
Passing and slumming experiments suggest that many Progressive Era Americans considered America a classed society. Slumming assumes that class boundaries are stable and mobility difficult if not impossible, while passing is predicated on belief that class status is fluid and mobility possible (even if not always successful). Both acts also contributed to a Progressive Era conversation over individual autonomy and agency. In this section, I take a closer look at how the turn-of-the-century discourse of class reflects and reproduces larger Progressive Era cultural anxieties regarding class mobility and personal autonomy. While the discourse of mobility served as a panacea to counteract the reality of distinct classes in America, some gothic realist works suggest that class mobility may not be possible.

At the turn of the twentieth century agency was under attack: psychoanalysis suggested that humans are at the mercy of unconscious drives formed during earliest childhood; competing theories of Lamarckian and Darwinian evolution suggested that both behavior and physical appearance are preordained. In 1878, anthropologist Cesar Lombroso utilized a form of Social Darwinism to create an early form of criminal profiling, arguing that criminals could be identified by particular physical features. All of the efforts at social reform and progress during the Progressive Era were undermined, even haunted, by a general sense that human lives are predetermined by uncontrollable social and psychological forces. Both naturalist and gothic fiction registered these concerns.
Fears related to the encroachment of technology and its effect on personal freedom contributed to this larger crisis of agency. Factory labor reduced workers to a collection of physical parts and functions, to a strong back or hand upon a lever, to standing, lifting, packing, what Wai Chee Dimock has identified as a nineteenth-century vision of “modernization as metonymic horror” (58). Reduced to performed labor, workers are imminently replaceable; manual labor can be performed by any number of other hands, other backs, other legs. At its most extreme iteration, “the human is replaced by an automaton manufactured from fragments,” a scenario gothicized as early as Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein (Punter and Byron 20). Progressive Era thinkers saw a late century dominated by machines that had rendered humankind machine-like, and individuals incapable of independent thought. In Literature and Insurgency (1914), for example, John Curtis Underwood writes that the contemporary individual has:

suffered the machinery that he had evolved to dominate him; and we exist today a machine-made people, conventionalized, standardized, commercialized as to our food, clothes, houses, homes, offices, factories, theatres; amusements, social wants, pleasures and obligations; working plans; civic and social responsibilities; local and national pride, and its absence and perversion. (vii)

Underwood is not simply voicing a concern over technology’s terrifying ascent and potential dominance, but an acute concern over individual autonomy. Progress, he feared, had turned modern men and women into machines.39

39 It is perhaps unsurprising that E.T.A. Hoffmann’s 1816 story “Der Sandmann,” in which a poet unwittingly falls in love with an automaton, enjoyed great success during the late century. The story was adapted by Jacques Offenbach for his 1881 opera Les Contes d’Hoffmann which made its US debut in 1882. Freud also treated the story extensively in “The Uncanny” (1919), although he is more interested in exploring the theme of blindness and the character of The Sandman. That the automaton/doll in the
This concern over personal autonomy finds its way into Progressive Era fiction of all modes, including the gothic. It is as expressed through the gothic mode, however, that concerns over autonomy and agency seem most at home, so naturally complementary as to be overlooked easily. Works that describe thwarted social mobility or downward mobility are also concerned with agency, and indeed scholars recognize these works as *naturalist* in order to distinguish their thematic fatalism from realist works, in which characters display a greater ability to control their social and economic environment (or at least are provided with adequate information to understand the forces at work against them). Naturalist works are often gothic realist modal composites, however; they employ the gothic insofar as they explore the effects of uncontrollable internal and external forces on individuals. The naturalist work, even more so than the realist work, is modally impure, and often utilizes the gothic mode to express the terrors of circumscribed agency and downward mobility. Unsurprisingly, many works we categorize as naturalist contain gothic expressions of powerlessness.

Much American fiction, both naturalist and gothic, is preoccupied with circumscribed or limited agency. “For Americans of all decades,” writes Peter Straub in his introduction to a collection of supernatural American short stories, “the loss of agency story, Olympia, evokes sensations of anxiety and terror is a given for Freud, part of “the unparalleled atmosphere of uncanniness which the story evokes” (379). The late-century success of a story about a mechanical doll attests to the close relationship between mechanization, theories of repression (including psychoanalysis), and fears of circumscribed agency during the Progressive Era.
and selfhood, effected by whatever means, arouses a particularly resonant horror” (xiv). One of the most recognizable features of naturalism is its bleak outlook on human agency with regard to either inherited or social forces. As Louis Budd writes, the naturalists “pushed further toward determinism — economic or biological or cosmic — than American novelists had cared or dared to go before” (43). Keeping in mind that the gothic registers cultural contradictions, we can trace in many naturalist works a gothic strain employed to voice concerns over the determinative power of class, one of the many forces that inevitably shape and limit human lives, in America. The naturalist fiction of Norris, London, Dreiser, and Crane (and to some extent Edith Wharton, especially in *Ethan Frome* and *The House of Mirth*) is concerned with the prescriptions placed on human behavior and the social constraints that prevent the realization of upward mobility for most. The gothic erupts in this fiction in particular when the discourse of predetermination overlaps with descriptions of class difference.

In Rebecca Harding Davis’s early naturalist story *Life in the Iron Mills* (1861), for example, a millworker displays signs of nascent artistic greatness. His success is thwarted, however, by insurmountable social and economic forces, barriers that Davis renders graphically visible through gothic language and imagery. Hugh Wolfe (whose

40 Straub suggests that a number of fantastic and gothic themes in American fiction are directly or indirectly concerned with individual agency:

Trance states, sleepwalking, mesmerism, obsession, possession, that variety of possession represented by literal invasion of wicked and ravenous forces, madness, spiritual infection, the evil potentiality of magnetism … exotic curses, evil atmospheres, and the simple machinations of malign beings, all these states, conditions, and forces conspire against the healthy, purposive, functional human identity. (xiv)
name etymologically suggests the gothic figure of the werewolf, or *hu*-man wolf, and all of the connotations of that figure, including, importantly, reader sympathy and loss of free will) is an uncanny figure, both other and very much like the presumed middle-class reader of the story. The narrator implores the readers to “see him as he is,” for “God put into this man’s soul a fierce thirst for beauty — to know it, to create it; to *be* — something, he knows not what, — other than he is…. [Hugh], with all his groping, this mad desire, a great blind intellect stumbling through wrong, a loving poet’s heart, the man was by habit only a coarse laborer…” (52; emphasis in orig.). Hugh’s similarity to the reader — that is, his artistic sensibility and capacity for love — makes him an appropriate protagonist for the tale, but that similarity also disconcertingly threatens class boundaries. He is by habit, not nature, of a lower class than the presumed reader. The “tragedy” of Hugh’s life, we are told early in the story, should be considered “a symptom of the disease of [his] class,” of which “no ghost Horror would terrify you more” (51). It is his class, not his character, that determines the fateful string of events that culminate in Hugh’s arrest and suicide. Davis’s mill, “like a street in Hell,” with its fantastic “wide caldrons filled with boiling fire, over which bent ghastly wretches stirring the strange brewing” is a gothic landscape (49), invoked to describe the effects of industrialized, mechanized labor upon the working class. Davis employs the gothic mode to depict the extent of Hugh’s suffering and entrapment, but also to provoke a sense of injustice in readers at the nightmare of class immobility, at the utter impossibility that Hugh could somehow lift himself from his hellish surroundings and achieve the greatness to which his talent would entitle him in a truly democratic society.
While Davis utilizes the gothic to express Hugh’s circumscribed economic position, other nineteenth-century writers turned to the gothic to express the terrors of biological or evolutionary predetermination. As Punter and Byron note, the preponderance of scientific and anthropological theories dominant during the late nineteenth century offered a way to “theorize deviance,” effectively “Gothicizing criminality by linking it to the past” (22). The criminal was born, not made; his place at the bottom of the social spectrum was therefore “natural” and expected. “Criminal,” “low class,” “degenerate,” “primitive”: all of these descriptors are correlative in Progressive Era anthropological and evolutionary discourse. Indeed, within the context of this increasing attention to heredity and evolution, we might even map a sort of Lamarckian evolutionary impulse onto the ideology of upward mobility. To move into the middle class is a sign of evolutionary success. Those who remain poor are less-evolved; those who attain middle- or upper-class status exhibit positive evolutionary traits. Downward mobility thereby signifies degeneracy and evolutionary failure. Class boundaries were validated, naturalized, even sanctioned, by Progressive Era scientific (and pseudo-scientific) inquiry.

This rich imbrication of inviolable class boundaries, evolutionary discourse, and the gothic is perhaps best exemplified in Frank Norris’s naturalist novel McTeague (1899). Norris’s brutish dentist and his miserly wife are portraits of evolutionary failure, but also of the terrors of downward mobility. McTeague’s small aspirations of upward mobility, including his desire to purchase a modest home away from the seediness of San Francisco’s Polk Street, are thwarted by the “foul stream of hereditary evil” into which he
and his wife Trina are inexorably pulled (27). The inevitability of McTeague’s failure

is rendered more poignant by his hesitant steps upward into middle-class respectability:

Gradually the dentist improved under the influence of his little wife…. He began to observe the broader, larger interests of life, interests that affected him not as an individual, but as a member of a class, a profession, or a political party…. But most wonderful of all, McTeague began to have ambitions — very vague, very confused ideas of something better. (149)

Because Mac’s improvement is tethered to economic prosperity (since he benefits vicariously from Trina’s lottery winnings), his downfall carries with it an implication that degenerate behavior might, in fact, be a product of social and economic forces as well as inherited characteristics.

At the same time, Norris insistently traces the blame for McTeague’s violent behavior and his wife’s parsimony to evolutionary inheritance. McTeague looks the very portrait of what criminal profilers of the period would have considered a degenerate; he is “a young giant” with “enormous, red,” hands, a “square-cut, angular” head, and a “salient” jaw “like that of the carnivora” (6). His physique identifies him not only as degenerate but as inherently criminal.41 Trina’s miserliness is traced to inherited personality traits, for “she had all the instinct of a hardy and penurious mountain race — the instinct which saves without thought, … saving for the sake of saving, hoarding without knowing why” (106). McTeague, too, has inherited an unhealthy relationship to

41 Norris was familiar with the work of criminologist Cesar Lombroso and sociologist Max Nordau, who believed that certain people were prone to primitive behavior, and that moreover, such individuals could be identified by their physical characteristics. Norris explores both themes in his early short story “A Case for Lombroso” (1897). According to Jerome Loving, Norris studied Max Nordau’s Degeneration (1895) as he revised McTeague for publication (xvi).
money: “The miner’s idea of money quickly gained and lavishly squandered” that runs in direct opposition to Trina’s inherited stinginess; this tension ultimately destroys them (235). Both characters are markedly aware of their circumscribed position: “I can’t help it,” Trina says of her hoarding compulsion; “It’s stronger than I” (163). Both are caught up in “the sport of chance” in which “they were allowed no voice” (73).

Norris’s novel exemplifies the overlapping discourses of determinism and class that during the Progressive Era combined to suggest that class boundaries might be insurmountable and positions within them preordained; in other words, that class mobility ultimately is impossible. At the same time, McTeague and Trina do experience class mobility, even if it isn’t of the type that middle-class readers envisioned for themselves. Evolutionary discourse and class mobility are both two-way streets, after all. While evolution implied a slow move forward from primitivism to acculturation, and a correlative move from poverty to the middle class, the possibility remained that one might regress, as well. Punter and Byron note that the gothic of the late nineteenth century is marked by a sense of decay and degeneration, “a conclusion that if something could evolve,” as a preponderance of scientific evidence attested, then “it could also devolve or degenerate” (42). In McTeague determinism and class discourse are

---

42 Norris’s location of the action on a liminal “accommodation street” (6) positioned between a “great avenue” above and a decrepit alley below, and used by San Franciscans of all classes on their way to or from other parts of the city, initially suggests that the McTeagues are in an unstable class position, part of a group that could either move upward to the proper middle class, or downward into the slums (156). Norris maps class hierarchy onto the streets, so that when Trina and McTeague later take up the junk-dealer Zerkow’s decrepit residence one block below Polk Street, they spatially enact movement down the social scale.
thoroughly imbricated in a gothic nightmare of circumscribed agency figured as downward mobility.

Alongside the American Dream of upward mobility, then, exists the American Nightmare of downward mobility. When applied to class boundaries and class mobility, the more general Progressive Era concern over agency manifests in one of two ways: on the one hand, class position might be preordained by social or inherited forces and is strictly hierarchical, rendering class mobility nearly impossible. On the other hand, mobility might be so fluid as to allow movement in either direction on the social scale; the individual in this situation is at the mercy of forces that control which direction he or she passes. While upward mobility is an American ideology, as I noted above, downward mobility is its dark double, the unspeakable yet inevitable corollary to America’s faith in social mobility. Due to either inherited or social forces (or some combination thereof) or their own machinations (which may also be products of inherited or social forces), individuals might move up or down the social scale. While initially this does not appear a particularly threatening proposition, since after all mobility is the panacea for the wounds that class inflicts on notions of American equality, we need only look to the naturalist plot of decline to behold the terrors associated with downward mobility in America. While naturalist works may only rarely contain overtly gothic conventions, many express the gothic through their preoccupation with mobility, agency, and predetermination.

Haunted/ing History: Nostalgia and the Fears of a Classless Society

Existing alongside concerns that America is classed, and that movement between classes is (or is not) possible, there exists a third, still-unexamined possibility with which
my projects is concerned: that America is classless after all. In the context of the
classified social milieu of the Progressive Era, when “class identities were still somewhat
in flux” (Foster 9), such a possibility implies that once-stable boundaries had become
destabilized as a result of a proliferation of new class categories: the nouveau riche and
the working girls, immigrants, the black bourgeoisie, unionized workers, a working class
dividing itself along racial lines, and a middle class also dividing into manual and non-
manual subsets: all of these suggested that “class” in any mid-nineteenth century use of
the term was meaningless by the late century.

The Progressive Era was marked by a pervasive awareness of chaos and social
disorder.43 The proliferation of terms to describe classes during this period is not only an
effect of disorder but also an attempt at a cure for that disorder, indicative of a desire to
categorize and therefore vanquish an increasing sense of social chaos. At the same time,
the very naming of so many subgroups attests to the stretching, sometimes to the
breaking point, of the work done by the term “class” in America. These terms register a
pre-existing problem of signification and propose an imperfect solution that confuses
rather than clarifies the problem of class in America.

43 This sense of disorder inspired Robert Wiebe to title his seminal work on the era The
Search for Order 1877–1920 (1967). Wiebe suggests that social chaos is a particularly
Progressive Era phenomenon. However, as June Howard responds in Form and History
in American Literary Naturalism (1985), “Wiebe’s approach is informed by an ideology
of stability, by the assumption that order is the natural condition of society. A different
eye might find class conflict inscribed continuously although variably in different
historical periods” (75). As I suggested in my Introduction, the Progressive Era was not
necessarily less socially legible and stable than previous generations; however, the public
consciousness of that disorder was certainly stronger in the late century.
The gothic enters this search for stability as it negotiates a relationship between the past and the present, between a fantasized past in which social hierarchies, and by extension classed identities, were more coherent, and a present marked by confusion and disorder. As a flexible, multivalent mode, the gothic expresses both fear of and nostalgia for that imagined past that is, in turns, both terrifying and comforting. While social and class stability have perhaps never been a reality in America, the ascription of stability to a fantasized past is a common reaction to modernization. On the one hand, social progress was a great equalizer, and, as Jarlath Killeen observes, gothic writers could express optimism in the future by villainizing the past, employing to that end “a mode centrally concerned with expressing antagonism toward the atavistic, Catholic past and loyalty to the enlightened present and future” (Killeen 29). On the other, “for Gothic writers the past was a place which could also be used to highlight the existential emptiness of the present, rather than optimistic plenitude” (Killeen 30). The past as figured in Progressive Era gothic fiction often contains both figurations of the past. Ghosts that haunt this fiction, as I will make clear in my discussion of Wharton in Chapter Two, and as I suggested above in my discussion of Freeman, are representatives of a more stable past, intruding on the present in order to stabilize degenerating class boundaries. Nevertheless, this intrusion is not always welcome or desired.

44 Killeen contends, in part, that Catholicism functions in gothic fiction as a metaphor for a violent and oppressive history. While Killeen is interested exclusively in British gothic, as I discussed in my Introduction, his observation might also apply to some American gothic works, including Twain’s No. 44 and a number of Wharton’s ghost stories, including “Kerfol” and “The Duchess at Prayer.”
The Progressive Era was marked by ambivalence toward the past, a troubled relationship with modernization common to gothic fiction in general. Killeen notes that this simultaneous embrace of the present and nostalgia for the past are characteristic of gothic fiction:

Rejection of the past, enchantment with the present and hope for the future was not the only attitude to time and modernity that can be detected in the nineteenth century, and the Gothic represents not simply a mode for ecstatic celebration but also one of melancholic warning. Many were concerned that there was something seriously wrong with modern culture, something missing, and they sought that lack in the ruins of the past and the Catholic culture that had been rejected. As well as denuding the world of ‘magic’ and ‘superstition’, after all, modernity was believed to have drained meaning and wonder from creation. (30)

The gothic represents a relationship between present and the past, an attempt to make sense of the present through comparison with a real or imagined past. In the nineteenth century, as Botting notes, the gothic erupts in fiction “as signs of loss and nostalgia, 45

45 Nostalgia for the past is also related to what Baudrillard refers to as the “counterfeit.” Insofar as the gothic is nostalgic for a more stable social order associated with the Middle Ages, it is inherently counterfeit. The proliferation of “mock gothic” ruins and buildings during the eighteenth century (including Walpole’s famous faux-gothic ruin Strawberry Hill) suggest a strain of the counterfeit apparent at the inception of the mode. “The counterfeit,” according to Jerrold Hogle, “is pulled in two directions at once: on the one hand, it includes a spectral longing for a fading ‘natural’ correspondence between sign and social status … ; on the other, that nostalgia is countered by the tendency to break signs of older status away from their earlier connections and to transfer them from one person to another — where they become counterfeits of status — at a time that allows increased social climbing depending on economic success” (“Counterfeit” 112). The eighteenth-century gothic is already a “Renaissance counterfeit of the medieval” (112); nostalgic at its core, and yet appropriating medieval signs for contemporary social or political commentary. The gothic realism of the late nineteenth century does a similar sort of work; these works express nostalgia for a time of more discernable social order, which is in effect a nostalgia for a pre-industrial correspondence between signifier and signified, or more specifically between class appearance and class status. At the same time, adoption of the gothic mode allows authors to comment upon contemporary social anxieties related to that very slippage between signifier and signified.
projections of a culture possessed of an increasingly disturbing sense of deteriorating identity, order and spirit” (114). As America moved toward modernity the gothic served as a tool for testing and challenging our claims of progress. The desire for social order that marks many gothic realist texts is just one manifestation of the nostalgia that haunts periods of tumult and change throughout American history, pleading for a return, albeit fallacious, to a well-ordered past.46

In the next chapter, I look more closely at an author whose gothic realist work expresses profound ambivalence towards the social upheavals of the Progressive Era. Criticism of Edith Wharton’s gothic works rarely takes her conservative social politics into account, focusing instead on her haunted houses as sites of female oppression or empowerment. Rather than taking Edith Wharton’s gothic away from conceptions of the female gothic, to which she rightly belongs, I argue instead that although her gothic work can be read as feminist, it also has a troublingly conservative class-correcting agenda. In Edith Wharton’s gothic realist fiction, ghosts expose and correct deviant class behaviors, the parameters of which Wharton describes in her non-fictional work on home decoration.

46 Nostalgia for a seemingly simpler past is a common response during times of economic stress or social upheaval. For example, 2012’s Academy Award for Best Picture, The Artist (2011), a black and white silent film set in 1920’s Hollywood and released during the Great Recession, serves as an obvious illustration of our tendency to turn toward the conservative and old-fashioned during hard times. The late nineteenth century was plagued by cycles of economic depression, as well, including the longest depression in US History between 1873–85, and crashes in 1893 and again in 1897. With economic instability, threats of class antagonism, and rapid technological and scientific advances threatening the bedrocks of American identity during the Progressive Era, it should come as no surprise that the gothic, expressing an appeal to and fear of the past, gained cultural traction during this period.
CHAPTER TWO

THE “INCORRUPTIBLE COSTODIANS” OF THE PAST:

CLASS AND THE HAUNTED HOUSE IN EDITH WHARTON’S GOTHIC FICTION

Ghosts, to make themselves manifest, require two conditions abhorrent to the modern mind: silence and continuity.
— Edith Wharton, preface to *Ghosts* (Ghost 9)

**Wharton and the Conservative Ghost Story**

Realism and the ghost story share a reliance on an evocation of realistic settings and motivations. In *Gothic*, Botting describes the ghost story as “realism’s uncanny shadow,” which “produces gentle tremors along the line separating the supernatural world from that of Victorian empirical and domestic order” (126). Ghost stories introduce the supernatural into a carefully rendered, realistic setting, and thereby produce their own unique horror, one that plays upon readers’ false sense of comfort and

---

1 All citations from the preface to *Ghosts* (1937), a collection long out of print, come instead from *The Ghost Stories of Edith Wharton* (1975). Unless otherwise noted, all short stories under discussion in this chapter are cited from *The Ghost Stories of Edith Wharton*.

2 I believe that the common critical distinction between the gothic and the ghost story is somewhat superficial, since ghost stories, like the larger gothic mode through which they operate, test the boundaries between the real and unreal, the living and dead, the past and the present, and invoke the uncanny for effect. Moreover, the American ghost story is clearly indebted to the eighteenth-century gothic tradition, as Lynette Carpenter and Wendy Kolmar argue in *Haunting the House of Fiction* (1991). As such, I refer to Wharton interchangeably as both a gothic writer and as an author of ghost stories in this chapter. My thinking somewhat mirrors that of Kathy Fedorko in “Edith Wharton’s Haunted Fiction,” in believing that Wharton “sees the apparitional in the real world as one clue to reality’s hidden Gothic story” (103, n2).
verisimilitude. When “the writer pretends to move in the world of common reality,” explains Freud in “The Uncanny,” “he deceives us into thinking that he is giving us the sober truth, and then after all oversteps the bounds of possibility” (405). The result of this violation of a reader’s expectations is that “we react to his inventions as we would have reacted to real experiences,” i.e. with fear (405). Edith Wharton clearly understood the necessity for realistic settings and scenarios in her work, including her gothic fiction. As she writes in her essay “Telling a Short Story” (1925), “one of the chief obligations, in a short story, is to give the reader an immediate sense of security,” so that “[h]is confidences once gained, he may be lured on to the most incredible adventures” (Collected xxxiii). The ghost story lends itself to realistic settings because without utter fidelity to life, place, and motive, the ghost’s entrance loses its power to terrify. It should come as no surprise, then, that many American realist writers, including Twain, Wharton, London, Gilman, James, and Freeman produced one or more ghost stories during their careers.³

Botting suggests that the nineteenth-century ghost story often “seemed a diversion from serious writing” for those authors who “spent more time writing novels along more conventional lines” (127). Botting does not include Edith Wharton in his list of authors

³ An early critical work The Haunted Dusk (1983), attempts to delineate the history of the American ghost story, and mentions several of these authors’ works. The volume is woefully under-representative of female and minority contributions to the genre, however, a critical gap that is filled in part by Carpenter and Kolmar’s Haunting the House of Fiction (1991) and Teresa Goddu’s Gothic America (1997). In his introduction to Scare Tactics (2008), Jeffrey Weinstock provides an excellent overview of the reasons for and criticism on the popularity of ghost stories in the nineteenth century, which he traces in part to Charles Dickens’s wildly successful A Christmas Carol in 1843 (5).
who simultaneously wrote gothic and realist works, but as Joseph Griffin points out in *America’s Social Classes in the Writings of Edith Wharton* (2009), her ghost stories “were literally the work of a lifetime of writing” (47); of her 86 published short stories, fourteen of Wharton’s tales might be characterized as ghost stories, and 22 as supernatural (Stengel 3).

Nevertheless, Griffin believes that Wharton’s ghost stories were “never a main concern, never came near to displacing those realistic stories of upper-class life that were her stock in trade,” even while he acknowledges that her ghost stories “satisfied some continuing urge in her to engage the supernatural sphere” (47).

Wharton’s gothic fiction cannot be written off so easily, as even Griffin must recognize, since he devotes an entire chapter to analyses of Wharton’s ghost stories. Wharton devotes both her preface to *Ghosts* and a section of *The Writing of Fiction* (1925) to the

---

4 There is some critical disagreement over which of Wharton’s tales should be classified as ghost stories. Most of Wharton’s ghost stories are collected in *The Ghost Stories of Edith Wharton* (1973). The collection is nearly identical to *Ghosts* (1937), although “The Looking Glass” inexplicably replaces “A Bottle of Perrier” in the later collection. In his grouping of Wharton’s short stories, Lewis, too, omits “A Bottle of Perrier” from Wharton’s ghost stories, including it as a crime tale, and listing as ghost stories only the 11 works published in *The Ghost Stories of Edith Wharton* (Wharton, *Collected* xxvii). “The Moving Finger” (1893) might also be classified as a ghost story, and while not ghost stories per se, “The Bolted Door” and “A Journey” might certainly be classified as stories featuring haunted individuals. “A Journey,” “The Duchess at Prayer” and “The Fullness of Life” are included in a later collection of Wharton’s supernatural stories, *The Ghost-Feeler* (1996), and “The Fullness of Life” is discussed as a ghost story in Weinstock’s *Scare Tactics*. All of these stories, including those later collected in *Ghosts* and *The Ghost Stories of Edith Wharton*, can be found in *The Collected Short Stories of Edith Wharton*.

5 Griffin problematically segregates Wharton’s ghost stories from the rest of her short fiction, treating them in a separate chapter that has little to say about class in these works. Nevertheless, the segregation of ghost stories from other works in Griffin’s book exemplifies the very lacuna this chapter hopes to address: the lack of critical work on class in Wharton’s gothic fiction.
ghost story, and describes her own childhood encounters with ghost stories in “Life and I,” an autobiographical manuscript written before 1920 (Lee 15). Rather than “run[ning] parallel to realist representations” (Botting 126), or subordinate to her realist output, Wharton’s gothic fiction should be considered a major facet of her work. Likewise, critical interpretations of social class in her oeuvre, to this date generally confined to her realist output alone, must address her gothic fiction, as well; such is one aim of this chapter.

Wharton penned ghost stories throughout her career, even after their vogue at the turn-of-the century had passed. In the early 1930s, she planned a collection of her supernatural tales (Ghosts), even though by that time she had difficulty placing those works in magazines (Griffin 40). As a result of her own unabashed enthusiasm and obvious use of the gothic mode, much critical attention has been paid to Wharton’s gothic oeuvre. Among major studies and monographs that have covered some aspect of

---

6 In Haunting the House of Fiction, Carpenter and Kolmar suggest that the ghost story never really lost popularity, but instead disappeared from major periodicals and magazines as a result of the “masculinization” of the publishing industry in the early decades of the twentieth century (9). Rather than disappearing, they argue, ghost stories instead moved to less mainstream publication venues (9). This may account in part for the difficulty Wharton had publishing her ghost stories by the 1930s. Weinstock identifies several other explanations for the decline of the female-penned ghost story in the 1930s, including “women’s rights advances that obviated the need to veil cultural critique, the increasing influence of Freudian psychoanalysis, and a decline in the respectability of the supernatural tale” (194).

Wharton also insisted on high prices for her stories, and found fewer and fewer periodicals able or willing to pay for her tales by the 1930s. In a letter to her editor at Appleton and Company, Wharton also expressed frustration at a changing publication industry: “I am afraid that I cannot write down to the present standards of the picture magazines” (Lewis, Edith 507). Her unwillingness to compromise by publishing in smaller periodicals, or by revising stories to make them more palatable to a changing general readership, likely affected her ability to find publishers for her ghost stories beginning in the early 1930s.
Wharton’s gothic and ghost stories are Carpenter and Kolmar’s *Haunting the House of Fiction: Feminist Perspectives on Ghost Stories by American Women* (1991), Jeffrey Weinstock’s *Scare Tactics: Supernatural Fiction by American Women* (2008), and Kathy Fedorko’s *Gender and the Gothic in the Fiction of Edith Wharton* (1995), as well as chapters in numerous collections on the American gothic, American women writers, the Female Gothic, or the American ghost story. While Wharton’s place in the Female Gothic canon has been cemented by a number of scholars, I would suggest that her ghost stories also allow her to voice class anxieties that have yet to be fully explicated by contemporary scholarship. In this chapter, I suggest that while her gothic work undoubtedly places her in a tradition of female writers who utilized the mode “to express the nightmares of women oppressed by patriarchal restrictions” (Weinstock 13, n21), we must also consider how Progressive Era class anxieties inform these works. Her gothic realist stories express concerns over the vulgarity of the nouveau riche and an ambivalent nostalgia for a socially stratified past. Furthermore, the largely one-dimensional attention paid to her gothic works by contemporary scholarship, which focuses almost exclusively on gender dynamics, illustrates the class-blind middle-class disposition I discussed in my Introduction, which repeatedly displaces or masks class subtexts with other discourses like race or gender.

Wharton’s preface to *Ghosts* suggests that her ghost stories are not just a diversion, but instead express larger concerns with modernity, loss, and nostalgia that have not been interrogated fully by scholars. In the preface, she explains the function of ghost stories and what differentiates good tales from bad ones, as well as how such works
should be judged.\textsuperscript{7} These few pages forge a direct link between her conception of ghostliness and the class anxieties expressed through the gothic realist mode. The preface is lighthearted, almost apologetic in tone. She asserts, for example, that the following collection is her “modest” contribution to the genre, and defers to several allegedly superior crafters of ghost tales, including Sheridan Le Fanu, Henry James,\textsuperscript{8} and Walter de la Mare, the latter to whom the collection is dedicated. Her knowledge of and indebtedness to the works of these authors betray her active interest in the mode, and somewhat qualify her claim that her own contributions are modest.

\textsuperscript{7} Countering contemporary claims (such as those forwarded by Howells in 1891’s \textit{Criticism and Fiction}) that literature must have a moral purpose or else “clog the soul with unwholesome vapors of all kinds” (Howells 325), Wharton writes that, “the ‘moral issue’ question must not be allowed to enter into the estimating of a ghost story … if it sends a cold shiver down one’s spine, it has done its job and done it well” (\textit{Ghost} 11). Wharton thereby judges the gothic based on its effect of terror and horror, with a qualification that the tale must scare not only the audience, but the author as well (11). She stops short of offering any advice on how to create this effect, though, noting that, “the more one thinks the question over, the more one perceives the impossibility of defining the effect of the supernatural” (10). Much of my argument below will focus on exactly what it is that scares Wharton (and what she believes will scare her middle-class readers) as those fears find expression in her ghost stories.

Wharton had her own childhood experience with the power of the ghost story. In an autobiographical fragment from her unfinished autobiography “Life and I,” published as a postscript in the 1973 \textit{Ghost Stories of Edith Wharton}, Wharton relays an incident in which she was given a book of “robbers and ghosts” to read while recovering from an illness. The book had such a profound effect on her heightened imagination and frail health that she suffered a serious relapse, and claims to have spent a childhood and young adulthood “in a state of chronic fear” as a result (\textit{Ghost} 302).

\textsuperscript{8} In “Telling a Short Story,” Wharton writes that James’s \textit{The Turn of the Screw} “stands alone among tales of horror in maintaining the ghostliness of its ghosts not only through a dozen pages but through close to two hundred — the economy of horror is carried to its last degree” (\textit{Collected} xxxiii). Wharton’s first published ghost story, “The Lady’s Maid’s Bell,” bears more than a passing resemblance to James’s novella.
Beneath her false-modesty (designed, perhaps, to maintain some social distance from the popular gothic mode) and tongue-in-cheek tone, however, runs a distinct sense of loss that undermines her attempt at jocularity. Wharton’s ghost stories are some of her most complex and critically rewarding work, with a far greater purpose than, as she suggests, merely to “send a cold shiver down one’s spine (11), or as she notes in “Telling a Short Story,” to instill “simple shivering animal fear” (Collected xxxiv).

The elderly Wharton laments the noisiness of the modern age, which drowns out what she calls the “ghostly instinct,” thereby making it impossible for ghosts to make themselves felt or heard. “Ghosts, to make themselves manifest,” she writes, “require two conditions abhorrent to the modern mind: silence and continuity” (9). The ghost, who “obviously prefers the silent hours,” finds fewer and fewer opportunities to make its presence known amidst the cacophony of modern inventions like radio and cinema, and “may after all succumb … to the impossibility of finding standing room in a roaring and discontinuous universe” (9). The disappearance of the ghost is linked, in Wharton’s thinking, to the disorienting pace of modern life.

Later in the preface, Wharton gestures toward the symbolic function of the ghost and the ghost story when she playfully admonishes ghosts to recognize their indebtedness to their author: “the ghost should never be allowed to forget that his only chance of survival is in the tales of those who have encountered him, whether actually or imaginatively — and perhaps preferably the latter” (10). The writer is therefore tasked with keeping the tradition of the ghost story alive. Careful to distance herself from any suggestion that she believes in the supernatural herself, Wharton instead suggests that
ghosts (and ghost stories) have a symbolic function or responsibility, while never clarifying exactly what that function is. Given the preface in toto, however, it can be assumed that the ghost and Wharton’s sense of loss are linked, particularly given her somewhat unexpected inclusion of “continuity” as a condition of ghostliness. While the possible connotations of “silence” as a prerequisite for ghostliness will be described in greater detail in the next section, I’d like to focus for a moment on the Whartonian ghost’s need for “continuity.”

At first glance, “continuity” appears a strange, even abstract prerequisite for a ghostly visitation. “Continuity” implies stability, lack of disruption, and consistency, all of which suggest that Wharton’s sense of ghostliness is very much imbricated with a sense of the past as more stable and orderly than the present, as well as with a desire to maintain some sort of unspecified connection with that past. If, as she suggests, the ghost story is a tradition in danger of being lost in the modern age, then Wharton’s acts of

---

9 Monika Elbert suggests that this quality of Wharton’s gothic (i.e. nostalgia or desire for the past) places her work in a category the author calls “Modernist Gothic.” In her reading of “A Bottle of Perrier” (1926/1930) as a work with modernist undertones, Elbert likens Wharton to Eliot, writing, “Wharton’s ghost stories fit into the Modernist tradition and place her alongside of contemporary questers, like T.S. Eliot, who try to resist the burden of modern history by recreating Western mythology or finding the sources of an older mythology. Both question contemporary culture as they nostalgically long for some mythological past” (Elbert, “T.S. Eliot” 19).

Elsewhere, Elbert argues that in her gothic fiction, “Wharton looks back to a Transcendentalist ethos” (“Transcendental”). In this reading, Wharton’s gothic fiction expresses her unhappiness with her own social set as well as with the unethical behavior of the nouveau riche, and offers a solution by a return to Transcendental values of internal peace, “suggesting that enlightenment might come from the silence within” (“Transcendental”). Wharton’s ghosts are still closely connected with the past in this reading, but an American Transcendental rather than a socially stratified past.
writing, collecting, and then defending ghost stories constitute a conversation with the past that she suggests has been threatened.

By choosing the term “continuity,” Wharton expresses a theme of loss common to the nineteenth-century ghost story. Botting observes that:

The uncertainty about individual perception and interest in other, supernatural dimensions stimulated by the ghost story … indicate a certain disaffection with the present. Excursions beyond the everyday world, the disturbance of boundaries between present, past and future, indicate both a fear and a nostalgia in relation to Victorian attitudes and society. What is missing, in a thoroughly secular, rationalized and scientifically-ordered material world, the ghost story suggests, is a sense of unity, value and spirit. Ghosts returning from a greater darkness surrounding the culture … signaled this sense of loss. (127–28)

Weinstock shares a similar understanding of nineteenth-century ghost stories as expressing a desire for stability and order: “Ghosts reestablish a form of historical continuity by linking past to present precisely when such a linkage seems threatened … ghosts act to anchor the past to an unsettled and chaotic present” (7; emphasis added). The ghost, then, emerges from a dissatisfying present, perhaps as a representative of a superior past. As I discussed in Chapter One, the “past” as figured in gothic realist fiction signifies both as nostalgia for a greater sense of order, and a fear of circumscribed agency in the present, a dual function that finds its way into Wharton’s ghost stories, as well. Her ghosts act as agents of the past intruding upon a discontinuous, disordered, and uncontrollable present. Depending on the context, her spirits manifest to warn, punish, or correct those who witness their visitation. These ghosts, who appear when a “linkage” between past and present has been broken, might therefore “require” continuity in more than one sense. Rather than a prerequisite, we might think of continuity as a ghostly
command; in other words, ghosts might appear in times of discontinuity in order to demand that a link to the past be re-established.

As figures of uncanniness, ghosts embody the contradiction associated with that term. They are both familiar and unfamiliar, both comforting and disquieting. They can also be either conservative or subversive, depending on the author or critical apparatus utilized to analyze a specific work. While the gothic is often considered a subversive mode, the ghost story is quite often conservative; recall, for example, my readings of Freeman’s ghost stories in the previous chapter. A ghost story might be progressive in one sense while, as Weinstock observes, helping “to legitimize the existing social order” in another (11). Wharton’s ghosts, as considered in light of her preface to Ghosts, are conservative; the ghost story is a cry for a return to order amidst a chaotic and noisy modern age. Her ghost stories channel an earlier, outmoded form of storytelling, in which ghosts are representatives of a quiet, well-ordered past.11

10 In recounting the major arguments of the Female Gothic, Weinstock notes that there is a “conservative side of the debate,” i.e. Female Gothic that supports, rather than subverts patriarchal domestic ideologies. In this line of thinking, “The happy endings of these texts in which the heroines marry and discover safety in domestic settings reveal the Women’s Gothic to be deeply conservative” (12). Weinstock notes that since the 1990s, critics have tended to lean toward readings of the Female Gothic as subversive rather than conservative (12). My argument maintains that while Wharton’s gothic may be subversive vis-à-vis domestic ideology, her considerations of class in these texts are conservative.

11 It is also of note that many of Wharton’s ghost stories are set in the past; her narrators often relate tales they have heard or read or recall experiences from their younger years. This strategy suggests that Wharton’s ghost stories are invested in relaying a sense of history on a narrative level. The ghost story, a traditionally oral narrative form, suggests a sort of historical continuity as well, as tales are handed down, told, and retold over generations while maintaining their basic characteristics and their sense of verisimilitude. Such is the case, for example, in “The Duchess at Prayer” (1900). The elderly Italian
Wharton’s conservative ghosts, upon closer inspection, are not out of keeping with gothic themes. As Botting notes, “The terrors and horrors of transgression in Gothic writing become a powerful means to reassert the values of society, virtue and propriety: transgression, by crossing the aesthetic and social limits, serves to reinforce or underline their value and necessity, restoring or defining limits” (Gothic 7). Wharton uses the gothic, and specifically the ghost story, as a means of testing and judging social boundary transgressions, returning social stability whenever such boundaries are found to be in danger of collapse.

In this chapter, I focus primarily on Wharton’s ghost stories, rather than her non-ghostly gothic works (such as Ethan Frome), because of the close association ghosts have with the past and with haunted houses. Since ghost stories rely heavily on location (i.e. the haunted house) for effect, Wharton’s work on architecture and interior decorating holds a prominent place in this research; I read Wharton’s haunted houses through the tasteful home as she describes it in The Decoration of Houses, her 1898 volume, written with interior decorator Ogden Codman, Jr., on tasteful home decorating. I consider both Wharton’s haunted houses and her model upper-class residences silent and continuous spaces. In making this claim I counter much existing scholarship on Decoration as it peasants/caretaker who relays the story to the narrator claims to have heard the story from his grandmother, who allegedly witnessed the macabre murder of her mistress’s lover over 200 years earlier. In answer to the narrator’s incredulity that the peasant’s grandmother could have been alive 200 years ago, the old man answers, “How that is, it’s not for an unlettered man to say; though indeed I myself seem to have seen many of the things she told me. This is a strange place. No one comes here, nothing changes, and the old memories stand up as distinct as the statues in the garden…” (73; ellipses in orig.). In this early short story, Wharton experiments with the past as a living, continuous presence, but one that relies, like the ghost story itself, upon telling and re-telling to give it life.
relates to Wharton gothic fiction, in particular Darcie Rives’s assessment that *The Decoration of Houses* “can be read as an assault on late Nineteenth-Century American architecture which replicated aspects of the menacing, claustrophobic gothic mansion” (9). As I make clear in the next section, however, most scholarship on Wharton’s gothic focuses on gender, not class. By reading Wharton’s guidebook as a classed, rather than a gendered, work, we can gain a different, but no less important, understanding of the Progressive Era anxieties at work in her gothic fiction.

In *Decoration*, Wharton suggests that the well-ordered home is a home in direct conversation with a well-ordered past. What serves as the point of inquiry for this chapter is the similarity between her call for “silence and continuity” as the appropriate settings for ghosts, and the architectural guidelines she advocates in *The Decoration of Houses*.12 Reading Wharton’s ghost stories with an understanding of her decorative philosophy gives us a new way to look at these gothic tales as implicitly critiquing vulgar taste, and as utilizing agents of the past, in the form of ghosts, to punish that vulgarity in an effort to restore a sense of social stability that Wharton believes is lost in the modern age. Wharton uses the popular ghost story as a way to articulate the upper-class anxieties of class boundary slippage and encroaching *nouveau-riche* vulgarity, concerns that she also expresses in her decorative handbook.

12 In using Wharton’s identification of “silence and continuity” as ghostly prerequisites in my reading of her ghost stories, I acknowledge that I’m using a definition she penned in the 1930s to understand fiction written almost 40 years earlier. However, given that Wharton identified which stories she wanted to include in *Ghosts* herself, and given her own commitment to this definition in her preface, reading her earlier stories according to these prescriptions is warranted.
In the following section, I provide an overview of the critical attention to Wharton’s ghost stories up to this point and suggest that class remains largely unexplored in Wharton’s gothic fiction. While not denying that Wharton’s gothic engages issues of domestic violence and female patriarchal disempowerment, I suggest that while Wharton might have been progressive in using the gothic to illustrate the silencing and isolation of women within domestic space, her architectural principles suggest a much more socially conservative stance in these works that has not been fully explicated by current scholarship. Following this critical overview, I read Wharton’s decorative and aesthetic schema as it relates to the denotative and connotative possibilities of “silence and continuity,” outlining how critics can use *The Decoration of Houses* as a guidebook for judging the good taste (or lack thereof) of the characters in her ghost stories. I uncover some of the gothic language in *Decoration*, both as it refers back to her ghostly criteria of “silence and continuity,” and as that gothic language informs new, aestheticized readings of Wharton’s ghost stories. I then take a closer look at two short stories, “Afterward,” and “The Lady’s Maid’s Bell,” in which ghosts and the homes they haunt act as agents of Wharton’s class conservatism. In both tales, ghosts correct deviant class behavior; they are agents of good taste who identify and expel that which is vulgar in order to restore a threatened silent and continuous space. Characters in these tales are punished for their unseemly, and moreover, low-class, behavior.

Wharton’s use of servants as characters and narrators in so many of her ghost stories, including “The Lady’s Maid’s Bell,” suggests that she considers domestic servants as conservative figures, as well. In *Decoration*, as in Wharton’s ghost stories,
servant and ghost are interchangeable; both police the conservative from a position of analogous invisibility. As Wharton neared the end of her life and career, however, both her ghostly servants and servant-ghosts become more unpredictable. In the final section of this chapter, I trace the depiction of servants through several of Wharton’s ghost stories to suggest that over time they become progressively more threatening, and thus indicate the author’s increasing sense of class hierarchy fragmentation. From agents who enforce conservatism, servants in Wharton’s ghost stories become, by the time “All Souls” was published in 1937, problems for class conservatism, symptoms of “a class structure in disarray” (Elbert, “Transcendental”).

In the Shadow of the Female Gothic: An Incomplete Recovery of Wharton’s Ghost Stories

The main themes of scholarship on Wharton include attention to gender (particularly in her gothic fiction), attention to class (in her realist and naturalist fiction), and assessments of her nonfiction, including The Decoration of Houses, in relation to either gender or class in her fiction. Beginning in the 1980s, most critical attention focuses on Wharton as a writer of the “Female Gothic.” Weinstock defines the Female Gothic as “that category of literature in which female authors utilize Gothic themes in order to address specifically female concerns” (1);¹³ readings of Wharton as a Female

¹³ In her introduction to The Female Gothic (1983) Juliann Fleenor defines the mode as follows:

It is essentially formless, except as a quest; it uses the traditional spatial symbolism of the ruined castle or an enclosed room to symbolize both the culture and the heroine; as a psychological form, it provokes various feelings of terror, anger, and sometimes self-fear and self disgust directed toward the female role, female sexuality, female physiology, and
Gothic writer therefore focus on manifestations of female entrapment, silencing, and abuse in her gothic fiction.

A gender-oriented approach to recovering and revaluing Wharton’s gothic fiction was certainly warranted, considering her absence from early critical treatments of the American Gothic. *The Haunted Dusk* (1983), an early attempt to recognize an American tradition of supernatural fiction, neglects Wharton’s extensive supernatural work altogether. The book focuses almost exclusively on male authors, although it includes readings of several of Wharton’s contemporaries, including Howells, London, Twain and James. Even Wharton’s early biographer, and the editor of the only complete collection of her short fiction, R.W.B. Lewis, disparages his subject when he suggests that Wharton’s ghost stories were merely thinly veiled commentaries on her personal experiences and that “it is unlikely she ever quite knew what she had accomplished” in her better ghost stories (“Introduction” xxi). Later, Lewis praises the “certain masculinity in her make-up” that resulted in what he considers her best stories, while gently chiding the “feminine sensibility” that led to perhaps too much attention to dress and interior decoration in her work (“Introduction” xxi). However, what Lewis devalues — Wharton’s expertise in the areas of taste, decoration, and architecture — are precisely the elements that need to be brought to bear upon readings of her gothic realist fiction.

---

This broad-ranging definition, in keeping with the general assessment of American gothic as psychological, neglects to take into account the variety of classed interactions that inform this fiction; the middle-class perspective, audience, readers, and interpretation of these texts is taken for granted and never explicitly addressed Fleenor’s work.
Lewis’s damning praise exemplifies why scholars of the Female Gothic were so eager to embrace Wharton. In *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), Gilbert and Gubar consider the wealth of nineteenth-century fiction by women as a “female impulse to struggle free from social and literary confinement” (xii), and later, their *No Man’s Land* (1988) paved the way for new readings of Wharton’s ghost stories. Wharton quickly came to be identified with the newly articulated Female Gothic mode. Gilbert and Gubar note that nineteenth-century women were “enclosed in the architecture of an overwhelmingly male-dominated society” (*Madwoman* xi); such gothic language informs many critical interpretations of space in Wharton’s gothic stories, which often feature women neglected (or worse) in overwhelming and isolated locales (“Mr. Jones,” “Kerfol,” “The Lady’s Maid’s Bell,” “Miss Mary Pask,” and “The Duchess at Prayer” all come readily to mind as exempla). In Female Gothic criticism, the home is a site of domestic politics and patriarchal oppression.

In *Haunting the House of Fiction: Feminist Perspectives on Ghost Stories by American Women* (1991), Lynette Carpenter and Wendy K. Kolmar focus specifically on ghost stories authored by women, challenging then-dominant assumptions that the mode was predominately male-authored. Carpenter and Kolmar suggest that women’s ghost stories were found wanting by men who judged such works against masculine standards.

---

14 In *No Man’s Land: Volume 2, Sexchanges*, Gilbert and Gubar suggest that there were numerous reasons why Wharton was attracted to the ghost story, among them that they “offered her a literature apart in which, for once, she could allow herself to imagine transcending the limits of possible and liberating desires for which there was no appropriate place in her culture.” Her ghost stories explore the “unleashing of female rage,” “the release of female desire,” and “the expression of female pain at the repression of rage and the killing of desire” (2: 159).
They read the tradition of ghost stories by American women, including Edith Wharton, as voicing particularly female concerns and anxieties, or the “symbolic possibilities of household politics” (4). This volume considers the female-penned ghost story as a tool “to critique mainstream male culture, values, and tradition” (Carpenter and Kolmar 1), and argues for recognition of an “Anglo-American women’s ghost story tradition” (3).

Kathy Fedorko, who contributed an essay on The House of Mirth and “The Lady’s Maid’s Bell” to Carpenter and Kolmar’s book, later produced Gender and the Gothic in the Fiction of Edith Wharton (1995), a monograph on Wharton’s gothic. Fedorko posits that Wharton’s gothic allows her to speak the unspeakable about women and men, and suggests that Wharton revises conventional gothic elements in her fiction (both gothic and realist) (xi), to explore the possibility of a dual-gendered self.\textsuperscript{15} Recognizing a theme of the silent woman in Wharton’s ghost stories, Jacqueline S. Wilson-Jordan argues that Wharton uses illness and disease in her gothic fiction to speak the unspeakable about traditional gender roles. In her reading of “The Lady’s Maid’s Bell,” Wilson-Jordan suggests that the “bell” of the title symbolizes a subversive female mode of communication that the tale’s villain, Mr. Brympton, attempts to silence. Wharton’s “diseased” narrators such as “Lady’s Maid’s” protagonist Hartley (who is recovering from typhoid) use writing and storytelling as therapy. As such, Wilson-Jordan concludes,

\textsuperscript{15} Taking a psychoanalytic approach, Fedorko considers the Female Gothic as concerned with the confrontation with the mother (xii), but argues that in Wharton’s gothic fiction, both men and women confront her, and women are sometimes responsible for preventing that maternal exploration, as well. In Fedorko’s readings, Wharton’s haunted houses are for women “an extension of her relationship to the maternal body she shares,” and for men are “maternal blackness” (10–11).
“Hartley’s ‘recovery’ of the story, suggesting as it does at least some measure of ‘recovery’ from the typhoid, cannot help but remind us of Wharton’s struggles with disease and her discovery that writing could be curative” (17). The works I have noted up to this point are representative of the major themes in critical attention to Wharton’s ghost stories. While these authors take various approaches (psychoanalysis, illness, etc.), almost all base their readings in gender distinctions and the female disempowerment common to Female Gothic interpretations.

Generally, critical discussions of class in Wharton’s gothic fiction subsume class antagonism under a larger umbrella of gender oppression. For example, Weinstock considers Wharton part of a group of nineteenth-century female writers who “deployed familiar conventions of the supernatural to critique not just the disempowered status of women in American culture, but also the expanding capitalist system that is shown to underlie gender oppression” (22). While Weinstock argues that “Afterward” belongs to a women’s tradition of using ghost stories to critique capitalism, his reading is still tethered to an understanding of women’s disempowered position within the capitalist system. For Weinstock, “Afterward” demonstrates that “capitalism not only fosters violence that produces unhappy ghosts, but also participates in the silencing of women who themselves are rendered metaphorical ghosts by virtue of not being fully autonomous agents” (100).

Holly Blackford’s “Haunted Housekeeping” (2005) discusses the mistress-servant dynamic in Wharton’s gothic fiction. Blackford argues that the haunted house in Wharton’s fiction is a site for a showdown between female servants and mistresses over domestic control. In stories like “All Souls,” and “Mr. Jones,” Blackford contends, “the
Gothic will not accept women taking men’s places” as the heads of households (242). Tales of mistress-servant conflict thereby dramatize the precarious and unstable position of the mistress, who often has less social mobility than her servants (237), and who has little agency or control over her own household. For both Blackford and Weinstock, class criticism serves to bolster Wharton’s inclusion as a subversive Female Gothic writer who uses the gothic to stage contemporary questions of domestic and national economy as they affect women.

Of the few critics who discuss class in Wharton’s gothic fiction, only Ann Patten avoids relating class tensions to gender dynamics. Patten’s argument centers on Wharton’s “unease over the shift in values in America” as evidenced in “The Lady’s Maid’s Bell” and “Afterward.” The latter story she reads as a critique of the grey moral areas engendered by modern capitalist business practices; the former she reads as evidence of Wharton’s anxiety over immigration. Patten suggests that Wharton’s gothic is a reaction to her own sense of uncanniness engendered by the “class slippage” of a changing American (1); in this reading, Wharton uses the gothic to express anxieties over the new capitalist landscape. I build upon this conclusion below to suggest that some of these tales also contain a fantasized, albeit equivocal solution to the problem of class slippage.

Finally, over the last decade critics have begun to turn their attention to how *The Decoration of Houses* influenced Wharton’s use of space in her fiction, but few have specifically treated the ghost stories and gothic fiction in this manner. Chief among articles that do address the gothic and *Decoration* is Darcie Rives’s “Haunted by
Taking a feminist approach, Rives suggests that *Decoration*, with its emphasis on privacy, light, and space, “becomes a treatise for eschewing the architecture depicted in gothic novels” (9). Wharton’s gothic fiction dramatizes female entrapment via its employment of gothic architectural and decorative motifs, Rives believes, noting that the gothic is “a genre centered on the lack of privacy, freedom, and safety for women in an isolated, gloomy mansion that harbors malevolent violence” (8). Both Rives and Fedorko believe that the architecture and decoration of Wharton’s fictional homes are presented in opposition to those design tenets she postulates in *Decoration* (Rives 9; Fedorko, *Gender* 20–21). In their arguments, *Decoration* encourages home decoration and architecture that give women the choice of privacy and some element of control over their domestic lives. Wharton correlates the “darkness and isolation” of the Victorian mansion with the “loneliness and vulnerability” of gothic heroines (Rives 10), thereby making the isolated and silent homes in her gothic fiction a symbol for the oppression of women. Wharton’s oppressive interiors stand in for oppressed lives (Rives 10).16

Rives’s argument at first appears to contradict my own, insofar as I suggest that Wharton’s gothic interiors actually share many features with the homes described in *The Decoration of Houses*. In my consideration of the interiors of Wharton’s ghost stories, I don’t negate the fine and groundbreaking work on gender dynamics performed in

---

16 Rives’s argument is heavily influenced by Kate Ferguson Ellis’s oft-cited *The Contested Castle* (1989), another work on the Female Gothic that suggests that female writers use the gothic home to dramatize women’s domestic disempowerment and subversively to critique patriarchy.
previous Wharton scholarship.\textsuperscript{17} Indeed, more recent scholarship, most notably Ann Mattis’s work on “The Lady’s Maid’s Bell,” which I discuss below, considers class and gender as intersectional concerns in Wharton’s gothic fiction. What I suggest is that Wharton’s gothic fiction warrants more varied and critical scrutiny than feminist treatments alone have allowed. If, as Rives suggests, we read Wharton’s gothic interiors as sites of female oppression, then those homes and the philosophy espoused in \textit{The Decoration of Houses} do appear at odds. However, Wharton’s empowered class position and oppressed gender position result in the projection of confusing and sometimes contradictory ideological positions in her work; we cannot assume that the home she rejects is always and unequivocally a patriarchal one. If we consider Wharton’s gothic interiors as highly \textit{classed} interiors, many of the disparities between her gothic houses and her tasteful model homes disappear. Where inconsistencies persist, they might be read as signifiers of a destabilized class hierarchy that the narrative attempts to correct. After all, \textit{The Decoration of Houses} is above all a work intended for, and its suggestions employed by, the upper class to which Wharton belonged. By considering it as such, we

\textsuperscript{17} Indeed, without the re-valuing of Wharton’s work undertaken by feminist scholars, I (and countless other scholars) would likely not have encountered these stories. Nevertheless, the consistent recourse to gender in criticism of Wharton’s fiction, at the expense of class, might be traced to the decline of critical attention to class during the “cultural turn” of the 80s and 90s, and is therefore subject to scrutiny. As Rosemary Hennessy has argued in \textit{Profit and Pleasure} (2000), we can see in the cultural turn a potentially dangerous elision of real material disparity. By encouraging identity politics at the expense of class identification, capitalism is able to prevent the sort of shared recognition of oppression that would be necessary to demand and enact real social change (Hennessy 12). Increasing attention to race and gender during the 1980s served to shunt discussions of class disparity aside. Hennessy argues that cultural and gender studies contribute to the atmosphere of neoliberalism that pervades universities and obscures the reality of class hierarchy while fostering consumption that supports “the goals of the marketplace” (79).
can trace a different agenda from *Decoration* to Wharton’s gothic fiction, an agenda focused on eliminating vulgarity, with ghosts policing good, and more importantly, *conservative* taste. In the next section, I take a closer look at *The Decoration of Houses*, focusing on how the ghostly necessity of “silence and continuity” she posits in the preface to *Ghosts* also registers in the emphasis on taste and congruity in her decorative handbook.

**“The Wants of Dead and Gone Predecessors”: Gothic Subtexts in *The Decoration of Houses***

Although it is concerned with private rather than public space, *The Decoration of Houses*, an architectural manual in which Wharton also details the qualities of tasteful home decorating and room design, is very much a product of the Progressive Era. As Annette Benert notes, *Decoration* was a highly political text that subscribed to the decorative ethics of the City Beautiful movement: “for mainstream city planners, neoclassical urban buildings and planning would bring order and harmony to American cities; help to acculturate and assimilate the foreign-born, the poor, and the new rich alike” (38). Wharton participates in the same process of cultural definition and purification that marked many aspects of Progressive Era culture, and that found in a rarified understanding of “culture” an opportunity to organize a disordered American populace from the top down: “Every good moulding, every carefully studied detail, exacted by those who can afford to indulge their taste, will in time find its way to the carpenter-built cottage.” (Benert 38). Neoclassical architecture and decoration would
presumably have a trickle-down effect, eventually reforming even the lowest of homes and their occupants.

Wharton’s philosophy echoes contemporary discourse on the relationship between space and morality. “For many Progressives,” Benert writes, “the physical and social conditions of our cities fused into a single problem and a single solution — the buildings in which we housed ourselves and what we valued” (39). The organizing of space in the home mirrored the larger movement to organize and stabilize a heaving, growing nation. Wharton’s manual should be considered a part of this larger ethical movement toward reformed public and private space, rather than a narrowly feminist work in which domestic space is catachrestically tethered to femininity.

Indeed, compared to other decorative manuals written for and by women during the nineteenth century, Wharton’s “reform” of space is much more socially conservative. In Women and Economics (1898), for example, published the same year as Wharton’s manual, Charlotte Perkins Gilman advocates a radical reform of domestic space and female labor. Gilman advocates professionalization of cooking and child-rearing; her idealized home deviates radically from the self-contained, isolated, and oppressive nineteenth-century homes in which women were expected to perform important work without having received adequate training. Gilman’s model home removes the kitchen from the home, leaving cooking to those best suited to that profession, and therefore allowing women the opportunity to pursue those occupations to which they are best suited. Wharton’s manual has no interest in freeing women from the home, because its audience was not subjected to the same degrading drudgery Gilman critiques. The
Decoration of Houses is a decorative guide that “fuses neoclassical aesthetics with upper-class contexts” (Benert 45), rather than a work that envisions a radically re-socialized domestic space for working women. Indeed, the sort of dismantling and socializing of space that Gilman advocates is contrary to the focus on privacy and spatial distinction in The Decoration of Houses.

The traditional use of space dictated by The Decoration of Houses is also at odds with the middle-class home as envisioned in the Beecher sisters’ American Woman’s Home, a domestic handbook originally published in 1869 and still influential several decades later. The American Women’s Home didn’t seek to free women from the home, but rather to “render each department of woman’s true profession as much desired and respected as are the most honored professions of men” (19). While obviously a socially conservative work, The American Women’s Home holds little in common with Decoration. Always attuned to the limited budget of their middle-class audience, AWH is full of tips for stretching pennies and dollars. This middle-class Yankee practicality is completely at odds with advice in The Decoration of Houses, which doesn’t even acknowledge the existence of kitchens, let alone offer advice and illustrations detailing how the convenient kitchen should be organized. The Beecher sisters were committed to the women’s place in the home, yet they envision a radical adjustment of domestic space to ease the burden of women’s labor.

The Beechers describe an economical home in which rooms, equipped with moveable screens and cleverly designed furniture, served multiple functions throughout
the day.\textsuperscript{18} Chapters on home decoration include tips for decorating rooms on tiny
budgets by building furniture, making picture frames, and wallpapering with a border
“made in imitation of the choicest French style, which can not at a distance be told from
it” (72). As will become clear from my description of Wharton’s aesthetic criteria below,
all of these qualities would have proven vulgar in her model home. Again, Wharton’s
handbook is intended for an upper-class readership free from the type of drudgery that
Gilman and the Beechers strove to alleviate, and is therefore only tangentially related to
these works which strove to reform the woman’s place in the home. While Wharton, like
the Beechers, strove to make the home more comfortable and convenient, her conception
of both comes from a privileged position that does not associate either term with
domestic labor (or its reform).\textsuperscript{19} *The Decoration of Houses* belongs to the genre of
Progressive Era reform literature, but its reforms are intended to teach taste and good
breeding to the elite and newly rich of both genders.

\textsuperscript{18} “The screen and couches can be so arranged as to have one room serve first as a large
and airy sleeping-room; then, in the morning, it may be used as sitting-room one side of
the screen, and breakfast-room the other; and lastly, through the day it can be made a
large parlor on the front side, and a sewing or retiring-room the other side” (354).

\textsuperscript{19} The Beechers’ model home saves the labor of the homemaker by “economizing time,
labor, and expense by the close packing of conveniences. By such methods, small and
economical houses can be made to secure most of the comforts and many of the
refinements of large and expensive ones” (29). Wharton, starting from a refined home,
has a very different conception of convenience and comfort that is very much imbricated
with upper-class habitus. The two works have some commonalities, though; both
advocate simplicity in décor and utilizing one primary color in a room, for example. The
Beechers, however, advocate many decorations that would have appalled Wharton, such
as wallpaper, mat carpeting, and curtain-tops; their practicality and frugality is part of a
larger agenda of establishing a humble Christian home. While both manuals insist on
simplicity, there is nothing humble about Wharton’s sense of the term.
The Decoration of Houses is evidence of a young author with an astounding grasp of architectural history, what R.W.B. Lewis calls a “nearly professional competence” in decorating gleaned from “her close looks into a variety of European houses” (Edith 78). Although Wharton’s model home is one clearly influenced by sixteenth-century Italian villas, her understanding of British, French, and especially Italian architecture and their relationship to one-another is truly impressive, so that when she claims that contemporary architecture and decoration have been “wander[ing] since 1800 in a labyrinth of dubious eclecticism” (Decoration 497), readers are inclined to trust her judgment.

Wharton’s vast knowledge of architecture and design was a result of her privileged upbringing, which was coupled with what she called, in “Life and I,” an early disposition to see the “visible world as a series of pictures, more or less harmoniously composed, & the wish to make the picture prettier” (1071; emphasis in orig.). This “visual sensibility” included a seemingly innate distaste for ugliness:

I think my suffering from ugliness developed earlier than my sense of beauty, though it would seem that, one being the complement of the other, they would have coincided in my consciousness. At any rate, the ugliness stamped itself more deeply on my brain, & I remember hating certain rooms in a London house of my aunt’s, & feeling for ugly people an abhorrence, a kind of cruel hate, that I have never been able to overcome. (1073; emphasis in orig.)

Wharton’s senses of beauty and ugliness are certainly inspired by her family’s 1866 relocation to Europe, where she was exposed to what Benert calls a “visual and spatial standard, an aesthetic imprint, against which the American scene could never measure up” after her return to New York in 1872 (21). Wharton’s aesthetic preference for order,
simplicity, and stability, founded upon her early exposure to the great homes and monuments of Europe, would later affect how decoration and home design signify in her fiction and nonfiction.\(^{20}\)

*The Decoration of Houses*, Wharton’s first published work,\(^{21}\) seems designed in part to mitigate some of the “ugliness” she saw in American decorating trends through adoption of superior European traditions. One of the work’s prime directives is that homes be decorated with an eye toward “comfort and convenience” (54), a seemingly simple philosophy that nevertheless stood in stark contrast to the over-stuffed, heavily upholstered and cluttered rooms belonging to members of Wharton’s class. “Comfort and convenience” has a complicated, almost contradictory meaning in Wharton’s text; it is both tethered to the past and progressive, “at once old guard and reformist” (Benert 25).

If, for example, she writes that excessive window hangings, and particularly those “fixed window-draperies, with festoons and folds so arranged so that they cannot be lowered or raised” (104) are to be avoided because they fail to adhere to the initial purpose of

\(^{20}\) As Suzanne Jones has argued, “she used domestic spaces both mimetically to identify characters and symbolically to reveal personality traits, but also thematically to explore their power to affect feelings and emotions” (180–81). Jones offers an excellent application of this theory to *The House of Mirth* and *The Custom of the Country*, arguing, for example, that the latter contains interiors that illustrate “what happens when modern life destroys historical continuity” (198), i.e. what happens when the newly monied decorate with an eye toward fashion rather than good taste. Her compelling reading of Wharton’s fictional interiors relies upon careful comparison of those spaces with *The Decoration of Houses*.

\(^{21}\) While architect and decorator Ogden Codman Jr. is listed as a co-author of *The Decoration of Houses*, he primarily was responsible for collecting the illustrations and photographs for the work, and for developing the ideas with Wharton, and not for actually writing the text. As such, I refer to Wharton (rather than Wharton and Codman) as the author of *The Decoration of Houses*. 
window coverings, i.e. to keep out light, Wharton also advises that decoration need not slavishly adhere to the past:

The unsatisfactory relations of some people with their rooms are often to be explained in this way. They have still in their blood the traditional uses to which these rooms were put in times quite different from the present. It is only an unconscious extension of the conscious habit which old-fashioned people have of clinging to their parents’ way of living…. To go to the opposite extreme and discard things because they are old-fashioned is equally unreasonable. The golden mean lies in trying to arrange our houses with a view to our own comfort and convenience…. (54)

Although Decoration is a predominately conservative work (Wharton’s cautions against central heating and electric light, for example), moments like this suggest that Wharton had a less assured — even an ambivalent — relationship with the past. Indeed, in some passages, Decoration is a surprisingly gothic text, depicting the past as both threatening and desirable.

Although she makes no explicit mention of ghosts in Decoration, Wharton does suggest that the past haunts the present: “it must never be forgotten” she writes, “that every one is unconsciously tyrannized over by the wants of others, — the wants of dead and gone predecessors, who have an inconvenient way of thrusting their different habits and tastes across the current of later existences” (54). Wharton takes a contradictory stance toward these habits. On the one hand, she espouses a decorative model that reifies

---

22 “Nothing has done more to vulgarize interior decoration than the general use of gas and of electricity in the living-rooms of modern houses…. In passageways and offices, electricity is of great service; but were it not that all ‘modern improvements’ are thought equally applicable to every condition of life, it would be difficult to account for the adoption of a mode of lighting which makes the salon look like a railway-station, the dining room like a restaurant” (Decoration 155; emphasis in orig.). For Wharton, modern inventions render the private residence a place of public commerce, and specifically a place of cross-class interaction and social ambiguity.
the superior taste of the past; on the other, Wharton sometimes conceives of the past as a dominant, controlling force that dictates the current order from a position of historical predetermination and allows for no contemporary variations outside of prescribed bounds of good taste. “Strive as we may for originality,” she writes,

we are hampered at every turn by the artistic tradition of over two thousand years. Does any but the most inexperienced architect think that he can ever rid himself of such an inheritance? He may mutilate or misapply the component parts of his design, but he cannot originate a whole new architectural alphabet. The chances are that he will not find it easy to invent one wholly new moulding. (49)

In Wharton’s architectural model, past taste is an overwhelming force; the good decorator, whom she acknowledges as appearing to some as a “possessor of some strange craft like black magic or astrology” (55), unlocks the mysteries of home decoration simply by conceding the superiority of the past over the present, and by adjusting those past models as little as possible to accommodate modern necessities. The past has almost a tyrannical hold over the present here. Nevertheless, although this sense of helplessness is implicit in the text, Wharton overwhelmingly favors those past decorative models, choosing past tyranny over contemporary attempts at originality.

Wharton’s desire to adhere to a historical sense of architecture is also highly informed by a sense of class hierarchy. For example, she traces the end of good decorative taste to the French Revolution, which she claims “brought about the general downfall of taste” (123), presumably as a result of the destruction of a highly cultured monarchy by the impoverished, uneducated masses. While claiming that the guidelines she lays out might be applied by anyone, no matter their income, Decoration includes references to servants, guidelines for libraries, ballrooms, and salons, and a general air of
“elegant snobbery” (as Lewis phrases it [Edith 79]) that assumes a highly cultured, wealthy audience.23

And not just any wealthy audience would do. Throughout Decoration, Wharton overtly critiques the decorative tastes of the nouveau riche, writing that “the vulgarity of current decoration has its source in the indifference of the wealthy to architectural fitness” (38). The principal affront committed by these unlearned is mimicry of tasteful decoration combined with a lack of education in the purpose of certain decorative features. The result is invariably an overuse of showier features, “a plague of liquid gilding” (234), and a jumble of discordant designs without recourse to quality or simplicity: “Nothing can exceed the ugliness of the current designs,” she writes; “All this showy stuff has been produced in answer to the increasing demand for cheap ‘effects’ in place of unobtrusive merit in material and design” (61).

Wharton’s refined sense of good taste is a testament to her cultural capital that also attests to her careful delineation of subclasses within the upper class; Decoration seems designed to demonstrate to the glut of new American millionaires that there is more to taste than wealth, and that those with cultural capital know the difference between true taste and gaudy pecuniary emulation. She proclaims, for example, that “[i]t is one of the misfortunes of the present time that the most preposterously bad things often possess the powerful allurement of being expensive,” and that “costliness is no test of

23 Lewis notes that a few contemporary reviewers criticized the work for its clear pandering to elite readers (Edith 79). Hermione Lee’s 2007 biography notes Decoration’s snobbishness, as well; Lee suggests that “class assumptions run unquestioned” through a work full of “high-handed prejudices” (134).
merit in an age when large prices are paid for bad things” (210–11). Indeed, *The Decoration of Houses* reads as a guide to upper-class habitus; Wharton’s ability to distinguish between items and design of good taste and showy and incongruous mimicry of such demonstrates her own habitus, an innate sense of what is beautiful and what is ugly that came to her as a result of her privileged youth.

Although Wharton demonstrates the utility of architectural features and defends the necessity for artistic and decorative unity, within these guidelines she also couches an appeal to taste; the best decorative schemes appeal to those with superior taste and breeding, those who demand good lines and form because of their cultured education and upbringing, and not merely because they have the money to purchase them. It is not just the “habits and tastes” of the past that haunt the present, then, but the “habitus and tastes” of a past which contained a stabilized, stratified class hierarchy that must be understood and adhered to within Wharton’s sense of decorative propriety. *Decoration* contains a clear sense of what is tasteful and what is vulgar, and the latter Wharton associates both

24 In another example, she reminds readers that “suitability of substance always enhances a work of art; mere costliness never” (234).

25 Wharton also disparages art that attempts exactly to imitate life: “This literal rendering of natural objects with deceptive accuracy, always condemned by the best artists, is especially inappropriate when brought in close contact with the highly conventionalized forms of architectural composition” (*Decoration* 195). As Bourdieu suggests, the “taste of necessity” dictates that members of the working class generally appreciate art for its exact reference to life, whereas members of higher classes appreciate the abstract, “the paradoxical product of conditioning by negative economic necessities — a life of ease — that tends to induce an active distance from necessity” (*Distinction* 5). Wharton’s taste in the abstract over the life-like thereby identifies her as a member of the upper class.
with the lower middle class and the *nouveau riche* who possess the wealth, but not the good breeding, to make sound decorative decisions.

Since *Decoration* is both a product of and guidebook to Wharton’s upper-class habitus, it should come as no surprise that she never clearly defines “taste” in the work—those who need to ask clearly do not possess it. Similarly, other terms and guidelines she discusses are never defined clearly. Along with “comfort and convenience,” for example, Wharton also appeals to “rhythm and logic” in home design. The best homes don’t slavishly adhere to earlier design principles; rather, they demonstrate continuity with such principles:

> Many of the most popular features in modern house-planning and decoration will not be found to stand this double test [of rhythm and logic]. Often … they are merely survivals of earlier social conditions, and have been preserved in obedience to that instinct that makes many people cling to customs the meaning of which is lost. In other cases they have been revived by the archaeologizing spirit which is so characteristic of the present time, and which so often leads its possessors to think that a thing must be beautiful because it is old and appropriate because it is beautiful. (47)

Again, there is a subtle variation here between following past design models with and without a true understanding of them. The key, it would seem, is a sense of congruity, of continuity with the past rather than repetition. It is Wharton’s ambiguous call for congruity, linked to an equally ill-defined sense of “fitness” that connects Wharton’s decorative schema to her ghostly prerequisites of “silence and continuity.”

As in the preface to *Ghosts*, in *Decoration* Wharton expresses a sense of an incongruous or discontinuous present in need of repair. Good taste necessitates a historical sense of architecture and decoration, that is, an understanding of the history of
decorative and architectural features, which leads to a greater sense of continuity in decorative schemes, and by extension, an identification and removal of all things discontinuous or incongruous with that history. For Wharton, modern homeowners and decorators have lost the historical sense of architectural features. As a result, modern homes are often incorrectly or crassly designed and decorated, with little sense of historical continuity; they are, in a word, noisy. In the ghost stories under discussion below, this sense of incongruity extends to the inhabitants of homes, many of whom are incongruous with their surroundings.

If Wharton’s sense of congruity is closely associated with the “continuity” required by her ghosts, we can find a similar correlation between tastefulness and “silence,” her other spectral prerequisite. While in the preface to Ghosts Wharton suggests a correlation between noisiness and the disappearance of ghosts in the modern age, in Decoration she assigns a different connotation to the term noise: something busy, flashy, or gaudy. In her chapter on knick-knacks, for example, she writes that, “Vulgarity is always noisier than good breeding” (213). Wharton’s adoption of the aesthetic

26 “Vulgar” is a popular adjective in Decoration and elsewhere in Wharton’s oeuvre. She uses the term ten times in Decoration to describe “trashy” or otherwise low-class décor (she uses “trashy” four times to describe various effects, usually the effect of mixing of cheap bric-a-brac with items of good design). Everything from pinchbeck, to wallpaper, carpet borders and even electricity she describes as “vulgar.” That Wharton assigns a clear sense of the low-class to the term is evident. In an amusing passage in the short story “The Bolted Door” (1909), for example, she refers to a wealthy man’s hobby of melon growing: “Not vulgar, out-of-door melons — his were grown under glass” (Collected 2:10). Similarly, Wharton clearly associates the term “noisy” with vulgarity. In her first published story, “Mrs. Manstey’s View” (1891) the titular character dislikes her neighbors’ servants: “Noisy slatterns, Mrs. Manstey pronounced the greater number; she knew their ways and hated them” (Collected 1: 4).
connotation of “noisy” allows us to conceive of her ghosts as not only representatives of the past, but as historical emissaries of good taste, as well. Good breeding, that is, good taste, thereby takes on the opposite connotation; since vulgarity is “noisy,” it follows that good taste is “silent.” A silent home might therefore be one in which the gaudiness of modern design doesn’t drown out or overshadow the superior lines of traditional décor, as Wharton implies when she continues, “it is instructive to note how a modern commercial bronze will ‘talk down’ a delicate Renaissance statuette …” (213).

Wharton’s suggestion that ghosts require “silence and continuity” becomes more weighted with class considerations when the terms are considered as they relate to her aesthetic prescriptions: in requiring “silence and continuity,” the ghost also demands the banishment of ill-breeding, and enforces the “ostentatious discretion” Bourdieu associates with upper-class taste (Distinction 249). Wharton’s ghosts require “silent” good taste as opposed to vulgarity, and concession to the supremacy of a stable past rather than embrace of an incongruous, discontinuous present.

27 “Ill-breeding,” writes Wharton in “Life and I,” “any departure from the social rules of conduct — was the only form of wrong-doing I can remember hearing condemned” as a child (1073). Wharton recalls that her hatred of ugliness, coupled with “a rigid rule of absolute, unmitigated truth-telling” often conflicted with her parents’ dislike of ill-breeding (1073), resulting in a childhood of anxiety and “anguish” at “the impossibility or reconciling God’s standard of truthfulness with the conventional obligation to be ‘polite’” (1074).

28 Bourdieu associates the bourgeois “intolerances” of noise and crowds with their drive to distinguish themselves from the nouveau riche: “bourgeois discretion signals its presence by a sort of ostentatious discretion, sobriety and understatement, a refusal of everything which is ‘showy,’ ‘flashy’ and pretentious, and which devalues itself by the very intention of distinction” (Distinction 249).
The decorative and classed connotations of “noise” also register in *Decoration*’s preoccupation with clearly delineated space. In reference to color choices in a room, for example, Wharton notes that, “A multiplicity of colors produces the same effect as a number of voices talking at the same time…. Each room should speak with but one voice: it should contain one color, which at once asserts its predominance …” (63). While Wharton clearly advocates the need for privacy in the modern home, a “house open to the outside world while providing ample opportunity for privacy” (Rives 9), the handbook also expresses a general anxiety over liminality; just as rooms should have one distinctive color to maintain their aesthetic silence, so should rooms have one clear function. The focus on creating order out of chaos, on re-creating or maintaining disrupted, destabilized or threatened boundaries, is another gothic subtext present throughout *Decoration*, and one that also plays an important role in Wharton’s gothic realist works.

Throughout *Decoration*, Wharton eschews indeterminate space, writing that “[e]ach room in a house has its individual uses: some are made to sleep in, others are for dressing, eating, study, or conversation; but whatever the uses of a room, they are seriously interfered with if it be not preserved as a small world by itself” (58). The mixing or mis-using of space is to be avoided, for it signifies discontinuity: “The

29 Wharton gives an example of this mis-use of space as regards gala rooms:

Nothing can be more cheerless than the state of a handful of people sitting after dinner in an immense ball-room with gilded ceiling, bare floors, and a few pieces of monumental furniture … yet in any house which is simply an enlargement of the ordinary private dwelling the hostess is often compelled to use the ballroom or saloon as a drawing-room. (163)
tendency to merge into one any two apartments designed for different uses shows a retrogression in house-planning…” (141).

She likewise laments the increasing prevalence of doorways that don’t contain doors: “First, the door was slid into the wall; then even its concealed presence was resented, and it was unhung and replaced by a portiere; while of late it has actually ceased to form a part of house-building, and many recently built houses contain doorways without doors” (81; emphasis in orig.). Not only should doorways always contain doors (portieres or curtains will not suffice, perhaps because they do not provide a clear enough delineation of space), but “[u]nder ordinary circumstances, doors should always be kept shut” to prevent the functions of rooms from bleeding into one another (82). “In fact,” Wharton continues, “the absence of privacy in modern homes is doubtless in part due to the difficulty of closing the doors between the rooms” (83). Throughout Decoration, Wharton rejects liminality in favor of self-containment, preservation of privacy, and a clearly delineated sense of space. Mixed-purpose rooms, uncovered windows, excessive doorways or lack of doors are an aesthetic affront that will produce nothing but unsatisfactory results. Decoration exhibits an anxiety of liminality through its devotion of several chapters to the treatment of openings in such a way as to preserve distinctions between spaces, and by extension, between classes.

30 In some cases, even the suggestion of a door is to be avoided; Wharton suggests instead installation of hidden doors (for any but the major entrances to a room), which maintain the symmetry of the room, but just as importantly, efface any suggestion of liminality, thereby maintaining the room as a complete “world by itself.” “There is no reason why, with proper care, a door of this kind [concealed] should not be so nicely adjusted … as to be practically invisible” Wharton writes (96).
Because she considers modern architecture and decoration inferior to those of a more socially stratified past, Wharton’s complaint that modern homes are marked by an “indifference to privacy,” expresses a desire for a return of stable class divisions and a concurrent rejection and ejection of liminality, be it of space or of class. The relationship between privacy and class boundary maintenance is particularly clear in the following passage:

The hearth should be the place about which people gather; but the mantelpiece in the average American house, being ugly, is usually covered with inflammable draperies; the fire is, in consequence, rarely lit…. Besides, on the opposite side of the room is a gap in the wall eight or ten feet wide, opening directly upon the hall, and exposing what should be the most private part of the room to the scrutiny of messengers, servants, and visitors. This opening is sometimes provided with doors; but these, as a rule, are either slid into the wall or are unhung and replaced by a curtain through which every word spoken in the room must necessarily pass….

Wharton’s desire for clearly delineated space is class-inflected here; she believes contained space shields the occupants of the home from public scrutiny, including that from domestic servants.

In the following two sections, I focus on how liminal and misused space, as defined in *The Decoration of Houses*, bears on Wharton’s short stories. In both “Afterward” and “The Lady’s Maid’s Bell,” ghosts enter the home to bolster a class hierarchy under duress. In both tales, the need for the ghost’s assistance is signified by architectural and decorative incongruities; in other words, ghosts enter to enforce aesthetic silence and historical continuity at precisely the moment when these qualities are threatened. First, however, a point of distinction must be made between how these ghosts function in relationship to spatial and social boundaries. If I am to make an
analogy between liminal and misused space, and transitional or ambiguous social positions, I must clarify that not all of Wharton’s ghosts have the same function in all of her haunted house tales. In some cases, such as “The Lady’s Maid’s Bell” and “Afterward,” ghosts seem to emerge whenever such boundaries have been crossed, seemingly in an effort to reassert stability. In these cases, the ghosts, despite their own liminality, function as extensions of the haunted home, akin to the invisible, ghostly servants implied in The Decoration of Houses. In other stories, such as “Mr. Jones,” the ghosts attempt to maintain an extant silence and continuity. These ghosts, products of Wharton’s later career, prove much more threatening and are indicative, perhaps, of a complete reversal of the master-servant dynamic necessary to preserve the silent and continuous home, a subject to which I turn in the final section of this chapter. Whether the ghosts in these tales need silence and continuity to appear, or they appear to maintain (or enforce) silence and continuity whenever either is found wanting, the result is the same: Wharton’s ghosts are always intimately associated with a particular home, and with the class boundary instability within it.

The “Incorruptible Custodian” of Taste: “Afterward” as Class Revenge Fantasy

In “Afterward” (1909), a newly wealthy American couple moves to Lyng, an appropriately silent and continuous setting for a Whartonian haunting. The secluded English manor house attracted the Boynes with its “air of remoteness out of all proportion to its geographical position” (60), and because of their sense that the home had witnessed centuries of quiet life that “had fallen as noiselessly into the past as the quiet drizzle of autumn fell, hour after hour, into the fish pond between the yews” (61). Lyng is doubly
appropriate as a haunted setting because of its atmosphere of continuity, for the home
“had almost all the finer marks of commerce with a protracted past” (61).

The “silence” at Lyng is a result not just of its isolation, but also of its lack of modern conveniences. Although *The Decoration of Houses* espouses “comfort and convenience” in home design, Wharton eschewed many modern innovations, most of which she also excludes from the fictional Lyng. In “Afterward” the *nouveau-riche* Ned and Mary Boyne find the home “romantic” precisely because of “its remoteness from a station, its lack of electric light, hot water pipes, and other vulgar necessities” (58). 

After learning that the home also has “no heating system” and a suspect water supply (59), Ned happily exclaims, “It’s too uncomfortable to be true!” (59). The Boynes’ attraction to the Lyng’s inconveniences is a demonstration of their new-found wealth, consistent with the behavior of members of what Thorstein Veblen termed the “Leisure Class.”

Veblen’s 1899 sociological treatise *The Theory of the Leisure Class* provided remarkable insight into the lifestyles and tastes of the privileged at the turn-of-the-century. Members of the Leisure Class, according to Veblen, engage in activities and hobbies that signify their freedom from productive labor. Such “conspicuous leisure” takes the form of, among other things, hobbies that signify “an unproductive expenditure

---

31 The Boynes are also told that they “can get it for a song” (58). Any aficionado of haunted house stories and films recognizes this plot device as a warning flag, a sign that something is horribly amiss in the home in question. If a home’s price is “too good to be true,” then a haunting is sure to follow. These types of hauntings usually result in the death or expulsion of the new owners, and therefore offer a commentary on the possibility of upward mobility in America. See my reading of Freeman’s “The Vacant Lot” in Chapter One for another version of this story.
of time” (Theory 45). The Boynes, having only recently acquired their fantastic wealth, are eager to embrace the leisure-class lifestyle as quickly as possible. One of their goals after moving to Lyng is “to give themselves only to harmonious activities. She had her vision of painting and gardening … he dreamed of the production of his long-planned book on ‘The Economic Basis of Culture’…” (60). For newly minted members of the leisure class, recipients of a “prodigious windfall that … had put them at a stroke in possession of life and the leisure to taste it” (60), an old-fashioned home, lacking in many modern necessities and requiring a small army of servants to keep it running, is an outward sign of wealth and leisure, a testament to a lifestyle of conspicuous consumption and conspicuous waste. Indeed, Ned demonstrates some understanding of how class is signified by consumption when he exclaims, “the least hint of convenience would make me think it had been bought out of an exhibition, with the pieces numbered, and set up again …” (58). Lyng’s “unusual architectural felicities” make it the perfectly inconvenient home with which Ned can demonstrate his freedom from necessity, and his superiority to those who purchase more convenient and conventional dwellings (58).³²

Veblen also notes that the leisure class is inherently conservative: “Conservatism, being an upper-class characteristic, is decorous; and conversely, innovation, being a lower-class phenomenon, is vulgar” (Theory 200). The leisure class, through its dedication to exploit as a means of invidious class distinction, prevents progress that would naturally lead to a more peaceful modern society. For Veblen, modern “exploit”

³² Lyng’s status as a leisure-class dwelling is further evidenced by the occasional “cultivated traveler” who visits to photograph the estate (74); such attention suggests that those with the knowledge and means are aware of Lyng as a particularly distinctive home. Ironically, Mary later mistakes the ghost for one of these cultured visitors.
includes contemporary cutthroat business practices like the deal that resulted in Ned’s fantastic, sudden wealth. The conservative tendency of the leisure class therefore inheres both in business practices that allow its members to acquire more wealth and in adherence to conventional social and decorative principles (since, again, knowledge of what is tasteful and what is socially correct evidences a leisure-class lifestyle, as well). Edith Wharton, in her vast and intricate knowledge of decoration and architecture, demonstrates her membership in the leisure class every bit as much as Ned and Mary, by their desire to purchase Lyng because of its inconveniences, demonstrate theirs. However, it becomes increasingly clear that neither Wharton nor the fictional Lyng consider the Boynes worthy of leisure-class status. With their newfound wealth, Edward and Mary attempt to buy distinction in the form of “unusual architectural felicities” that they “romantically” associate with wealth and good breeding which, as we learn, they cannot legitimately claim. Upper-class habitus, after all, cannot be purchased.

Aside from the status a home like Lyng could confer upon its owners, the secluded manor also comes with its very own ghost, a feature that initially delights Ned and Mary. The ghost, symbolizing a connection to a storied and conservative past, is desirable to the *nouveau-riche* Boynes as they work to cement their place in the leisure class. Ned, a consummate capitalist, also expresses a desire to *own* the ghost: “I don’t want to have to drive ten miles to see somebody else’s ghost,” he exclaims, “I want one of my own on the premises” (59). The ghost lends to Lyng an air of history, and by extension, distinction, to its occupants, a habitus the Boynes, coming from a working-to-middle-class background, cannot rightly claim as their own.
Nevertheless, the Boynes must concede that their ghost isn’t perfect because it manifests in a singularly peculiar way. According to their friend Alida Stair, Lyng’s ghost is unique in that whoever encounters it will not realize that they have seen it until some time afterward; thus, no amount of preparation can prevent this manifestation of the past from making its presence known. Indeed, the prospect of haunting looms over Lyng, a home that awaits the appropriate moment to make its ghost manifest. The manor’s name, Lyng, is suggestive of this sense of anticipation. While critics have noted that the name suggests “lying,” “a cipher for the way the Boynes have lied to others to get where they are” (Patten 4), the name also suggests the home’s agency, its “lying” in wait for the appropriate moment to reveal its ghost to its occupants.

The unusual nature of Lyng’s ghost indicates that it is not just the home that is haunted, but also the individual who inhabits it, since the apparition presumably takes a different form for each occupant of Lyng. The home itself, having drifted for decades in

---

33 The appropriately named Alida Stair serves as the Boynes’s contact in England. Alida, to whom they appeal for assistance in finding a home because she had “successfully solved [the problem] in her own case” (58), has presumably mastered the task of finding a distinguished home without possession of a particularly distinguished pedigree. Alida Stair might be thought of as having “elided” a step/“stair” on the way up the social ladder. Alida also seemingly “elides” some important information concerning Lyng’s ghost. When she tells the Boynes about it, Mary is “struck by a note of flatness” in her voice (59). Alida may also have a financial interest in unloading a cursed property, since it belongs to her husband’s family (58).

34 Weinstock agrees, noting that, “Lyng is suggestive of lying…” (102; emphasis in orig.).

35 Griffin considers the real ghost in the story and the fabled ghost of Lyng two different entities; “Mary cannot see the present ghost for the old ghost that lurks romantically in the shadows of Lyng…. The real ghost has produced … the pain of loss, solitude and disenchantment” (60). However, there is no evidence in the story to support this reading.
an appropriately silent and continuous state, and in direct conversation with the past via its conservative architectural features, proves itself unwilling to harbor any vulgar occupants within its walls, and dispatches the spirits most fitted to expel them.

While “Afterward” is a class revenge fantasy and a ghost story, it is the house rather than the ghost that is its true agent of revenge. The ghost of Robert Elwell, Ned’s wronged business partner who committed suicide in the aftermath of the shady business deal that made Ned wealthy, does exact a fantastic revenge by literally spiriting Ned away forever. However, it is Lyng that calls the shots. Indeed, when the ghostly Elwell finally arrives, he appears as a man who “wishes to make it known that his intrusion is involuntary” (74). Elwell clearly serves Lyng, and comes only as an agent of the estate. Wharton, as Elbert observes, “creates mansions haunted by ghosts who stand in the way of social climbers” like the Boynes (“Transcendental”). In this story, however, it is the home itself that exercises agency by summoning ghosts to punish the upwardly mobile.

From the beginning of “Afterward,” Mary senses that the home has a personality. Wondering at her husband’s despondency since their arrival, she asks, “Can it be the house?” (62). She attributes to Lyng some volition in its own haunting: “It was the house itself” she thinks, “that possessed the ghost-seeing faculty, that communed visually but secretly with its own past; if one could only get into close enough communion with the house, one might surprise its secret, and acquire the ghost’s sight on one’s own account” (63). Mary succeeds at gaining this ghost sight, as the home slowly “reveal[s] itself” to

It can more easily be assumed that the “romantic” ghost the Boynes imagine and the rather prosaic ghost that eventually appears are one and the same, and therefore that Lyng produces the appropriate ghost for each of its inhabitants.
her, “treasure after treasure” (63); she delights in the discovery of a hidden staircase that leads to the roof, from which vantage point she and Ned first behold what she afterwards realizes was the ghost of Elwell, making his first attempt to reach Lyng. In revealing its secret door and passage, Lyng includes the unsuspecting Mary in its plot and reveals its ability to summon ghosts. Mary, however, mistakes the home’s agency for benevolence. On the day that Elwell succeeds in reaching the home and taking her husband away, Mary feels at peace with her new estate:

it sent her … the look of some warm human presence, of a mind slowly ripened on a sunny wall of experience. She had never before had such a sense of intimacy with it, such a conviction that its secrets were all beneficent … such a trust in its power to gather up her life and Ned’s into the harmonious pattern of the long long story it sat there weaving in the sun. (74–75)

At this moment, when Mary has been lulled into a sense that Lyng has her best interest in mind, the ghost of Elwell finally arrives. Lyng has granted Mary the “ghost sight” so that she will grant Elwell access to the home, where he then takes Ned away forever.

In the aftermath of Ned’s disappearance, Mary is left to ponder Lyng’s culpability. Before her husband disappeared, Mary attributed an unusual anxiousness in Ned’s behavior to the possibility that he had seen the ghost but felt it inappropriate to tell her: “Mary was too well versed in the code of the spectral world not to know that one could not talk about the ghosts one saw; to do so was almost as great a breach of taste as to name a lady in a club” (63). Mary and Ned clearly consider the open discussion of sordid secrets or business dealings bad form. Ned, as we later learn, had not seen the ghost, but was instead tortured by the threat of legal action against him (a threat that Elwell’s temporarily alleviated); he ultimately is not gentlemanly enough to keep his
secrets quiet. Instead, it is Lyng that is able to keep silent about its unseemly secrets, thereby proving itself the more tasteful: “[T]he house knew [what had happened to Ned]. Lyng was not one of the garrulous old houses that betray the secrets entrusted to them. Its very legend proved that it had always been the mute accomplice, the incorruptible custodian, of the mysteries it had surprised” (85).

Ned’s disappearance leaves Mary “sitting face to face with [Lyng’s] silence…” (85), and “domesticated with the Horror, accepting its perpetual presence as one of the fixed conditions of life” (84). A tasteful home, Lyng would never noisily betray itself. Instead, like a demanding master, the home summons a servant to clean house by removing the offending Ned from the premises, and thereby maintains the silence and continuity that the Boynes’s arrival had threatened.

What remains to be determined after his disappearance is the exact nature of Ned’s crimes, or rather, an explanation for why he is incongruous with Lyng. Ann Patten considers “Afterward” an anti-capitalist work, one that explores the “grey areas” of “inappropriate commercial behavior” and “muddied” business ethics at the turn of the century (Patten 4). Weinstock describes the story as “a sort of capitalist revenge tragedy in which the duped Other returns from beyond the grave to repay Ned in kind” (104). While the work undoubtedly critiques lax and dangerous business ethics, it also considers Ned’s unethical behavior vulgar, noisy, and low-class. “Afterward” is not only a critique of unethical business practices, but also a conservative class revenge fantasy in which the nouveau riche are punished for their crass obsession with acquiring, and then displaying, vast wealth.
Ned proves himself the most vulgar of capitalists. “I don’t say it wasn’t straight, and yet I don’t say it was straight. It was business,” Ned’s friend later tells Mary of her husband’s deal with Elwell (85); the deal ends in Elwell’s suicide and the public outing of Ned’s role in his partner’s financial ruin. He resembles Marx’s capitalist vampire, who “lives by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks” (362–63). The effects on Elwell’s wife and children, who Mary learns are destitute and were forced to publicly apply for aid after his death, further implicate Ned as a cannibalistic capitalist, willing to feed from his fellow man for his own material benefit.

Ned’s vulgarity registers in both his business practices and his aesthetics. He is unabashed about his wealth, flaunting it about in his fantasy of “owning” a ghost, and by purchasing a high-maintenance home. His planned book, *The Economic Basis of Culture*, is perhaps his most grievous fault, though. To suggest that wealth and capital (rather than an innate sense of good and bad taste, the beautiful and the ugly) are the basis of culture is crassly to link taste to privilege, to acknowledge that at its root what is considered tasteful is inextricably linked to wealth. Ned’s planned book tethers cultural to economic capital, openly proclaiming that taste can be purchased. Rather than keeping a gentlemanly silence about this relationship, Ned determines to profit from it in the open market. *The Economic Basis of Culture*, had it been completed, might have proven itself the foil of *The Decoration of Houses*, an acknowledgment of the vulgar reality of wealth that underscores that work’s claims to an innate sense of good taste, and by extension, that threatened the boundaries between Wharton’s own old stock upper class, and the
emergent breed of capitalist *nouveau riche*. In “Afterward,” Wharton vehemently
denies the newly rich access to the highest realms of culture. Taste, she maintains, cannot
be purchased.

Although Mary is not similarly evicted from Lyng, by the story’s end, when she is
faced with full knowledge of the “material foundation on which her happiness was built”
and her own unconscious participation in Lyng’s revenge (70), she feels surrounded by
the home: “She felt the wall of books rush toward her, like inward falling ruins …”
(91). Mary, like Elwell, is a pawn in Lyng’s battle against vulgarity. As a result of the
home’s corrective behavior, she is no less lost and ruined than her missing husband. Mary
never exerts agency, but instead is manipulated not only by Ned, who withholds crucial
information from her, but also by Lyng, which uses her already disempowered domestic
position to force her collusion in her own comeuppance when it tricks her into inviting
the ghost into her home.

While the story might act as a sort of wish fulfillment, with Ned and Mary
punished for their social mobility, this class revenge fantasy is not without ambivalence.
For a contemporary reader, it is difficult to imagine a worse punishment than Mary’s,
forced to live in the home that manufactured her husband’s demise, too weak to fight the
\footnote{Fedorko notes that “[i]n Wharton’s Gothic, startling, disorienting, and often erotic
discoveries take place in libraries, as intellectual knowledge is expanded by intuitive,
uncanny awareness” (*Gender* 4). The library at Lyng functions similarly to many other of
Wharton’s fictional libraries, by providing a backdrop against which characters like Mary
come to terms with some fundamental truth. In the library, Mary learns about Ned’s
underhanded business dealings and their repercussions, but it is there that she also
discovers her own role in his disappearance. Furthermore, it is in the library that she
senses the home is withholding information from her, perhaps denying her information
that would help her come to terms with what has happened to Ned.}
“incorruptible custodian” of the past, and its enforced silence and continuity.\textsuperscript{37} Having rid itself of the offender to good taste and breeding, the man who makes his wealth by unethical means without any sense of responsibility, Lyng returns to its former silent and continuous state, keeping its secrets, and standing no aesthetic offense. Such a harsh punishment doesn’t feel deserved, particularly for Mary, whose worst offence is her willed ignorance. “Afterward” ultimately denies the satisfaction or closure common to revenge fantasies, suggesting perhaps that Wharton is ambivalent about the potentially devastating effects of maintaining an outdated, if stable, class structure. This ambivalence also marks many of her other ghost stories, including “The Lady’s Maid’s Bell,” a tale in which the home has less agency in the punishment of it inhabitants, but that nevertheless offers a similar critique of and punishment for noisy, incongruous behavior.

\textbf{Liminal Space and the Continuous Servant in “The Lady’s Maid’s Bell”}

Wharton’s composition of her first ghost story, “The Lady’s Maid’s Bell” (1902), coincides with her first and only opportunity to design a house from the ground up in accordance with the criteria she had laid out in \textit{The Decoration of Houses} five years before. She sent the story to \textit{Scribner’s} in February 1902, around the time the walls were going up at The Mount, the spacious Lenox residence she later fondly remembered as her “first real home” (\textit{Backward} 879). Wharton was involved in every aspect of The Mount;

\textsuperscript{37} Fedorko reads the story as one in which a woman becomes empowered by uncovering her husband’s secrets. She writes that “Mary probes her way into awareness” (Gender 54) as the story progresses, but I would argue that knowledge doesn’t necessarily equal awareness. Although Mary finally understands what happened to her husband, and her own role in his disappearance, she is hardly empowered by that knowledge, and ends the tale a victim of both her husband and Lyng. The books in Lyng’s library, rather than offering up their knowledge to her, instead surround and seemingly crush her with what she cannot comprehend. After all, habitus cannot be learned.
indeed, she became so notoriously difficult to work with on its design and execution that in mid-1901, Codman (her logical choice as architect) temporarily left the project due to “Wharton’s constant bossy demands” (Dwight 90). He later wrote that Wharton “fuss[ed] over every detail” at The Mount (91). Hermione Lee observes that both “The Lady’s Maid’s Bell” and Wharton’s last story “All Souls’” (which I discuss in greater detail below) are both “set in houses like The Mount” (148). Wharton certainly had decoration and architecture in mind when she composed “The Lady’s Maid’s Bell,” and while Lee is correct to note that Brympton Place, the story’s haunted house, is at least superficially similar to The Mount, the fictional home deviates from Wharton’s aesthetic guidelines in critical ways. While Brympton Place appears to be, as its narrator observes “the right kind of house” in which “things were done handsomely” (14), it fails at one of Wharton’s most vital criteria: clearly delineated space.

Architecture wasn’t the only thing on Wharton’s mind during this highly productive period. After completing “The Lady’s Maid’s Bell” she immediately began work on the uncompleted novel Disintegration, a look at the decay of old New York society that undoubtedly laid some of the groundwork for The House of Mirth. According to Lewis, “it was her first large-scale look at social change and social pressure, and at the wounding effect both could have upon the young and sensitive. The social deterioration referred to in the title is the consequence of wealth without responsibility” (Edith 107). Lee provides an overview of the seventy or so pages Wharton completed: “It was the story of a neglected young New York girl … whose glamorous, ‘improper’ mother has run away with another man…. The story of the Clephanes’ divorce, and of the errant
wife’s re-entry onto New York and Long Island society [by marrying a millionaire] … is seen through the eyes of a cynical family friend” (Lee 179).

I note the plot of Disintegration only to propose that while Wharton was undoubtedly occupied with architecture and decoration while she composed “The Lady’s Maid’s Bell,” she was also turning her attention to the excoriating observations of high society that would make her famous after the publication of The House of Mirth in 1905. The Brymptons, the ill-fated couple at the center of “The Lady’s Maid’s Bell,” “had been an unhappy match from the beginning.” As Hartley, Mrs. Brympton’s new lady’s maid and the narrator of the tale describes them, “Mr. Brympton was coarse, loud and pleasure-loving; my mistress quiet, retiring, and perhaps a trifle cold” (19). Their marriage recalls the consolidations of wealth and power, or the merging of amassed fortunes, common in the elite during the late nineteenth century. 38 Ann Patten even suggests that “The Lady’s Maid’s Bell” “presents a picture of the haunted conditions that can arise when old money looses [sic] its hold on power and resorts to marrying new money as a way of staving off erosion in social and economic position” (2). Clearly not a match of hearts or temperaments, the Brymptons’ marriage can only be explained as one of convenience or financial gain. Mrs. Brympton’s fragile health, Mr. Brympton’s

---

38 In Edith Wharton: An Extraordinary Life, Eleanor Dwight notes that “[i]n the mid-1890s, four young Vanderbilts … were married, mostly to children of other millionaires…. Other American heiresses were marrying European nobility in very visible matches” (9). Auchincloss speculates that Wharton’s first engagement to Harry Stevens may have been called off because of pressure from a mother who “was probably looking for something grander than a Jones for her son Harry when [he] fell in love with Edith” (42).
alcoholism and quick temper, and the early deaths of both of their children suggest a

toxic match, and little hope for the future of such unions.\textsuperscript{39}

“The Lady’s Maid’s Bell” combines Wharton’s disaffection with the decayed
state of the modern elite marriage with her aesthetic conservatism in a ghost story that
allows her to critique the ill-breeding of couples like the Brymptons while appealing for
the return of a more stable and moral past. Wharton uses space in this story to illustrate
the vulgar behavior of both Brymptons, and Mrs. Brympton in particular. The disorder in
Brympton Place can be traced to Lady Brympton’s lack of discretion in carrying on an
extramarital affair. Her ghostly servant, the previous lady’s maid Emma Saxon, attempts
to reestablish order within the home, with disastrous results. As such, we can also read
“The Lady’s Maid’s Bell” as exploring master-servant dynamics toward which Wharton
was clearly ambivalent.

Like “Afterward,” “The Lady’s Maid’s Bell” has the perfect haunted setting: a
silent, secluded country home on the Hudson River, where the invalid maid Hartley is
sent to work as she recovers from typhoid fever. Hartley’s temperament is a perfect
match for Brympton Place; like a tasteful home, she is “quiet” and “well-mannered” (13).
“The Lady’s Maid’s Bell” relates Hartley’s attempt to understand the strange events, both
natural and supernatural, that occur shortly after her arrival. At first glance, the estate
appears every bit as tasteful and well ordered as the spacious abodes Wharton describes
in \textit{Decoration}. Hartley notes with approval that “the main part of the house seemed well

\textsuperscript{39} While I don’t place too great a stake in biographical coincidences in my reading, it is of
note that Edith and Teddy Wharton were childless, as well. Like the Brymptons, they too
were from the beginning a poor match.
furnished, with dark paneling and a number of old portraits,” and she “could tell by the look of everything that [she] had got into the right kind of house, and that things were done handsomely” (14).40

Hartley soon notices several “queer thing[s] in the house” though (16), all of them somehow associated with the deceased lady’s maid, Emma Saxon. Each time Emma Saxon appears, she is framed by a doorway or threshold. Hartley’s first encounter occurs as she is shown through the house: “halfway down the passage I saw a woman standing. She drew back into a doorway as we passed and the housemaid didn’t appear to notice her. She was a thin woman with a white face, and a dark gown and apron” (14).41 In Decoration, Wharton eschews indeterminate and otherwise liminal space (recall that “[u]nder ordinary circumstances, doors should always be kept shut”), but she repeatedly stages ghostly encounters within open doorways and thresholds throughout “The Lady’s Maid’s Bell.”42

40 Following her design for The Mount, Wharton places the lady’s maid’s bedroom at Brympton Place on the same floor as the mistress’s chamber, rather than in a separate servant’s wing. Wharton also made extensive use of servant’s bells, like the eponymous ones featured prominently in the story, at The Mount (Lee 148). As in “The Lady’s Maid’s Bell,” The Mount also featured a large sewing room situated directly across the passage from her maid’s room (Marshall 94). For complete blueprints of The Mount, see Marshall, The Mount: Home of Edith Wharton (1997).

41 In her third appearance, Hartley looks up from her sewing to see the ghost standing “in the door” of her room (30). In the climactic scene, Mr. Brympton “tore the door open; but as he did so he dropped back. On the threshold stood Emma Saxon” (35).

42 Wharton also experiments with threshold space in the novella Ethan Frome (1911). Besides staging uncanny gothic encounters and many other scenes in doorways or thresholds, the entire narrative takes place within a doorway, in the brief moment the narrator stands framed within the threshold of the Frome kitchen, and imagines the connections between those he sees inside. Like “The Lady’s Maid’s Bell,” Ethan
Emma Saxon is directly associated with liminal space. Aside from her appearance or association with doorways during each of her four manifestations, Emma is linked more specifically to the open door of her former bedroom, which faces Hartley’s room. Following Hartley’s first sighting of Emma, that door is found to be open, even though Mrs. Brympton had specified that it permanently be closed and locked:

Facing my door was another which stood open: the housemaid exclaimed when she saw it:

“There — Mrs. Blinder’s left that door open again!” said she, closing it.

“Is Mrs. Blinder the housekeeper?”
“There’s no housekeeper: Mrs. Blinder’s the cook.”
“And is that her room?”
“Laws, no,” said the housemaid, crosslike. “That’s nobody’s room. It’s empty, I mean, and the door hadn’t ought to be open. Mrs. Brympton wants it kept locked.” (14)

Emma seemingly manifests as a result of liminality; despite Mrs. Brympton’s attempt to confine her to clearly demarcated space, something in Brympton Place has necessitated the arrival of the ghost to act as an agent of correction and stability.

Given Wharton’s advice to keep all doors closed at all times, closing Emma’s door should have a stabilizing effect in Brympton Place. When the room was locked up, however, the sewing room became the new lady’s maid’s bedroom (16). Hartley’s bedroom is therefore misused space, forced to function as both a bedroom and a sewing room. The room cannot be “preserved as a small world by itself,” as Wharton dictates in Decoration, but instead it serves as a nexus of the space and class instability that threatens the silence and continuity of Brympton Place.

---

*Frome’s* themes include infidelity, illness, isolation, and the unstable place of the servant. Both works also feature an unreliable narrator.
Within the destabilized space of Hartley’s ersatz bedroom, several of the story’s most important and revelatory moments occur. It is while she is sewing in her bedroom that Hartley discovers a hidden photograph of Emma that provides proof that the person she has seen is indeed a ghost: “as I was working a drawer which I had never been able to open slid forward and a photograph fell out … I knew I had seen the face somewhere — the eyes had an asking look that I had felt on me before. And suddenly I remembered the pale woman in the passage” (27). Hartley is sleeping in the room when her servant’s bell rings late one night, leading to another ghostly encounter, and it is from the threshold of this room that Emma later appears directly to Hartley.

Mrs. Brympton’s decision to lock up Emma Saxon’s room also results in a confusion of hierarchy amongst the servants. In a house that had servant bells “in every room,” and even a direct one allegedly “ringing from my mistress’s room to mine,” Hartley is told that she will instead be summoned by a lowly housemaid whenever her services are requested: “whenever Mrs. Brympton wanted anything, she rang for Agnes, who had to walk the whole length of the servants’ wing to call me” (16).\footnote{Ann Mattis notes that, “even to an elite reader, the bell would have seemed outdated and decidedly un-American” (17). However, the anachronistic bells are perfectly consistent with Wharton’s desire to re-establish historical continuity in the home and in master-servant relations. Wharton’s heavy reliance on the bell as a plot device is further evidence of her desire for a return to an earlier sense of social stability. The disruption of this stability, signified through Mrs. Brympton’s misuse of the servant bells, is therefore significant. At The Mount, Wharton had servant bells connecting her quarters to the Sewing Room in an arrangement that mirrors that in the story. The servant’s call box in the Sewing Room at The Mount contains slots for “Mrs. Wharton’s Boudoir,” “Mrs. Wharton’s Bedroom,” and “Mrs. Wharton’s Bath” (Marshall 245); Wharton’s bedroom contains buttons for the house maid, servants hall, and her personal maid (Marshall 237). For photographs of these features, see Marshall, \textit{The Mount: Home of Edith Wharton}.} Hartley is
clearly nonplussed by this lapse in form: “Well,” she tells us, “that was certainly strange: a lady’s maid having to be fetched by the housemaid whenever her lady wanted her!” (16). Veblen writes that with domestic servants, “there grows up an elaborate system of good form…. Any departure from these canons of form is to be deprecated … because it shows an absence of special training” (Theory 61). By forcing a disruption in the orderly carrying-out of domestic duties within an established servant hierarchy, Mrs. Brympton’s decision not to ring her lady’s maid’s bell reflects poorly on her conspicuous leisure as well as the vicarious leisure of her servants. To have a bell, and not to use it, is a direct refutation of Wharton’s edict for a comfortable and convenient home; Mrs. Brympton’s lack of good domestic form inconveniences both herself and her servants.

Brympton Place is an orderly home in its design; the disruption and inconsistencies within cannot be attributed to aesthetic lapses in rhythm or logic, but rather are a result of the behavior of its occupants. Mrs. Brympton is pursuing an adulterous relationship with her neighbor Mr. Ranford, a tepid, “rather-melancholy” gentleman who liked “to keep her company when the master was away” (19). Moreover, she enlists Hartley’s help to deliver notes to her lover, thereby making the new maid complicit in her affair.

Considering Wharton’s now well-known affair with Morton Fullerton between 1908 and 1910, it would be a stretch to claim that she considered infidelity vulgar per se. It can be argued, however, that Wharton, who Louis Auchincloss called “a gilded puritan” who “never shook off the firm sense of propriety of old brownstone New York” (97), and who Lee notes “hated the thought of a scandal” (365), objected to lapses of
Wharton was extremely careful to keep her own affair with Fullerton a tightly guarded secret, and was clearly alarmed that any word of marital discontent or infidelity might reach the public. In late 1908, Wharton wrote Fullerton, asking him to destroy all correspondence from her (Lewis and Lewis 193). In 1913, she filed for divorce (on grounds of adultery) in Paris (where divorce proceedings were closed to reporters) to avoid media scrutiny (Lee 399); on the day of her filing she wrote a friend that “[i]t’s all settled! But don’t say a word to anyone” (Lewis and Lewis 289). Later, she thanked Fullerton for remaining silent about his knowledge of the proceedings: “you did absolutely right in telling the reporters that you knew nothing of my divorce. — I have told all of my friends of it, & that is sufficient…. In case of any other enquiries, please simply say what you have already said: ‘I know nothing’” (Lewis and Lewis 301–02; emphasis in orig.). When it came to infidelity, Wharton always chose silence over vulgarity; even her autobiography makes no reference to Fullerton.

Her husband Teddy took the opposite approach, engaging in a series of embarrassing public affairs. “[H]e detailed his exploits with variety-theater ladies and

44 In 1909, for example, while both she and Teddy were involved in extramarital affairs, Wharton was appalled to learn that “a rumor that she was separating from Teddy appeared in a Paris newspaper…. Edith spent nearly two months tracing the source of the false story” (Benstock 224).

45 At her death, Wharton appointed her friend Gaillard Lapsley as her literary executor. Lapsley sold her papers to Yale with a stipulation that no biographical writings be published for thirty years (Lee 755). Lapsley, who was aware of both Edith’s and Teddy’s affairs, therefore protected his friend’s reputation for several decades after her death. Wharton’s affair with Fullerton was such a closely guarded secret, shared only with a few close friends, that it was not well known until the publication of Lewis’s *Edith Wharton: A Biography* in 1975, nearly four decades after her death.
boasted of the money he spent on them” to his friends (Benstock 274). As Auchincloss relates in one colorful anecdote, Wharton once stopped in at a hotel that she had never visited before. “As they were signing the register, Edith noted the prior entry of a ‘Mr. and Mrs.’ Edward R. Wharton, and observed with a slight smile and shrug: ‘Evidently I have been here before’” (94; emphasis in orig.). Teddy’s lack of discretion appears to have troubled Wharton as much as the fact of his affairs. His habit of signing in his girlfriends as “Mrs. Wharton” at hotels, Wharton considered “rather a gratuitous last touch of ill-breeding” (Lee 398).

In “The Lady’s Maid’s Bell” Mrs. Brympton is unsuccessful at hiding her relationship with Ranford, and Hartley, as much as she attempts to protect her mistress by claiming ignorance of the matter, is equally unsuccessful at keeping the affair from the reader. Mrs. Brympton’s affair is noisy, resounding like a bell throughout the narrative. She enlists Hartley to run errands in town, often stopping to return books to Ranford (20), and likely delivering letters concealed within. Later, she asks Hartley to fill a prescription for her as an excuse to ask the maid to deliver a letter to Ranford, stipulating that the maid leave early and avoid meeting Mr. Brympton along the way (25). Hartley begins to suspect something, and finds of the two errands that the latter disturbs her more: “If there was nothing to conceal about my visit to the chemist’s, was it my other errand that Mrs. Brympton wished me to keep private? Somehow, that thought frightened me worse than the other. Yet the two gentleman seemed fast friends …” (26). If Hartley understands the nature of her mistress’s relationship with her neighbor by this point, she is loath to make
her suspicions explicit. Intentionally or not, however, Hartley exposes her mistress’s affair.

While Mrs. Brympton is carrying on a rather obvious affair, Mr. Brympton’s faults are a bit more difficult to parse. Faced with her first duty of utmost obedience to her mistress, Hartley’s narrative understates Mrs. Brympton’s adultery, while heightening Mr. Brympton’s bad temper and sexual appetite, and therefore making it “entirely possible to read Hartley’s demonic portrayal of Brympton as a way of rationalizing her implicit acceptance of an unacceptable extra-marital affair” (Griffin 55).46 Despite her efforts to the contrary, however, Hartley’s narrative repeatedly debunks her negative assessments of Mr. Brympton’s character. Even though she claims he drinks heavily, for example, on the night of an alleged attack of his wife she admits “to my surprise I saw that he walked a straight as a sober man” (24). He is also not the jealous brute she makes him out to be. Instead, we are told that he is on surprisingly “excellent terms” with Mr. Ranford (19), and finds his wife inexplicably cold and distant. “You make the place about as lively as the family vault” (22), he tells her.

Hartley also attempts to depict Mr. Brympton as a lecherous man, one inclined to force himself on the servants. In her first meeting with him, Hartley claims that he “looked me over in a trice. I knew what the look meant, from having experienced it once or twice in my former places … I was not the kind of morsel he was after” (18). Despite her suggestions, however, he never makes a sexual advance toward her. Hartley uses the

46 Stengel argues that Hartley is sexually attracted to Mr. Brympton, who “is portrayed with a repulsion downright sensual.” In her harsh critiques of her master’s character, “we detect a sour note of the woman scorned” (8).
effects of typhoid as an excuse for his indifference: “The typhoid had served me well enough in one way: it kept that kind of gentleman at arm’s length” (18). She even pursues her suspicions of his sexual history when talking with a friend, who quickly disproves her germinating theory that the previous lady’s maids had left because of his unwanted advances. The story’s highly subjective viewpoint attenuates Hartley’s condemnation of Mr. Brympton as a vulgar or violent man, and his character ultimately is too ambiguous to identify as the impetus for the haunting at Brympton Place. Mrs. Brympton’s lack of discretion in her affair is a far more identifiable source of instability.

Hartley’s unerring defense of Mrs. Brympton can be explained by the requirements of her position. According to Veblen, “the first requisite of a good servant is that he should conspicuously know his place” (Theory 60). The highly trained servant reflects positively upon his masters, who have the wealth to acquire such skilled persons. Furthermore,

In order to satisfy the requirements of the leisure-class scheme of life, the servant should show not only an attitude of subservience, but also the effects of special training and practice in subservience … it is this aptitude and acquired skill in the formal manifestation of the servile relation that constitutes the chief element of utility in our highly paid servants…. (Theory 60)

The good servant must conspicuously know and assume her subservient place in the household, and retains some of the esteem bestowed upon her by the vicarious leisure she performs. Thus while Hartley is “educated above her station” (13), and considers herself somewhat above other servants (in her refusal to listen to their gossip, for example [13]), she still acquiesces immediately to the authority of her mistress: “when she smiled I felt there was nothing I wouldn’t do for her” (15).
The lady’s maid is a particularly intimate servant, acting as a close companion to her mistress, and therefore falling into a “derivate leisure class” of servants Veblen identifies as performing no function save that of “specialised service directed to the furtherance of his master’s fullness of life” (Theory 60). The labor of these types of servants, difficult and thankless as it often was, Veblen terms “vicarious leisure,” since it serves only to demonstrate the conspicuous leisure of masters who can afford servants who perform duties for comfort, rather than necessity (Theory 58–59). Such servants learn the good form and manners necessary to work in the closest proximity to their masters, and as a result glean a vicarious esteem that ranks them above other domestic servants.

This derivative leisure class retains some of the conservative characteristics of the master leisure class it serves. Hartley and Emma, as lady’s maids with full access to Mrs. Brympton’s domestic travails, and with some degree of power over the lower servants, are charged with the same moral and social conservatism of the leisure class. Such servants were conservative of “class and caste” (Bell 96). To maintain good form, and to preserve the vicarious esteem that comes with their position, it would be in a servant’s best interest to protect her mistress’s good name even in the face of blatant lapses in good form.

In “The Lady’s Maid’s Bell,” this devotion and conservatism extend even into the afterlife. Emma Saxon protects Mrs. Brympton’s reputation even after death, remaining silent (the ghost never speaks) about the domestic tension and infidelities she, like Hartley, must have been aware of in life. In “The Lady’s Maid’s Bell,” a good servant
performs her duties so well that even death will not stop her from protecting her mistress. Within the context of turn-of-the-century labor reform that pushed to professionalize or eradicate domestic servitude, Wharton predictably looks backward to an antiquated master-servant relationship — one that Veblen identified as characteristic of the leisure class — that valorizes a servant’s utter devotion to her mistress. As Ann Mattis has suggested, “Embedded in the narrative logic of Wharton’s writing about elite American households … is an uncanny desire to maintain the residual intimacy of feudal service relations, which were, of course, largely a figment of her imagination” (9; emphasis in orig.). Emma Saxon, in posthumously coming to her mistress’s aid, thereby maintains a tasteful, continuous, and mostly imagined servant relation with Mrs. Brympton, what Mattis refers to as a “hyperbolic idealization of a feudal service industry” under duress in Wharton’s time (15).

Wharton’s fantasy of the devoted servant is not without ambiguity though, especially considering that neither Emma nor Hartley succeeds in rescuing Mrs. Brympton, much less in preserving her good name. Ghosts, as representatives of the past, can also prove tyrannical and threatening in Wharton’s ghost stories. In “The Lady’s Maid’s Bell,” the interference of Emma and later Hartley actually results in Mrs. Brympton’s death. Although the common critical reading of the story posits that Mrs. Brympton’s death is the result of her husband’s tyranny and abuse, the final scene bears closer scrutiny that perhaps implicates the lady’s maids in her death, as well. Awakened by her servant’s bells during the night, Hartley rushes to her mistress’s room, only to find that “to my surprise … she had not undressed for the night” (33); Mrs. Brympton is
assuredly about to run away with her lover Ranford. Mr. Brympton bursts in on his maid and wife, only to be confronted by the ghost of Emma Saxon in the doorway. Mrs. Brympton, ill and already excited by her maid’s alarming appearance, is shocked into a faint at her husband’s unexpected arrival.

Several clues in the final scene implicate the intrusion of the servants, rather than the arrival of Mr. Brympton, as contributing to the lady’s death. Mrs. Brympton reacts “harshly” to Hartley’s arrival at her door at such a late hour; the maid tells her the ringing servant’s bell has awakened her, and her mistress “turned pale, and seemed about to fall,” since, after all, the bell can only have been rung by Emma Saxon. Hartley’s cryptic and portentous warning that “there is someone in the house” could therefore be interpreted as referring to either Mr. Brympton or Emma Saxon. Mrs. Brympton’s death comes not after her husband arrives, but immediately after Emma Saxon’s final appearance in the doorway, when “my mistress suddenly raised herself, and opening her eyes fixed a look on him [her husband]. Then she fell back, and I saw the death flutter pass over her face” (35). That look is ambiguous; it could be a “look” of pleading, guilt, or accusation. In any event, it is the arrival of the ghost, not Mr. Brympton, that precipitates her death. Her illness and death result from the haunting and continuous interference of Emma Saxon (and Hartley) in her love life just as assuredly as they might be the effect of an abusive husband.

For his part, Mr. Brympton clearly feels displaced in his wife’s affections by the constant meddling of the servants. He bursts into the room, clearly looking for Ranford, but finds only Hartley and Emma Saxon. When Hartley asks him to “for pity’s sake look
at your wife!” he answers, “It seems that’s done for me.” Again, his cryptic reply could refer either to Ranford or the servants (34). In an earlier incident, Hartley follows the ghostly servant to her mistress’s room late at night, only to be confronted by Mr. Brympton, who cries, “How many of you are there, in God’s name?” (24; emphasis in orig.). Mr. Brympton feels himself run out of his home by his servants. By the story’s end, Mrs. Brympton is dead, and Mr. Brympton has deserted his familial home, leaving Brympton Place a home full of servants, but no masters.

With these alternative narrative possibilities uncovered I would like to revisit the question of space and taste as they figure in “The Lady’s Maid’s Bell.” Emma Saxon, as Mattis convincingly argues, represents an obsolete master-servant relationship about which Wharton is clearly ambivalent. The subservient ghost is silent and continuous, i.e. representative of a socially stable past that Wharton clearly desires. At the same time, Emma’s devotion evolves through a sense of protection and into an enforced correction of her mistress’s behavior; she is ever-present, policing Mrs. Brympton’s behavior, and enlisting the help of Hartley to do the same. Emma Saxon is literally a silent ghost (unlike most of Wharton’s ghosts, who speak), and therefore also a symbol of good taste. She communicates with Hartley via gestures and ringing the servant’s bell, the only noise that can be directly attributed to her.47 The ringing bell signifies everything that has

---

47 Much has been said of the eponymous bell in Wharton’s story. Fedorko argues that the bell “links the three female characters by allowing them to communicate with one another” (Gender 28), while Stengel maintains that the ringing bell signifies the defeated repression of Hartley’s sexual attraction to both Brymptons (6). Mattis complicates these homoerotic readings by suggesting that “the bell … establishes a singular line of communication and thus unites the domestic counterparts of mistress and maid” in an unrealistic fantasy of feudal servile devotion (17).
become incongruous in Brympton Place, its “furious ringing” noisy and unseemly
evidence of Mrs. Brympton’s indiscretion (33).

Emma ultimately is much more conservative — much more tethered to an
outdated master-servant dynamic — than her mistress. Mrs. Brympton’s personal
happiness (whether or not she has been abused by her husband) is less important than the
maintenance of good form, which she violates in reality through her adultery, and
symbolically by her disruption of space and domestic hierarchy. Emma Saxon’s spirit
thereby asserts a sense of historical continuity that oppresses Mrs. Brympton every bit as
much as her loveless marriage; the ghost of the past has true authority and agency over
the present. Emma Saxon “knows her place” as agent of the past so conspicuously that
her servile devotion morphs into a terrifying — and ultimately deadly — policing of her
mistress’s behavior.

When she locked the door of Emma Saxon’s room, Mrs. Brympton attempted to
preserve the close relationship she had with Emma, while simultaneously locking it away,
isolating it from the present and future she imagines for herself. Mrs. Brympton cannot
have it both ways though; she cannot preserve the feudal master-servant relationship she
shared with Emma Saxon, and still pursue happiness and freedom in her affair with Mr.
Ranford. She, like the decorators Wharton addresses in Decoration, is “tyrannized over
by the wants of dead and gone predecessors” who “inconveniently” foil her feeble
attempt to break from good form and pursue a noisy and incongruous affair.

Hartley is a very different kind of servant than Emma Saxon. She claims not to
understand the events she witnessed, but is perceptive enough otherwise to cause us to
doubt her ignorance. Her failure to keep Mrs. Brympton’s secret reflects upper-class anxieties concerning servant indiscretion and over the effects of labor reform on domestic service. In many ways she represents exactly the kind of imprudent servant that concerns Wharton in *The Decoration of Houses*. Hartley is the very type of servant against whose prying eyes (and ears) doors must remain closed in order to preserve privacy in the home.

Wharton rarely mentions servants in *Decoration*. Their presence in the upper class home is implied through Wharton’s great attention to privacy, though, as in the passage in which she decries home designs that exposes occupants to the “scrutiny of messengers, servants, or visitors” (56). In another passage, Wharton describes an ideal bedroom suite, consisting of four rooms with two entrances, “one for the use of the occupant, leading into the antechamber, the other opening into the bath-room, to give access to the servants” (197). Such a design maintains at least one room between the occupant’s bedroom door and the servant’s entrance, thereby minimizing the chance that a servant could enter that most intimate room unannounced, and perhaps overhear or see anything that might compromise the master or mistress of the home.

48 In one passage, Wharton suggests that an inner glass door be placed in vestibules to shelter servants who must wait outside during entertainments (135). In another, she mentions the “prosaic” occupation of “interviewing servants” in the boudoir or small ladies’ sitting room (159). Servant quarters and living arrangements are not considered in the text; the servant is instead treated as a feature of the home, as natural and assumed as a ballroom or salon.

49 “Where space is not restricted there should in fact be four rooms, preceded by an antechamber separating the suite from the main corridor of the house. The small sitting-room or boudoir opens into this antechamber; and next comes the bedroom, beyond which are the dressing and bath rooms …” (*Decoration* 197). Wharton employed this design at The Mount. She also seemingly employs it in “The Lady’s Maid’s Bell,” although Mrs. Brympton isn’t always careful to keep the doors between rooms closed.
In “The Lady’s Maid’s Bell,” this threat is illustrated when Hartley overhears the Brympton’s arguing in the lady’s bedroom: “When I went in [through the dressing room, in keeping with Wharton’s design], the door into the bedroom was ajar, and I heard Mr. Brympton saying angrily [in reference to Ranford]: ‘One would suppose he was the only person fit for you to talk to’” (21). Wharton fictionalizes what was considered a very real threat in Victorian society, that a servant might overhear and repeat unsavory facts about her masters, a fear that “servants could leak family secrets out of the house” and thereby discredit the family’s name (Lynch 70). Since Hartley is relating the discovery of her masters’ unhappy marriage, it seems that Wharton believes such fears are valid.  

Had the Brymptons followed Wharton’s edict of keeping all doors closed (thereby keeping the servants away from potentially damaging information), then Hartley would not have overheard their argument. Hartley’s ability to eavesdrop easily upon her mistress emphasizes not only an upper-class anxiety that servants might air the dirty family laundry, but also the necessity, as expounded in Decoration, that all doors in the home must remain closed at all times.

When servants do appear in Decoration, they are associated with secretive or private design features (or lack thereof), which gesture toward the secretive and hidden

---

50 This scenario could not have taken place in The Mount, where Wharton rejected the original design plan and removed the closet from her suite in order to preserve greater privacy for her bathroom, which in the initial plans had two doorways and “would have seemed like a passageway” (Marshall 96). Wharton also rejected Codman’s original plan for “a circular glass floor in the attic to allow natural light from the cupola to enter the hallway below. This feature … would have resulted in less privacy on the bedroom floor” because the servants would be able to look through it from their own quarters which “were directly overhead” (Marshall 94–95). Wharton’s alterations to The Mount’s design show a clear awareness of the threat the servant posed to privacy.
work of domestic workers in general during Wharton’s time. For example, while not passing aesthetic judgment on them, Wharton notes that spiral staircases have historically been used “as a means of secret communication or for the use of servants” (138), thus suggesting a correlation between the servant and something hidden or secretive.

In *Decoration*, as in “The Lady’s Maid’s Bell,” Wharton troubles the distinction between servant and ghost. As Eve Lynch observes, “like the apparition appearing out of nowhere, the silent housemaid appeared out of nowhere at the pull of the cord, responding to some as yet unspoken desire of the mistress or command of the master” (67). Lynch argues that the living servant often served as the recipient of ghostly visitation in nineteenth-century fiction because servant and ghost hold similarly liminal positions: “Like the ghost, the servant was in the home but not of it, occupying a position tied to the workings of the house itself.” (68; emphasis in orig.).\(^5\) The ghostliness of servants also inheres in their direct connection to the Victorian home, within which servants could be passed down, like other possessions, from generation to generation, thereby establishing a direct connection to a tasteful and socially stable past. Thus, “the

\(^5\) In “Not at Home: Servants, Scholars and the Uncanny” (2006), Brian McCuskey notes that Victorian supernatural fiction often casts the servant as medium. Spiritualists often assigned great psychic power to domestic servants. This belief stemmed in part from a sense that the servant was less intellectually developed, and therefore in closer contact with the spiritual. McCuskey also observes that while domestic workers had a monetary and social incentive for claiming psychic powers, they were also welcomed above stairs because “séances thrived on the forms of ideological confusion and subjective turbulence heightened by the mixing of classes” (423). Psychic servant fiction might therefore be considered yet another result of class destabilization in the late nineteenth century; that servants were allowed to share the table with their masters during séances suggests that Victorian social norms were eroding or destabilizing. Wharton channels the trope of the psychic servant in this story, and also more amusingly in “The Looking Glass” (1935), in which a servant pretends to be psychic for the benefit of herself and for her ailing mistress.
cook and the maid seemed to go with the house — and sometimes did, being ‘inherited’ by succeeding families — furnishing the home with a ghostly agency that moved the tables and chairs, emptied the grates and chamber pots, and disappeared around corners and through passages …” (Lynch 68).

Emma Saxon appears to be just such a maid. Although Mrs. Brympton is still “a youngish woman” (12), Emma had been with her for twenty years before her death (13). Emma had therefore served Mrs. Brympton since the latter was a child; she therefore likely came to Brympton Place with her mistress like any other possession Mrs. Brympton might have brought to her new home following her marriage. Emma exerts her “ghostly agency” by invisibly acting on her mistress’s behalf after death, but she is simply a slightly more incorporeal manifestation of the silent and invisible servant that came with the upper-class home.

Hartley, however, is not this type of servant. As Mattis argues, “Hartley represents domestic service as a professionalizing industry” (14). She is an immigrant, not an inheritance. Service is her occupation, and she therefore seeks employment through an agency. Her bout with typhoid emphasizes her precarious social position; without work, she will starve. When she is offered the position at Brympton Place, she tells us “most of my money was gone” and “I pretty nearly lost heart, for fretting hadn’t made me fatter” (12). Patten suggests that “the uncanny in the story is … motivated by [Wharton’s] unease over a new breed of servants: typhoid-afflicted immigrants like Hartley … who congregated as the servants ‘under the stairs,’ … and who represented a new form of power base that threatened to contaminate American democracy” (2). The
increasing number of immigrant and professional domestic workers, less attached to the master and home, clearly concerned Wharton, who late in life lamented the passing of the old type of dedicated servant. She wrote to a friend that it was “utterly impossible to find that kind of decent respectable middle aged maid any longer,” and that “the old type of quiet lady’s maid, who is ‘in it’ for anything but the wardrobe, & high jinks at Palace Hotels, has vanished” (qtd. in Dwight 231; emphasis in orig.).

In “The Lady’s Maid’s Bell,” we get a taste of this shift through Hartley. Perhaps the true threat in the story is not Mrs. Brympton’s infidelity, but the threat that a changing domestic service industry poses to her privacy. Emma Saxon would never divulge her mistress’s secrets, while Hartley exposes all under a guise of ignorance. If she isn’t explicit about her mistress’s affair, it is after all possible that she is preserving her own reputation, and not that of Mrs. Brympton. Emma Saxon is literally a “quiet” old-fashioned servant, while Hartley is confident enough to retell her story for readers. She is a more empowered, and therefore perhaps even more dangerous servant than Emma, who protects and maintains silence even after death. The strict confidant that Emma Saxon represents and that Wharton had in her own long-time servants in life was clearly a dying breed.

**An “Afterward” on Wharton’s Ghostly Servants**

“The Lady’s Maid’s Bell” is first in a series of Wharton’s ghosts stories to address the increasing power of servants. If in “The Lady’s Maid’s Bell” Wharton downplays her ambivalence toward the changing social position of servants, by the time “All Souls” was published in 1937 it was clear that she recognized domestic help as a
potential threat to the agency of the homeowner. Ironically, as Holly Blackford has noted, servants have more freedom than their mistresses in some respects: “Their liminal position in the house gives them a freedom of mobility that upper-class female characters do not feel and in fact, envy. And yet, deprived of cultural authority and recognition, servants become ghosts, automatons, and conservative forces that keep the past alive” (237), sometimes to the detriment of their masters. This threat is dramatized in a number of Wharton’s ghost stories, including “The Lady’s Maid’s Bell,” but also in “All Souls’.” Sara Clayburn, the protagonist of that story, is exiled from her home by the agency of her servants just as assuredly as is Mr. Brympton in “The Lady’s Maid’s Bell.” Between these two stories, which bookend Wharton’s ghostly oeuvre, other supernatural tales like “The Looking Glass” (1935) and “Mr. Jones” (1928) show an increasing anxiety that those who live below stairs might have more power, mobility, and freedom than those above.

In “The Looking Glass” a clever servant convinces her mistress that she has clairvoyant powers and, for a price, can carry a message to the lady’s lost love, a young man lost on the Titanic. Cora is not strictly a servant (she is a beautician), but rather a member of a new class of workers who perform professionalized domestic labor. Nevertheless, her duties toward Mrs. Clingsland are very much like those of a lady’s maid. Cora, however, represents a newly liberated and quickly changing domestic labor market. Although she “manag[es] the details” of her narrative “so that Mrs. Clingsland

52 Daniel Sutherland details the decline of the live-in servant through the nineteenth century, as “cooperative living, reduction of workers’ hours, reorganization of household labor, contractual relationships, and competition with factories and shops for workers”
will not appear in too bad a light” (Griffin 89), much as Hartley does, it is clear that Cora’s former boss was cold, haughty, and self-centered. The beautician takes advantage of Mrs. Clingsland’s vanity and wealth; her fabricated messages from beyond the grave first guarantee a steady income, and later enough financial support to keep Cora and her family afloat during the Depression. In “The Looking Glass,” Wharton expresses anxiety that with the changing relationship of master and servant, and the professionalization of the domestic workforce, the opportunity for domestic workers to take advantage of their bosses for monetary gain was greatly increased. Wharton lays much of the blame in this amusing tale on the wealthy and vain Mrs. Clingsland, however, who allows herself to be duped by “clinging” to the past (as characterized by her lost love, fading beauty, and faith in Cora’s devotion to her).

In several other stories, however, servants pose a much greater threat to their masters. In “A Bottle Of Perrier” (1926), a servant dissatisfied with his master’s tyranny murders the man and hides his body in a well. In “Mr. Jones” (1928) a free-spirited heiress must fight a ghostly servant to take back control of her family estate. The story is commonly cited as a Female Gothic work, and rightfully so, considering the nature of the secret Lady Jane Lynke uncovers at Bells, her ancestral family home. After taking possession, Lady Jane uncovers the grim fate of a female ancestor who was locked away in the home, neglected, and despised by a husband who married her for her wealth and property.

---

led to a shift toward day laborers like Cora (183–84), who performed labor that had previously had been assigned to live-in servants.
As Lady Jane investigates, she is consistently impeded by the ghostly Mr. Jones, and by the current housekeeper Mrs. Clemm, both of whom clearly have some stake in maintaining the home’s secret. In “Haunted Housekeeping,” Blackford argues that the ghost isn’t real, that “Mr. Jones represents the specter of the female mind that is anxious about independent women,” and that the true competition is therefore between the modern Lady Jane and the traditional female servants, who “compete with Lady Jane for possession of the house” (239). Fedorko considers it a story in which “a middle-aged woman does nothing less than reclaim her female heritage from male control … by entering the house and crossing thresholds within it she claims the right to control her own body” (Gender 119). Both readings are convincing. However, “Mr. Jones” is also read a tale about an upper-class woman regaining control of a home from a domestic servant who has forgotten his place. While “Mr. Jones” is undoubtedly a tale about the historical silencing and recovering of the “speechless, soundless, alone” female voice (Ghost 214), it is also a tale very much about a contested master-servant relationship. Like “The Lady’s Maid’s Bell,” “Mr. Jones” features a ghostly servant who enforces silence and continuity in a home to the detriment of its upper-class occupants.

“Mr. Jones” also contains an architectural subtext that has been entirely neglected by critics. While Lady Jane is clearly interested in the silenced history of the women who lived at Bells before her, the plot of “Mr. Jones” progresses through her discovery of misused and discontinuous space in her new home. Bells is characterized by “much space wasted in crooked passages and superfluous stairs” (194), and by an inexplicably off-limits, yet “delicious room” that “no one has been able to use … for ages” (200–01). The
“blue parlor” is mysteriously cold despite its Western view, and its hearth is covered in ashes, even though Lady Jane has been told it cannot be lit due to a faulty chimney. Even more mysterious is a bricked-over doorway in the room, a “rectangle of roughly plastered wall” obscured by a curtain (211). These discontinuities, architectural flaws, and aesthetic faults signify the unbalanced master-servant dynamic at Bells and lead Lady Jane to uncover both the mystery of her ancestor’s deplorable treatment of his wife and the servant Mr. Jones’s protection of his old master’s sordid secret. The ambiguous ending of the story leaves Mr. Jones and Lady Jane engaged in a stalemate of sorts over the body of Mrs. Clemm, whom Mr. Jones has murdered to protect the family secret (and perhaps the family name). Wharton is characteristically silent about what happens next, and the reader is unsure whether or not the plucky and likeable Lady Jane is a match for the all-too-faithful servant of the past, Mr. Jones.

In a reversal of the “all-too-faithful retainer” (Stengel 3) subtext of “Mr. Jones” and “The Lady’s Maid’s Bell,” and in opposition to the light-hearted treatment of a servant’s morally ambiguous behavior in “The Looking Glass,” “All Souls’” (1937) is Wharton’s most terrifying treatment of servants, who in this case abandon their elderly and infirm mistress. Helpless and in pain from a sprained ankle, Sara Clayburn awakens during a blizzard to a strangely deserted home in which the silence has become a thing of terror: “There was no break, no thinnest crack in it anywhere. It had the cold continuity of the snow which was still falling steadily outside” (288). From desirable qualities in the

53 While the butler in “A Bottle of Perrier” does murder his master, he is a sympathetic character.
tasteful home, silence and continuity have by “All Souls” become malevolent forces. Sara Clayburn’s reliance upon her servants, emphasized by an injury that leaves her physically helpless, has left her trapped within her own home, unable, perhaps, to comprehend a world whose social dynamics have changed.

Whitegates, the Clayburn home, is an unusual “haunted” house for Wharton. Although it is old and stately, the home has been modernized “with electricity, central heating and all the modern appliances” (276), all things to which Wharton objects in Decoration. Nevertheless, the Clayburns are a family of tradition: they “shared with their old house a sort of reassuring orderliness and dignity” (277). The modern aspects of the home, despite being the type that drown out the “ghostly instinct,” also match the progressiveness of their owner, Sara, who undertakes to keep the home after her husband’s death rather than passing it to a male heir. Both home and owner thereby exist in a somewhat discontinuous balance of old and new, one that predictably invites ghostly activity. Sara, however, leans toward the traditional over the modern, much as did Wharton herself; given her sense in the preface to Ghosts that the modern age is discontinuous, it would seem that Sara is a continuous woman in an increasingly discontinuous world.

Despite her quasi-modern home and progressive view of women’s property rights, Sara is staunchly conservative when it comes to her servants. Her maid Agnes she “inherited from her mother-in-law,” and she is surrounded by “old servants” who have

54 As the narrator of “All Souls” tells us, “this isn’t exactly a ghost story” (276). I include it in my analysis because it does appear in Wharton’s Ghosts, and because its treatment of servants and architecture is consistent with the other works discussed above.
been with her for decades (279). Sara retains a relationship of strict formality within her home and toward her servants. Even in fear, as she slowly hobbles from empty room to empty room, Sara is careful to maintain a boundary between her space and that of her servants. Though she is injured, and the servants’ stairs are closer, for example, Sara chooses to “walk slowly back, the whole length of the passage, and go down by the front stairs” as she explores the empty house (286). Her journey through her deserted estate is one of the most frightening passages in all of Wharton’s ghostly fiction. With each new room she enters, “The deep silence accompanied her; she still felt it moving watchfully at her side, as though she were its prisoner and it might throw itself upon her if she tried to escape” (289). Around each corner she expects to find “the bodies of her dead servants, mown down by some homicidal maniac” (286–88), but what she discovers is even more terrifying: nothing, only a deafening silence and a home in ghostly, perfect order. Her servants, upon whom she has relied her entire life, have deserted her, leaving her alone in the terrifying and oppressive silence and continuity of Whitegates.

In their reading of “All Souls,” Janet Beer and Avril Horner suggest that the reader should recognize that the supernatural explanation provided by the narrator of Sara Clayburn’s experience — that her servants abandoned her during a blizzard to take part in a Coven — is clearly ludicrous, a fantasy Sara and the narrator concoct to avoid the more terrifying prospect that “real human agency” might be involved (283). The tale exposes not the reality of a coven of nefarious house-servants, but rather Sara’s “fears of anarchy”

55 Likewise, Sara is uncomfortable entering the lower-class space of the servants’ rooms: “she looked slowly around, vaguely apprehensive of what she might see” (284).
and “loss of social control” (283). It is easier for her to imagine her servants dead or involved in witchcraft than to imagine they willingly have deserted her.

Daniel Sutherland suggests that the number of domestic servants declined in America as technological progress made them obsolete: “the mechanization of the home was both a cause and an effect of the declining number of servants” (192). It can be no coincidence that Wharton attributes these same technological advancements (electricity, central heating, the radio) to both the decline of the ghost and the general decline of good taste in America. Her fears of this decline crystallize in the climax of “All Souls,” when “some undefinable instinct told her that the kitchen held the clue to the mystery” (289–90). Sara makes her way to her modern kitchen, from which she is terrified to hear a male voice emanating, one that, moreover, “was speaking in a foreign language” (290): 56

Coming closer, she “peered cautiously through [the doorway] into the kitchen, and saw that it was orderly and empty as the other rooms. But in the middle of the carefully scoured table stood a portable wireless, and the voice she heard came out of it” (290). The wireless (one of those inventions Wharton specifically notes as an “enemy” of the ghost), has seemingly replaced — perhaps even drowned out — Sara’s ghostly, faithful servants. The foreign voice that emanates from it signals Sara’s discontinuity with her modernized home and its modernizing, professional domestic workers. Faced with this truth, Sara falls unconscious.

When Wharton looks back to a time of silence and continuity, pre-wireless and pre-automobile, she also looks back to a time of stable social boundaries. The servants in

56 The “foreign language” of the radio perhaps alludes to the increasing number of immigrant servants during Wharton’s lifetime.
“All Souls’” are defiantly un-ghostly because they are not, like Emma Saxon in “The Lady’s Maid’s Bell,” “conservative forces that keep the past alive” (Blackford 237), but instead represent a new, less-predictable labor force that exercises agency, and defies expectations of unquestioned subservience. The decline of live-in domestic service is a terrifying prospect for Sara and for Wharton, who casts an elderly wealthy woman like herself as the victim of shifting power dynamics and destabilized class hierarchies. While “The Lady’s Maid’s Bell” and “Afterward” demonstrate that the servants and home might punish a vulgar master, “All Souls’” suggests that the modern servant might instead reject what is tasteful and outdated. In “All Souls’” the servants succeed in driving Sara Clayburn from her home, but we can assign no lapse of good form, no discontinuity or noisy vulgarity to Sara’s actions that might justify her banishment. Instead, Sara is faced with the prospect that “silence and continuity,” i.e. her adherence to an idealized past of greater social stability, is no longer possible in the “roaring and discontinuous” present. Sara ultimately takes the form of the homeless, lonely, conservative spirit — a displaced master in search of a servant.

In the next chapter, I turn to an author who embraced the vulgar, noisy, and impolite. While Wharton strove in her gothic fiction to preserve decaying social boundaries, Frank Norris deliberately violated them by adopting a series of fictional and non-fictional personas through which he could experiment with the Progressive Era class acts of passing and slumming. These fictional doubles, however, discover that slipping in and out of variously classed identities sometimes produces terrifying results.
CHAPTER THREE

“MANY OTHER KINDS OF MAN”: DOUBLES AND CROSS-CLASS EXPERIMENTATION IN FRANK NORRIS’S FICTION

Mr. Norris is, indeed, a ‘Harvard man,’ but that he is a good many other kinds of man is self-evident.
— Willa Cather, Review of McTeague (McElrath and Knight 41)

The class act of slumming, which I discussed in Chapter One, manifests in Progressive Era fiction as either a physical or symbolic intrusion of the upper classes into lower-class space. Although he didn’t physically slum amongst the poor to relay their suffering first-hand to his middle-class readers, Norris’s fiction and non-fiction are nevertheless marked by symbolic cross-class intrusions. Slumming, in his fiction and non-fiction, takes the form of both modal experimentation in which he slums the gothic in his pursuit of narrative Truth; and vicarious slumming, involving his extensive use of fictionalized doubles through which he explores fictional lower-class space. Both slumming acts, which explore class boundaries and express social realities, with sometimes terrifying results, mark much of Norris’s work as gothic realist.

1 All reviews of Norris’s work quoted in this chapter are cited from Frank Norris: The Critical Reception (1981), edited by Joseph R. McElrath, Jr. and Katherine Knight.

2 “Truth” is a heavily weighted term in Norris’s non-fiction, and is often used in place of the lower-case “truth” when he describes the purpose of fiction. For this reason, I preserve Norris’s capitalization of the term throughout this chapter. The significance of the term will be discussed in greater detail below.
Cross-class experimentation also inheres in Norris’s adoption of a working-class persona in much of his non-fiction. The “Novel With a ‘Purpose’,” as he writes in a 1902 essay bearing that title, is one that “brings the tragedies and griefs of others” and specifically lower-class others, “to notice” (1199) of self-absorbed middle-class readers, and that, moreover, is most effective when it speaks directly to what Norris elsewhere calls the “Plain People” (“Salt” 282), void of pretension or overwrought language. In his non-fiction, Norris re-casts himself as an ersatz working-class hero; he class passes as a leader of the People and of writers seeking truth through fiction. In order to advocate an egalitarian definition of the literary, Norris conceptualizes a literary revolution with the writer, and more specifically himself, as its figural, rough-and-tumble head.

By fictionalizing and dispersing variously classed authorial personae throughout his fiction and non-fiction, Norris engages in the Progressive Era class acts of passing and slumming. His fiction abounds with authorial doubles, middle-class writers who embark on passing or slumming experiments as they mine the poor and working class for topics of literary interest or models of inspiration. Although several critics have recognized The Octopus’s (1901) Presley as a double of Norris, and that Blix (1899) and

---

3 With the exception of “Salt and Sincerity,” which I discuss below, all Norris essays, columns, and “Weekly Letters” quoted in this chapter are collected in and cited from Norris: Novels and Essays (1986), edited by Donald Pizer.

4 As with “Truth,” I deliberately preserve Norris’s capitalization of “Plain People” and “People” throughout this chapter, in part to suggest that for Norris, downtrodden and common people were symbolic muses rather than real men and women with whom he interacted.
Vandover (1914) are highly autobiographical, none have yet taken up the extent to which Norrisean doubles appear in several of his texts, not just as Blix’s “Condy Rivers,” or as “Presley,” but under a number of guises, such as the writer Karslake in “A Memorandum of Sudden Death” (1902), or the unnamed middle-class narrator of “Little Dramas of the Curbstone” (1897). From the poet Presley of The Octopus, to a well-known cameo in McTeague (1899), Norris utilizes fictional avatars, rather than physical experimentation, to explore “how the other half lives.” The doubling impulse that echoes throughout Norris’s oeuvre allows him to be, as Willa Cather wisely observes in her 1899 review of McTeague, “a good many other kinds of man” than himself (McElrath and Knight 41), vicariously encountering lower-class space while maintaining a safe physical distance from actual slums.

Through this class experimentation, however, Norris inadvertently exposes the thin boundary between passing and slumming. His work is marked by a consistent and unresolved tension between the author as a part of, and the author as apart from, the masses. Through doubling, Norris explores a spectrum of slumming scenarios, ranging

---

5 In Frank Norris: A Life, McElrath and Crisler note that Blix follows Norris’s experience as a young journalist for The Wave (217). Donald Pizer details some of the biographical elements of the novel in Chapter 3 of The Novels of Frank Norris (1966) (96–97). Pizer notes that Blix captures a moment of time from Norris’s life — the wooing and courtship of his wife (101–02). Critical takes on Norris’s similarity to his characters Vandover and Presley will be discussed below.

6 As the dentist McTeague, fleeing from the law after murdering his wife, enters a mining office in search of work, he sees “a tall, lean young man, with a thick head of hair surprisingly gray … playing with a half-grown great Dane puppy” (McTeague 292). The fictional Norris, like the real Norris, who visited a mine operated by a college friend in 1897, is presumably gathering information on mining for his revisions.
from thinly veiled fictionalized accounts of his own interactions with workers, to scenarios in which the observer/writer inadvertently or unconsciously becomes an agent in or subject of the narrative. The fantasy depicted in his non-fiction, of the writer leading the masses in a literary revolution, is haunted by the identity nightmare depicted in his fiction, in which the author finds himself unable to maintain distance between himself and his lower-class subjects. When the author-characters in his fiction attempt to slum, they repeatedly find themselves drawn into the lower class, unable to preserve the class distinction upon which their livelihood and sense of classed self depends. Once breached through the act of passing, class boundaries in Norris’s fiction remain unstable.

In “Undercover Exploration of the ‘Other Half,’ or the Writer as Class Transvestite,” Eric Schocket writes that the danger in slumming is the “heightened opportunity for adoption, inhabitation, and integration” into the lower class (117). Norris’s work dramatizes these dangers; bringing the “griefs” of the suffering to light carries with it the distinct and sometimes terrifying possibility of the slumming writer’s absorption into the lower class. Although Norris did write some overtly gothic tales,7 this chapter is more concerned with his work as conceptually gothic — through modal inconsistencies and interactions, Norris’s work exposes destabilized boundaries between the middle-class author and his lower-class subject.

7 For example, “Grettir at Drangey” (1902) and “Grettir at Thorhall-Stead” (1903) both make use of conventional gothic settings and plots; “Lauth” (1893) is a gothic meditation on death, resurrection, and the relationship between body and soul. “The Strangest Thing” (1897, published in The Third Circle) is an unnerving tale involving grave robbing and a dead infant. Norris also included gothic elements in otherwise naturalist or realist works, such as lycanthropy in Vandover and the Brute) and telepathy in The Octopus.
I identify Frank Norris as a gothic realist author because of his engagement with unstable modal and social boundaries, often as figured in the same works through his vicarious cross-class experimentation. Norrisean doubles appear in his fiction with almost uncanny frequency. His vicarious social experimentation thereby complicates and expands our received understanding of the double, a quintessential feature of nineteenth-century gothic fiction. The double, as Jackson writes, is a product of dawning modernity, signifying mankind’s attempt to get back in touch with a “lost centre of personality” (108). The frequency with which the double appears in late-nineteenth-century fiction should come as no surprise, given the Progressive Era search for stability that commonly manifested in nostalgia, as I discussed in Chapter One. Jackson’s definition is reminiscent of Freud’s definition of the unheimlich as something simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar, which is in all of its manifestations “concerned with the idea of the ‘double’” or the “confounded self” that has been divided, fragmented, or otherwise made unfamiliar to itself (386–89). The double is something or someone once known that has become defamiliarized; it is unassailable fact, ultimate truth.

Norris’s doubles are consistent with these definitions although they are not unfamiliar (indeed, they are often obvious stand-ins for the author), nor can they be considered as doing strictly psychological work, as most critical assessments assign to the work of the double. I refer to them as doubles in part because they perform the Truth-exposing work of Freudian doubles. The Truth exposed by Norris’s doubles, however, is more social than psychological. If, as Fred Botting asserts, “the double presents a limit that cannot be overcome” (93), then in Norris’s fiction that limit is not divisions of the
individual psyche, as Botting asserts, but the individual’s ambivalent reactions to class difference and class boundaries in reality. Limits or boundaries between classes are breached in Norris’s fiction, but what cannot be overcome is the anxiety and terror that frequently attend those ruptures.

Norris’s doubles are also not definitively or clearly other in the sense implied by most definitions of the term. Rather than “illustrating self as other” (Jackson 45), in Norris’s fiction the self becomes other through the dynamics of passing and slumming. While still doubles of the author, Norris’s fictional avatars express a particular anxiety related to class boundary destabilization: the fragile boundary between the experiences of slumming and passing. They offer a new way for us to conceive of the work of the double, not just as expressing that which has become foreign to the self or that which has been repressed, but the process by which identities (and specifically classed identities in this case) are tested, rejected, or accepted.

In the next section, I suggest that Norris’s slumming experiments resulted in a complicated and often-contradictory public image. Despite his call for a literary revolution, and his locating of literary authenticity in the masses, Norris was never completely comfortable in his self-styled place as a leader of and spokesperson for the People and their literature. His ambivalence towards the lower class, demonstrated by the social distance he is careful to maintain in some of his non-fiction and short stories, (in particular, the Bunt and “Three Crows” tales), is somewhat responsible for the identity crisis that has marked Norris’s critical legacy. Critics have variously — and often
simultaneously — identified Norris as condescending to the poor and a champion for equality, exposing through their confusion the multiple doubles of the man in his fiction.

Following this critical overview, I demonstrate how three works, “Little Dramas of the Curbstone,” “A Memorandum of Sudden Death,” and *The Octopus* capture the anxiety and ambivalence experienced by Norris’s fictional doubles as they interact with, and sometimes lose themselves in, the lower classes. Just as his doubles, like *The Octopus*’s Presley, sometimes reject integration with the lower class, retreating instead to the relative stability (and reassuring class blindness) of the middle class, Norris himself rejected this possibility as he turned from the identity-threatening, modally impure implications of *The Octopus* to the relatively stable bourgeois ground of *The Pit* (1902).

As a consequence of his earlier experimentation, however, Norris ultimately cannot re-stabilize the boundaries he has breached. The fourth section of this chapter, “Doubled Trouble,” details how *The Pit* is haunted by its ur-text, Norris’s early, unpublished work *Vandover and the Brute*, which details the degeneration and eventual hysterical lycanthropy of its titular character, a middle-class, Harvard-educated man who is helpless against the strength of his inner brute. *The Pit* and *Vandover and the Brute* illustrate a third kind of doubling in Norris’s work: the novels are intertextual doubles, sharing similar language and character motivations between two modally disparate texts. The textual and linguistic similarities and echoes between the two novels — one a sordid, uneven portrait of degeneracy, and the other an inconsistently sympathetic depiction of a wealthy Chicago speculator — illustrate the modally composite nature of Norris’s work.
Although occurring between texts rather than between the author and text, this doubling is evidence of a pervasive tendency toward destabilized boundaries in Norris’s work.

The final section of this chapter details how the modal instability demonstrated by the similarities between these two novels gestures toward a larger sense of uncanniness in Norris’s oeuvre, one initiated in part by the author’s own conscious attempt to conflate and collapse distinctions between modes while maintaining distinctions between classes. In “Zola as a Romantic Writer” (1896), for instance, Norris casts romance as upper class, realism as middle, and naturalism as lower-class modes, even while considering the former and latter as similarly interested in depicting the lives of those “twisted from the ordinary” (1107). One of the defining features of nineteenth-century gothic fiction is a slippage of boundaries, “uncanny disruptions of the boundaries between inside and outside, reality and delusion, propriety and corruption, materialism and spirituality” (Botting 113). This chapter explores the threatened boundaries in Norris’s work: those between classes, and how they are mirrored and expressed through the slippage between and interaction of modes, both of which have rendered Norris’s work unstable.

**Ambivalent Doubling: Norris as Writer, Norris as Worker**

In a biographical sense, Frank Norris has always had a doubled personality. He has long suffered from a reputation as a privileged dilettante, a boy genius who dabbled in art and journalism but who never took himself or his craft as a writer very seriously. This reputation was cemented in part by Franklin Walker’s *Frank Norris: A Biography* (1932), the first — and only — biography of Norris for more than 70 years, until the
publication of McElrath and Crisler’s more generous *Frank Norris: A Life* in 2006. Walker crafted an image of a youthful and somewhat juvenile writer, one “characterized by arrested development and protracted immaturity” (McElrath and Crisler, *Frank* xv).

Unfortunately, Norris’s early death at age thirty-two and a flagging interest in his work for much of the twentieth century allowed Walker’s work to shape Norris’s critical legacy. Walker was undoubtedly drawing upon an existing reputation that can be traced into early reviews of Norris’s work. As a 1903 *New York Times* review of *The Pit* noted after Norris’s death, “Mr. Norris would have gone much further in the time allotted him if he had taken himself a little less, and his chosen profession a little more, seriously” (McElrath and Knight 237). The reviewer offers more of a critique of a career than a review of a novel, and faults Norris as youthfully naïve in his attempt to write about such various and cumbersome subjects as the Chicago wheat pit or railroad trusts, claiming that his arrogance resulted in fiction that was unoriginal and misinformed: “He was a preacher turned novelist — a preacher, that is, of elementary sociology and economics, and his magnificent powers of observation and description were allowed to run wild in order that he might hasten to tell the world some true things that were not new and some new things that were not true” (237). The reviewer holds a contradictory perception of Norris’s character. He argues that elitism prevented Norris from writing better fiction, while also finding fault in Norris’s attempts to expose social and economic ills, subjects that should counteract public charges of his elitism. The author of the review cannot correlate the young, upper-middle-class rogue with the larger cultural issues he tackles in his fiction.
In other reviews, Norris was viewed as a champion for worker’s rights and for the poor. In response to the New York Times reviewer quoted above, Mary Patterson writes: “Those who have suffered from railroad monopolies, trusts, and other institutions which have menaced civic liberty, found in Mr. Norris a champion who voiced their wrongs by that far-reaching and most effective argument, the popular novel” (McElrath and Knight 283). To complain that this makes him “a Socialist or preacher,” she continues, would mean, “the same could be said of Dickens, Harriet B. Stowe, and all authors who have used the popular novel as the means of agitating public reforms” (283). Patterson believes that, “The passion with which he was consumed is a real one, and when we lay down his books we remember them” (283). For Patterson, Norris was a bit of a rebel, but one clearly passionate about social reform. Like many of his characters, from Vandover to the inconstant Laura Jadwin of The Pit, Norris himself appears to have a divided personality, or at least a divided reputation.

In part, inconsistent treatments of Norris’s character arise from the fact that he was a privileged man who often treated the under-privileged in his fiction. As McElrath and Crisler explain:

Norris’s admirers cannot help but wish that he had not been so obviously ‘born to the manner.’ The premise seen repeatedly in such left-leaning academics is that such a gilded young man could not possibly have understood what was transpiring in the day-to-day life of ‘the people.’ Foreign to him, so this line of thought runs, were those outside ‘the better class’ to which he belonged. (Frank 14)

Unlike his naturalist contemporaries London and Dreiser, and even his realist contemporary Howells, Norris did not come from working-class roots. He was a white, upper-middle-class male who enjoyed all the privileges those labels entailed during the
tail end of the nineteenth-century. One result of his born privilege is that much
existing criticism prior to McElrath and Crisler’s 2006 biography treats Norris’s attitude
toward the poor as one of indifference or even manipulation. As recently as 1995, Jerome
Loving’s introduction to McTeague speaks of Norris’s “condescending attitude” toward
the poor (xix), writing that he “did not see their lives as equal to his own” (xviii). Loving
erroneously considers Norris a “selective naturalist,” arguing that in his work, “heredity
and environment were barriers mainly for the poor, not the middle and upper classes”
(xxvi). In fact, Norris’s fiction as a whole suggests that he believed these forces are at
work on all classes. His degenerate Vandover is, after all, a man of good breeding and
education who is nevertheless unable to resist the inherited character flaws that reduce
him, by the novel’s end, to scrubbing the filth from a home built on land he once owned.
Curtis Jadwin, the wealthy protagonist of The Pit, finds himself in a similar predicament,
helpless against a gambling addiction that encourages him to hazard more and more of
his fortune in his attempt to corner the wheat market. As I will explain further in the last
section of this chapter, inherited or social forces act equally on all classes in Norris’s
fiction. Furthermore, Norris repeatedly expresses egalitarian, even socialist tendencies in
his non-fiction, even if he cannot claim working- or lower-class roots.

Much of Norris’s non-fiction posits a philosophy that looks past class and even
national boundaries in pursuit of a larger, unifying sense of Truth. This philosophy finds
its fullest expression in “The Frontier Gone at Last” (1902), where Norris argues that
since we have little control over their inherited proclivities, all “races must follow their
destiny blindly” (1188). Unexpectedly, however, Norris proceeds to claim that these
racialized inherited forces, which consistently have driven the Anglo-Saxon to push Westward from England and Germany, through the New World, and back around the globe into Asia, ultimately are intended to unite, rather than divide, mankind. The “Westward impulse” (1188) is an agent of patriotism, the ultimate end of Westward expansion. He conceives of patriotism as something much larger than protection and loyalty to a family and clan, however, expanding the word to embody loyalty to city, state, country, and ultimately to the world, as nations become one. The essay ends with a call to Americans to think beyond their own borders: “we who now arrogantly boast of ourselves as Americans, supreme in conquest, whether of battle-ship or of bridge-building, may realize that the true patriotism is the brotherhood of man and know that the whole world is our nation and simple humanity our countrymen” (1189–90). Hardly the words of a privileged youth who believed himself distinct from the masses. Rather, Norris frequently used his fiction and especially his non-fiction to force his middle-class readers into a sense of discomfort, of sometimes-unwilling cross-class interaction, in order to expose a unifying foundation he believed lay below the surface of modern civilization. To find common ground between nationalities and classes was to transcend boundaries, not reinforce them.

Norris’s imperatives challenge middle-class readers to critique their own taste and class, to notice the parallels between themselves and the poor. In several works he also searches for continuity between modern and ancient times, thereby (and perhaps inadvertently) threatening conceptions of agency and individuation even while he expresses Progressive Era nostalgia. Near the beginning of his narrative poem *Yvernelle*
(1892), his first full-length published work, Norris writes that there are some “evils”
that “swarm each land, each century” and “hath no age, no nationality” (12). The first,
and therefore presumably the most prescient of these evils in the young Norris’s
evaluation, is that of class disparity. Looking back on the middle ages, Norris writes:

Still unresolved that evil which them vexed,
That never-ending strife ‘twixt high and low
...
The feudal baron yet remains today,
But, changed into the modern moneyed lord,
Still o’er the people holds more cruel sway,
But ‘tis with hoarded gold and not with sword. (13–14)

Displaying a proto-Veblenian sensibility, Norris recognizes that class disparity and
inequality are part of every age and culture, yet he by no means supports them. The
modern moneyed man or woman, he implies, gained a position of power only through
inheritance in an existing power structure that can be traced backward into time
immemorial. As early as 1892, then, while Norris was still a freshman at UC Berkeley, he
displayed a nascent sense of a brotherhood that linked all classes and nationalities, a
theme that would mark his later fiction, as well.

His argument that class disparity and oppression are omnipresent also has the
unexpected effect of destabilizing class boundaries, for it suggests that all men, no matter
their class, are subject to forces beyond their control that continuously divide mankind
into classes. Class boundaries might be inevitable, he suggests, but divisions of men into
those classes are seemingly arbitrary. This sense of inevitable class antagonism marks
Norris’s work as expressing Progressive Era concerns over class mobility, as I detailed in
Chapter One. While works like McTeague do at times display an almost gleeful authorial
manipulation of lower-class characters, it does not automatically follow that the
author of such a work therefore disparaged the poor or took their suffering, or his
responsibility toward them, lightly. Instead, this manipulation expresses the powerful
forces that thwart the upwardly mobile aspirations of many. A closer look at Norris’s
non-fiction, particularly those works in which he discusses the relationship between Truth
and fiction, reveals an author who took his responsibilities toward the People quite
seriously.

In the appropriately titled “The Responsibilities of the Novelist” (1902), Norris
contends that since the novel is the primary vehicle for expressing “contemporaneous
life” (1207), successful writers have a great responsibility to give the People the Truth
(1209). Here Norris espouses his view that common people are the best judges of
literature: “no art that is not in the end understood by the People can live or ever did live
a single generation. In the larger view, in the last analysis, the People pronounce the final
judgment. The People, despised of the artist, hooted, caricatured, and vilified, are after
all, in the main, the real seekers after Truth” (1208). Here, too, he defends popular
literature, since “the People … make little distinction between Maggie Tulliver and the
heroine of the last ‘popular novel. They do not separate true from false, they do not care”
(1208). Norris suggests that popular literature can be great literature, but warns writers

---

8 In a series of essays titled “Salt and Sincerity,” collected in *The Responsibilities of the
Novelist* (1902), Norris offers a similar opinion, arguing that the masses, not the elite,
have the last word in identifying great literature, and will always decide correctly:

> Literature is of all the arts the most democratic; it is of, by and for the
> people in a fuller measure than even government itself. And one makes the
> assertion without forgetting the mouth-filling phrase, the ‘aristocracy of
> letters.’ The survival of the fittest is as good in the evolution of our
to take their responsibilities seriously, for finally, “The People have a right to Truth as they have a right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” (1210). He achieves this literary egalitarianism by rejecting the exigencies of middle-class literariness and late-Victorian propriety, which encouraged highly educated youth like Norris to write pleasant subject matter for and concerning their own social class.

Reviewers of Norris’s early novels often criticized him for writing outside of his social element. Norris was, after all, a Berkeley- and Harvard-educated son of an affluent Chicago jeweler, whose earliest published works, including closed form poetry and poems on obscure medieval battles, demonstrate his considerable cultural and educational capital. Many reviews of *McTeague*, for example, fault Norris for a perceived literature as of our bodies, and the best ‘academy’ for the writers of the United States is, after all, and in the last analysis, to be found in the judgment of the people, exercised throughout the lapse of a considerable time. For, give the people time enough, and they will always decide justly. (“Salt” 256)

Aside from *Yvernelle*, which clearly reflects Norris’s interest in medieval armor and mastery of closed-form narrative verse, among Norris’s earliest published works are the sonnet “Crepusculum,” a meditation on death, in the *Overland Monthly* (April, 1892); and several poems of esoteric historical interest in the Berkeley student magazine *Occident* in 1890, which McElrath and Crisler note made “few concessions” to readers (*Frank* 133). All of these works evidence a highly educated author, and demand a similar class of readers. McElrath and Crisler surmise that Norris adjusted his style toward the popular as a result of feeling out of place amongst his peers at Berkeley, for whom works like *Yvernelle* “suggest[ed] effeteness and preciosity” (*Frank* 115). As his style became grittier and more accessible, Norris eventually disowned *Yvernelle* (*McElrath and Crisler, Frank* 117).
discontinuity between his obvious talents and his subject matter.\textsuperscript{10} For a representative example, The Outlook reviewer writes:

\begin{quote}
It is a misfortune that he should have devoted so much skill and virility to the description of a life so essentially without spiritual significance, and so repulsive in its habit and quality…. [T]he reader is immersed in a world of bald and brutal realism from beginning to end, and is brought into association with men whose vulgarity and brutality are unrelieved by higher qualities. This is a serious artistic defect. (McElrath and Knight 37)
\end{quote}

William Dean Howells, a long-time supporter of Norris, also recognizes that McTeague might offend, although he doesn’t necessarily deem this a failing: “Polite readers of the sort who do not like to meet in fiction people of the sort they never meet in society will not have a good time in ‘McTeague,’ for there is not really a society person in the book” (McElrath and Knight 40).\textsuperscript{12} Howells’s more forgiving review touched upon what was so new and unusual about Norris’s fiction: he was an upper-middle-class writer unwilling to cater to a middle-class readership’s demands for pleasant subject matter, but his talent couldn’t be denied. Norris could not be written off as a hack.

\textsuperscript{10} Norris’s writing instructors at Harvard also criticized his chosen subject matter, often quite harshly. Early sketches for McTeague written in Lewis Gates’s course were variously commented upon as “gruesome,” and “Not a toothsome subject” (in reference to an early draft of Trina’s death scene). In a longer response to a sketch of Trina and McTeague’s abusive relationship, Norris’s graduate assistant instructor writes “Morbid and repulsive in subject matter. Your manner is strong and effective but ask yourself why you present us with this subject. To force upon our unwilling attention a repulsive, painful and debasing image is itself something akin to the brutal” (Norris, “Themes”).

\textsuperscript{11} Norris also was lambasted by critics for including a pants-wetting in an early scene of the novel, and rewrote the scene for the third printing of the novel. McElrath and Crisler detail the criticism and revision in “The Bowdlerization of McTeague” (1989).

\textsuperscript{12} Unsurprisingly, Norris generally was praised for The Pit, which was considered a “society novel” featuring no lower-class characters.
Norris’s choice of the poor as literary subjects undoubtedly was a result of Zola’s influence, as many critics have noted.\(^\text{13}\) As his dedication of *McTeague* suggests, however, Norris was also very much influenced by Lewis Gates, one of his writing instructors at Harvard, to whom he dedicated *McTeague*. Gates believed that romanticism and realism were not mutually exclusive terms. As opposed to Howells, who argues in *Criticism and Fiction* (1891) that realism inherited the throne of accuracy from a decayed, dangerously sentimental romanticism, Gates believed that romance could be rehabilitated. A modally composite, realistic romanticism was for Gates an altruistic romanticism because it rejected the selfishness of sentimental romance. Gates’s theory of a reinvigorated romanticism had a profound effect on Norris not only because it privileged romance over realism, even while advocating a fusion of both, but because of its moralistic bent.

As McElrath and Crisler observe, the danger of selfishness is a common theme in Norris’s works (*Frank* 160), from Trina McTeague’s miserliness to Laura Jadwin’s unrealistic (and nearly disastrous) romantic self-centeredness in *The Pit*. From Gates, Norris learned “the potential value of the ‘vulgar’ and ‘sordid’ in a work intended to be true to the ‘actual’” (McElrath and Crisler, *Frank* 167); detailing the struggles of the

----

\(^{13}\) Zola’s influence on Norris’s work has been well documented, and was certainly commented upon during Norris’s lifetime and after. See, for example, McElrath and Crisler, *Frank Norris: A Life*, Chapters 7–9, for more on Norris’s enthusiasm for and conscious adoption of Zola’s technique. Norris seemingly discovered Zola outside of his courses of study, but was clearly adopting Zola’s method and subject matter by the time of his enrollment in an English course at Harvard in 1895 (McElrath and Crisler, *Frank* 152). See also Richard Lehan, “American Literary Naturalism: The French Connection” (1984).
poor, sometimes exaggeratedly but always with an eye toward fidelity, could rehabilitate a self-centered middle-class readership; might, in fact, lead to greater class consciousness in the self-centered, class-blind middle class. Norris’s choice of lower-class subject matter and characters therefore reflects not only the influence of French naturalism, but also a morally inflected aesthetic choice. Like other naturalist authors like London and Crane, he believes in the power of literature to enact personal and social change by exposing social ills to an otherwise complacent middle-class.

Norris’s adoption of a Gatesian approach to romantic realism brings his complicated understanding of “Truth” into greater focus. In “A Plea for Romantic Fiction” (1901), Norris argues that romance has been unfairly conflated with sentimentalism. Echoing Gates in his belief that romance is superior to the “tinsel and claptraps” of sentiment, Norris writes: “Is it not something better than this? Can we not see in it an instrument, keen, finely tempered, flawless — an instrument with which we may go straight through clothes and tissues and wrappings of flesh down deep into the red living heart of things?” (1165). This “living heart of things” is a subject of great interest to Norris; in some places he aligns this idea with “Truth”; in others, with “Life.” Ultimately, the two may be inseparable within his aesthetic philosophy, which privileges romanticized realism as that mode best suited to express both “Truth” and “Life.” Better suited to express Truth, in fact, than strictly realistic representations of true events or real places.

In an early essay, “Fiction is Selection” (1897), Norris discusses the relationship of reality to fiction. Recalling the writer’s constant bombardment by those who tell him a
“true story” that he should fictionalize, he argues that most of the time, “in a written tale it would not seem real” because “[f]iction is what seems real, not what is real” (1115). Fiction, he suggests by extension, is always truthful, even if the events described in it did not actually occur in the way described. Norris makes the relationship between fiction and Truth even more explicit in a 1901 column for the Chicago American Literary Review, writing that, “Accuracy is realism and Truth romanticism” (1141). Norris argues that romanticism aims for Truth by voicing that which is impossible to express in reality, while realism seeks only accuracy. Realism, then, is not always truthful, nor is it a superior method of writing: “It is not difficult to be accurate, but it is monstrously difficult to be True” (1141). Thus Norris supports his own brand of romantic realism, while advocating that literature need not adhere to facts, since after all, “Is it too much to say that fiction can be truer than Life itself … for fiction must not be judged by standards of real life, but both life and fiction referred to a third standard. The expression ‘true to life’ is false, is inadequate, for life itself is not always true” (1141). In these two essays, Norris articulates an understanding of Truth that is distinct from reality; the writer’s task is to combine truths observed in reality in such a way as to make those truths clear to readers. Norris’s practice of authorial doubling in his fiction supports and reflects this assertion; in accordance with his aesthetic philosophy, vicarious slumming has as at least as much potential as physical slumming to express real social ills.

While the practice of authorial doubling is perhaps more prominent in his fiction, as I will discuss below, Norris’s non-fiction also contains doubles, through which he sometimes identifies himself as outside of and against the upper middle class into which
he was born. In a fantasy of successful passing, Norris imagines himself as one of what he calls the “Plain People,” the masses amongst whom he finds a sense of authenticity and life. In “An Opening for Novelists” (1897), for example, Norris argues that the “life” of a story is more important than its form. In language that clearly condemns middle-class literary taste, Norris protests:

Damn the ‘style’ of a story, so long as we get the swing and the rush and trample of the things that live … a man has time to be stabbed while you are composing a villanelle; the crisis of a life has come and gone while you have been niggling with your couplet. “Murder and sudden death,” say you? Yes, but it’s the life that lives; it’s reality, it’s the thing that counts…. We don’t want literature, we want life. (1114)

Norris aligns himself here against his implied reader, pitting a “we,” against the middle-class “you” that made up The Wave’s readership. More specifically, he pits himself against a middle-class taste that prefers art whose appreciation requires a high level of cultural competency over art that reflects real conditions. While McElrath and Crisler note that this particularly vitriolic essay appears at a time when Norris appeared to be suffering from overwork and disillusionment (Frank 230–31), I see in this essay only a slightly more vociferous articulation of Norris’s aesthetic theory that locates both Truth and life away from middle-class reading circles and stale university curricula, and instead in the “living men and women” of the slums and alleyways of San Francisco, with whom

14 In Distinction (1979), Pierre Bourdieu distinguishes between popular taste, which “reduces things of life to the things of life,” to intellectual taste, which values “representation.” In other words, low art is valued for its fidelity to reality, and high art for its reference to other art (5). The greater the cultural capital, the more likely an individual would value art in the second category. I discuss the relationship between cultural competency and the canonical fate of gothic realist fiction in Chapter Four.
he symbolically aligns himself. In this essay, as in others, he also suggests that the young author look for life in “strong, brutal men” and women with “unleashed passions” and “blood and bones and viscera in ‘em” (1113). His use of a clipped “them” to describe “these living men and women” is telling; Norris clearly sees life and Truth in the working and lower class, and not in the highly educated or their art.

Over the span of his vast non-fiction output, Norris’s aesthetic theory develops a certain continuity: literature should tell the Truth (even if some of the details of the work are inaccurate); it should take as its subject those in the greatest struggle for life, the lower class; it should value life (i.e. Truth) over form; and it should choose the appropriate settings to display these features: the slums, lower-middle-class neighborhoods of cities, or the unpredictable Western frontier. For Norris, the greatest literature is that which can delve below the surface, past the trappings of literariness, and

Norris critiques middle-class education and literary taste in several essays, including “The ‘English Course’ at University of California” (1896), in which he complains that students are instructed to “classify” (1109) rather than create. The word “classify” connotes class hierarchy and distinction; when students are taught to classify, they are also taught to value some works, and by extension modes and genres, as superior to others. They are also taught to separate and segregate modes and styles, thus denying the truth-telling powers of the romantic realism Norris embraced. Their “literary instincts” atrophy as a result (1111), and their understanding of literature is reduced to the middlebrow exercise of the literary circle (1110).

In “Novelists of the Future” (1901) he disparages any education that ends with a diploma, thereby expressing his dislike of the meritocracy of higher education. In “Salt and Sincerity,” he excoriates the cultural practice whereby writers become isolated from the People; and in an August 24th, 1901 editorial letter for the Chicago American Literary Review he describes the unenviable fate of the young writer who becomes enmeshed in the middlebrow literati set and who ultimately loses the authenticity that made his early work great. In his novels, Mrs. Cedarquist in The Octopus, who enjoys cultivating sham artists, and Laura Jadwin of The Pit, who allows her taste to be dictated by others, exemplify Norris’s dislike of middlebrow taste.
straight to the universal truth that lies below. Once an author has done that, he has written not just the Great American Novel, but the Great Novel.

In “The Great American Novelist” (1902), an essay dealing with just this subject, Norris claims that the great novelist “would at last strike the universal substratum and find the elemental thing that is common to the creole and the Puritan alike … once getting hold of that, he could produce the Great American Novel that should be a picture of the entire nation” (1181). If a novelist were able to do this, he continues, his novel ultimately would transcend American letters altogether and become “a heritage of the whole world” (1182). Thus the search for the Great American Novelist is not as important as the search for “the Great Novelist who shall also be an American” (1182). Echoing “The Frontier Gone at Last,” Norris here argues that a great novelist belongs not to a country but to the whole world. This essay suggests that when Norris slums in his fiction, or passes as a working-class hero in his non-fiction, he does so because he wants to be able to speak to and for everyone. He believed, after all, that the People were the final judges of great literature, and therefore that to be great, that literature must be accessible to those “Plain People.”

In both “The Responsibilities of the Novelist” and a similar essay, “Salt and Sincerity” (1902) Norris is explicit on this point. However, in the latter essay, Norris provocatively couches his argument in revolutionary terms:

---

16 For ease of citation, I refer to the pagination of the collection of essays entitled “Salt and Sincerity” as published in The Responsibilities of the Novelist (1903). Norris published seven essays in 1902 that ultimately were associated with that title. For more information on these essays, see McElrath, Frank Norris: A Descriptive Bibliography,
Time was when the author was an aristocrat, living in seclusion, unspotted from the world. But the Revolution of which there is question here [a “revolution in the history of literature”] has meted out to him the fate that Revolutions usually prepared for Aristocrats, and his successor is, must be, must be — if he is to voice the spirit of the times aright, if he is to interpret his fellows justly — the Man of the People, the Good Citizen. (“Salt” 279; emphasis in orig.)

Norris’s unmistakably leftist tone stages the uprising of a literary proletariat in need of a leader — the author — to voice their right to representation. The essay is also noteworthy in its explicit support of popular literature and disparagement of literary pretension. He rejects the notion that the “Great Man” of literature “belongs only to the cultured few” (280), arguing instead that “if the modern novelist doesn’t understand the Plain People, if he does not address himself directly to them intelligibly and simply, he will fail” (“Salt” 282). This can be done, Norris suggests, through the cultivation of a high quality popular literature, for “[a] literature that cannot be vulgarized is no literature at all and will perish just as surely as rivers run to the sea. The things that last are the understandable things — understandable to the common minds, the Plain People, understandable, one is almost tempted to say, to the very children” (“Salt” 281). Norris casts himself as this leader of the Plain People, thus fashioning a fictionalized, lower-class version of himself that will bring a vulgarized literature to the populace.

In his contemporary milieu of social agitation and labor organization, Norris views the leader of American letters as a labor leader or union organizer. In “The Need of a Literary Conscience” (1901), Norris describes his literary “Man of the People”: “The leader is no vast, stern being, profound, solemn, knowing all things, but, on the contrary, which identifies the original publication dates and venues for each essay ultimately collected under the title “Salt and Sincerity” (244–45).
is as humble as the lowliest who follow after him” (1160). Continuing with a militaristic conceit, Norris appeals to the aspiring writer to “look from your window. A whole Literature goes marching by, clamoring for a leader and a master hand to guide it. You have but to step from the doorway” (1159). Here, literature is personified as a “clamoring” mass in the streets; an image that at once evokes militarism and the potential violence of class antagonism. Speaking from the position of one who has already stepped from the doorway and into the masses, Norris again casts himself as a working-class hero. This essay also demonstrates Norris’s tendency to speak of aesthetic concerns as class concerns, a subject that will be described in greater detail in the final section this chapter.

To align himself with the Plain People, Norris also recasts his craft as working-class labor, thus disarticulating professional writing from connotations of leisure. In “Fiction Writing as a Business” (1902), Norris discusses the widely held misconception that novelists are always financially successful. He exposes the reality of what it takes to make a profit at writing, particularly given the unlikely success of any given novel, and the enormous amount of time required to write one. The essay recasts the writer as a worker, one who may make a decent living from his labor but who doesn’t make a “princely income” (1174). While the essay may be an expression of Norris’s frustration with his career, it may also be read as related to his aesthetic philosophy. Norris, always the advocate of Truth and life, associates these qualities with the working class, with the

---

17 His hypothetical writer must turn to book reviews and short stories to make a living (both of which Norris did, as well).
“street corners” and “the marketplace,” rather than with the university. By aligning
himself with the workers, he creates for himself a place as the “Great Man” of literature
he described in “The Need of a Literary Conscience.” He becomes the “leader and …
master hand to guide” American letters (1159).

Nevertheless, although he conceives of himself as a leader of the People, using his
writing to stage a literary revolution with himself as its de facto leader, Norris never fully
escapes from his upper-middle-class habitus. His vast cultural capital is always on
display, even when he uses it critiques middle-class literary taste. While Norris seems to
agree with and prefigure Emma Goldman’s claim in “Intellectual Proletarians” (1914)
that “though the intellectuals are really proletarians, they are so steeped in middle-class
traditions and conventions, so tied and gagged by them, that they dare not move a step”
(Goldman 229), he is also a good example of the Intellectual Proletarian, because despite
his attempts at working-class identification, he is always more comfortable as the middle-
class flâneur than the working-class hero. He exemplifies Goldman’s observation that
“[e]ven in their sympathies for labor — and some of them have genuine sympathies —
the intellectual proletarians do not cease to be middle-class, respectable and aloof” (227).

Despite the claims in his essays that the writer for the People must join the People, Norris
nearly always stations himself or one of his literary doubles at a social distance from his
working-class subjects. Ultimately, his sympathy for the poor may be described more
accurately as a valorization of authenticity, which he problematically associates with
poverty and suffering. In Norris’s thinking, the writer-leader of the Plain People must be
part of the People, while remaining somehow apart from them. This tension runs
throughout his fiction and non-fiction, manifesting in the efforts of his literary doubles to observe suffering while trying to avoid suffering themselves.

In “The Novel With a ‘Purpose’,” Norris suggests that a novelist must achieve his purpose of bringing “tragedies and griefs” to light while maintaining objectivity: “The moment … that the writer becomes really and vitally interested in his purpose his novel fails” (1198). In response to hypothetical questions of authorial sympathy, Norris argues that the artist may be brought to tears by the characters and situations he has created, even if he remains unmoved by similar events in reality:

As an artist his sensitiveness is quickened because they are characters in his novel. It does not at all follow that the same artist would be moved to tears over the report of parallel catastrophes in real life. As an artist, there is every reason to suppose he would welcome the news with downright pleasure…. He would see a story in it, a good scene, a great character. (1199)

Given remarks such as this, it should come as no surprise that some critics sometimes consider Norris aloof or even callous. A middle-class author taking pleasure in the suffering of others is a distasteful admission, particularly for an author who styled himself a voice of the Plain People and advocated a vulgarized literature. At moments like this in his writing, Norris sounds every bit the distanced intellectual proletarian; one who recognizes the need for equal rights and styles himself an activist, but who has mistaken “theoretic sympathy” (Goldman 230) for the griefs and suffering of others for the real thing. At times, Norris appears to see the suffering poor more as muse than reality, more as an interesting subject than a social problem.

Norris also occasionally criticizes lower-class taste, a troubling stance for a writer who believes the poor to be necessary subjects for and superior judges of fiction. In “The
True Reward of the Novelist” (1901), Norris assigns “low-class” taste to the middle class. In a jeremiad against the shallowness of historical romances, Norris compares those who like such novels to those who are fooled by appearances in life: “the people who applaud them — are they not the same who would hold persons in respect because of the finery of their bodies? A poor taste, a cheap one; the taste of serving-men, the literature of chambermaids” (1148). He insults middle-class readers by telling them their taste is low class, thereby displaying an ambivalence toward the lower class; they are seemingly appropriate as subjects of study, even muses for literary production that explores Truth and life, but he is inconsistent in his identification with them as real people, and displays a hierarchical attitude toward their taste in keeping with his middle-class status. His sympathy, it would seem, is indeed theoretic, and he must go to great lengths to distance himself, the slummer, from becoming a part of the slums. Norris’s derision of middle-class taste suggests that he believes his own taste to be superior to both that of the poor about whom he writes, and the bourgeois to whom he writes. This contradictory stance, of an author who identifies with yet despises the poor, and who critiques the taste of middle class and lower class alike, crystallizes in the figure of Presley, the writer cum labor sympathizer double of Norris in The Octopus, as well as in several other Norrisean doubles. In his fiction, Norris’s doubles experience a nightmare of destabilized identity engendered by their close interactions with the poor and working class; his vicarious slumming, enacted through a series of author-characters, exposes the central gothic anxiety of Norris’s oeuvre, where fictional Norrisean doubles are unable to maintain the necessary boundaries between author and lower-class subject.
Little Gothic Dramas: Norrisean Doubles in the Slums

Norris, who in “The Novel with a ‘Purpose’” declares that, “It must be remembered that the artist has a double personality, himself as a man, and himself as an artist” (1198–99) seems to invite speculation on the links between the two by frequently inserting himself into his fiction. As Dixon, Overbeck, Presley, Vandover, and Karslake demonstrate, sometimes the man and the artist collide in the fictional character, particularly when that character is an artist who resembles the man. These doubles illustrate how delicate the boundary between self and other, and by extension between artificial constructions of class and modal hierarchies, can be. As doubles of Norris, they also allow him vicariously to explore lower-class space and confront the terrors of class boundary slippage. Unlike his non-fiction, in which Norris frequently passes as and identifies with the working class (even if that identification is theoretic and symbolic), in Norris’s fiction author-characters frequently reject the possibility of identification with the lower classes.

What Norris argues for in “The Novel with a ‘Purpose’” — a necessary aesthetic distance between author and subject — translates, in several of his short stories, into a carefully maintained social distance between his narrator-doubles, who are almost always middle-class, well-educated aspiring writers, and his subjects — seamen, immigrants, criminals, the underclass, manual laborers, and other representatives of the lower class. Besides Presley, whose trouble maintaining this distance will be discussed in greater
detail below, the most obvious example of this is the recurring character Dixon, a young writer who travels around the West, collecting and preserving the tales of the Western types he meets. Dixon befriends the old Forty-niner turned miner Bunt McBride, collecting from him a variety of folkloric and comedic tales, including “The Passing of Cock-Eye Blacklock” (1902), “A Bargain with Peg-Leg” (1902), and “Two

---

18 Dixon is not given a name in all of the tales under discussion. However, the “I” of the tale is identified as Dixon in “Two Hearts That Beat as One” (1903), a tale in which Bunt McBride, who appears in other Dixon stories, relays to him a tale about The Three Crows wreckers, with whom both he and the speaker are familiar. In other stories, Dixon is identified clearly as either part of the action or as an observer of some of The Three Crows’s exploits. Dixon is therefore presumed to be the narrator in both the Bunt and Three Crows tales.

In the short story “Dying Fires” (1902, published in *The Third Circle*), another Norrisean double, Overbeck, makes a minor sensation with his first manuscript, titled “The Vision of Bunt McBride,” which complicates my assumption that Dixon is the narrator of the Bunt and Three crows tales. Since Overbeck appears in only this story, however, I refer to the narrator of the Three Crow’s stories as Dixon. In any event, both characters are doubles of the author.

19 Bunt is the embodiment of the Western type Norris describes in “The Literature of the West” (1902). In that essay, Norris argues that the West has produced a specific type of literary subject, but that heretofore literature has reduced that subject to a stereotype of the Old West. Norris argues that neither the urban man nor the stock Wild West characters that populate western fiction are “characteristic” of the region. However, falling back upon his theory that literature should treat the unusual and exceptional, he argues that the true product of the West is “the adventurer”—this is the man you will find if you “[b]ut scratch the surface” of the old, tamed Forty-niner, the true product of the West (1177). Bunt is described in “The Passing of Cock-Eye Blacklock” as “one of a fast-disappearing type,” who had “seen the end of the gold and the end of the buffalo, the beginning of cattle, the beginning of wheat, and the spreading of the barbed-wire fence, that, in the end, will take from him his … reason for being” (34).

A character named Bunt also appears in “A Memorandum of Sudden Death.” The complicated narrative structure of the tale, which does not include Dixon as narrator, will be discussed in greater detail below. The two Bunts may not be intended to be the same character, although some clues in “Memorandum” suggest they are. If so, Bunt’s death at the hands of renegade Indians in the tale provides an appropriate end for Norris’s true figure of the West.
Hearts That Beat as One” (1903), collected in *A Deal in Wheat and Other Stories of the New and Old West* (1903).

Although Dixon claims in “A Bargain with Peg-Leg” that “Bunt and I were ancient friends” (26), there is a clear social distance between them. Bunt, for example, recognizes Dixon as his mouthpiece; in “The Passing of Cock-Eye Blacklock” he tells the young observer stories that “a man with a’ imaginary mind like yourself ought to make into one of your friction tales” (37). Dixon’s deliberate preservation of Bunt’s dialect and malapropism (“friction” where he means “fiction”) in “Passing” maintains a distinct class boundary between the writer and his subject. Dixon is entertained by Bunt, but nevertheless holds himself apart from the old miner and herder, as when he continues by observing that, “ever since I once made a tale (of friction) out of one of Bunt’s stories of real life, he has been ambitious for me to write another…. With him, fictitious literature must always turn upon the discovery of hidden wealth” (37).

In the Bunt tales, Dixon appears to be researching and collecting technical data for his fiction writing. He is a thinly veiled stand-in for the author, who, as McElrath and Crisler note, spent a good deal of time at the Big Dipper mine, a California gold mine operated by one of his fraternity brothers, while researching portions of *McTeague* (*Frank* 199). Dixon appreciates the authenticity of Bunt’s tales; he collects them rather selfishly for his own material benefit (in the form of publishing), and not for Bunt’s

---

20 The “Big Dipper” mine that appears in the final section of *McTeague* becomes, in “A Bargain With Peg-Leg,” the “Big Dipple” mine. The Big Dipper mine also appears in the stories “Dying Fires” (featuring the Norris double Overbeck), and “Shorty Stack, Pugilist,” both of which were published in *The Third Circle* (1902).
benefit. While Dixon is willing to slum into the mines with Bunt, he is quick to point out that he is not himself a miner, but a middle-class observer, identifying himself in “A Bargain With Peg-Leg” as “the one loafer of all that little world of workers” (25–26). Rather than a laborer, this narrator is clearly a writer, a middle-class college man embarking upon a leisured career in letters.

Dixon also appears in tales of “The Three Crows,” a seedy salvage group operating out of San Francisco. Dixon is a part of, yet apart from the group; he joins them, as he puts it in “The Ship That Saw a Ghost” (1902), “only by tolerance” (Deal 88), and on several occasions displays his superiority to the rough-and-tumble crew. For example, in “The Ghost in the Crosstrees” (1903), Dixon witnesses what The Three Crows believe is a ghost that haunts the ship they are preparing for a salvaging journey. The three men are overcome by superstition and abandon their voyage. Dixon, however, later discerns that the “ghost” is really one of the crew, who has a habit of sleepwalking while wrapped in a sheet. The middle-class observer not only proves his intellect superior to that of The Three Crows, but he maintains the social gap between them by electing not to divulge what he has learned, preferring instead the greater amusement of their continued ignorance. The ignorance of the group is put on display again in “Two Hearts that Beat as One,” in which the men fight for the hand of a mysterious and beautiful woman who turns out to be a man in disguise; thus both their intellect and their masculinity are insulted. Indeed, the comedic impact of these tales comes precisely from

---

21 Short stories involving the salvage group include “The Ship That Saw a Ghost” (1902), “Two Hearts that Beat as One” (1903) “The Dual Personality of Slick Dick Nickerson” (1902), and “The Ghost in the Crosstrees” (1903). Dixon appears in all but “Dual Personality.” All are collected in A Deal in Wheat.
the superiority of the narrator to The Three Crows; only Dixon has the education and
social distance to exploit their buffoonery for an approving middle-class readership.

McElrath and Crisler suggest that these later tales are evidence of a writer who
had finally “arrived” and therefore had the luxury to write, as Norris’s widow Jeanette
later called them, “potboilers dashed off for supplemental income” (Frank 406).
Nevertheless, these stories undoubtedly attest to a desire to stabilize and maintain class
boundaries in Norris’s fiction; that they are potboilers does not make them irrelevant to
Norris’s oeuvre. The trend in these later stories is toward issuing the gothic or
sensational as a means of stabilizing class boundaries; the gender bending in “Two
Hearts” and the “ghost” in “Crosstrees” serve as mechanisms for proving the superior
intellect of Dixon over The Three Crows, thus maintaining the social boundaries between
observer and subject. While these stories may be evidence that magazines were willing to
publish anything by Norris by 1902 (following the commercial and critical success of The
Octopus), I also suggest that they appealed to a middle-class audience who wanted to
keep a safe distance from the lower class, fictional or otherwise.

In these Deal in Wheat tales Norris’s double, Dixon, is able to slum successfully,
maintaining (and even reinforcing) the social distance between himself and his subjects.
In other works, however, Norrisean doubles are less successful at maintaining a secure

Contradicting these claims of frivolity is the fact that at least one of the Three Crows
tales, “Two Hearts that Beat as One” was significant enough to Norris to warrant a public
reading at his alma mater. After his death, Norris’s brother Charles donated the
manuscript of this story to the library at UC Berkeley, which included a letter that read in
part, “It is a pleasure to think of this story that he read to the University, being preserved
in the library, where during his university days he spent so much of his time” (Norris,
“Manuscript”).
distance from their lower-class subjects. In “Little Dramas of the Curbstone” (1897), published in *The Third Circle*, an unnamed middle-class narrator observes three unsettling urban scenes: an impoverished, blind “idiot” boy and his mother, a disabled girl and her mother, and finally, the arrest of a young middle-class man much like himself. During the first encounter, the narrator vacillates between misery and disgust. Through his conversation with the mother of the blind boy, it becomes clear that the narrator would like the reader to feel sympathy: “Born blind and idiotic! Can you fancy the horror of that thing? Perhaps you cannot, nor perhaps could I myself have conceived of what it meant … had I not seen that woman’s son …” (48). Almost immediately, however, the narrator betrays a violent hatred of the boy:

> When I looked at that face of him I knew not what insane desire, born of an unconquerable disgust, came up in me to rush upon him and club him down to the pavement with my stick and batter in that face — that face of a blind idiot — and blot it out from the sign and the sun for good and all. It was impossible to feel pity for the wretch. (48)

Rather than offering an explanation for his shocking outrage, the narrator recoils in horror from the poor woman and her disabled son: “I could bear with it no longer, and went away” (49). Frightened of his own ambivalent reactions to poverty, and unnerved by the

---

23 To date, little critical attention has been paid to this short story. Pizer argues that these vignettes reflect contemporary discourse on “degeneracy and inherited criminality” (59) that are common themes in Norris’s fiction. McElrath and Crisler outline a brief autobiographical reading of the story (*Frank* 232–35), arguing that this tale comes at a particularly troubled psychological period in Norris life and career. They consider the story “autobiographical art” (234).

24 In all three tales, father figures are conspicuously absent. McElrath and Crisler note that the tale can be perceived as Norris’s commentary on his own absent father, who by 1897 had long been absent from his son’s life (*Frank* 234). While the tale clearly is concerned with the deleterious effect of broken families, it also exemplifies Norris’s narrative social distancing.
conflicting emotions aroused by his slumming, the narrator retreats to the safety of his club, from which vantage point he observes a second “Little Drama.”

In the second episode, the narrator observes a poor old mother and her “paralytic” daughter through the “bay window of the club” (50). The safety of social distance, signified by the window through which he views the “little drama” of poverty and helplessness, also protects the narrator from irrational emotional outbursts. By retreating to his club, the narrator-writer adheres to Norris’s own rule, articulated in “The Novel with a ‘Purpose’,” that a writer must maintain an emotional distance from his subject. For Norris, the artist must detach himself from real suffering if he is adequately to depict the Truth of suffering in his work. His sympathy for the suffering must, however, remain theoretic. The artist must enact a window-like barrier between himself and the suffering poor he depicts, a place from which to view misery without becoming emotionally involved. In other words, the successful purveyor of Truth must maintain the safe distance of slumming, which allows observers to enter lower-class space without becoming mired in it. The detached reality of the second vignette, although in keeping with Norris’s criteria in “The Novel with a ‘Purpose’,” rings inauthentic, though, a strangely tepid interlude between two much more visceral episodes. The second vignette presents a narrator who may have gained artistic perspective through his conscious social (and physical) distancing, but who has done so by denying the inherent (and ultimately more realistic) ambiguity aroused by cross-class interaction. Despite Norris’s injunction against the writer becoming too involved with his lower-class subject, the writer-narrator of “Little Dramas,” at least, seems drawn back to the street.
On the streets once more, the narrator observes the drama of a public arrest. This time, however, the subject is a “well dressed” and “fine-looking” young man (52), who has inexplicably chosen incarceration over the option of returning home to his suffering mother. The apparent social status of the young man (who to the narrator “did not seem capable of any great meanness” [52]) and his mother fails to protect them from the type of suffering on display in the first two vignettes. The narrator is presented with “a curious, baffling mystery” (51): the subject of this public spectacle is not so different from himself. He stands arrested by the reality of middle-class suffering and middle-class crime, by the exposure of “those things that are not meant to be seen” (54).

The central vignette acts as an attempt to control the frightening ambivalence experienced by the narrator in the first, while in the final act the narrator’s descent back into the streets from the club signals a return to ambivalence and ambiguity. In the final vignette, ambivalence cannot be resolved or avoided by a retreat to middle-class space, for the subject of the vignette is the class double of the narrator; they share the same social space. Here, the middle-class subject becomes the object of scrutiny and derision, thereby upending a safe and direct correlation between poverty and suffering established in the first two episodes, and suggesting that the middle class is not immune to the social forces so visible amongst the poor.

By dismantling perceived connections between class status and security, “Little Dramas” also exposes the risk to classed identity posed by slumming. The narrator’s experience of uncanniness at the sight of the middle-class criminal signals a slippage from slumming to passing, a slippage from a safe observation of suffering to a terrifying
and disorienting experience of it, signified by the doubling of the narrator and the middle-class criminal. In short, the narrator experiences a moment of class consciousness, a fleeting experience of middle-class visibility. At the end of “Little Dramas,” we leave the narrator in a state of confusion, not unlike the troubled helplessness he experienced in the first vignette, but in this case forcing him to reconsider his own classed sense of self. There is no retreating from the mystery and anxiety surrounding the middle-class criminal. The narrator has encountered something that he cannot process, something unspeakable, a tension that cannot be resolved by reinforced or increased social distance and that unmoors the narrator’s preconceived association of misery with poverty and with it his sense of stable class boundaries.

Norris’s aesthetic philosophy does leave space for the uncanny ambivalence experienced by the narrator of “Little Dramas.” Ambivalence is not necessarily to be avoided, but offers the opportunity to experience truth, or more specifically, Truth as Norris conceives of it in nonfiction essays like “An Opening for Novelists,” published during the same tumultuous period in 1897 as “Little Dramas.”25 We can see “reaching down to the very depths of those things that are not meant to be seen” in “Little Dramas”

25 In her introduction to Life as We Have Known It (1931), a collection of sketches penned by working-class women, Virginia Woolf expresses an ambivalence similar to Norris’s. She notes that the sympathy she feels toward these women “was aesthetic sympathy, the sympathy of the eye and of the imagination, not of the heart and the nerves; and such sympathy is always physically uncomfortable” (xxvi). Both Norris and Woolf turn to the literary to make the suffering of the poor real to them. Norris, who believed that fiction need not be factual to be True, prefigures Woolf, who finds that reading the stories written by working women makes them more real to her, makes them “individuals” rather than “symbols” (xxix), even while she believes that the “barrier” between classes is “impassable” (xxviii).
Norris’s call for writers to get straight to the “red living heart of things” (1165) to move past literature and straight to Truth. For Norris, who sought Truth and life through fiction, there is perhaps no greater truth than the ambivalent reaction of the middle-class writer/observer to the lower-class suffering he observes.

One of the most powerful aspects of “Little Dramas” is its lack of resolution, its refusal to allow the narrator’s terror at the incomprehensible to resolve into a more manageable experience of horror.\(^{26}\) Indeed, it is just this ambiguity — this sustained tension — that marks the story as gothic realist, even though its content is not conventionally gothic.\(^{27}\) The story leaves the narrator experiencing uncanniness as he attempts, and fails, to connect the suffering of the poor with the existence of the middle-class criminal. The narrator is therefore subject to the same contradictory social realizations that mark Norris’s fiction as a whole: recognition of the seemingly

\(^{26}\) In *Gothic*, Botting distinguishes between the terms *terror* and *horror*:

While terror and horror are often used synonymously, distinctions can be made between them as countervailing aspects of Gothic’s emotional ambivalence. If terror leads to an imaginative expansion of one’s sense of self, a sensation of shock or awe, horror describes the moment of contraction and recoil. Like the dilation of the pupil in moments of excitement and fear, terror marks the uplifting thrill where horror distinguishes a contraction at the imminence and unavoidability of the threat. (10)

Terror, therefore, is the fear that attends knowledge of the self’s expansion or revelations of unutterable or incomprehensible truths; horror, on the other hand, attends the revulsion felt by the individual who turns away from those truths, a fear disassociated from awe and associated with retraction from its object. In terror, then, we find sublime knowledge, while in horror that knowledge is disallowed.

\(^{27}\) As I noted in Chapter One, the gothic is formally marked by ambivalence and sustained indecision, features that in gothic realist fiction express the contradictions of class in America.
impassable and uncloseable gap between social classes, the inevitability of class disparity, and the more terrifying Truth of man’s fragility within this class system. Social classes may be inevitable, but man’s place in that social hierarchy is tenuous, at best.

While “Little Dramas” masterfully ends without resolving the sustained tension of the narrator’s ambivalence, in *The Octopus* (1901) Norris uses one of his most personal characters, the poet Presley, to clarify and resolve the threat to the slumming artist. With Presley, Norris shies away from the sustained sense of uncanniness with which he closes “Little Dramas,” depicting instead the mental vacillations of a middle-class writer who strays perhaps too close to those he depicts and who withdraws in horror when his sense of classed self becomes threatened.

Presley has long been recognized as a Norris double; like the author, he was educated at “an Eastern college” (although Presley, unlike Norris, has graduated) *Octopus* (584), and he strives toward literary success, in this case through poetry. Most tellingly, Norris uses Presley to voice his opinion that the West is fruitful ground for creating a great American literature.28 As Jack London recognized in his review of the novel:

---

28 In a 1901 review of the novel, for example, Frederic Taber Cooper writes that Presley’s experience is obviously another way of stating Mr. Norris’s favorite creed: that realism and romanticism are, after all, convertible terms; that the epic theme for which Presley was vainly groping lay all the time close at hand if he could but have seen it, not merely in the primeval life of mountain and desert, and the shimmering purple of a sunset, but in the limitless stretch of steel rails, in the thunder of passing trains, in the whole vast, intricate mechanism of an organised monopoly. (McElrath and Knight 137)
Presley, with his great Song of the West forever leaping up in his imagination and forever eluding him; Presley, wrestling passionately for the swing of his ‘thundering progression of hexameters’ — who is this Presley but Norris grappling in keen travail with his problem of *The Octopus*, and doubting often, as we of the West have doubted [i.e. that the West could be captured in print]? (McElrath and Knight 152)

As London recognizes, both character and author share the same literary goal. As in the essay “A Neglected Epic” (1902), in which Norris suggests that the history of Western expansion is “our epic” (1204), badly in need of romanticized literary treatment, in *The Octopus*, Presley:

was determined that his poem should be of the West, that world’s frontier of Romance, where a new race, a new people — hardy, brave and passionate — were building an empire; where the tumultuous life ran like fire from dawn to dark, and from dark to dawn again, primitive, brutal, honest, and without fear. Something (to his idea not much) had been done to catch at that life in passing, but its poet had not yet arisen. (584)

Presley has come to Magnus Derrick’s ranch presumably to do justice to those Western types, the types Norris reproduced in part with his creation of Bunt. However, Presley suffers from an extreme aversion to those very people he hopes to romanticize. Although he wants to write an epic “Song of the West,” that “should embrace in itself a whole epoch, a complete era, the voice of an entire people, wherein all people should be included” (584), the young poet is disgusted by the poor farmers that work the California land: “These uncouth brutes of farm-hands and petty ranchers, grimed with the soil they worked upon, were odious to him beyond words. Never could he feel in sympathy with them, nor with their lives, their ways, their marriages, deaths, bickerings, and all the monotonous round of their sordid existence” (581). Presley looks for a West that exists

Cooper prefers Norris’s realism to his romance, which he believes turns the plot of the novel into allegory.
only in his imagination — a romanticized West free of poverty, begrimed immigrant farmhands, and the reality of grain tariffs and railroad monopolies. In error, he believes that he can distance himself from these people and still write about them as one with himself, as part of his all-encompassing epic of Western life. Indeed, like the author, Presley is simultaneously inspired and repelled by the poor: just as Norris problematically found the theoretical poor an inspiration for his writing, their suffering a means of bringing romance back to the forefront of literary respectability, Presley eventually uses the suffering of the workers as fodder for his one poetic success, the poem “The Toilers.”29 Echoing Norris’s arguments in “Salt and Sincerity” and “The Responsibilities of the Novelist,” Presley learns that in order to have the greatest power, his work must be

29 Jack London, in his review of the novel for Impressions Quarterly (1901), writes that Presley also resembles the poet Edwin Markham: “as mere surface incident goes, he is undoubtedly Edwin Markham but down in the heart of him he is Frank Norris” (McElrath and Knight 152). Markham’s poem “The Man with the Hoe,” inspired by the 1863 Jean-Francois Millet painting of the same name, appeared in 1898 and was adopted by the progressive labor reform movement. Presley, too, is inspired to write by an unnamed painting he sees in Captain Cedarquist’s private collection. The irony of this is obvious: that a middle-class writer initially is inspired to write of laborers not from first-hand experience (since in practice Presley despises the poor), but from a painting viewed in a wealthy shipbuilder’s home, safely removed from any true-life referent to actual misery. McElrath and Crisler complicate the common critical assumption that Norris identified with his character, arguing that although Presley does resemble Norris in the earlier sections of the novel, that resemblance is weakened by the poet’s ultimate failure to produce anything that is not a reproduction of a reigning public sentiment; in other words, they contend, Presley is not Norris because Norris wrote “from real life” while Presley wrote “secondhand” (Frank 400). Whether or not Norris intended his character to resemble himself, Presley’s failure as a writer (and as a disaffected observer of suffering) illustrates Norris’s dictum of aesthetic distance. When Presley eventually does come too close to the masses, he nearly loses his identity (and his sanity), thus illustrating Norris’s opinion that the writer who comes too close to his subject is doomed to failure. Presley becomes a literary double through whom Norris can experiment with a hypothetical scenario in which a middle-class writer loses himself to his lower-class subject.
accessible. As Vanamee, the troubled shepherd who ultimately acts as the poet’s spiritual and moral counselor tells him of the poem:

Your inspiration has come from the People. Then let it go straight to the People — not the literary readers of the monthly periodicals, the rich, who would only be indirectly interested. If you must publish it, let it be in the daily press … such a poem as this of yours, called as it is, ‘The Toilers,’ must be read by the Toilers. It must be common; it must be vulgarized. You must not stand upon your dignity with the People, if you are to reach them. (876; emphasis in orig.)

Sounding in this case like Norris himself, proselytizing to his middle-class readers and to young writers, Vanamee instructs Presley to allow his poem to be imperfect, unpolished, and therefore alive. Here then, Norris stages Presley as a potential convert to his own call for a vulgarized, popular literature. The struggle that awaits Presley is whether or not he can write about the toilers while maintaining objective aesthetic distance from them.

In part, the inspiration for Presley’s composition of “The Toilers” is his indoctrination into the working class via his friend Dyke. Presley writes the poem in a belief that having observed the effects of the railroad monopoly on the idyllic life of California wheat ranchers, including Dyke’s financial ruin under an artificially high tariff on hops, that he has somehow morphed into one of the People, even though his own livelihood as a writer has not been threatened. Having listened to an anarchist saloon-owner convert Dyke to lawless action, Presley returns to the Los Muertos ranch “seeing red” (872): “Now he was one on the People; he had been stirred to his lowest depths” (873). That he is called to action by these emotions while still considering them low, even base (thus the low “depths” to which he feels talk of anarchy has brought him), is telling,
for it suggests that he is not yet truly comfortable among the workers, even as he identifies as one of their number and voices their grievances through his poem.

Presley consistently struggles to balance his own middle-class sense of self, which leads him to look down upon farm workers with scorn and disgust, with an encroaching identification with the workers in their struggle against the railroad. Presley, however, is not inclined towards liminality; he is a man who, because of his highly sensitive and impressionable disposition, needs balance and stability, needs transparency and clarity of both class and modal boundaries. In his character sketch of Presley, Norris describes the poet as having a “melancholic disposition, capable of extremes of exaltation … an unbalanced mind”; a man who “could easily go insane” (“Presley”). Presley’s sanity seems dependent on his maintenance of boundaries even when they become increasingly murky and tenuous. While Presley searches for a mythical sense of romance in the West upon which to base his epic poem, for example, a realist romance is played out before him in the battle between the ranchers and the railroad. Presley never recognizes this opportunity to voice the sort of romantic realism that Norris advocated. He is so intent on mapping his own pre-conceived notion of a pure, romanticized West onto his surroundings that he fails to recognize the “True” romance unfolding before him.

Throughout the novel, Presley’s dependence on social and modal stability is repeatedly challenged and exposed, subjecting the sensitive poet to paroxysms of terror, self-hatred, and, finally, madness. Near the beginning of *The Octopus*, just as he believes he is capturing the romantic essence of the West he sought, Presley witnesses the slaughter of a flock of sheep that had wandered into the path of a speeding train. The
sheep, representations of Presley’s imagined, romanticized West, had “found a breach” in the fence separating them from the track, and the result is an unspeakable horror:

It was a slaughter, a massacre of innocents. The iron monster had charged full into the midst, merciless, inexorable. To the right and left, all the width of the right of way, the little bodies had been flung; backs were snapped against the fence posts; brains knocked out. Caught in the barbs of the wire, wedged in, the bodies hung suspended. Under foot it was terrible. The black blood, winking in the starlight, seeped down into the clinkers between the ties with a prolonged sucking murmur. Presley turned away, horror–struck…. (616)

This graphic slaughter occurs not only to illustrate reality’s intrusion upon Presley’s romantic vision of the West, but also to suggest via Presley’s horrified reaction to compromised boundaries. As the novel progresses, it becomes clear that the poet has also breached a boundary between himself and the farm workers. When he breaches class boundaries by identifying as a worker, Presley slips from slumming, which allowed him to observe yet remain distinct from the suffering of the toilers, to the much more threatening territory of passing.

Beginning with the slaughtering of the romanticized sheep under the wheels of a speeding locomotive, *The Octopus* repeatedly stages a pattern whereby the romantic is violently destroyed by reality. The shepherd Vanamee’s idyllic love with the seed rancher’s daughter Angelé ends in her death after a brutal and unsolved rape. Annixter’s barn dance, one of the few moments of levity in an otherwise ponderous plot, is cut short by the iron grip of the railroad as it announces its plans to take back the farmers’ land; the sentimental love plot that brings the rancher Annixter and the milkmaid Hilma Tree together ends in his murder and her loss of their unborn child in the shock that follows his
death. Norris disallows any traditional sense of a romantic or sentimental plot, perhaps suggesting that any stereotyped sense of romance will be destroyed under the harsh economic truths facing the farmers of Southern California. *The Octopus* is a different kind of romance, the kind mixed with realism that Norris evokes in his nonfiction, as when, in “True Reward of the Novelist,” he suggests that “Romance and Realism are constant qualities of every age, day and hour. They are here today…. The difficulty then is to get at the immediate life, immensely difficult, for you are not only close to the canvas, but are yourself part of the picture” (1150).

For Norris, the writer must be willing to become “part of the picture,” yet still disinterested enough to avoid sentiment or distortion, if he is to write this type of fiction. Presley, then, represents how not to write, for he is unable to prevent himself from coming too close to his subjects. After witnessing the slaughtering of the sheep, Presley turns away in horror, thus foreclosing the terrifying Truth — that his idyllic vision of a Romantic West is falsehood; that modal boundaries, like spatial boundaries, cannot be forever maintained — that confronts him. Rather than allowing the terror suggested by a breached boundary between realism and romance to inform his writing, Presley consistently rejects this Truth. Mentally broken by the seemingly insurmountable grip the railroad has over individual lives, the loss of several of his good friends at the climatic shootout, and the railroad president’s troubling justification of its actions (Shelgrim tells Presley that “[r]ailroads build themselves” and to “blame conditions, not men” for the massacre [1036–37]), Presley helplessly turns away, booking himself on a ship to India. Although the narrative suggests that the power of the railroad is “terrifying” (a word used
several times to describe its monstrous power), Presley’s reactions are generally those of horror, rejection, and flight.

In *The Octopus*, horror and self-loathing are Presley’s consistent responses to destabilized boundaries. Presley’s flight to India is his last-ditch effort to recover his sanity after the massacre at the irrigation ditch at the novel’s climax. During that moment of crisis Presley’s gradual identification with the laborers escalates into a full-blown identity crisis in which he nearly loses himself to anarchy. Following the clash of the ranchers and the railroad, and the inevitable destruction of the resistance by the railroad’s superior strength, Presley is “sick with horror, trembling from head to foot” (998). Recoiling from the horror of the massacre, Presley flees to the anarchist Caraher, declaiming: “I’m with you from now on. *By God, I too, I’m a Red!*” (1004; emphasis in orig). His transition from middle-class observer to labor activist is incomplete, though. After giving an impassioned speech to a group of protesters, Presley realizes his words have fallen flat, that “for all his love of the people, [Presley] saw clearly for one moment that he was an outsider to their minds. He had not helped their cause in the least; he never would” (1018). This realization unmoors him; after the horrors he has witnessed, he cannot go back to his calm and privileged existence, yet he will never be accepted as an equal by the laborers. He can no longer slum amongst the workers, but has been denied the acceptance necessary to successfully pass.

After an unsuccessful attempt to murder the railroad’s local representative, Presley plummets into a full-blown identity crisis, and nearly into a mental breakdown brought about by his inability to reestablish a stable sense of middle-class self. He
vacillates between anarchic rage and apathetic self-loathing (1028): “There had come
to Presley a deep rooted suspicion that he was — of all human beings — a failure.
Everything to which he had set his mind failed — his great epic, his efforts to help the
people who surrounded him, even his attempted destruction of the enemy, all these had
come to nothing” (1029). However, Presley’s sense of failure does not stem, as he
believes, from his failures as middle-class writer or lower-class activist, but because he
has failed to prevent his slumming from becoming passing. Because he is never able to
overcome his inherent dislike of the masses, he can do nothing but hate the part of
himself that identifies with them, that was “flung off the spinning circumference of things
out into a place of terror and vacancy and darkness” (1029). When he thinks back to his
unsuccesful attempt on Behrman’s life, Presley imagines the scene in the third person,
watching himself as if from a distance as he attempts to distinguish Presley the writer
from Presley the anarchist (1028–29). Presley has become unhinged from a sense of
social place; because he can identify with the laborers, he can no longer rejoin the
oblivious ranks of the middle class. The seemingly safe dynamic of slumming has been
overtaken by the threat to identity posed by passing, resulting in Presley’s class identity
crisis, a crisis he resolves only by fleeing the site of social and modal liminality and
thereby retreating from nascent class consciousness.

The threat to the slumming author’s classed identity posed in The Octopus is
pushed to its most terrifying conclusion in the short story “A Memorandum of Sudden
Death” (1902), a tale that dramatizes the worst-case scenario for the author who loses
himself in his subject. Posthumously published in A Deal in Wheat, “Memorandum” is
unique among this latter collection of mostly Western character sketches and darkly humorous tales in part because of it its complicated frame structure. Criticism on this story is virtually non-existent, although reviewers of *A Deal in Wheat* singled out this story as particularly strong. A close reading of the story reveals that the fictional writer at its center, Karslake, is a Norrisean double, and the tale therefore offers yet another performance of authorial slumming. Karslake is a young writer who enjoys moderate success (under a pseudonym) before enlisting in the U.S. Calvary “to get in closer touch with the *milieu*” of a planned “novel of military life in the Southwest” (46; emphasis in orig.).

His manuscript, detailing the deaths of his comrades and his thoughts as he faces his own death at the hands of a band of Indians, is reproduced faithfully by the narrator, who obtained the pages third-hand from a harness-maker who obtained them from a bone-collector who found the pages in the desert. The complicated narrative framing adds to the unnerving nature of the story, which is marked by Karslake’s escalating terror and frustrating narrative gaps. Pages are missing from the manuscript, and Karslake’s

---

30 Aside from their occupations, there are a number of similarities between Norris and the fictional Karslake. The narrator knows Karslake by his pseudonyms “Anson Qualtraugh” and “Justin Blisset” (43–44), the later of which is similar to one of Norris’s pseudonyms while working at *The Wave*, “Justin Sturgis.” Furthermore, Norris, too, enlisted in the military when he joined the Uitlanders while on assignment for the *San Francisco Chronicle* in 1895, and later had success publishing a detailed account of his observations during the Jameson Raid and his subsequent ejection from South Africa when it failed. See McElrath and Crisler, *Frank Norris: A Life*, Chapter 11 for more information on Norris’s brief stint in South African British military service.

31 Aside from the theme of impending doom and the frame narrative, the fragmented nature of this story clearly aligns it with the gothic tradition, in which fragmentation, as Botting puts it, “leave[s] a sense of uncertainty and irresolution” (102). In another sense, Karslake, too, is fragmented into two men: a writer and a character, a theme perhaps emphasized by the narrator’s revelation that he used two pseudonyms.
writing becomes more incoherent as his situation becomes more dire, until finally the manuscript ends mid-sentence, presumably at the moment of the writer’s death. In “Memorandum,” the boundary between middle-class writer and lower-class subject is obliterated completely; rather than returning to write about his experiences with the soldiers and their near-brush with death (early on, Karslake is confident that he will survive the Indian attack, and seems unable to comprehend that his experiment in slumming might lead to his annihilation. He believes that “this business of to-day will make a good story to tell. It’s an experience — good ‘material’” [47]), Karslake becomes the subject of a disturbing tale of terror. From a peripheral position, Karslake slips into the role of victim; in death he is indistinguishable from his lower-class comrades. “Memorandum” dramatizes the dangers of slumming, whereby the observer becomes the observed, and on a narrative level, where the boundaries between modes and classes are crossed and blurred. While Karslake sets out presumably to write a realistic novel, his demise becomes the subject of a gothic, or rather gothic realist, tale.

While Norris emerges through his fictional doubles as “many kinds of man,” it is also clear that some of these men rejected the possibility of multiple selves and retreated to safer ground, perhaps to avoid the fate of Karslake, who ultimately becomes indistinguishable from his literary subjects. Norris’s final novel, *The Pit*, generically enacts Presley’s rejection of Truth via the relative safety of the novel of manners, a novel in which the reader is never invited to identify with the poor, who remain spectators of, rather than players in, the action. Following the actions of his fictional double Presley, Norris seems to retreat from the class and modal instability suggested by *The Octopus*
into the safety of his one society novel, *The Pit*. Norris is on his best, least offensive behavior in this final novel, and critics responded by raining praise upon an author who, after dabbling in the unsavory, had finally “arrived.” The reviewer for the *Louisville Times*, for example, wrote that, “‘The Pit’ is Norris’ most human and most emotional work. There is none of the reek of ‘McTeague.’ None of the blood conflict of ‘The Octopus’…. It is a genuine novel” (187–88).32

On the surface, the novel undoubtedly shies away from the dangerous class-boundary-destabilizing and mode-bending implications of *The Octopus*. Of all of Norris’s major works, *The Pit* contains the least slumming, generic or otherwise.33 Unable to resolve the class boundary instability expressed by his doubling experiment in *The Octopus*, Norris seemingly retreated to the stable, less-disturbing confines of the realist

---

32 The irony, of course, is that Norris’s “arrival” coincided almost exactly with his death. In a perverse twist on Goldman’s claim that the “arrival” of the Intellectual Proletarian was “synonymous with mediocrity” and “the denial and betrayal of what might in the beginning have meant something real and ideal” (177), Norris’s final, most highly praised and yet least demanding novel was accompanied by the physical extinction of his unique literary voice.

33 Indeed, the poor are literally sidelined in the novel’s opening pages. As the wealthy enter a Chicago theatre to view an opera, “a crowd had collected about the awning on the sidewalk … peeping and peering from behind the broad shoulders of policemen — a crowd of miserables, shivering in rags and tattered comforters” watching the “prolonged defile of millionaires” (69–71). This passage, coming near the beginning of the novel, sets up a class tension that is nowhere resolved within the novel. Readers expecting the overt social commentary they had come to expect from *The Octopus* would likely have been surprised as *The Pit* abandons all mention of poverty and injustice at that single image, following instead the gaze of the poor into the theatre to join Laura and Curtis Jadwin as they take in the heightened bourgeois spectacle of the opera.
In *The Pit*, no one behaves outside of social expectations designated by their class. The internal strife faced by Laura and Curtis Jadwin is conventional; Curtis strays into the arms of his “lover,” The Wheat; his neglected wife nearly strays into the arms of Sheldon Corthell. Returning from the brink of their own “pits,” they find a renewed faith and love for one another. Their threat is not one of identification with poverty, for poverty is far-removed from the inner circle of the novel, filled as it is with the glittering amenities of the Gilded Age wealthy. If his vicarious doubles ultimately enact a recoil against the threat of social boundary collapse, retreating instead to a socially distant and aesthetically elevated position, Norris instantiates a similar retreat in his turn from *The Octopus* to *The Pit*, ultimately rejecting the opportunity for merging that he initiates in his non-fiction, and that he vicariously explores in his fiction.

In *The Pit*, class boundaries are seemingly in place; stable, predictable and unthreatening. At the same time, however, this very lack of engagement with social injustice, along with a conspicuous lack of lower-class characters from a writer who built his reputation in the slums, speaks to the extent to which destabilized class boundaries mark Norris’s work more generally. Furthermore, a closer textual look reveals that boundaries are still very much under assault in *The Pit*. In the next section, I examine

---

34 Critical discussions of gothic elements in *The Pit* are virtually non-existent. In *Panic!: Markets, Crises & Crowds in American Fiction* (2006), however, David A Zimmerman makes a convincing argument linking mesmerism to the stock market plot of *The Pit*. Zimmerman argues that audiences would have recognized the mesmeric discourse in Curtis Jadwin’s almost supernatural ability to predict the fluctuations of the wheat market. Zimmerman reads Jadwin’s mental and physical breakdown as indicative of his loss of agency, for “mediumship” involves surrender to a higher force, to “the anarchic guidance of [the] second selves” (137). Both Jadwin and Laura are ultimately “seduced” by the mesmeric market (137). Without using the term, Zimmerman identifies a gothic expression in *The Pit*. 
how class boundary collapse is enacted on a textual level through similarities between *The Pit* and an earlier novel, *Vandover and the Brute*.

**Doubled Trouble: *Vandover and the Brute* and *The Pit***

When *Vandover and the Brute*, an early novel that failed to find a publisher during Norris’s lifetime, was eventually published in 1914, many reviewers were confused by Norris’s treatment of his titular character. Frederic Taber Cooper writes that, “there is nothing to account for the hero’s weakness of will. There is no hint of any defective heredity, no evidence that there was anything especially vicious in Vandover’s environment. His college course was fairly normal; he had his lapses, but they were comparatively rare…” (McElrath and Knight 353). In other words, Cooper considers the work flawed because Vandover’s degenerate decline is out of keeping with his upper-middle-class upbringing and education. Unsurprisingly, for comparison, reviews of *McTeague* contain no such protests; critics may have considered the dentist’s fate heavy-handed or tragic, but none found it undeserved. The most obvious difference between *McTeague* and *Vandover*, of course, is the class of their protagonists; reviewers of the latter are generally uncomfortable with the scandalous and appalling behavior of a man who squandered all the opportunities provided by his social privilege. Reviewers of *Vandover and the Brute* display the same sort of confusion and discomfort as the narrator of “Little Dramas,” who cannot fathom why a middle-class man might be publicly arrested.

---

35 George Hamlin Fitch is more to the point in his review, writing that Vandover simply “did not deserve the severe punishment dealt out to him by his creator” (McElrath and Knight 349).
As in the works discussed above, in Vandover Norris experiments with a middle-class double who in this case slips from a stable class position as artist into the lower-class subject of a gothic plot. Norris’s widow Jeanette claimed the novel was “Norris’s imaginative construction of how his life might have turned out” (McElrath and Crisler, Frank 61); even some of Vandover’s prized possessions are objects owned by Norris (McElrath and Crisler, Frank 197). Through his titular character, Norris fantasized a version of himself who gives in to his baser instincts and descends the social scale. In this case, however, Vandover’s downward mobility is accompanied by a discernable modal shift from naturalism to the gothic. As Vandover descends the social ladder, he becomes afflicted with lycanthropy. Norris deploys the gothic to describe the turning point at which his double becomes fully immersed in lower-class space. Mirroring the reactions of the press to the crimes of H. H. Holmes, as I discussed in my Introduction, in Vandover Norris can only describe middle-class degeneracy and criminality through gothic language.

Following a series of financial blows and errors that leave him in tight circumstances, and after an evening of drinking and gambling, Vandover is overthrown suddenly by a fit in which “it seemed to him that he was no longer human … he was sinking, all in a moment, to the level of some dreadful beast” (203–04). He drops to all fours, muttering, “Wolf — wolf — wolf,” and eventually descends even further into beastliness. As his friend Ellis later relates the event: “I could hear the sound of something four-footed going back and forth inside the room. When I got inside there was

---

36 Donald Pizer details many of the similarities between Norris and Vandover, and considers Vandover “Norris’ most autobiographical novel” (33–34).
Van, perfectly naked, going back and forth along the wall, swinging his head very low, grumbling to himself” (204). As Ellis describes it, and indeed as Van’s diagnosis confirms, he is suffering from a degenerative disease that mimics lycanthropy, “Lycanthropy-Pathesis.” As Vandover sinks lower, both morally and economically, he becomes a werewolf, a stock gothic monster associated with atavism, sexual repression, and circumscribed agency. Vandover’s ailment forges a direct line from werewolf through character and to author, who doubled himself in his character, thereby troubling the boundary between fiction and reality. The truth revealed by the double is the tenuous distinction between man and beast, but also between upper and lower class. When Norris slums as Vandover, he slums an alternate, downwardly mobile version of himself, with terrifying results.

*Vandover and the Brute* also expresses another boundary-destabilizing aspect of Norris’s work: his reuse of phrases or entire passages in multiple texts, a phenomenon that results in uncannily doubled texts. As McElrath and Crisler note, Norris was “ever adding to his stash and not at all reluctant to ‘recycle’ what he had in hand” (*Frank* 163), often drawing from a vast collection of written observations, published or unpublished.

37 It is interesting that Norris chooses to give Vandover’s ailment a clinical diagnosis, as if in an attempt to control the gothic connotations of “werewolf” under the auspices of hard science. Pizer notes that Vandover’s neurological symptoms are consistent with the latter stages of syphilis, including “mental hallucinations” such as the belief that one is a wolf (36–38). This likely is an accurate diagnosis, given that Vandover has a sexual relationship with a prostitute who is known to have infected another character with an unnamed (yet obviously sexually-transmitted) illness. However, whether or not Vandover is “truly” a werewolf is not as important as establishing how Norris resorts to gothic imagery and stock convention to describe Vandover’s, and by extension his own, (hypothetical) decline.
manuscripts as he drafted new works. His short story “The Riding of Felipe” (1901, published in A Deal in Wheat), for example, is a prose re-telling of Yvernelle adapted to a Western setting, while the short story “Dying Fires” (1902, published in The Third Circle) is a fictionalized version of his August 1901 “Weekly Letter.” This tendency to recycle phrases and passages is in part traceable to the necessity of meeting strict deadlines, which Norris was forced to do during his days as a staff writer at The Wave.

In the case of Vandover and the Brute, however, Donald Pizer suggests that Norris “began lifting scenes from it for other novels” because he was unable to find a publisher for his manuscript (Norris, Norris 1217). Both Pizer and McElrath and Crisler note that Norris uses the same passage to describe a lower-middle-class parlor in Vandover and in Blix. McElrath and Crisler also call attention to similar language in theatre-going scenes from Vandover and the Brute and The Pit (Frank 162, fn20). The similarities between Vandover and The Pit go far beyond this, however, ultimately rendering visible the class and modal instability that marks Norris’s oeuvre.

38 McElrath and Crisler attribute this habit to his artistic training, which taught him to preserve and reuse “sketches” of value, since “good work should not be wasted, as it may someday serve a worthwhile purpose.” They likewise observe that the artist “sometimes … employs the same sketch for similar but ultimately quite different paintings” (Frank 162).

39 In the introduction to Frank Norris of The Wave (1931), Oscar Lewis claims that over 120 works by Norris appeared in the magazine between 1891 and 1898 (14); McElrath and Crisler put the number at 150 (Frank 203). Including unsigned contributions and those written under unknown pseudonyms, the number is possibly a bit higher. Norris’s own claim to have written 30,000 words (100 pages) per week for The Wave clearly is much exaggerated (Frank 203), but he undoubtedly was prolific during his days on staff with the magazine.
By the time *Vandover and the Brute* was published in 1914, Norris’s popularity, which had peaked with the posthumous publication of *The Pit* in 1902, was already on the decline. Few critics reviewed the work, and many of those who did pointed out its obvious roughness. *The Outlook* reviewer calls it “a repulsive, shocking spectacle” (McElrath and Knight 352), while George Hamlin of the *San Francisco Chronicle* writes that “it produces only disgust in the reader” and “it is a pity that it should have been published” (McElrath and Knight 350). More generous reviewers recognize that this was a very early work, written around the same time as *McTeague* (both Vandover and McTeague appear in Norris’s college sketches), and accordingly view it as evidence of nascent greatness. The *New York Evening Post* review states that, “The novel’s very faults claim relationship with Norris’s later merits. The irrelevancies, as some of the scenes in the low class ‘Imperial’ café, and the gross melodrama, as the attacks of lycanthropy, were to be pruned away” (McElrath and Knight 337) as he honed his craft toward superior works like *The Pit*. The reviewer clearly associates lower-class settings and themes with lower-quality fiction, assuming that Norris left such experimentation behind in favor of less offensive subject matter and a higher quality readership. Another reviewer notes simply that “[i]t is a crude, but powerful, story, not to be compared with ‘The Pit’ or other works from the same hand, but with passages here and there which a critic might note as foreshadowing a splendid future” (McElrath and Knight 362). Ironically, however, Norris lifted many passages, phrases, and themes from his first work for inclusion in his last.
Beyond the theatre scene noted above, Norris uses surprisingly similar
language to describe the protagonists of these novels. Norris recognized parallel
motivations controlling the dissipated, downwardly mobile Vandover and the hyper-
wealthy Curtis Jadwin, that ultimately render them ersatz, paratextual doubles. For
example, in a fit of remorse over his past debauchery, Vandover vows to redeem himself
by returning to art, only to find he has lost his talent. When he attempts to draw, he is
inexplicably unable to concentrate, for: “slowly, slowly, a queer, numb feeling came in
his head, like a rising fog, and the touch of … unreasoning terror returned, this time
stronger, more persistent, more tenacious than ever before” (167). As his symptoms
progress, his mental blockage becomes more pronounced until it affects any attempt at
mental exertion, for “in a few moments the same numbness stole into his head like a
rising fog, a queer, tense feeling, growing at the back of his forehead and at the base of
his skull, a dullness, a stupefying sensation” that brings with it “unreasoning terror”
(177). His panic eventually manifests in unusual physical sensations:

From time to time a slow torsion and crisping of all his nerves, beginning
at his ankles, spread to every corner of his body till he had to shut his fists
and teeth against the blind impulse to leap from his bed screaming. His
hands felt light and … [a]ll at once he felt a peculiar sensation in [them]:
they seemed to swell, the fingers puffing to an enormous size, the palms
bulging, the whole member from the wrist to the nails distended like a
glove…. Then he had a feeling that his head was swelling in the same
way. He had to rub his hands together, to pass them again and again over
his face to rid himself of the fancy. (179–80)

To the end, Vandover’s dissipation is marked by three characteristics: mental fogginess, a
sensation of swollen hands or head, and terror. The symptoms obviously suggest the
appearance of the “brute” with which Vandover’s better self has struggled and been
defeated. The sense of physical growth is also consistent with his hysterical lycanthropy, his sense of transformation from man to beast. This description of the onset of mental and physical degeneration is perfectly in keeping with the themes of *Vandover and the Brute*. This is why it is so surprising that Norris uses almost identical language in *The Pit* to describe Curtis Jadwin’s mental state.

As his conquest of the wheat market grows more hazardous, Jadwin presents symptoms remarkably similar to Vandover’s:

> All at once, his whole body twitched sharply in sudden spasm, a simultaneous recoil of every muscle. His heart began to beat rapidly, his breath failed him. Broad awake, he sat up in bed…. Then he paused, frowning, his eyes narrowing; he looked to and fro about the room…. Slowly his hand went to his forehead.

> With almost the abruptness of a blow, that strange, indescribable sensation had returned to his head. It was as though he were struggling with a fog in the interior of his brain; or again it was a numbness, a weight, or sometimes it had more of the feeling of a heavy, tight-drawn band across his temples…. There smote across his face the first indefinite sensation of an unnamed fear…. (3855–62)

Like Vandover, Curtis has trouble sleeping, and begins to take bromide of potassium to calm his nerves. As his speculation becomes an obsession, Curtis, experiences unusual, yet familiar physical symptoms:

> This was a sensation, the like of which he found it difficult to describe. But it seemed to be a slow, tense crisping of every tiniest nerve in his body. It would begin as he lay in bed … between his knees and ankles, and thence slowly spread to every part of him, creeping upward, from loin to shoulder, in a gradual wave of torture that was not pain, yet infinitely worse.

> His body felt strange and unfamiliar to him. It seemed to have no weight, and at times his hands would appear to swell swiftly to the size of mammoth boxing-gloves, so that he must rub them together to feel they were his own. (4199–203)
Passages describing Jadwin’s strained mental state are interchangeable with those describing Vandover’s madness; he, too, suffers from a sense of swollen head and hands, terror, and increasing mental fogginess, in this case whenever he attempts to rest his mind from thoughts of his speculating. Vandover’s bestial cry of “wolf—wolf—wolf” is transformed into the “cadence” of “wheat—wheat—wheat” that circulates endlessly, manically in Curtis’s mind (3854).

The multiple similarities in the two works suggest that as Norris composed what was to be his final, and what many critics would consider his greatest novel, he culled descriptions, passages, and situations from a manuscript previously deemed unpublishable. Aside from the mental perturbations and their physical effects experienced by Curtis and Vandover, Norris also resurrected his sense of multiple consciousnesses in his depiction of Laura, who, like Vandover, sometimes feels that she is two, even three people. For Vandover, this sense of multiple selves intensifies and fragments as he descends into poverty and bestiality: “It seemed to him that in some way his personality had divided itself into three. There was himself, the real Vandover of everyday … then there was the wolf, the beast, whatever the creature was that lived in his flesh … and last of all, there was a third self, formless, very vague, that stood aside and watched the strife of the other two” (228). Norris also describes Laura using the discourse of multiple personalities throughout the novel, but in particular as she considers how far she has descended into the “cult of self”: “She had been accustomed to tell herself that

---

40 Three publishers rejected the manuscript of Vandover in 1899 (McElrath and Crisler, Frank 362), and Norris appears to have abandoned it after that time. Norris’s brother Charles posthumously edited it for publication.
there were two Lauras [i.e. regular Laura, and the Laura of the “high” manner]. Now
suddenly, behold, she seemed to recognize a third … that in some beautiful, mysterious
way was identity ignoring self” (4895–96). While this third self may at first appear to be
the positive force of a conscience, Norris quickly undermines any sense that Laura has
truly changed for the better, not only because her expanded sense of self is yet another
iteration of her narcissism (her self-reflection temporarily leads her further down the path
to infidelity), but because the passage channels Vandover’s failed struggle with his
divided self, and his own weak submission to instinct.41 While Laura shares some
similarities with the beleaguered Vandover, it is Curtis who is undeniably his true
intertextual double. Despite reviewers’ beliefs that Norris had left his days of
sensationalism and otherwise objectionable content behind him by 1902, that he had, in
fact “arrived” as a “Great American Writer,” he was in many ways dressing a wolf in
millionaire’s clothing in The Pit.

Curtis Jadwin’s obsession with the wheat market is an upscale, grandiose iteration
of Vandover’s gambling addiction. Speculation is rich-man’s gambling, and Norris’s
doubling of these characters suggests that both were distasteful to him; that they were, as
Howells astutely observed in his review of The Pit, “vulgar” (McElrath and Knight
289).42 By the novel’s end Curtis, like Vandover, is a broken man (despite Norris’s

41 In yet another borrowing from Vandover, Laura makes the grisly discovery of a dead
man (in both cases, a father figure) in his study chair. Vandover discovers the corpse of
his dead father in a strikingly similar manner (Vandover 112; Pit 4410–11)

42 In “The Last Work of Frank Norris” (1903), Howells suggests that Norris didn’t realize
he had created unlikable characters:
capitulation to his middle-class audience by sending him and Laura out West to start over again, rather than destroying him outright). Rich or poor, powerful or pathologically weak, Curtis Jadwin and Vandover continuously merge into one another, refusing to resolve into distinct, clearly delineated characters. After reading Vandover, it is difficult to read The Pit without a sense of uncanniness; we’ve seen these characters, these descriptions and situations before. In light of Vandover and the Brute, The Pit is a palimpsestic text; beneath the glean of privilege lurks the monstrous ur-text below, rendering this last novel the last in the line of Norris’s experiments with uncontrollable internal and external forces that ultimately affect all classes, and all men, equally. As a thematic revision of Vandover and the Brute, The Pit retains the earlier work’s sense of its protagonist’s weakness and beastliness, only transferred up the social scale to the very wealthy Jadwins. The gothic markers of lycanthropy are removed, but this final novel, nevertheless expresses Progressive Era anxieties of collapsing class boundaries and downward mobility.

The pity of the thing is that so much of the book relates to the unimportant society side of the business, to the half-cultured, half-ignorant, wholly egotistical woman who stands for the heroine, when its sole heroine should have been The Wheat…. Before the story is finished, one has quite ceased to care for either of the Jadwins, whether she as ruined through her greedy vanity or he through his ruthless lust of power….” (McElrath and Knight 288)

Howells ultimately takes issue with the Jadwins’ vulgarity: “It is not alone the luxury of the Jadwins which is vulgar; it is the Jadwins themselves who are vulgar…. It is for such brute state as theirs that the earth groans with harvests and her children with hunger, and we have not quite an assurance from the novelist that he senses their vulgarity” (McElrath and Knight 289). Howells’ use of the word “vulgar” is particularly interesting, since the term connotes the lowbrow. That Howells picks up on the vulgarity of these characters I believe gestures toward Norris’s subtle derision of them, Laura in particular, who Norris depicts as thoroughly middlebrow throughout the work.
Norris’s Destabilized Literary Hierarchies

The intertextual doubling of *Vandover and the Brute* and *The Pit* exemplifies the unstable nature of Norris’s work. To read one novel with knowledge of the other is to hold in unresolved tension two seemingly dissimilar works, resulting in a quality of uncanniness. In Norris’s fiction, uncanniness also emanates from a resistance of many of his works to modal classification, a resistance that is complicated by Norris’s own utilization of classed discourse to discuss modal hierarchies and characteristics.

In “Zola as Romantic Writer” Norris assigns class characteristics to literary modes. He identifies realism as middle class: writing that, “We ourselves are Mr. Howell’s characters, so long as we are well behaved and ordinary and *bourgeois*, so long as we are not adventurous or not rich or not unconventional” (1106; emphasis in orig.). In the same essay, Norris suggests that romance is the upper, and naturalism the lower, class of literature. He associates each mode with the challenges at the far ends of the social spectrum, where characters are most likely to encounter great challenges that place them outside the “the rank and the file” of the ordinary (1107). Norris thus describes a classed modal stratification, whereby romance=upper-class, realism=middle-class, and naturalism=lower-class subjects, but he immediately calls into being a potential contradiction in terms by his close correlation of romance with naturalism. In “Zola,” he argues that Zola should be considered a naturalist rather than a romantic writer, but he is never clear on the distinctions between the terms. In fact, he suggests that, “Naturalism, as understood by Zola, is but a form of romanticism after all” (1106). In Zola’s naturalism, he argues, “Everything is extraordinary, imaginative, grotesque even, with a
vague note of terror quivering throughout” (1107). However, he suggests that both the romantics and the naturalists “have the same huge dramas, the same enormous scenic effects, the same love of the extraordinary, the vast, the monstrous, and the tragic” (1107–08). The anxiety and ambiguity surrounding these terms is only intensified in Norris’s later essays, when the boundary between romance and naturalism collapses altogether.

Norris also inconsistently assigns class characteristics to a series of personified literary muses that he associates with different modes. In “A Plea for Romantic Fiction,” Norris personifies Realism as a middle-class caller, “respectable as a church” (1166), making house calls with the author and mistaking surface appearances and the mendacities of middle-class social rituals for “life” (1166). Romance initially is personified, in contrast, as a lower-class woman, someone the middle-class reader might be loathe to be seen in public with (1167): “She would be out of place, you say, inappropriate. She might be awkward in my neighbor’s front parlor, and knock over the little bisque fisher boy” (1167). The characterization of romance as lower class immediately shifts to a more specific type of lower class: the stereotypically nosy domestic servant, privy to the most intimate secrets of the well-to-do. While “Realism” chats in the parlor, “Romance” can be found, “prying, peeping, peering into the closets of the bedroom, of the nursery, into the sitting-room; yes, and into that little iron box screwed to the lower shelf of the closet in the library…” (1167).⁴³ Romance collects the

⁴³ Norris characterizes the housekeeper Maria Macapa similarly in McTeague. In a parody of his personification of romance, Maria delves into the darkest secrets of the dentist’s flat, exposing the secrets of its tenants “room to room from floor to floor” (16).
secrets of the middle class, their “hopes,” “fears,” “Joys,” and “sorrows” and brings them to light, exclaiming that these are not “life,” but “Life!”; i.e. Truth (1167). Romance then shifts class connotation yet again in the essay, becoming not just working class, but impoverished: “in this very hour, she is sitting among the rags and wretchedness, dirt and despair of the tenements … among the vicious ruffians” (1168). In the final page of the essay, romance is described variously as a slum-dweller, aristocrat, and prophet; indeed Norris seems to suggest she is all these things; a cross-class slumming figure with the ability to use her fine education and bearing to temporarily inhabit lower-class space.44

Romance takes on variously classed guises that ultimately destabilize any distinction between romance and naturalism in Norris’s oeuvre. While in “Zola” Norris

In a more troubling turn, however, Maria also steals from the tenants, and then sells her stolen (and non-stolen) goods to the junkman Zerkow as she relays to him the stories behind them. The entire process enacts a commodification of secrets and suffering; within the closed economy of Polk Street, Maria’s bag of collected junk is romance’s “bag of hopes and fears … joys and sorrows” (“Plea” 1167). Intertextually, these parallels suggest an exploitation of the poor by “Romance,” whereby suffering is brought to light not to enact social change, but for the financial benefit of the storyteller.

44 In “Novelists of the Future” (1901), Norris further complicates this personification by introducing the “Child of the People,” somehow both pastoral and urban, to his arsenal of fictional muses. In “Novelists,” Norris presents two literary muses, both in the form of women. Warning novelists to reject the “chaste, delicate, super-refined mademoiselle of delicate poses and ‘elegant’ attitudinizings” (1155), in other words, the type of literary appreciation instilled through middle-class education that values form over content, Norris instead vaunts the “Child of the People,” “a robust, red-armed bonne-femme, who rough-shoulders her way among men and among affairs, who finds a healthy pleasure in the jostlings of the mob and a hearty delight in the rough-and-tumble, Anglo-Saxon give-and-take knockabout that for us means life. Choose her, instead of the sallow, pale-faced statue-creature…” (1155). It is this lower-class working woman, embodiment of hard work, simplicity, and vitality, that for Norris symbolizes the right choice for the muse-seeking writer, for she “will show you a life untouched, untried, full of new blood and promise and vigor” (1155). This Child of The People also bears some resemblance to the character of Hilma Tree in The Octopus.
differentiates romanticism from naturalism, by the time “Plea” was published in 1901 Norris uses the term “Romance” in place of his earlier definition of naturalism, abandoning the latter term altogether. According to his own aesthetic model, Norris’s replacement of “naturalism” with “romanticism” potentially repositions him as a novelist of the elite, for it is that mode with which he associates royalty. At the same time, however, this adoption carries with it the very instability it may have been issued to resolve, for his larger agenda is to resurrect romance in the present day, particularly in the literature of the West, thereby forcing a correlation between the rough-and-tumble Western type, and the lords and ladies of the middle ages, or between the carboys and miners and urban millionaires. In his search for continuities between the present and the past, Norris’s work ultimately destabilizes boundaries between romance and naturalism, and by extension, between the wealthy and the poor, in the present.

Beginning as early as Yvernelle, where he expresses that class conflict is one of but a few historical consistencies, Norris expresses a tendency to look for parallels between the past and present, between the medieval and the modern. In some of his work, like McTeague, this search takes the form of an interest in contemporary evolutionary theory; in others, like The Pit, he describes contemporary concerns using tropes of romanticism, such as Curtis Jadwin’s epic battle to defend his corner in wheat. In still other works, such as “Little Dramas of the Curbstone,” and The Octopus, Norris seems cognizant of the threat that such correlations make to autonomy and free will, and attempts to distance himself, through one of his many literary doubles, from the threat to
identity posed by his explorations in lower-class space. The result of all of his boundary testing and collapsing is a body of work that is modally impure and unstable.

Critics in Norris’s day had trouble justifying the author’s class with the tendency to sensationalism and the popular contained in his work; today, we can recognize that inconsistency as indicative of an aesthetic philosophy that consistently merged classes and modes to create literature both realist and romantic, both naturalist and gothic. The long-term effect of Norris’s experimentation with modal interaction is a troubled critical legacy in which scholars struggle and fail to identify either the author or his work as producing a particular kind of literature or of holding a consistent attitude towards the poor. In Norris’s work, romance, realism, naturalism, and the gothic consistently rub against, interact with, and at times upset one another. Thus McTeague has been read as a naturalist grail quest,\(^45\) The Pit as mesmeric naturalism or romance, and Norris himself as elitist and socialist. In his insistence that romantic elements might express Truth in realist or naturalist texts, Norris’s work exudes an overarching sense of the uncanny that makes it difficult to place him in the stratified, hierarchized American literary canon, and has negatively affected his adoption by an academic literary establishment. In the following chapter, I take a closer look at how the cultural stratification that took place in America during the Progressive Era, and that profoundly influenced the organization of English departments and the development of literary scholarship, contributed to the

\(^{45}\) In “Parody and Dark Projections: Medieval Romance and the Gothic in McTeague,” Susan McFatter argues that Marcus and McTeague “operate within a framework of a ridiculous but endearing parody of medieval romance” (120) that makes them doubles in their romantic pursuit of Trina. McFatter reads the first half of the novel as a parodic grail quest, and the second half of the work as a gothic novel.
misidentification, and by extension the misinterpretation, of modally impure works
like Norris’s.
CHAPTER FOUR

MODAL SEGREGATION AND THE CANONICAL FATE OF GOTHIC REALISM

In January 2013, I attended a panel at the MLA Annual Convention titled "The Experience of Class in the Academy." The panel was organized by the Division on Sociological Approaches to Literature and featured seven speakers who related their personal experience of class as academics. The session was clearly warranted, given the high attendance and the galvanizing conversation that followed the presentations. The speakers were for the most part engaging, and they made a strong case for the increasing need for a frank and open discussion about class in higher education. The issues they brought up were provocative, controversial, and relevant: the built-in precariousness of graduate labor, the gendering of the working class as male (thereby putting the working-class female academic at a disadvantage in the job market), the pressure for working-class students to pass as middle class, and the sometimes-public shaming of those who refuse to do so were among the more interesting topics the speakers illuminated.

The panelists shared a consensus that academia is not adequately acknowledging class, a viewpoint with which I agree fully, as this project has demonstrated. However, the panelists and audience demonstrated a selective understanding of class, one that identifies class as either upper or lower, with nothing in-between. The "experience of class" meant, for these panelists, only the experience of one class: the working class.
None of the speakers were interested in relaying their experiences as middle-class academics. Instead, each speaker detailed either how their working-class backgrounds—as focalized through their disadvantaged race, gender, or sexual orientation subject positions—affected their experience in higher education, or how academia maintains its own institutional class hierarchy.

I took two major observations away from this panel, both of which bear heavily on the subject of this final chapter, in which I consider class as a factor not just in the production, but also the consumption and consecration,¹ of gothic realist literature. The first, to which I alluded in the previous paragraph, is related to what I identified in my Introduction as a middle-class blindness to class, which manifests as a blindness of the middle class to the determinative power of class in America, and as a lack of consciousness of the middle class to their own behaviors and dispositions as classed. Every person in attendance at that session, by virtue of his or her educational and cultural

¹ My use of the term “consecration” to refer to the acceptance of certain authors and works within the critical establishment should be familiar to readers of Bourdieu. In The Field of Cultural Production Bourdieu uses the term as roughly correlative with “prestige,” or “honor,” but the sacred (and preserved) connotation of the term is both intended and important, for “the system of conservation and cultural consecration fulfills a function homologous to that of the Church” (122). According to Bourdieu, consecration is a source of authority and power within the literary field (7) and is the end result of canonization (123). It is a major component of the symbolic capital cultivated by academics and other members of the middle class. In “The Market of Symbolic Goods” Bourdieu argues that “the education system [and in particular the university], claiming a monopoly over the consecration of works of the past and over the consecration (through diplomas) of cultural consumers, only posthumously accords that infallible mark of consecration, the elevation of works into ‘classics’ by their inclusion in curricula” (123).

Bourdieu’s conception of “consecration” bears much in common with Levine’s “sacralization,” a term he uses to describe the late-nineteenth-century purification of American culture and veneration of objects deemed culturally superior. I use both terms in my discussion of Progressive Era cultural stratification below.
capital, was middle class. And yet, when I questioned the group on this point during the discussion that followed the presentations, several members of the panel and the audience defended quite vociferously their “working-class identity.”

Many of the academics presenting on the panel did not consider themselves middle class, despite their education, job security, and display of cultural capital as demonstrated by their selection to present, behind closed doors that only those with the proper credentials (i.e. those who paid not only for membership to the MLA, but also to attend the conference) could access, at our profession’s most prestigious and rarified gathering. I observed in these responses an awareness of class (i.e. recognition that a common set of experiences might mark someone as belonging to a class, in this case the working class), but not a consciousness of class (i.e. observation that their self-identification as working class, despite their middle-class status as academics, constitutes a form of middle-class class blindness). They were seemingly unaware of the many markers that place them firmly in the middle class and that render their claims of lower-class identity confusing and problematic. In other words, they demonstrated an awareness of class that in this case manifested as class-blindness.

I don’t deny that those present came from working- or lower-class backgrounds, and that because class habitus is a powerful predictor of behavior, those backgrounds had a profound effect on their experiences in higher education. Their pursuit of higher education and a life in academia suggests a belief in education as a tool of upward mobility, which suggests, likely as not, a lower- to lower-middle-class background. What surprised me, however, was how unique those advocates of working-class identity
perceived their situation to be, especially considering that education is widely considered to be the primary tool of upward mobility in this country. Like many in that room, I, too, came from a lower- to lower-middle-class (in my case, downwardly mobile) background. My education and cultivation of cultural capital, crowned by my attainment of the highest educational achievement, the PhD, marks my ascent into the middle class, whether I have the economical capital to support that title or not. I do not consider my situation to be unique, since my education has enabled me to participate in the American ideology of upward mobility. I also do not consider myself to be working or lower class.

Indeed, “Working-class academic” seems to me a contradiction in terms, but as many present at that MLA panel demonstrated, this contradiction is merely a symptom of the impoverished vocabulary we have as Americans to discuss and describe class, and of a middle-class reticence to recognize the middle class as a class to which they belong. The panelists’ denial of their own middle-class position is, in fact, consistent with that position. By denying (or failing to recognize) their membership in the middle-class, they demonstrated that they belonged in it. The middle-class disavowal, or perhaps more accurately, the blindness towards the proverbial (middle-class) elephant in the conference room, is a symptom of middle-class class blindness.

The call of some participants at the session to recognize the working-class academic does, of course, have an intra-institutional dimension to it that was not lost on me, and that in some cases supports the self-identification of some academics as working class. As Paul Lauter has observed, academics would do well to recognize that in many respects they are working class, particularly in relation to university administration.
which, like the bourgeoisie, relies upon departmental politics and stratification to prevent the organization necessary for large-scale educational reform, pitting tenured professors against part-time staff and adjuncts, who side with full professors and against graduate students in an attempt to maintain distance from the working class.\(^2\) There is a class system extant in higher education, as signified both in institutional rankings, and within individual institutions, between departments with greater and lesser esteem, and within those a hierarchy of labor from tenured faculty down to graduate assistants. The reality of academic and intra-institutional intellectual and labor hierarchies is almost completely obscured, however, by the homogenizing middle-class ideology of upward mobility that subtends higher education in America and that discourages open discussion of class.

The result is in an educational environment that encourages lower- and working-class students like myself to “pass-or-die,” to quickly adopt the middle-class values and worldview espoused by contemporary higher education or else fail. As panelist Sharon O’Dair observed, the university produces upper-middle-class identities that preclude discussion or even acknowledgment of the lower-class backgrounds of many students and

\(^2\) In “American Studies, American Politics, and the Reinvention of Class” (2002), Lauter also suggests that the increasing encroachment of business-model reforms into universities has resulted in an uneven balance of power between students and professors (a conclusion also drawn by Thorstein Veblen in 1918, as I will clarify below), who often must concede to the demands of students and their paying parents. Because universities do not include class studies on their curricula, Lauter argues, students learn about class only through their university experiences, which tend to reaffirm students’ privileged class positions. Lauter sees academia as generally stratified by classed positions, both within the university, and in professors’ increasingly powerless position in relation to students.
the class system that governs academic labor. Class can’t be discussed, she suggests, because we can’t resolve the contradiction of being both lower class and upper-middle-class. While I agree with O’Dair, I also register in the absence of discussion of class, and specifically the middle class, in academia, evidence that “working-class” academics are passing so successfully, as required by their education, that they have become indistinguishable from their middle- and upper-middle-class colleagues. Successful passing, which entails the adoption and espousal of the values of the adopted class and ultimately a different sense of classed self, means that academics look, act, and have the values of the middle class. No matter their history, the academic belongs to the middle-class, and presents a middle-class front to both students and the larger public.

Beneath the surface of academic middle-classedness runs a growing recognition, registered in this MLA panel, that class is an under-recognized element of the academic experience. Nevertheless, there is still a disconnect between class as it is perceived by these academics—whether it be their identification as lower class, or their recognition of intra-institutional class hierarchies—and their pedagogical practice. Herein lies the second observation I took from this panel: when I questioned the panelists about how their experience of class affects their teaching, in other words, how they teach their experience of class, I was answered with a confused silence, and then a tentative admission from one panelist that she does not teach her experience of class to her students at all. None of the panelists, it turns out, teach class to their students. I find this both disheartening and confusing, considering the panel’s organization by the Division of Sociological Approaches to Literature. Rather that a discussion about how to address
intra-institutional class hierarchies or how to teach the reality of the experience of class in America through the study of literature, the panel felt more like a “working-class anonymous” meeting, where academics and audience members confessed to their working-class roots and, in some cases, bemoaned the lack of recognition of their identity within academia.

The class system that exists in academia remains hidden because universities produce middle-class identities that discourage discussion of class. The academics present at this panel have internalized their middle-class habitus so thoroughly that they don’t even recognize that they are still avoiding the issue by talking about class only behind closed doors. Students see us as solidly middle class, even affluent; they perceive only the homogenous middle-class front put up by higher education. If we don’t teach them about the class divide within academia, or about the ideological prohibition against discussing class in the university (or specifically, addressing the middle class as a class) and in larger US culture, then we will never be able to resolve the issues of intra-class tension within universities or class disparity without. Lower-class students and academics with lower-class roots will continue to feel isolated, and through their absorption into the middle class through their education will adopt the prohibition against discussing class that characterizes the middle-class experience. The isolation these academics felt as lower-class students in a middle-class institution is simply passed on to their students.

I relate the above episode as evidence of a continued elision of and aversion to questions of class in academia, both class as it affects the production of fiction — the subject of the previous chapters — and the consumption of that fiction in the form of
scholarly attention and curricular inclusion, the subject of this final chapter. My observations of this MLA panel serve as a reminder that classed behaviors shape academic inquiry and that those behaviors are rarely even recognized, much less examined, by middle-class academics. The middle class’s defining feature, the denial of its own behaviors, tastes, and mores as products of class position, has a profound effect not only on which works we study but on how those texts are read within the middle-class institutional space of the university.

What the incident I have detailed also signifies is that class is still very much under-recognized in the literature classroom, due in part, as I will argue below, to a middle-class practice of policing generic, modal, and disciplinary categories. Despite the cultural turn and the canon debates of the last several decades, fiction is still subjected to a purifying practice, established during the Progressive Era, of distinguishing legitimate objects of study from those beyond the pale of critical consideration. This purifying practice has affected how we study realist literature in particular, since realism is that mode most widely understood as appealing to and reflective of the middle-class. Class is only partially visible in our accounts of realist literature, just as it is only partially visible in our own disciplinary discussions of class. This partial visibility reproduces an aversion to modally mixed fiction that can be traced back to the Progressive Era.

Following Levine, I use the adjective “legitimate” to distinguish works of high culture from those of popular culture. Levine notes that the term as one of aesthetic judgment was initially applied to classical plays in order to distinguish them from contemporary popular stage entertainment like vaudeville or musicals (75–76). The designation “legitimate” carries with it the strong implication that all popular works are somehow “illegitimate.” Both terms carry class and social hierarchy connotations, suggesting again the close connection between cultural and class hierarchies in the U.S.
In earlier chapters I suggested that class anxieties were a factor in the creation of Progressive Era gothic realist fiction. In this chapter I suggest that the cultural practices of middle-class academics — cultural stratification, field coverage, demonstration of competency, and downplaying the importance of class — are responsible for the continued lack of attention to this fiction in the present. I close this project, then, with the question that in many ways initiated it: Why has so little scholarship recognized the frequency with which Progressive Era realist writers adopted gothic themes in their fiction? The answers to these questions can be found, I believe, in a closer look at how the cultural upheavals in the latter half of the nineteenth century influenced our popular understanding of “culture” and the creation of the modern English department.

I take a somewhat circuitous approach to this exploration in the following pages, in part because of the difficult task of delineating the genesis and effects of a critical absence — absence is exceedingly difficult to articulate. In each of the next two sections of this chapter I look closely at two important critical works. First, I interrogate two seminal studies, Lawrence Levine’s *Highbrow/Lowbrow* (1988) and Gerald Graff’s *Professing Literature* (1987), each of which provides explanations for the low critical esteem of gothic fiction that are rooted in the shifting social landscape of nineteenth-century America. Dealing with these works in turn, I suggest that what is missing from these esteemed accounts of nineteenth-century American culture and the formation of the modern literature department is an assessment of the importance of class, and specifically the middle class, to these phenomena. This explanatory gap is hardly surprising, given
that both Graff and Levine speak from within the confines of middle-class academia.
I offer contemporary Progressive Era insights by sociologist Thorstein Veblen, who observes the profound influence of the middle class on American culture, as a correction to Graff and Levine.

Following this assessment, I turn to two more recent critical works, Phillip Barrish’s *American Literary Realism, Critical Theory, and Intellectual Prestige, 1880–1995* (2001), and Andrew Lawson’s *Downwardly Mobile* (2012), which link the work of realism to specifically middle-class anxieties. Both Barrish’s and Lawson’s arguments rely upon a purified conception of realism that is a by-product of the cultural purification that occurred during the Progressive Era. While both perform admirable work in forging connections between realism and middle-class habitus, their blindness to modal mixing limits their otherwise compelling assessments of realism’s relationship to middle-class concerns. In both sections, I suggest that class has not been fully articulated in these works, even when it is explicitly invoked. Furthermore, I identify absences and oversights in each work that gesture toward a larger absence of critical work on modally mixed Progressive Era fiction.

The class-blindness that permeates middle-class academia is not all encompassing. After all, historical materialism, Marxist criticism, and more recently the cultural turn have all to varying extents included or foregrounded class in the critical conversation. In the final pages of this chapter I suggest that although the canon debate and the cultural turn brought many otherwise forgotten Progressive Era authors and works back into the critical conversation, including gothic works, assessments of this
literature occur within a middle-class environment that rarely acknowledges itself as also belonging to a class, as, indeed, the product of the middle-classing of academia that took place during the Progressive Era. As a result, “class” within the university curriculum generally refers to either the upper or lower class, with almost no critical reflection on the middle class or on the extent to which the university — and the literary curriculum developed within it — contributes to particularly middle-class evaluations of texts. The critical neglect of the interaction of the gothic and realist modes in Progressive Era fiction is of course only one symptom of this middle-class blindness to class. At greater stake in my project is the ideological work of the university and the hierarchical distribution of power within the middle-class system of higher education, a system which will continue to reproduce a culture of class blindness in its students so long as academics fail to recognize their own class position or teach their students the complicated and contested history of class in America.

Insofar as I am interested in exploring how the classed behaviors of a particular group, the academic, have resulted in incomplete approaches to class, the gothic, and gothic realist fiction, this chapter is, to some extent, an ethnographic study of literary scholars. If this ethnography leans toward the surreal, if, in other words, my exploration of the canonical fate of gothic realist fiction renders the middle class both familiar and unfamiliar, this result is appropriate to a study of the gothic such as mine. After all, the unheimlich, or the sensation of familiar unfamiliarity, is one of the hallmarks of the gothic experience. In both an academic and literary context, the gothic provides a
vocabulary through which class anxieties, contradictions, and behaviors might be expressed.

**Isolating the Middle Class: Patterns of Absence in Assessments of American Culture**

In an assessment of the role of the middle class in the recognition or assessment of literary modes, it is often what isn’t said that is most revelatory. In *The Field of Cultural Production* (1993), for example, Pierre Bourdieu contends that we can trace corresponding hierarchies between literary modes and audiences. Within the literary field, he argues, and especially as regards the novel, “the hierarchy of specialties [modes] corresponds to the hierarchy of the audiences reached and also, fairly strictly, to the hierarchy of the social universes represented” (*Field*, 48). In other words, a correlation can be drawn between social hierarchies and modal hierarchies within the literary field, so that, for example, the “society novel,” correlated with the upper middle to upper class, enjoys a higher degree of consecration than the “novel of manners,” whose audience is lower-middle to middle class. While Bourdieu’s work is confined to observations of French culture (and specifically to the French literary field in the latter decades of the nineteenth century), his statement about corresponding hierarchies rings

---

4 For Bourdieu, a “field” is any internally structured system in which power is arranged hierarchically and within which different forms of capital are cultivated as signs of distinction. In Bourdieu’s understanding, the largest fields are the field of class relations and, within it, the field of power, within which smaller, somewhat autonomous fields are also arranged hierarchically and with varying degrees of distinction. For more information on the concept of field, see the title chapter of *The Field of Cultural Production*.

5 In *The Field of Cultural Production*, Bourdieu charts the cultural distinction of both genres and modes, the latter of which he refers to as “specialties.” For the sake of continuity with my own assessment of the gothic as a mode, I use the term “mode” instead of “specialty” in my discussion of Bourdieu.
particularly true in an American context, where culture functions as a proxy for class. The closest thing we have to a recognized and agreed upon class hierarchy in this country is a cultural hierarchy, so to a great extent modal hierarchies function as a substitute for class hierarchies.

If we attempt to incorporate gothic realism into Bourdieu’s model, however, we begin to run into difficulties. In its level of cultural distinction, gothic realism might fall somewhere between the “novel of manners” (on the higher end) and the “popular novel” (on the lower end), insofar as it contains characteristics of both. Nevertheless, such a simple identification is problematic. Like other popular modes, gothic realism is somewhat heteronomous (i.e. tied to the market place). Because of the potential for the gothic to have mass market appeal, as compared to other genres (like poetry) and modes (like the society novel), gothic realism has a low degree of consecration (distinction within the literary field). Gauging the popularity of gothic realist works is outside the

---

6 As a somewhat autonomous field nestled within the field of power (which is itself nestled in the upper regions of the field of class relations), the literary field organizes hierarchies based on an “upside-down economic world” in which obscurity and economic failure are seen as positive qualities affecting consecration. Bourdieu writes that in the most perfectly autonomous sector of the field of cultural production, where the only audience aimed at is other producers (as with Symbolist poetry), the economy of practices is based, as in a generalized game of ‘loser wins’, on a systematic inversion of the fundamental principles of all ordinary economies: that of business (it excludes the pursuit of profit and does not guarantee any sort or correspondence between investments and monetary gains), that of power (it condemns honours and temporal greatness), and even that of institutionalized cultural authority (the absence of any academic training or consecration may be considered a virtue). (Field 39)

In this “anti-economy” (Field 40), the more mass-market appeal a work has, the less likely it will be granted cultural distinction within the literary field.
scope of this project; however, it is safe to say that some gothic realist works (for instance Henry James’s novella *The Turn of the Screw*) enjoyed great popularity in both popular and critical circles, while others (Norris’s *Vandover and the Brute*) have languished in both popular and critical obscurity. The real difficulty with placing gothic realism within Bourdieu’s figuration of the literary field, however, is that to place it at all would imply that gothic realism has received some sort of cultural or critical validation, when in truth this fiction is frequently misrepresented, ignored, or, more often, simply invisible within the cultural field. Its very absence from critical discussion is telling, a void whose absence signifies the presence of a middle-class aversion to class. Like many of the critics I will discuss in this chapter, Bourdieu’s model does not account for modal impurity or irregularity, thereby leaving complex modal composites under-theorized or unrecognized.

Bourdieu’s model allows us to understand the effects of class-based dispositions, or habitus, on canonization, but only insofar as those dispositions manifest themselves in concrete, observable behaviors and as related to simplified definitions of mode. He uses spatial metaphors to highlight his consumption-based understanding of class, but in so doing provides us a way to express only what is present, not what is absent. Habitus is a figuration of presence; it provides a means to express only what members of certain classes do, rather than what they do not do. What I suggest is that an *absence* of a conversation — that is, the lack of recognition of the modal interaction of the gothic with realism and its ramifications as a vehicle for expressing class concerns — is itself an
expression of middle-class habitus. Gothic realism is exceedingly difficult to place on
a chart simply because it is, effectively, off the critical radar altogether.

Bourdieu’s correlative model of class and genre (and its revelatory gaps)
describes the effects of certain kinds of acculturative dispositions that have resulted in a
literary hierarchy that privileges some modes and genres over others. Bourdieu, a
sociologist, isn’t particularly interested in detailing the genesis of these dispositions, but
instead charts their results vis-à-vis relative positioning (dominated or dominating) of
cultural productions within the field of power. Since the gothic realist mode would first
have to be recognized before its critical recognition (or lack thereof) could be up for
scholarly debate, we must look to more generalized accounts of American culture and
scholarship to cobble together a cultural explanation for why the gothic has lower critical
esteem than realism, why academia is hostile to modal interaction, and how gothic realist
fiction fell through the proverbial critical cracks.

There is no simple way to chart the multivalent and complex relationship between
literary esteem and canon formation, or the relationship between class hierarchies,
cultural hierarchies, and the critical fate of gothic realist fiction. However, two seminal
critical works, Lawrence Levine’s *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, and Gerald Graff’s *Professing
Literature*, provide important accounts of how changes in American culture during the
latter half of the nineteenth century affected how cultural productions were consumed.
Ultimately, however, what these two works neglect to say about class in American
culture is just as significant as what they do explain toward our understanding of how
certain works come to have high canonical status while others fall beyond the pale of
scholarly consideration. Both works contribute theories useful toward an assessment of the critical fate of gothic realist fiction, but neglect fully to take the middle class into account in their assessments of Progressive Era culture. Levine’s and Graff’s works emerged from the same critical moment (on the cusp of the cultural turn) and have since gone on to become part of the critical canon. Both provide readings of American culture during the Progressive Era that contribute pieces of an explanation for the absence of critical attention to the gothic, specifically, and more generally to modal interaction.

**Highbrow/Lowbrow and Nothing In-Between: The Missing Mixed-brow in Levine’s Cultural Hierarchy**

In *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, Levine details the fragmentation of American culture into “legitimate” and “mass” culture during the decades following the Civil War. Levine looks at various cultural productions, theatre, museums, opera, and classical music, to demonstrate that a once-shared public culture separated into high (legitimate) and popular (mass) culture during the late nineteenth century. Levine’s analysis is excellent; he uses a broad range of sources: journals, editorials, playbills, advertisements, etc., to demonstrate that what we think of as “culture” today was solidified only around the turn of the century.

Levine traces the source of this schism to a widespread sense of loss and disorder that permeated all levels of Progressive Era culture:

> In an industrializing, urbanizing nation absorbing millions of immigrants from alien cultures and experiencing an almost incomprehensible degree of structural change and spatial mobility, with anonymous institutions becoming ever larger and more central and with populations shifting from the countryside and small town to the city, from city to city, and from one urban neighborhood to another, the sense of anarchic change, of looming
chaos, of fragmentation, which seemed to imperil the very basis of the traditional order, was not confined to a handful of aristocrats. Indeed, the elites had more allies than they were ever comfortable with, for to many of the new industrialists as well as many members of the new middle classes, following the lead of the arbiters of culture promised both relief from impending disorder and an avenue to cultural legitimacy. (176)

Levine suggests that “culture” in the rarified, sanctified sense, became a panacea for the cultural vertigo of the late nineteenth century. “Culture” provided an escape from chaos, it was “one of the mechanisms that made it possible to identify, distinguish, and order this new universe of strangers” (177).

In Levine’s reading, the fragmentation of culture during the latter half of the nineteenth century was partially driven by a sense of loss that manifested in nostalgia for an allegedly less chaotic past. The work of nineteenth-century cultural leaders was to identify those works and artists that best represent the highest cultural achievements of mankind and to shore their genius against the ruins of a disordered present. The nostalgia for a shared culture that led to the distinction of “highbrow” from “lowlbrow” culture is not to be confused with what Levine identifies as the common shared culture actually enjoyed in the mid-century United States, however, when the rich and poor sat together to enjoy a night of Shakespeare (24), or when soprano Fanny Esler, who performed both popular ballads and operatic arias indiscriminately, was “welcomed and admired by people from all segments of the society and ‘owned’ by none” (108). Instead, the nostalgia-driven classificatory impulse led to the rejection of shared American culture and capitulation to moral authorities (i.e. “experts” in the form of scholars or critics who could identify what qualified as a work of art) who looked elsewhere — to the past and to
Europe — for what had been lost. Cross-class interaction was increasingly seen as evidence of disorder, of deficient American cultural sensibilities.

In the abstract, then, culture was also a weapon against the deleterious effects of democracy, the “anarchy of urban life” (Levine 203) that fostered civil unrest and an increasing backlash, on the part of the working class, against the cultural affectations of the wealthy. Amidst fears that democracy might be dangerous, that egalitarianism might result in, among other things, moral erosion and the dumbing down of the populace, culture emerged as a saving grace, a moral authority that could educate and elevate the dangerous masses into a higher moral order (204). Thus, the cultural hierarchy Levine describes maintains class hierarchies by emphasizing cultural distinction, in the form of cultural edification and the display of cultural capital, as the crowning achievement of civilization. Culture in this sense is actually antithetical to democracy — a cultural hierarchy is necessary in a culturally edified state, so the vaunting of culture was (and still is) a veiled means by which not just cultural distinctions, but class distinctions, are maintained, as well. By the late century, cultural competency was a tool of class distinction, so that “in spite of the flood of rhetoric embracing the task of converting the unwashed masses to true culture, the spokesmen for culture were less missionaries than conservators, less bent upon eradicating the cultural gap between themselves and the majority than on steadfastly maintaining that gap …” (218). Levine never explicitly

---

7 Levine also suggests that those in power have no real interest in morally educating the masses through culture, because, if such a project were successful, the reality of class disparity would have to be addressed:

Despite all of the rhetoric to the contrary, despite all of the laments about the low state of mass culture, there were comforts to be derived from the
articulates a one-on-one correlation between class distinction and cultural hierarchy, but it is clear that in the absence of clear social and class distinctions in America, cultural distinctions and stratifications took their place. In the absence of a distinct class system, the consumption and demonstration of aptitude for culture became a primary means of class distinction in America. The search for order we associate with the late nineteenth century is not just a search for cultural order, but importantly a search for class order made manifest in cultural hierarchies. We can see in the flowering of cultural competency during the late century a groundwork being laid upon which critics and scholars would later make their own claims to cultural superiority through demonstration of expertise in particular fields. In time, academics would use competency in specific modes or genres, including realism, as tools to distinguish themselves not only from other members of the middle class, but also from the real social conditions and necessities seeking expression through those modes.

The ideology of culture that emerged during the late nineteenth century had a profound effect on the fate of both popular and American works. The vaunting of culture meant that some works were selected as representative of the highest moral and artistic

situation as well. Lift the people out of their cultural milieu, wipe them clean, elevate their tastes, and where in the world of burgeoning democracy was one to locate distinctiveness? How could one justify any longer the disparate conditions in which various classes worked and lived? (227)

The distinction between highbrow and lowbrow culture thus maintains class distinction by implying that those who consume lowbrow cultural objects are not just uneducated, but are morally unfit for positions of power. Their taste for popular fiction and art is perceived as evidence of their innate inferiority; those in power have no real vested interest in edifying the tastes of the masses, but instead in maintaining the cultural distinctions that shore up and reproduce class hierarchies.
achievement, while others were by necessity disparaged, often based on criteria as arbitrary as mass appeal, appeal to affect, or popularity. Americans, lacking their own native culture and “retain[ing] a colonial mentality in matters of culture and intellect” (2), needed to look to the past and to Europe for their cultural edification. As a result, not only were current and popular works like sentimental and gothic novels excluded from the realms of legitimate art, but indeed, almost all American art, literature, and music were excluded, as well. The general consensus was that not only was America too young to produce its own legitimate culture, but that it was too egalitarian, for “true art required standards and authority of a kind that was difficult to find in a country with America’s practical, leveling tendencies” (215). The late nineteenth century was marked by an idolization of culture, but that culture was, importantly, neither American nor contemporary.

The effects of the reordering and stratification of cultural productions on the critical recognition of gothic realist fiction are obvious; gothic works by American authors were rejected from the realm of culture because they were American, first and foremost, but also because they were contemporary and because they cultivated a presumable low-class affective response. Such a conclusion is certainly not

---

8 Levine notes that, “the adjective ‘popular’ has been utilized to describe not only those creations of expressive culture that actually had a large audience … but also, and often primarily, those that had questionable artistic merit…. The use of such arbitrary and imprecise cultural categories has helped obscure the dynamic complexity of American culture in the nineteenth century” (31). “Popularity” is associated, in a denotative chain, both with mediocrity and with the masses who consume popular fiction. Levine prefigures Bourdieu’s observation regarding the upside-down economics of the literary field, noting that by the late century, “anything that produced a group atmosphere, a mass ethos, was culturally suspect” (164).
groundbreaking, but perhaps warrants a reminder because the causes of residual
critical disdain toward the American gothic are the result of cultural changes that took
place during the Progressive Era and that are largely uninterrogated by contemporary
scholars. Bias against the affective, American, and contemporary has been thoroughly
ingrained into the American cultural conscience.  

I may appear to have contradicted myself in the preceding pages. If, as Levine
argues, the organization of American culture during the late nineteenth century privileged
the old and the European, then the gothic, despite its reliance on affect (in generating
responses of terror or horror), should have maintained some level of cultural distinction.
To some extent, it did; Radcliffe, Lewis, and Walpole, eighteenth-century British

---

9 A brief illustration, involving a canonized Progressive Era gothic realist work, Henry
James’s novella The Turn of the Screw, serves as the exception that proves the rule
regarding the exclusion of gothic works from critical consideration and acceptance into
the realm of culture. The novella was actually quite well received upon publication in
America in 1898. However, a gothic work by an expatriate living in Europe, featuring
British characters in a properly British setting, The Turn of the Screw doesn’t strike the
reader as particularly American. Moreover, James’s mastery of the conventional gothic
frame tale and first-person narrative, conventions associated with eighteenth-century
gothic novels, doesn’t strike the reader as particularly modern, either.

The novella’s subdued tone, slow-burning suspense, and the absence of any
graphic moments of violence or gore endeared it to critics, who were quick to raise The
Turn of the Screw above the run of common, sensational ghost stories. Both British and
American critics praised the author’s restraint in dealing with a “gruesome” subject, and
suggested he had elevated the common ghost story into the realm of art. As one reviewer
praised, “A touch where a coarser hand would write a full-page description, a hint at
unknown terrors where another would talk of bloody hands or dreadful crimes, and the
impression is heightened in a way which would have made even Hawthorne envious … a
curious turn of phrase is substituted for a more hackneyed expression” (Hayes 303). The
novella was distinguished from the affective ghost stories and gothic tales that
presumably appeal to the lower classes. It is a ghost story, the critic suggests, but the
cultured can recognize in The Turn of the Screw a superior, tasteful ghost story, an
educated man’s ghost story. The Turn of the Screw was praised not for its adherence to
ghost story conventions, but for how James had managed to transcend the vulgar
trappings of the gothic to create a tale with real moral force.
practitioners of the gothic romance, have all enjoyed varying degrees of critical recognition; in the American context, Nathaniel Hawthorne and Edgar Allen Poe are associated with the gothic tradition, and are still held in high critical esteem. I do not mean to suggest that gothic fiction has without exception been derided and ignored by critics or scholars. My interest in this chapter is not on gothic fiction per se, however, but on the modal interaction of realism and the gothic in the work of many Progressive Era American authors. The criteria of exclusion detailed above and discussed in great detail by Levine go a long way toward explaining why American and gothic works have enjoyed less literary distinction than their European counterparts, gothic and otherwise. Nevertheless, *Highbrow/Lowbrow* fails to make vital connections between the late nineteenth-century fragmentation of culture and the increasing cultural leverage of the American middle class that have important ramifications for our current under-recognition of modally mixed fiction.

Levine suggests that Progressive Era Americans were “preoccup[ied] with discussing, defining, and categorizing culture” (213). “Everywhere in the society of the second half of the nineteenth century American culture was undergoing a process of fragmentation…. This multiplication, or fragmentation, was manifest in the rise of professionalization … residential patterns … new immigration … [and] the relative decline of a shared public culture” (207). The division of culture into highbrow and lowbrow categories was both a reflection of that fragmenting culture and a response to perceived fragmentation and disorder. Cultural categories were a way to make sense of a cultural chaos, even if that answer entailed the creation and maintenance of cultural
categories. Levine recognizes that fragmentation also led to, and was stemmed by, insistence on cultural purification so that in all cultural venues eclecticism gradually gave way to continuity. To draw from several of Levine’s examples, the purification of culture meant that performances of Shakespeare no longer included interludes featuring trained animals or Siamese twins; orchestras performed entire symphonies rather than selections of popular movements interspersed with popular ballads, and conductors no longer took liberties with the score; and museums no longer featured human sideshow acts amongst mixed displays of oddities and artworks. In short, the purification of culture meant that generic or modal mixing was increasingly frowned upon as thoroughly antithetical to the Progressive Era work of order and organization.

The effects of cultural purification are perhaps even more far-reaching than Levine suggests. So thoroughly did pure, static, and sanctified cultural ideals permeate Progressive Era culture that by the late century no critical mechanism remained through which scholars could recognize, yet alone assess, the modal interaction that characterizes gothic realist fiction. The uniquely heteroglot quality of American cultural productions is ironically what characterizes many works as American cultural productions. When, as Levine details, cultural leaders insisted that there was no such thing as American culture, they did so at the cost of excluding the modal fecundity that might have been recognized as the basis of American culture, a reflection of a nation built on diversity. “Culture” was a concept instead increasingly perceived as pure and unadulterated; civilized, to be sure, but also racially and socially segregated. In a country as diverse as the United States, and particularly at the chaotic moment of the late century, cultural purification could only
create and reinforce social hierarchies. “A place for everything and everything in its place,” an adage popularized during the nineteenth century, extended not just to cultural categories but to class identification, as well. Gothic realist fiction, which not only expresses unease with nebulous and unpredictable social boundaries, but does so through the intermarriage of two seemingly disparate literary modes, was a cultural production with no place in the new order of highbrow and lowbrow, legitimate and mass, cultured and vulgar.

The segregation and purification of performance venues, audiences, and programs extended to literature, as well. In a culture that insisted on transparency, in the clear identification of a work as belonging to a particular period, culture, mode, time, or audience, works with claims to liminality, eclecticism, or ambiguity were ignored or mislabeled. Gothic realist fiction was not disparaged or devalued because it contains qualities of both modes. Rather, in the organization of cultural hierarchy that took place during the Progressive Era there was simply no place for it. Gothic realism couldn’t be disparaged simply because it was never acknowledged in the first place. The purification process that resulted in an established cultural hierarchy in America foreclosed the emergence of any critical medium through which modal interaction could be recognized as a criteria for cultural distinction or, in fact, acknowledged at all.

10 Recall, for example, the review of Norris’s *Vandover and the Brute*, mentioned in Chapter Three, in which the reviewer suggested that “[t]he irrelevancies … and the gross melodrama, as the attacks of lycanthropy, were to be pruned away” as Norris pursued a finer, purer literary voice (McElrath and Knight 337). According to this reviewer, the gothic and sensational are perceived as incongruities that would later be expelled from Norris’s writing as he matured and entered the realm of legitimate fiction with later works like *The Pit*. The reviewer’s conception of literature has no place for modally composite works.
One of Levine’s larger aims is to suggest that the cultural schism is a historical event with consequences that affect how literary scholarship is undertaken in the present day. By perpetuating a cultural hierarchy, he contends, scholars are missing out on opportunities to understand American culture more fully. One of the most insidious effects of the cultural hierarchy, one that Levine mentions only in passing, is that its construction as a historical event remains largely invisible. Scholars take these categories as natural without interrogating their historical genesis: “we have tended to take relatively recent developments and invest them with the mystique of age … we have indulged in the process of inventing tradition and have become prisoners of our own constructs” (241). Unfortunately, Levine falls victim to this blindness as well, particularly insofar as he fails to acknowledge the role of the middle class in the creation of, and the continuing maintenance of, a cultural hierarchy in America.

To be sure, Levine doesn’t ignore class as a determining factor in the cultural schism. As my above analysis acknowledges, Levine is fully aware that class boundaries were carefully policed through the rhetoric of culture during the Progressive Era, and that “there can be little doubt that the creation of the institutions and criteria of high culture was a primary means of social, intellectual, and aesthetic separation and selection” (229). He even briefly suggests that cultural hierarchies took the place of class hierarchies as America entered the modern era, concluding that:

The process that had seen the noun ‘class’ take on a series of hierarchical adjectives … in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was operative for the noun ‘culture’ a hundred years later. Just as the former development mirrored the economic changes brought about by the Industrial Revolution in England so the latter reflected the cultural consequences of modernization. (225)
In Levine’s assessment, however, both culture and class seemingly have only two categories: culture is either “highbrow” or “lowbrow,” and class is a clear-cut dichotomy of upper and lower. He defines cultural and class categories in terms that are themselves products of the same categorizing, purifying, and segregating terms his work attempts to historicize and critically assess. In short, Levine’s Progressive Era America is one of haves and have nots; a world in which the middle class had little input in the organization, and little stake in the maintenance of, cultural or class boundaries.

Levine rarely acknowledges the middle class, and on the few brief occasions when he does so is unsure of where to place them in his assessment. He notes, for example, that “the emergence of the new middle and upper-middle classes, created by rapid industrialization in the nineteenth century, seems to have accelerated rather than inhibited the growing distinctions between elite and mass culture” (225–26), but he suggests no causal connection between the emerging class and the rapidity with which cultural segregation became the norm in America. In other words, he recognizes that the middle classes were increasingly visible during this period, but does not place them as agents in the hierarchizing phenomena he describes. Unsure of their importance, Levine conflates the middle class with the upper, invoking Veblen’s theory of conspicuous consumption to explain how this new middle class was thoroughly absorbed into the culture of the elite by acquiring material (possessions) and immaterial (education, etiquette) markers of cultural competency (226). Emulating the upper class, the growing middle class adopted the cultural criteria that would facilitate their upward mobility, criteria that necessitated a clear distinction between highbrow and lowbrow. The result, in
Levine’s analysis, is that the middle class fully subscribed to the cultural ideals of the elites who dictated them.

Levine’s account effectively erases any cultural distinction between the middle and upper class. However, while the middle class does participate in the conspicuous consumption, conspicuous waste, and pecuniary emulation (i.e. mimicry of the spending habits and behaviors of those in a higher class) of what Veblen called the “leisure class,” they are not thereby absorbed into that class. Pecuniary and cultural emulation is, rather, a defining characteristic of the middle class, a behavior by which we can identify the middle class as middle class. In other words, while all classes participate in the pecuniary emulation described by Veblen, the very public denigration of popular culture and corresponding cultural emulation of the elite is a particularly middle-class practice, calculated to demonstrate distance from necessity and thereby entailing a careful policing of the boundaries between highbrow and lowbrow cultural productions. After all, as C. Wright Mills explains in *The Power Elite*, the true “power elite” are “quietly expensive and expensively quiet; they are, in fact, often deliberately inconspicuous in their consumption” (59). The ostentatious wealth described by Veblen, Mills reminds us, is characteristic of the Progressive Era *nouveau riche*, and not characteristic of old wealth or of those in positions of power (58-59). The behavior Levine characterizes as elite might more accurately be attributed to the middle class, or, rather, to the newly wealthy with origins in the lower-middle to middle classes who are seeking acceptance in the upper class. It is this middle class, rather than the elites to which Levine ascribes such
prominence, whose role in the maintenance of cultural hierarchies has yet to be fully recognized.

Levine’s description of the cultural schism is superb, but it is also incomplete. He is correct in recognizing that attitudes toward culture that were formulated at the turn of the century are still accepted and reproduced today, and that their origins in a particular historical moment have been rendered invisible by their widespread adoption and the passage of time. However, their origins have also been obscured by a middle-class worldview, unaccounted for in Levine’s analysis, that naturalizes its own viewpoint as the correct viewpoint, its own definitions of culture as the only definition of culture. In my Introduction, I suggest that one identifying middle-class characteristic is a lack of class consciousness, one that Giddens suggests sometimes takes for the middle class the “form of a denial of the existence or reality of classes” (111). The middle class, he observes, does not recognize that its behaviors “signify a particular class affiliation” (111). Instead, as I suggest, the middle class intrinsically norms its habitus as the default cultural and moral code to which other classes should aspire. That lack of class consciousness enabled the middle class to internalize a cultural hierarchy, and prevents the middle class from recognizing its own responsibility in the perpetuation of that cultural hierarchy today.

Levine’s description of how one class came to naturalize (and then foist on others) its own definition of culture sounds very much like a middle-class worldview that renders natural and desirable its own values, morals, and aesthetics:

The taste that … prevailed was that of one segment of the social and economic spectrum which convinced itself and the nation at large that its
way of seeing, understanding, and appreciating music, theater, and art was the only legitimate one…. The accomplishment of the patrons of culture at the turn of the century was not only that they were now able to experience the expressive culture they appreciated, performed, and presented in ways they thought proper, but that everyone had to experience them in these ways as well. (231)

While it may be true that the very wealthy were responsible for organizing and defining culture at the turn of the century, it must also be remembered that the task of preserving culture during the larger part of the twentieth century fell to the middle class, and increasingly took place within the middle-class space of the university. The transfer of cultural authority from the elite to the middle class was facilitated not only by the rise of professionalization during the Progressive Era, but also by the transition of the university from an upper- to a middle-class institution. The upper class need only initiate cultural definitions; it is the middle class that is responsible for carrying the torch of a century-old definition of culture, its origins as the product of a particular class habitus lost to time. It is the middle class — conservative, anxious about appearance, and highly concerned with policing social boundaries (particularly the boundary between themselves and the lower to lower-middle classes below them) — that has most assiduously defended the cultural hierarchy. While elite taste may once have dictated cultural criteria that were adopted by the middle class in emulation, the upper class has long since ceased to dictate criteria of literariness.

In short, by failing to account for the middle class, Levine only partially succeeds in laying bare the constructedness of cultural hierarchy in America. He organizes the Progressive Era into haves and have-nots, ignoring the have-enoughs that were and are the true arbiters of American culture. His work fails to acknowledge those things that lie
“betwixt and between” — those things in the middle — both in terms of class and culture, fashioning instead a vocabulary that while brilliant, is best suited to interpretation of the highbrow or the lowbrow, the rich and the poor.

**Professing the Middle Class: Patterned Isolation and the Invisibility of Modal Composites**

To understand more fully the role of the middle class in the maintenance of a cultural hierarchy that has de-legitimized modally composite works, we must look more closely at the reorganization of the university at the turn of the century. In many ways the conflicts and reforms of higher education during this time reflected the larger cultural battle that was taking place outside the university. The effects of the reforms that took place in higher education at this time also profoundly influenced how critics approach literature today. Such is one of the connections made by Gerald Graff in *Professing Literature* (1987), an institutional history of the study of literature that offers a nuanced account of how Progressive Era concerns affected literary study as a profession.\(^{11}\) While Levine’s work is concerned with American cultural productions on a large scale, Graff focuses specifically on how literary study has reflected, affected, and sometimes avoided (to its own detriment) the larger cultural conversations that might give it more relevance in American culture.

Like Levine, Graff is concerned with professionalization, cultural fragmentation, nostalgia, and the search for order in Progressive Era America, only in this case as these

\(^{11}\) Unless otherwise noted, all citations to *Professing Literature* refer to page numbers in the Kindle edition. Citations from the Preface to the Twentieth Anniversary Edition, also accessed through the Kindle edition, are cited by location numbers, indicated in parenthetical citations by a (loc.).
phenomena were reflected in changes to the profession of literary study. He traces to the Progressive Era many of the characteristics of modern English departments that we take for granted today, or that have only recently come under scrutiny, including the establishment of a literary canon, the professionalization of literary study, and the fragmentation of literary specialties into fields. All three of these developments were responses to the same larger cultural crises taking place outside the university, crises that resulted in the phenomena of cultural segregation identified by Levine. Discussing Graff’s assessment of each of these three major developments in turn, I will suggest below that the entrance of the middle class into the university had a profound effect not only on the ideological purpose of the university, but ultimately on the canonical fate of modally ambiguous works within English departments, as well. Like Levine, Graff acknowledges yet vastly underestimates the importance of the middle class to the shifting cultural landscape of Progressive Era America.

Graff associates late-nineteenth century literary canon formation with two related phenomena: a pervasive sense of lost shared cultural inheritance, and the admittance of large numbers of middle-class students to universities. Canon formation therefore was a response to both the democratization of universities and administrator’s fears of cultural degeneration, fears that were in part instigated by that democratization but also echoed larger concerns over the negative influence of immigrants, the lower class, and mass culture on the impressionable American populace.

Within the pre-Progressive Era “Old College” era, these fears were voiced most vehemently by what Graff refers to as the “generalists,” or those academics who
defended an Arnoldian concept of culture and who “saw national leadership as the virtual birthright of the cultured classes” (82). The generalists, proponents of wide humanistic inquiry, “saw themselves as the upholders of spiritual values against the crass materialism of American business life” (85), and felt that specialization eroded the common basis necessary to define literary scholarship as a profession. While their presence in the university diminished during the last decade of the nineteenth century, many of the generalists’ ideals profoundly influenced the humanistic approach to literature and the selection of the appropriate texts for literary study.

The generalists believed that great literature could teach itself (9), that it had inherent moral and ethical value. The “old college ideal of liberal culture” (85) that generalists strove to maintain in the modern university was impossible to recover, however, in large part because Progressive Era college students no longer could be assumed to share a set of common cultural values enjoyed by their more privileged predecessors. Canons of literature, first solidified in the 1890s, attest to those changing times, reflecting both an attempt to stop and reverse social change and an ideologically-contradictory effort, resulting from changing social conditions, to establish literary study as a profession.

Canonization was a new concept during the Progressive Era. Indeed, prior to the nineteenth century, literature was not studied at all as its own subject, but rather was used as a tool in the study of other subjects like philology, Latin, or rhetoric (Graff 19). As long as the university’s purpose lay primarily in the training of upper-class men to assume positions of power, leadership, or leisure, it could safely be assumed that entering
students shared a similar cultural background, a shared cultural heritage. As such, “there seems to have been a tacit assumption in the colleges that the meanings of literature were self-explanatory and thus in no need of elaborate explication. English literature was felt to be too easy to qualify as a college study, not a fit subject for examinations” (28). In the early nineteenth-century context, literature did not have to be taught because reading was a leisure activity already enjoyed by students before matriculation. Upper class students brought to the university a canon incidentally pre-selected by their positions of privilege.

Only after the university democratized did the function of literature change to such an extent that canon formation and the rigorous study of literature as a subject (and a profession) become necessary. “The … rise of literature as a college subject,” Graff tells us, “with its own departments and programs coincided with the collapse of the communal literary culture and the corresponding estrangement of literature from its earlier function in polite society, where it had been an essential instrument of socialization” (20). The Old College assumption that literary study was unnecessary, that the meaning of literary works was transparent to its socially homogenous student-body was possible only within a kind of class society that had been crumbling since the first quarter of the century, and the assumptions of which, as the century progressed, were no longer tacitly shared. After the triumph of Jacksonian populism in the 1820s and even more after the rapid industrialization following the Civil War, the college’s patrician conception of leadership had ceased to reflect the realities of American power. (34)

As the demographics of the university shifted to reflect the consolidation of power in the hands of captains of industry and finance in American culture at large, the Old College
educational model became increasingly, glaringly inadequate. Middle-class students entering the university during the Progressive Era no longer shared a body of common cultural knowledge with the monied elite who came before them. Canon formation, then, can be viewed as an attempt to enforce an upper class cultural habitus on middle-class students, to recreate the Old College atmosphere in the new student body by introducing students to those works the earlier privileged generations took for granted.\(^\text{12}\)

The formation of canons attested to a sea change in the university. Middle-class students were in need of cultural indoctrination — to prepare them for college work and, also, in the minds of some administrators, to counteract the deleterious effects of mass culture outside the university — but their increasing presence in the university also marked the transformation of higher education from an upper to a middle-class institution, one that catered to the middle class and, as a result, one that increasingly became oriented toward and influenced by middle-class business and professional models. The university did not so much succeed at indoctrinating middle-class students into elite habitus as it capitulated to the demands of the middle class and made itself over in their image.

\(^\text{12}\) As Graff details, a list of important works initially was developed by the National Conference on Uniform Entrance Requirements in 1894 as a guide for students planning to take college entrance exams (99). The literary canon (in 1894, two lists of works marked for either “wide” or “deep” study, reflecting even at its inception the schism between generalists and specialists [99]) was in part a tool for middle-class primary and high school students to gain entrance into college by demonstrating proficiency in the shared texts of the elite. It was, as such, a means of indoctrinating middle-class students into upper class habitus, to “reconstitut[e] as a curriculum under more or less democratic conditions something that had previously been part of the socialization of a particular class” (2).
Graff, however, never explicitly makes this connection; he recognizes the middle class as a part of, but underestimates their importance to, the phenomena of educational reform. He acknowledges that, “by the 1870s … educators had become resigned to the probability that the college could not survive unless it compromised with the ‘vulgarity’ and ‘conceit’ of the new business classes” (21–22). The period was marked by a shift in how universities presented themselves to the public, specifically through an increase in marketing and advertising. That universities began to market themselves at all during this period is a clear signal that they were catering to a middle-class audience; higher education did not need to be pedaled to the power elite who already understood the social value of a university education. The open promise of upward mobility that today is commonplace in higher education advertising was anathema to the Old College. By the late nineteenth century, however, as Graff tells us,

> The reasons for attending college were becoming unashamedly opportunistic, as popular manuals urged that “schools that pay good wages want college graduates,” and promised that during the four years a student “will become personally acquainted with hundreds of young men and young women who will become leaders in their communities.” (105)

These promises directly appealed to the newly monied, upward mobile business class.

Middle-class Progressive Era youth attended college to learn a particular professional trade that would result in a career (an unprecedented approach to higher education, given its prior social purpose). They also attended to take advantage of any residual cultural capital remaining from the Old College atmosphere of elite brotherhood. At the same time, children from wealthier families continued to attend. The result was a bifurcated student body, divided along class lines, that hasn’t much changed in the past
Children of the wealthy (both those with inherited wealth or fortunes gained through capitalist enterprise) still attend college primarily to gain a social education; children of the middle class and below attend to gain an academic education that will facilitate an improvement in their standard of living and greater opportunities for their own children. Indeed, throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries what Bourdieu calls “a profound change in disposition toward scholastic investment” took place (Distinction 132–33); what had before been seen as the prerogative of the elite (higher education) became increasingly within reach of, and ultimately necessary to, the upwardly mobile middle and upper middle classes.\footnote{Although many universities democratized during the Progressive Era, admitting students from many points on the economic spectrum, institutions bifurcated along class lines during this period, as well. Over time, as educational aspirations trickled downward, those universities that catered to the wealthiest students also garnered reputations for academic excellence, in part because, as Bourdieu suggests, students from dominated classes (i.e. those not in power) subscribe most fervently to the ideological correlation of scholastic achievement with economic success. Schools that attract students from the highest economic brackets are still considered to be the “best” schools; schools that cater to the lower or working classes have inferior scholastic reputations. Students from middle- and lower-class backgrounds aspire to attend highly ranked institutions but rarely succeed at acceptance. Bourdieu notes that the dearth of students from dominated classes represented in those schools with the highest academic reputation is evidence that “these schools refuse to apply purely scholastic criteria, but it is also [evidence that] the scholastic hierarchy is most faithfully respected … by those who are most dependent on the educational system” (Distinction 122).}

The exclusivity of these universities reifies their reputation for scholastic excellence in a culture that equates financial success with academic achievement, just as it equates business acumen (an the financial success it brings) with wisdom. As Thorstein Veblen observes in The Higher Learning in America (1918), “Business success is by common consent, and quite uncritically, taken to be conclusive evidence of wisdom even in matters that have no relation to business affairs” (901–03). I will discuss Veblen’s work and the influence of business practices on the reorganization of higher education in greater detail below. For now, it should be recognized that these ideological equivocations are both responsible for and reflective of the transition of the university to a middle-class institution during the Progressive Era.
In the new, mixed-class university, the correlation of academic rigor with class of origin did not much change; academic achievement was [and to a great extent still is] only really necessary for those otherwise lacking in social and economic capital. Graff observes that until around WWI, hard work and determination identified a student as of lower- or middle-class origin, one who was “scorned and pitied” accordingly in relation to his well-heeled, anti-intellectual peers (26). Students who worked hard obviously needed the educational capital much more so than wealthy students who came to college to acquire cultural and social capital. As such, wealthier students spent their education involved in clubs, fraternities, and other social pursuits that denoted a life of leisure, whereas the poorer, “unpresentable” students, in Progressive Era writer Randolph Bourne’s words, “take the honors and rewards of scholarship” (qtd. in Graff 105). This bifurcated student body is not quite so much a relic of the past as Graff would like to believe, however. Many graduate students and academics today, myself included, hail from the lower or middle class, and most of us could likely relate any number of occasions when our scholarly pursuits and academic work ethic negatively impacted our attendance at social gatherings or subjected us to the derision of our peers. Keeping in mind that, as Mary Marchand has demonstrated, ease can’t be “faked,” all this striving toward professionalization — toward cultural distinction and acceptance — merely betrays our lower-to-middle-class backgrounds and middle-class habitus. Our dedication to the intellectual life is as much a product of our class (and our faith in education as a key to upward mobility) as it is the result of any ‘natural’ claims to superior intelligence.
While the distinction of wealthier from poorer students remained in the university, the professionalization of literary study, another phenomena discussed by Graff, conveniently gave middle-class scholars, those high on educational capital but low on economic capital, a solid, respected position in a culture obsessed with order. Mirroring the larger American culture conversation, universities during the Progressive Era increasingly relied on and deferred to experts and cultural authorities to render the chaotic Progressive Era transparent and comprehensible. Literary scholars and critics could number themselves amongst those experts. While during the early nineteenth century English professors (or those who taught only literature) were a rarity (23), by the early twentieth century many universities boasted not only a curriculum in literary study but also a specialized faculty in a dedicated department. The major shift toward professionalization took place in “the 1870s and 1880s, when schools and colleges organized themselves into departments corresponding to what were deemed to be the major subjects and research fields” (6). As the university organized and codified into an increasingly complex system of majors, fields, and specialties, academic study became a respected middle-class profession, one both sustained by and reproduced within the modern, middle-class-oriented university.

Professionalization of literary study was a symptom of the larger search for cultural authority (with its related preponderance of scientific and methodological apparatuses), but is also evidence of the encroachment of business models into the
university. Graff attributes “bureaucratic standardization” — of courses, degrees offered, credit distribution, emphasis on publishing, faculty specialization, etc. — to the rapid growth of the university at the turn of the century (59). His causal account is perhaps oversimplified, though. Professionalization within and bureaucratization of American universities no doubt took place as a way to deal with an explosion in enrollment. However, that such standardization increasingly took cues from the business world suggests more was at play in these reforms than a response either to increasing enrollment numbers, or the larger cultural search for order and stability. Standardization of the curriculum, professionalization, and the establishment of managerial hierarchies in university administration and academic hierarchies within departments, suggests that universities internalized a thoroughly middle-class disposition toward achievement, distinction, and mobility during this period. After all, the American faith in meritocratic reward most often crystallizes in a discourse of business success and professional excellence. Success, for members of the middle class, is measured in degrees attained, awards won, and, just as importantly, how those degrees and awards reflect and enable success in the business sector.

As Veblen argues in Theory of the Leisure Class, it was the captains of industry whose “exploits” had come to replace, by the turn-of-the-century, the feats of war and

14 For more on the influence of business and marketing practices on higher education today, see Derek Bok, Universities in the Marketplace (2003). Bok primarily is concerned with the financial juggernaut of college athletics, on-line course offerings, and for-profit education, and the ethical grey area of corporate-sponsored research (and research sold for profit), and warns that “by trying so hard to acquire more money for their work, universities may compromise values that are essential to the continued confidence of faculty, students, alumni, and even the general public” (x).
violence with which earlier generations had distinguished themselves from their peers. The middle class, invested in the practice of pecuniary emulation, follows suit, so that success in the corporate world becomes that which is imitated in the pursuit of class distinction. The university’s adoption of business models and bureaucratic hierarchization was not merely a reflection of the larger standardization and ordering of American culture, or a reaction to student overpopulation, but importantly also served as the final stage in the university’s transformation from a training ground for elite socialization to a vehicle for middle-class upward mobility.

The reorganization described by Graff fails to articulate fully the extent to which the bureaucratization of the university and the fragmentation of departments (and within them, into specialties) that occurred as a result are directly attributable to the intrusion of middle-class habitus and middle-class business practices into the field of higher education during this period. In *The Higher Learning in America* (1918) Veblen takes up in great detail how business has infiltrated and transformed the nature of higher education in America, and his observations help to fill in some of the crucial connections lacking in Graff’s argument.\(^1\) Veblen speaks from a temporal vantage point much more

---

\(^1\) While tinged somewhat with concern, Veblen’s work is not so much a jeremiad as an astute set of sociological observations and related projections concerning the fate of higher education in America. To be sure, Veblen is critical of the effects of business on higher education, concluding at one point that the intrusion of business principles in the universities goes to weaken and retard the pursuit of learning, and therefore to defeat the ends for which a university is maintained. This result follows, primarily, from the substitution of impersonal, mechanical relations, standards and tests, in the place of personal conference, guidance and association between teachers and students; as also from the imposition of a mechanically standardized routine upon the members of the staff, whereby any disinterested
contemporaneous with these changes than our own, and his insights therefore offer an illuminating perspective on a period of transition, when the appearance of business practices in higher education was not yet an unquestioned commonplace. Arguing that “the higher learning takes its character from the manner of life enforced on the group by the circumstances in which it is placed” (81) and thus is ever-fluctuating in its scope and aims, Veblen suggests that business success — the natural outlet for the American Instinct of Workmanship (that unavoidable tendency of “men to turn to account, in a system of ways and means, whatever knowledge so becomes available” [103–04]) — is the force most influential in the shaping of contemporary American higher education, so that

any inquiry into the effect which recent institutional changes may have upon the pursuit of the higher learning will necessarily be taken up in a peculiar degree with the consequences which an habitual pursuit of business in modern times has had for the ideals, aims and methods of the scholars and schools devoted to the higher learning. (86–88)

As a result of our cultural conflation of business success with wisdom, Veblen suggests, academic affairs have been taken over by men of business rather than of letters. Veblen

preoccupation with scholarly or scientific inquiry is thrown into the background and falls into abeyance. (2979–83)

One of his most pressing concerns throughout Higher Learning, however, is that the purposes of the “college” have been confused with the purposes of the “university” so that the unfettered environment of dispassionate research in the university has been infiltrated and in many ways negatively impacted by the exigencies of practical education better handled at the colleges. His intent is not to disparage the work done at colleges and trade schools, but rather to detail how the conflation of the aims of both types of education is injurious to both. It is not a question of judgment, but rather “only a question of distinguishing between things that belong apart” (273). Veblen’s work in Higher Education and in Theory of the Leisure Class, influential, prescient, and ingeniously insightful, nevertheless must still be understood as a product of the ordering impulse of the Progressive Era.
observes that business practices have affected university life at all levels, including expansion of athletic programs, proliferating committees and administrative posts, building projects, endowments, fundraising, and even down to landscaping, all of which serve only to improve the image of the university to the public, and to thereby help raise more funds to erect more buildings, etc, in a cycle that does little to improve the quality of the research and academic work done in higher education, but everything toward the “reputable publicity” of the school (1838).  

While Veblen is not explicitly concerned with class distinction in Higher Learning, as he was in the earlier Theory of the Leisure Class, on several occasions he correlates and even conflates the “business” class, which exercises undue influence on

---

16 Veblen notes, for example, that style often takes precedence over building design in university planning, so that while the exteriors of campus buildings are spectacular and impressive:

In recent scholastic edifices one is not surprised to find lecture rooms acoustically ill designed, and with an annoying distribution of light, due to the requirements of exterior symmetry and the decorative distribution of windows; and the like holds true even in a higher degree for libraries and laboratories, since for these uses the demands in these respects are even more exacting. Nor is it unusual to find waste of space and weakness of structure, due, e.g., to a fictitious winding stair, thrown into the design to permit such a facade as will simulate the defensive details of a mediaeval keep, to be surmounted with embrasured battlements and a (make-believe) loopholed turret. So, again, space will, on the same ground, be wasted in heavy-ceiled, ill-lighted lobbies; which might once have served as a mustering place for a body of unruly men-at-arms, but which mean nothing more to the point today, and in these premises, than so many inconvenient flagstones to be crossed in coming and going. (1906–13)

His purpose here is to illustrate that the modern university has entered the competitive business arena, in which appearance and reputation must be cultivated in order to improve the viability of the brand, which in the case of American higher education comes in the form of support from donors and benefactors in the business sphere.
the course of higher education, with the middle class. For example, he describes the
benefactors and donors catered to by university administrators as drawn from

various clubs, churches and other like organizations under whose auspices
the edification and amenities in question are commonly brought into
bearing, or by virtue of voluntary attendance at these occasions of quasi-
culture and gentility. It is a somewhat exclusive fragment of the public,
*pecuniarily of a middling grade*, as is indeed also its case in other than the
pecuniary respect.... Neither the small minority of the wholly idle rich, nor
the great majority who work with their hands, are present in appreciable
force.... (3393–99; emphasis added)

The changes he describes within the modern university are the result of the high esteem
in which business acumen is held in American culture, changes that accompany the
university’s shift to a middle-class institution. He fears that a “large and aggressive
mediocrity” will take over higher education (2474), a mediocrity that he associates with
the middle class.

Veblen offers an important correction to Graff by expressing the problem of
bureaucratization of the university in class terms. The university bureaucratized not as a
means of attracting or adapting to middle-class students but as a result of its shift to a
middle-class institution. Veblen’s solution is the careful maintenance of the boundaries
between the college and the university, essentially a return to an earlier model that
separated research and scholarship (the university) from committee work and career
training (the college) that drastically compromised the ideals of the university.
Ultimately, his strategy is yet another iteration of the Progressive Era search for order and
stability. Purification and standardization ironically are progressive and regressive,
always contradictory. For example, we can trace in the re-organization of the university
into the “field coverage” model described by Graff both forward movement to address
and reflect the influence of the middle class, and a backward imperative to stabilize, order, and control.

Field coverage, Graff’s term for describing the organization of English departments according to nationality, historical period, or, in more recent decades, culture, is yet another lingering product of the Progressive Era search for order and the period’s related move toward cultural purification. The university responded to larger cultural concerns by codifying, compartmentalizing, and categorizing literature, not only between legitimate and popular works, but within those categories between genres, modes, historical periods, nationalities, and later culture, class, and the author’s gender, race, or religion.

Graff identifies a pattern whereby internal disagreements in the field of literary study have been compartmentalized through “patterned isolation” that allows scholars and critics who represent different viewpoints to work in the same departments without ever addressing or confronting their ideological disagreements. Field coverage models, Graff contends, absorb rather than confront disagreements — the department simply adds a representative for each viewpoint and school of thought to the department, thereby foreclosing the radical reform each successive movement might have initiated. Even interdisciplinary programs, which theoretically might combat patterned isolation, have failed because they “tend to be assimilated into the university as add-ons, instead of building bridges between the disciplines” and therefore “reproduce the fragmentation they were invented to counteract” (loc. 205).
Graff suggests that patterned isolation, of which the field coverage model is but one symptom, is the profession’s response to internal disagreement, one that can be traced back to the earliest schism between the generalists and the scholars. Disagreements over how literature should be studied, analyzed, and taught, usually initiated by the emergence of a new theoretical school, historically have been resolved by simply making space at the proverbial table, but a table with very little congenial conversation or, in fact, any conversation at all. Graff provocatively describes the relationship as one marked by class difference, suggesting that

the history of the American curriculum resembles the history of the American city: just as clashes between socioeconomic classes and races have been avoided, or at least made less visible, by emigration to the frontier and later to the suburbs, turf battles in the university have been avoided by adding new curricular outposts in the form of new fields, new courses, and new buildings. (loc. 204)

To avoid conflict, departments create new “suburbs” for emerging schools, thereby diffusing the threat new methodologies posed to the cohesive and coherent front presented by the profession, much as the creation of neighborhoods and suburbs in cities helps to maintain the peace and contain violence by segregating conflicting factions from one another, leaving the more affluent to maintain a fantasy of purity, cohesion, and superiority. “By configuring the curriculum as a set of courses taught by solo instructors not in communication with one another” Graff recognizes, “the field-coverage model took a set of connected conversations and cut them into disconnected fragments” (loc. 92), avoiding both conflict and coherence in the process.

Isolation, fragmentation, segregation: all qualities Graff associates with contemporary English departments, but that have their origins in the cultural anxieties of
the Progressive Era. I suggest that the tendency toward disciplinary fragmentation that resulted in the field coverage model also resulted in institutionally sanctioned prohibitions against modally composite works. Within the newly developed and codified fields of American and British literature, further divided into historical periods, fragmentation into modes, genres, and styles occurred, each of which was placed on a spectrum of legitimacy that ranked some modes higher than others. The under-recognition of modally mixed works in literary studies is therefore fundamentally tethered to the middle-class-enforced silence regarding class in America. Classification is not itself a middle-class practice, but the policing of boundaries to maintain cultural purity, and therefore to avoid contamination by the mixed or impure that might necessitate a conversation about why such categories exist in the first place, certainly is. As I will explain in the following section, the maintenance of modal purity is particularly important to the study of American realism, that mode most associated with the middle class and therefore particularly subject to middle-class cultural purifying practices that exclude and deny the gothic.

“Patterned isolation” describes not only the systemic fragmentation of literary study into isolated fields in order to avoid questions of real pedagogical or theoretical difference, but also the middle class’s systematic failure to address its own classed behaviors by recognizing class as only upper or lower, the rich or the poor, the have and have-nots, categories then carefully maintained and policed by the middle class. The field of literary study offers a microcosm wherein we can observe the deleterious effects of patterned fragmentation and isolation in preventing a sustained assessment of the
irresolvable, the ambivalent, or the impure. Literary segregation resulted in an impoverished critical vocabulary for describing modally composite works. The relentless separation of literature into fields, genres, styles, modes, and other ranks of legitimacy has resulted in an academic environment hostile to not only gothic realism, but to other modally mixed works. Gothic realist fiction is not only suppressed by the cultural schism that rejected the American, popular, and modally impure, but also by the institutionally sanctioned practice of patterned isolation initiated during the Progressive Era and in large part continued today.

Patterned isolation and the field-coverage model offer more evidence that the university is a middle-class institution, and that it became so during the Progressive Era. My purpose in this project, however, is not to prove that this is the case, but rather to suggest that contemporary accounts of the history of American culture and letters, even exemplary ones like *Highbrow/Lowbrow* and *Professing Literature*, consistently talk around the middle class, offering explanations of cultural phenomena that suggest the presence of but not the importance of the class most responsible for defining culture and maintaining the boundaries between cultural categories. These works exhibit class awareness on the part of their authors, but not a fully formed class consciousness, that is, a self-consciousness of class, that would result in a more critical assessment of the role of the middle class in cultural consecration and curricular development.
Class Blindness and the Invisibility of Modal Composites in Contemporary Realist Criticism

I have suggested in the previous sections that the middle class has been under-recognized in critical assessments of the cultural schism and the reorganization of the university during the Progressive Era. Aware of the increased visibility of the middle class during the latter years of the nineteenth century, Levine and Graff nevertheless fail to make crucial connections between middle-class habitus and the widespread transformations they describe, connections that have important implications for how academics approach American realist fiction today. The transformation of the university to a middle-class institution laid the foundation necessary for the development of the critical esteem afforded to American realism. Realism’s ascendance to a place of critical prominence was also achieved at the cost of excluding other modes from its scope; realism’s high level of cultural esteem has been maintained in part through the suppression of its modally mixed qualities.

The middle-class disposition of the modern university is particularly amenable to strategies of distinction that obscure some modes while purifying and segregating others. The result is a critical history of gothic fiction that, in relation to realist fiction, reflects the invisibility of class in larger American cultural conversations. Critical attempts to avoid or deflect the discussion of both class and the gothic in literary studies are symptomatic of a larger aversion to class in U.S. culture. While I stop short of the temptation to correlate class directly with the gothic, I do suggest that class in America is
gothic insofar as, like a gothic secret, it is unspeakable, unspoken, impossible to express clearly and, most importantly, hidden in plain sight.

As in the previous sections on Graff and Levine, in this final section I attach meaning to absences, this time in contemporary critical assessments of the relationship between the middle class and realist fiction. I am not concerned here with proving that realism is a middle-class fiction; that work has already admirably been undertaken by other scholars. Rather, I am complicating the commonplace assumption that realism is middle class by suggesting that at its most purified and sterilized, the realist mode has been vaunted by academics because it is a middle-class fiction.

Realism, or rather, the ability to demonstrate competency in the literary mode of realism, offers middle-class scholars a particular form of cultural capital through which they can demonstrate distance from the real needs, deprivations, and social controls presented in realist fiction. By demonstrating expertise in a purified realism rather than a consciousness of the social conditions it potentially expresses, literary critics demonstrate their middle-class status. As I have maintained throughout this project, the gothic steps in to assist realism where the latter fails to express social and economic truths difficult for Americans to articulate, specifically the contradiction of class in America. The gothic expresses these contradictions in Progressive Era fiction, including realist, regionalist, and naturalist works. Realist fiction, in particular, voices particularly middle-class

---

17 Phillip Barrish discusses several of these works in the Introduction to *American Literary Realism, Critical Theory, and Intellectual Prestige, 1880–1995*, and provides a list of several prominent works in which realism is discussed in relation to the middle class. For a discussion of these approaches, see Barrish, Introduction and n.3, p. 158–59.
concerns for middle-class readers; the middle class cohabits with realism. When academics maintain a purified definition of realism, cleansed of contamination from the gothic, they thereby silence the class concerns the gothic mode helped realism express. The separation of the gothic from realism is therefore very much a middle-class act, a symptom of the aversion to and blindness toward class consistent with a middle-class American worldview.

In the contemporary university, realism holds a place of great respect, in part because realism is a middle-class mode. Indeed, critics and writers have recognized continuities between realism and its middle-class audience for almost as long as “realism” has been an identified literary mode. Frank Norris, for example, frequently described modal hierarchies in terms of class, most clearly in “A Plea for Romantic Fiction” (1901), where he describes realism as a middle-class caller and romance as a prying lower-class servant. A “blunt tool” that “stultifies itself” and “notes only the surface of things,” realism is depicted in Norris’s work as the literature of “teacups, rag carpets, wall paper and haircloth sofas” (Norris 1166; 1169). Norris is invested in distancing himself from the pedestrian connotations of realist fiction, in his case through espousal of romantic, and later, naturalist fiction as distinct from the shallow commonplace depicted in realism. Those middle-class readers who wish to distinguish themselves, in Norris’s assessment, should turn to naturalism and romance to discover truth and to demonstrate their own distance from the stuffiness of middle-class realist fiction.
In *The Art of Fiction* (1884), Henry James also associates realism with the middle class, but his purpose is rehabilitative. Instead of dismissing the mode, he instead critiques theories of realism that emphasize fidelity to life, such as that espoused by William Dean Howells in *Criticism and Fiction*, arguing instead that the best that realism can achieve is fidelity to the artist, or “reality coloured by the author’s vision” (387), the depiction of the truth as it is understood by the keen observations of an artist or writer “upon whom nothing is lost” (390). James suggests that realism, as an art form, need not adhere to reality in order to depict a subjective kind of truth. He implicitly endorses a view that at its best, realism maintains a certain distance from the things of life, from the crass materialism that lower- and lower-middle-class readers admire. In elevating realism to an art form rather than a faithful reflection of material conditions, James distances it from connotations of vulgar necessity. He carves out a place of distinction for realism, a means by which middle-class readers and critics can utilize the mode to demonstrate their own distance from necessity by appreciating realism as art. Howells’s realism, James  

---

18 Norris explicitly critiques Howells’s realism in “Zola as a Romantic Writer,” claiming that “[w]e ourselves are Mr. Howell’s characters, so long as we are well behaved and ordinary and bourgeois, so long as we are not adventurous or not rich or not unconventional” (*Norris* 1106). While he never explicitly invokes Howells, James’s essay is also an implicit critique of Howells’s moralizing realist aesthetics.  

In *Criticism and Fiction* (1891), Howells critiques the heightened affect of romanticism, writing that “I believe fiction in the past to have been largely injurious, as I believe the stage play to be still almost wholly injurious, through its falsehood, its folly, its wantonness, and its aimlessness…. If a novel flatters the passions, and exalts them above the principles, it is poisonous” (325). Realism, he argues, should not be compared to other art forms, for it has a deeply moral responsibility to depict reality in a dispassionate way in order to provide readers with the tools necessary to make their own ethical decisions. James’s essay counters Howells’s assessment by introducing a contingent, subjective understanding of reality.
implies, is rather low rent; James’s realism, in comparison, is upwardly mobile, expressing a recognition of the distance between life and art. In short, James suggests that realism, understood as a mode somewhat detached from reality, has greater social and cultural traction than mundane, didactic Howellsian realism.

Both Norris and James prefigure what Virginia Woolf would later identify as “middlebrow” aesthetics by correlating the middle class with conservative, shallow, “dead” taste in aesthetic objects and literature: “What are the things that middlebrows always buy?” Woolf asks. “Queen Anne furniture … first editions of dead writers, always the worst; pictures, or reproductions from pictures, by dead painters … but never anything new … for to buy living art requires living taste” (Woolf). All three authors over-simplify things a bit, however, by implying that the middle class is a stable enough category that generalizations can be made about its fiction or taste in cultural productions. As a class not generally aware of itself as a class, the middle class only problematically can be said to have any homogenous sense of classed taste. Nevertheless, we can trace in the middle-class predilection for the mundane an anxiety over legitimacy and social position, a guarded attempt not to rock the proverbial boat that is an affect of social

19 As I noted in Chapter Two, Bourdieu distinguishes the “taste of necessity” that characterizes the lower classes from the taste in the abstract that, for the upper classes, is “the paradoxical product of conditioning by negative economic necessities — a life of ease — that tends to induce an active distance from necessity” (Distinction 5). When distinguishing between popular taste and the taste of intellectuals, Bourdieu theorizes that the former reduces “the things of art to the things of life,” while the latter values “representation” (Distinction 5). What we value as high art refers not so much to life, then, but to other works of art. In this reckoning, Howells’s view could be described as petit bourgeois for the intellectual invested in displaying cultural capital. James posits a theory of realism in which the reader both recognizes realism as a middle-class mode and potentially can use that recognition to facilitate his or her display of cultural and educational capital.
insecurity. What is consistent about all three of these authors’ approaches to class and
taste is that they denigrate middle-class taste while offering strategies middle-class
readers can use to distinguish themselves from other middle-class readers.

Despite criticism of realism’s bourgeois predilections, it historically has been
afforded a place of high critical distinction. While the most obvious explanation for this
is that those earlier critiques have since been corrected and realism’s cultural significance
thereby defended and upheld, that the corrective work has been undertaken by middle-
class academics is perhaps evidence that realism truly does reflect middle-class taste and
middle-class values. Recent criticism of realism focuses not on whether or not the middle
class is accurately reflected in this fiction but on the work that realism may have
performed for the nineteenth-century middle class, such as offering the kinds of strategies
for social distinction I observe in James’s and Norris’s work. While the two works I will
discuss below offer clear, if differing accounts of how and why realism is a middle-class
mode, each also relies on an inherited understanding of realism as modally pure, and
therefore stops short of fully assessing the relationship between realism, criticism, and the
middle class. Realist criticism still reflects its middle-class audience in these more

---

20 I acknowledge, of course, that realism has not always held a place of high critical
favor. Graff details the process by which realism and naturalism, commonly included in
curricula during the 20s and 30s, were temporarily ejected from the canon during the
1950s when attempts to identify a national literature focused instead on the romantic
tradition of Hawthorne and Poe, and defined American literature by its “symbolist
viewpoint” (222). Donald Pizer’s Introduction to The Cambridge Companion to
American Realism and Naturalism (1995) is also an excellent source that details the
rising and falling fortunes of realism and naturalism over the course of the twentieth
century. Although it suffered from the turn to New Criticism, realism weathered the
twentieth century far better than naturalism, which was first found faulty of poor form,
and later, as America entered the Cold War, of leftist tendencies that rendered it unfit for
academic study (10–11).
contemporary accounts, but not necessarily in the way these critics intended. The current criticism I discuss below reflects an academic audience that perpetuates a fantasized understanding of a purified realist mode, thereby excluding the possibility of modal impurity and with it, a complete understanding of the social work that realism performs for the middle class.

Foremost amongst these works is Phillip Barrish’s *American Literary Realism, Critical Theory, and Intellectual Prestige 1880-1995*. Barrish compellingly suggests that contests over the purpose and value of realism historically have served as tools of intra-class distinction. Realism, that literature “most prominently identified with” the middle class, “helped them to define themselves, as a grouping, in relation to other groupings” (4). Barrish observes that realism reflected middle-class values and mores, but more importantly, that competency in realism provided a way for members of the middle class, whom he describes as, “culturally insecure” and “ever-jockeying for status and distinction” (11), to differentiate themselves from other members of the middle class. “Realist texts,” in Barrish’s assessment, “explore, experiment with, and embody modes of competing within … a narrow and specific context”: the middle-class competition for intra-class distinction (11; emphasis in orig.). His understanding of the work that realism performs for the middle class dovetails nicely with my assessment of James’s critique of realism above; academics can differentiate themselves from other academics, and from the middle class outside of academia, by cultivating a detached appreciation for the social realities depicted in realist fiction. Unlike James, Barrish locates this detachment both as it is expressed by academics engaged in interpreting realist fiction and as vocalized and
For Barrish, certain works of realist fiction make their own internal claims for authority, expressing various “realist dispositions” that accrue distinction by “insisting upon their own privileged access to hard, irreducible realities” (8). Claiming special “intimacy with materiality” over and above other claims to the same is a strategy of middle-class distinction (8); realism helps define and resolve the middle-class problem of intra-class distinction, allowing readers and literary critics to cultivate “intellectual prestige” through claims to a “realer” realism than that espoused by other readers, writers and critics (10).

In *Downwardly Mobile* (2012), Andrew Lawson takes issue with Barrish’s thesis. Arguing that rather than claiming any intimate access to reality, realist fiction provided a fantasy of economic and social stability for middle-class readers, Lawson suggests that realism provided a “solid world of fact as a counterweight to the misty and undefined” economic and social reality of the early nineteenth century (2). As opposed to Barrish (whose argument Lawson considers, among other things, “vague,” “unspecified” and “unclear” [142–43]), who suggests that realism reproduces hegemonic middle-class ideologies, Lawson argues that the stable fantasy projected in realism gestures toward a reality of uncertainty, disempowerment, and precariousness for large factions of the middle class. “The emergence of realism,” he writes, or “the hunger for the real, suggests the fissures, contradictions, and instabilities of life for the middle class, rather than its ability to smoothly and seamlessly reproduce the conditions of its existence” (10).

---

21 Lawson locates realism’s origins in the 1837 Panic, which stripped many comfortably middle-class Americans of their identity by divesting them of the objects that helped them identify themselves as middle class. The 1837 Panic destabilized reality, rendering “all fortunes, and indeed all things … in essence fungible” (4).
Realism, he concludes, is the fiction that the precarious lower middle class invented to counter a chaotic and unpredictable social and economic reality. Realists never intended to depict reality at all. Instead, “they set about refining the referential and denotative capacities of literary language, with the aim of evoking a stable and intelligible fictive realm” (17).

Lawson is markedly silent when it comes to naming any other mode, other than realism, that might have emerged as a response to class anxieties, or, more specifically, why realism alone was up to the task of expressing the fears of the middle class. What Lawson fails to acknowledge is that realism is an impure mode. Indeed, Lawson’s argument hinges upon the carefully policed boundaries of realism, which he positions as antithetical to all fantastic modes, including the gothic. Reality, Lawson suggests, had become so “dangerously” fantastic by the mid-nineteenth century that realism was issued to stabilize it, to offer a pure, practical, rational alternative to the social indeterminacy of the lower-middle-class experience. To acknowledge that the gothic (as I argue) or the romantic (as Andrew Hebard, whose work I discussed in Chapter One, argues) are conventional characteristics of realism would completely dismantle Lawson’s argument. In other words, the gothic would destroy Lawson’s middle-class fantasy of realist purity.

While he doesn’t exclude the possibility of modal mixing outright, Barrish’s argument is also dependent on a purified understanding of realism. In his reading of Howells’s evolving “realist taste,” for example, Barrish suggests that the contradictions and complexities of class in America were too big a problem for realism to solve: “realist taste in middle–late Howells involves … orienting one’s attention toward irreducible
complexities and ironies … of America’s social problems” (38). Recognizing his earlier realism was complacent vis-à-vis social and economic disparity, Howells articulated in his later fiction a fatalistic view that realism was somehow not up to the task of depicting reality. Barrish observes that irresolution and ambivalence replaces moral certainty in Howells’s later realist works. Although he recognizes that realism couldn’t embody the anxieties and complexities of Progressive Era American experience, Barrish never admits of the possibility that when combined with other modes, realism could be made to adapt and flourish under those new social realities. He leaves realism incomplete and insufficient, something that struggles and fails to depict truth and that as a result became a mode over which middle-class scholars contested what constituted reality and how best to present it rather than a mode through which real problems might be expressed.

Neither author recognizes the work that the gothic (or any other non-realist) mode performs, alongside and within realist works, to express the social inequalities and anxieties experienced by middle-class readers and writers. While both Lawson and Barrish suggest that realism expresses (even if it doesn’t overtly depict) middle-class social realities and concerns, we can also trace in their readings an exclusion of the gothic, a class act that itself expresses middle-class anxieties. No mode is better suited for expressing the un-articulable, the unspeakable, and the ambivalent than the gothic, which offered a way of addressing and expressing the class problems that realism, with its limited awareness (much less consciousness) of class pressures, couldn’t get its mind around. Modal mixing provided a way for authors to deal with realism’s limitations in
depicting social realities and contradictions. That critics have failed to recognize the multivalent possibilities of modal mixing in their assessment of realist fiction is evidence of how isolated and exclusionary fields of literary specialization remain, and how committed, albeit unconsciously, the middle class is to maintaining cultural hierarchy, and with it, boundaries between modes.

Barrish resolves the problem of realism’s inability to depict social realities by turning inward, by understanding reality as relative, contingent, and abstract — an idea to be debated by scholars and authors within the literary field. For Barrish, realism is not so much a mode dedicated to expressing (or recognizing its failure to express) reality, but instead provides a site of “realer-than-thou” contests that “operate as bids for intellectual prestige” (10) for the insecure intellectual middle class. These bids for class distinction are predicated upon demonstration of distance from necessity. In other words, Barrish equates critics’s demonstration of competency in realism in the abstract with competency in the experiences of other classes, a demonstrated familiarity with but carefully maintained distance from actual material concerns that is a crucial element of upward mobility.22

22 Although he considers Bourdieu “too reductively literal-minded about what reality is” Barrish acknowledges his indebtedness to Bourdieu’s theory of necessity in Distinction, and in particular his observation that “cultural distinction constitutes itself through the form of its relationship with material and social reality” (Barrish 8). Social distinction requires demonstration of freedom from what Bourdieu calls “crudely material reality” (qtd. in Barrish 9). Middle-class intellectuals must be careful to demonstrate competency in realism without claiming any particular first-hand knowledge of the social realities actually depicted in that fiction if they are to use their knowledge of the mode to facilitate their own “jockeying for status.”
These “realer than thou” moves of academics interested in exploring realism has resulted in an increasingly tenuous link between realism as a mode, and the reality it is purported to reflect. This distancing from the real as it is practiced by academics, a phenomena Barrish identifies as “realist taste,” constitutes a distancing of the middle-class scholar, for whom class is always something other than middle class, from class contradictions through the deployment of increasingly complex levels of abstraction, veils that protect and uphold the middle-class’s awareness of class disparity without pushing it toward the uncomfortable territory of class consciousness. Realist taste refines our understanding of realism while rejecting the reality it attempted to express.

Barrish suggests that realism was a tool for the vicarious experience of other classes and cultures, one completely consistent with the social distancing practiced by the middle class. While many critics have suggested that literary taste is cultural capital designed to distance the middle class from those classes around it, Barrish contends that greater attention must be paid to the strategies by which those in the middle class use cultural competency to distinguish themselves from other members of the middle class. Realism, or, rather, competency in realism, allows middle-class academics to claim authority on and knowledge of other classes without being mistaken for members of those classes.

---

23 Richard Brodhead makes similar claims about American regionalist writing in “Regionalism and the Upper Class,” which I discussed in Chapter One.

24 Two articles that admirably detail middle-class strategies of social distancing as figured in literary taste are Rita Felski’s “Nothing to Declare: Identity, Shame, and the Lower Middle Class,” and Cynthia Ward’s “From the Suwanee to Egypt, There’s No Place Like Home,” both of which appeared in the January 2000 PMLA dedicated to class. Felski
What I find most revelatory about Barrish’s approach to realist criticism is that while he recognizes the distancing strategy undertaken by critics who assess realism as part of the mechanism by which cultural capital is acquired by the middle class, his study participates in the same distancing by rendering realism even more abstract, even less engaged with material reality than critics before him have considered the mode.

Critics like Barrish and Lawson have attempted to understand the realist mode by isolating it from reality altogether, an inward-turning move that demonstrates these critics’ distance both from necessity and from the real social problems with which realist writers grappled in their fiction. Realism, in these assessments, is segregated from other modes. Threats to realism, such as those posed by the gothic or other modes that might expose truths about social disparity, have been summarily ignored or ejected, rendering the mode a vehicle for the middle-class tendency to divide, hierarchize, and demonstrate mastery of increasingly narrow cultural categories.

Ironically, then, the purification of realism as a mode, even in studies in which that purification is intended to facilitate a greater understanding of how realism helped resolve middle-class problems, is another expression of the middle-class tendency to evade or ignore the importance of middle-class habitus in the critical acceptance or discusses the lower middle class as a “negative identity” in American literature, a class whose depiction in fiction has suffered critical neglect because so many academics reject their own lower- and lower-middle-class roots in their bid for upper-middle-class acceptance. Ward suggests that female middle-class readers rely on identification with and sympathy for characters in their assessments of literariness, and that they cannot relate to female lower- to lower-middle-class characters who do not display ambitions of upward mobility, such as, for example, Arvay Meserve in Zora Neale Hurston’s novel *Seraph on the Suwanee* (1948). Both articles suggest a blindness to class in middle-class assessments of literature; in neither case is the distancing or rejection of certain kinds of literature claimed to be intentional.
rejection of various literary modes. Assessments like Barrish’s and Lawson’s stop at class-awareness — recognizing realist writers were interested in and engaged with issues of class — never proceeding to a level of class-consciousness that might allow them to consider other modes as expanding, critiquing, or even completing the work of realism towards that end. The gap between awareness and consciousness manifests here in blindness toward the modally mixed, or those works that exist in the grey area between otherwise carefully policed modal boundaries. The gothic, in this final assessment, acts as the abject of realism; it threatens to make class visible to that class most invested in downplaying, displacing, or diminishing its importance in American culture. The gothic, to paraphrase Stephen King’s famous epigraph to his novel *It*, is “the truth inside the lie” that middle-class critics tell themselves about realism.

As a tool for the middle-class academic to display cultural competency and class awareness (again, not to be confused with class consciousness), and as it has been subjected to the categorizing impulse of the modern university, realism has been subjected to a process of purification, segregation, and hierarchization, a process that resulted in the fragmentation of realism into various related modes: naturalism, regionalism, and local color, for example. Fragmentation led to contests over how to

25 “Realism,” like most of the terms with which my project engages, has no clear or agreed-upon scholarly definition, and I have no intention of positing a monolithic definition of realism with this project. For more information on the historical discourse over “realism” and “naturalism,” see Donald Pizer’s Introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to American Realism and Naturalism*. In part, what I have been detailing instead in this section is an investment in clarifying and categorizing realism in contemporary criticism, an act closely associated with the patterned isolation Graff observes in the modern university, and by extension with the categorizing work performed by the middle class in the contest for social distinction.
define a work — Wharton’s *Ethan Frome* is a good example, as critics have described it variously as gothic, modernist, regionalist, even anti-regionalist — that resulted in works being discarded or judged inferior based on restrictive generic criteria.26 Most importantly for my purposes, however, the purification of realism meant that the gothic was not just excluded, but ultimately ignored, in assessments of realism. It is not so much that gothic realist fiction was judged and found wanting, but that it simply was never recognized as present in the first place, even in the earliest assessments of realist fiction.

Popular modes like the gothic, subject to the middle-class work of social distancing, obviously were denigrated because of their association with the popular. The gothic, however, especially as figured during the Progressive Era, also expresses cultural contradictions — institutionally supported class disparity, unequal access to the tools of mobility, the possibility of downward mobility, and potential immobility — truths that the middle class is reticent if not completely unwilling to acknowledge. My purpose throughout this project has been to suggest that within realist works the gothic expresses social anxieties. Its presence in Progressive Era realist works disrupts the story that middle-class academics tell themselves about highbrow and lowbrow fiction, but in so

---

26 This re-defining or re-categorizing impulse is of course not confined to realist fiction alone. Literary and modal distinctions and re-definitions serve as a tool for demonstrating cultural capital in distinctions of late modernism from post-modernism, or romanticism from sentimentalism, as well. I focus on the modal purification of realism, however, because of its close association with the middle class. Realism, which has been theorized as a middle-class fiction, is a particularly rewarding mode through which we can make visible the middle-class mechanisms of exclusion and social distancing that serve to downplay the reality of class in America.
doing it also intrudes on the stable, insular, middle-class world of academia, complacent in its sheltered claims of class awareness.

While realism does express some middle-class anxieties, as Barrish and Lawson have demonstrated, the segregation of the gothic from realism is perhaps an even larger testament to the work that realism performs for the middle class. Excluding (or ignoring) the gothic to stabilize realism is a middle-class act because the gothic expresses the realities of class that the middle class is reticent or unable to acknowledge. The gothic haunts indeterminate areas, hampering efforts to clearly delineate boundaries between modes, and by extension, between classes and cultural categories. The gothic expresses the silences enforced by modal segregation; by reassessing the modal mixing present in realist fiction academics can make the middle class visible.

As Levine’s work demonstrates (and perpetuates), we have been trained to look for the high and the low and meanwhile neglect to recognize the mixed; we fail to trace the class continuities that have shaped our approaches to realist fiction, and in so doing fail to recognize our own hand in assessments of realist fiction. The gothic does not function in this reckoning as resurrecting something repressed that is intruding into a stable realist fictive realm. Rather, the gothic articulates something known but unarticulable, unthinkable, or contradictory. As I argued in Chapter One, the gothic is not merely a vehicle for the repressed, since such assessments tend to de-historicize the gothic. Rather, the gothic expresses very contemporary, yet complex, anxieties. The middle class is not exactly repressed, it is simply the default class in America, rendered invisible, and characterized by its lack of class consciousness. The gothic serves to
expose middle-class behavior as classed behavior. It does not return the repressed so much as bring focus and clarity to the otherwise unobserved or imperceptible.

Barrish would probably find fault with my work as another “realer-than-thou” move in the history of assessments of realist fiction. In a way, I’m guilty as charged. I believe that there is something more real in expressing reality than there is in describing reality, that the gothic expressions I have described in Progressive Era gothic realist fiction — embodying fear, ambivalence, and unease with modernity — are more real than critical suppressions of the gothic that maintain a false sense of realist purity. I suppose I am guilty of distancing myself from “vulgar materialism” (Barrish 144), since my own account renders realism more abstract by mixing it with the gothic, and I consider realism at its most revelatory when it is less concerned with accurate description and more invested in expressing truth. Gothic expressions in realist fiction offer a truer, more “real” picture of Progressive Era social concerns than a purified, stultified realism.

With full awareness of my own middle-class position, cemented in part by my production of this original scholarship in pursuit of educational capital bestowed upon me by a PhD, and my location within institutionalized middle-classedness, I recognize that it might be impossible to escape the trap Barrish describes. I hope, however, that in my consciousness of my interpellated middle-class position I can begin to articulate and inspire a more thoughtful, thorough, class-conscious approach to the study of American realist fiction. The ramifications of a frank discussion of class, including the middle class, within the university, both between academics and within the classroom, are far-reaching, both as a means toward improving labor conditions for academics and for educating
students to be critical of the ideologies instilled in them by their education. In short, my project is an important and necessary step toward making the middle class visible to itself.

I close with a few open questions: What might a class-conscious pedagogy look like? How might we design courses or re-design curricula to raise class consciousness? Is this reassessment even possible within the modern, middle-class university? In the MLA panel on class I discussed at the beginning of this chapter, many audience members and at least one panelist suggested that universities should recognize the working-class identity of many students and faculty. Teaching class as an identity is a dangerous proposition, however. As several critics have observed, if we celebrate working-class culture and poverty as an identity, we do so at the expense of recognizing the economic disparity that subtends that culture.27

Walter Benn Michaels, perhaps the most prominent critic of identity politics, observes that the “growth of identity studies in the United States has taken place during the same period as the growth in economic inequality” (Michaels, “Plots” 301), and that for the middle class that is invested in ignoring the reality of class disparity, cultural studies has substituted awareness of diversity for consciousness of inequality. In “Plots

27 For other critiques of identity politics, see Paul Lauter, “The Race for Class” (2000), and Rosemary Hennessy, Profit and Pleasure (2000). In addition to “Plots Against America,” mentioned above, see also Walter Benn Michaels, “The University Déclassé” (2004), “Why Identity Politics Distract Us From Economic Inequalities” (2006), and The Trouble with Diversity (2006). Sharon O’Dair offers a related critique in “Beyond Necessity” (2000). O’Dair argues that the middle-class obsession with status (which we can associate with Barrish’s sense of intra-class distinction), which she finds most intense in the academic middle class, influences how we consume culture, fragmenting it into varying “status hierarchies” that rather than helping to expose or resolve class disparity, serve instead to distract us from inequality.
Against America” (2006), Michaels writes of “our ingenuity in focusing on issues that render economic inequality either irrelevant or invisible or both” (298). If we collapse class into a subject position, something discussed as we treat race and gender, for instance, we risk making poverty an identity, thereby naturalizing class distinctions rather than critiquing the conditions that created them. For the same reason, teaching the literature of the poor or working-class as valuable in its own right is equally problematic. As Michaels writes elsewhere, “when we start insisting that working class literature has its own value and that, as literary critics, we have done the poor an injustice by failing to appreciate their literature — we commit ourselves not only to ignoring but to erasing the inequality, not by removing the deprivation but by denying that it is deprivation” (“University” 17–18).

Instead, we must teach students how class invisibly shapes our attitude toward and interpretation of cultural productions, beginning with a frank discussion of our own class positions and our contested and often contradictory definitions of class. Acknowledging class in the literature classroom — not just the class of characters or the class anxieties those characters express, but the classed dispositions that gave rise to those works and that have structured our approaches to literature — will force students to confront themselves as classed, as well. If, as Paul Lauter observes, “class analysis flies in the face of America’s predominant ideology of individualism and has long been associated with communism and other presumably foreign ways of thinking” (“American” 499), and has thereby been relegated to tertiary importance behind race and gender in the university, then bringing class into the classroom might force students out
of their complacent absorption of those ideologies, and challenge them to think more critically about how those beliefs have served to naturalize and strengthen class disparity while effacing the reality of classes in the United States. Students, Lauter observes, learn about class in the university only through example. So long as academics continue to speak of themselves as classed individuals only behind closed doors, our students will continue to appropriate the deficient class-consciousness modeled to them by a university curriculum averse to examining itself as “a technology for denying the existence of class” (Michaels, “University” 17). In this final analysis, studying the interaction of the gothic and realist modes — segregated in assessments of Progressive Era fiction because of a boundary policing middle-class tendency to silence and displace discussions of class — is a class act.

It isn’t enough simply to teach lowbrow culture as highbrow culture; the appropriation of pop culture by academics does little besides elevate the lowbrow to the highbrow, keeping the categories themselves intact and having almost no impact on the perception of those cultural productions outside of academia. Teaching the problems, as Graff would put it, in this case would mean introducing students to contests over the definition of class, of literature, of the highbrow and lowbrow. It would mean not just teaching noncanonical works, but discussing the larger cultural motivations behind canon formation. Most controversially and perhaps most dangerously, however, it would mean introducing students to the class structure within academia, to the middle-class dream of mobility they have been sold, and to the middle-class motives that structure our approaches to literature.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


---. The Second Twenty Years at Hull House. New York: Macmillan, 1930. Print


Dimock, Wai Chee. “Class, Gender, and a History of Metonymy.” Dimock and Gilmore 57–103.


   Print.


Hume, Robert D. “Charles Brockden Brown and the Use of Gothicism: A Reassessment.”


   375–408. Print.


---. *The Turn of the Screw*. 1908. Ed. Peter G. Beidler. Boston: Bedford-St. Martin’s,


---. “Manuscripts of the story ‘Two Hearts that Beat as One’.” N.d. MS. Frank Norris Collection of Papers and Related Materials, BANC MSSC-H 80 V. 5 Box 2. The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.


---. “Themes written for Prof. Lewis E. Gates course in writing (Eng. 22) at Harvard University.” 1895. MS. Frank Norris Collection of Papers and Related Materials, BANC MSSC-H 80 V. 5 Box 2. The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.


Peters-Golden, Rebecca. “Gothic Realism.” Diss. Indiana University, 2011. TS.


VITA

Gillian Nelson Bauer was born in Merrillville, Indiana, but spent her childhood in several southern states. She attended the University of Southern Mississippi, where she earned a Bachelor of Arts in English and a Bachelor of Arts in Music, *summa cum laude*, in 2002. Gillian moved to Chicago in 2003 to pursue a Master of Arts in Literature at Northwestern University, a degree she completed in 2006. In May 2013 she received a Ph.D. in English from Loyola University Chicago.

While at Loyola, Gillian served as Treasurer and later President of the English Graduate Student Association. She placed twice in the English Department’s Stanley Clayes Essay Competition, and has twice been the recipient of the Amber Gravett and David Tuma Graduate Book Scholarship. Her work on gothic literature and conventions has been published in the e-journal *Victorian Network*, *The Treatment of Disabled Persons in Medieval Europe*, published by Edwin Mellen Press, and is forthcoming in *Studies in American Naturalism*. She was the recipient of a 2012-13 Arthur J. Schmitt Dissertation Fellowship.

Gillian lives with her husband in the Rogers Park neighborhood of Chicago, Illinois.